

SAINT MALLORY

RUTH BEDDER

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FOR THE GOBLIN GANG BECAUSE I KEPT THIS ONE FOR MYSELF

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PART ONE

"For millennia, we have known beyond doubt that monsters exist. Whether Hydra, Oni, Djinn or Wendigo, the creatures of legend are no more myth than we ourselves. It is not their existence which is of particular interest, however, but the reasons for their continued opposition of humanity, and in particular the designs and desires of the Canon."

Savia deHauteville, 1742

MALLORY

Unlike New York, London sleeps, but she does it with one eye open and a knife under her pillow. I never understood the pull of this city until I lived here; the way you can hate it so much but not want to give it up for any price. She's an angel whose call you can't ignore, a monster that breathes into your ear while you sleep, and changes your dreams. She wakes frantic and fumbling, desperate to have missed nothing around her. She's a place of fear and passion in equal measure, and under her fragile, watchful exterior, London is unique to each wandering soul. For me, London carries the call of music and the loneliness of other people's laughter, the sweet swimming buzz of alcohol racing through my blood and the press of bodies on a crowded floor; arms raised and voices lifted in an anonymous arena scented with the gasp of perfume and the sensation of fresh sweat, slick and warm in the small of my back.

In all of London, my favourite place used to be Camden Lock Market. We'd go there every day, a pack of college kids playing at being adults, spending hours wandering over the cobbles in the rain, moving from stall to stall, trying on clothes, picking up little knick knacks and curios, turning them over and putting them back unbought, listening to the steady pulse of bass and the cry and call of people, eating the crappy food and actually enjoying it. When the others left, I tried to stay. They grew up, they moved on, but I waited, addicted to the noise of the rain on the cobbles, unable to let it go, still hearing the whisper of the place long after they'd all left it behind. I'm the last one left coming here every day, only now instead of eating the crappy food, I'm serving it – a task that has nowhere near the same kind of poetry; leaning over a packed row of twelve different varieties of the same superheated sludge, separated from a growing lunchtime queue of irritable last minute Christmas shoppers by nothing more than the width of the counter, while my apoplectically red faced employer shrieks at his truculent wife in Cantonese.

I slop black bean beef with rice into tinfoil takeaway containers with a hard plastic ladle and wish I'd actually taken the time to learn more than the six words of Cantonese I've picked up. Right now I can't tell if my boss is listing his wife's faults, or complaining about his shoes. I tried to learn it when I started working here, but learning from Simon isn't easy. He's a tiny, placid looking man, but he's got the temper of a rampaging bull elephant. When he's angry he talks faster than anyone alive, and the handful of words I've learned from him become utterly useless. I never really got to know him, but I always feel a kind of sympathy towards the guy. He works his backside off to keep this tiny, weather pummelled corner of the market open, and I think he loves his wife though God alone knows why. She's got the face of a mangled pug and the personality of a wasp with a migraine.

The queue in front of me grows inexorably as I shovel out food as fast as I can, wiping sticky fingers on my disposable apron and flicking back a repeatedly rogue wedge of hair with the back of one hand as I take money and hand out change with the other. Out of the corner of my eye I see Simon pick up his prized cleaver, and for a moment I think he might actually have snapped. I pause to look, mouth slightly open, dark satay sauce dripping from ladle to tray. He waggles the glittering blade in the air over his head, and then slams it down emphatically into the meat joint on the chopping board. I sigh; the wasp-woman will live another day. At least I won't have to clean up any body parts. I shudder at the thought, and go back to work, pretending with a practised care that the two people behind me aren't screaming at each other at an ear splitting volume. The people at the back of the queue drift away slowly into the wintry afternoon dark of the market to find food elsewhere, while the couple at the front stare shamelessly at the show. Their bags dangle limply at their sides, full of incense and handcrafted notebooks, rave music, silk tops and joke gag gifts. They take their

food without making eye contact with me and slope away to watch from a distance, shovelling spicy pork and noodles into their mouths.

I fall back into the routine of scoop, pour and serve, and as the afternoon rolls in the queue gradually dies down, Simon and his wife fade into a continuous background drone. It takes me a moment before I realise that my last remaining customer has leant across the counter towards me, one extended hand clicking thumb and fingers together.

"You in there?"

I look up, blinking. A pale face with familiar freckled skin and wide blue eyes under ginger hair grins at me as the snapping fingers pull away.

"Hey Janine." I resist the urge to look over my shoulder at Simon. "What you having?"

She pouts prettily, tiny features framed with a thick green woollen scarf and hat.

"Don't be such a bore, Mallory."

"You know the rules. I'll get into trouble."

"Bleh. Okay. I'll have... what's that one?"

"Kung po."

"Is it nice?" She looks at it suspiciously.

I shrug.

"What's in it?"

"Cat."

"Mallory! That's disgusting!"

"Do you see any *live* cats around here?"

She points subtly back at Simon, furiously slicing meat, emphasising each angry phrase with a downward swing of the cleaver. "That joint is way too big to be cat."

"That doesn't go in the food. He just keeps that one back there for show."

Janine sticks her tongue out, and drops a couple of coins into my outstretched palm. I scoop up the remaining meat, sifting around in the tray for the best bits. Janine rubs her gloved hands together and jumps up and down on the spot a couple of times. Her mittens match the hat and scarf. At just over a metre and a half, she's the perfect elfin picture of Christmas.

"You look like a bloody pixie."

"I'm freezing my tits off. I don't think that happens to pixies."

I snort laughter and stick a little plastic fork into the top of her food as I hand Janine the tray.

"Mallree!" I flinch as Simon breaks off from screaming at his wife to scream at me. "No free food!"

I open my mouth to explain, but Janine beats me to it, a string of effortless syllables rolling out of her mouth. "*Lo sigh, mo mun tigh, ngor bay jor chin, ho may dough, ho sound yee.*"

Janine is some kind of linguistic genius; she speaks about six different languages, and she's always going on about how I should make more of an effort to do the same thing. She seems to think everyone finds it as easy as her.

The wasp woman snaps at Simon, flapping one hand in front of his face, made even angrier by this interruption. "*Suey yan, ngor tung nay gong yeah, nay yat dee dough uum tank ngor gong, gig say ngor!*"

Simon's face reddens to a deep beetroot colour, and Janine blushes as well, so I assume that must have been rude. I turn back to my only customer as a fresh bout of screaming takes place behind me.

Janine, refusing to talk with her mouth full, swallows and glances over my shoulder as subtly as she can manage. "They're really going for it. I'm glad I don't have to listen to that all day."

"I finish in an hour anyway." I shrug. In fact my stomach is a tight knot, and has been since Simon's wife first buzzed in here at the start of my shift and started shrieking.

"You still coming out tonight?"

"Dunno, it'll be late and I've been at work all day."

Janine's face sets into a stony look that slides her features straight from gorgeous to gorgon. "Mallory, it's Christmas, and you promised." Her voice is as unforgiving as steel.

"Jan, I..."

"No. No no *no*. You're going straight home after work and getting changed. I'll come by at nine and pick you up."

"Okay." My shoulders droop. I'm not arguing with her. I hate arguing, especially with Janine; she always wins.

Her face smoothes back to its picture perfect happy smile. "Good. You're not working tomorrow anyway, so it won't matter if you're out late. Right, I'm going. See you at nine – don't you dare not be ready!"

She skips off with her food in one hand and her scarf swinging across her back. I watch her disappear unhappily, left with a familiar hollow feeling, like I did something stupid or didn't quite measure up, either to her or to her other friends. Then I'm on my own again, stuck awkwardly on the edge of someone else's argument.

I refill the trays, shuffling around Simon and his wife, who continue to scream at each other. Janine was right; I've never seen them this bad before. They're always yelling at each other, but it used to only be for a few minutes at a time. They've gone on longer and longer recently; today it's been well over seven hours with no real sign of abating. Even the customers have been worse than normal over the last couple of weeks, arguing and shouting at each other and at me. The food's too hot, the food's too cold, the price is too high, that guy cut the line, that guy got more, I gave them the wrong change, I gave them the wrong order. That always pisses me off. I *never* give anyone the wrong order. And honestly, even though I beat up on it, the food's pretty good. It seems like recently the world's gone crazy just in time for Christmas. So much for peace on earth.

The last hour of my shift crawls by intolerably slowly. My feet ache in the cold and my fingers and cheeks redden from the combination of frosty air and steaming food. I clean up as the dishes run out, hoping that the rapidly disappearing food will mean I get to slip away ten minutes earlier. Normally there's enough left over that people who come late get their little dishes piled high with extras, but with Simon so distracted we're sold out well before closing. His argument reaches its long overdue climax when the wasp woman leans across the small space between them, and lands a heavy open handed slap across his cheek. He's surprised enough that he staggers, and the precious cleaver spills out of his hand to hit the ground with a metallic clatter. She storms off, still shouting, pushing past shoppers who stumble in the wake of her tempestuous passing. A trail of angry voices follows her as she leaves the market. Simon stands with one hand pressed against his cheek and a stunned look on his suddenly exhausted face. His cleaver lies forgotten on the floor where it's skittered to a halt under the worktop at the back of the stall. I watch him for a moment, trying to decide between awkwardly comforting him and the much easier choice of staying out of the way. His face is crumpled into a confused grimace and his shoulders droop downwards in the perfect picture of dejection. I grab a cleaning cloth and let myself out of the stall.

I watch Simon out of the corner of my eye as I wipe down the outside of the stall. He spends a long time just standing, looking like he can't make up his mind whether to be devastated or furious, switching between the two over and over before starting muttering to himself and turning away to find his dropped blade. I slip back inside while he's not looking and yank off my apron, then pause as I grab my coat from its bundled hiding place under the counter, looking back at Simon, suddenly uneasy now that it's just me, him, and his cleaver.

"Is it okay if I take off now?"

There's nothing.

He's stopped muttering now and is stood with his back to me, turning the cleaver over and over in his hands like he's assessing it for damage. I've never understood why he loves that thing so much.

"Simon?"

"Huh?" He looks around; face pointed at me, eyes elsewhere. It makes him look a little creepy.

"I'm going home."

"Mm."

"Are... uh, are you going to be okay?"

"Goodbye Mallree."

His voice is hoarse. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I back towards the exit. "Okay. Well... have a good time. Y'know. With Christmas and everything."

He doesn't respond.

I let myself out and head for the main street, glancing backwards over my shoulder every few seconds.

I walk home through the city that never lets up with my gloveless hands stuffed deep into my pockets and my chin tucked under my coat collar. My breath turns to puffs of frost in the air as I head for the tube, shivering in the chill of the evening. It hasn't snowed yet, but it's cold enough for it. Janine will be unbearably giddy if it does snow. She'll run around making snowmen and snowballs, somehow balancing perfectly while I slip and slide and fall. Snow's pretty and everything, but I like walking on something more solid.

I duck and weave across shop fronts wrapped with tinsel and Christmas lights, past hanging racks of gothic clothes accented with zips and buckles, around a tattoo place where I can hear the faint buzz of needles even over the noise of the buskers and the hurrying, excited crowd. Stall vendors shout to be heard over each other and the voices of the passers-by. The streets are crammed with shoppers of every size and disposition, from kids with brightly dyed hair and silver piercings that glitter in the artificial lights, to men and women in smart business suits and long woollen coats, talking earnestly into mobiles and earpieces. I pass a young couple, hand in hand, clutching bulging shopping bags and sharing little glances like tiny intimate secrets. Her earrings are Santa bobble heads with flashing LEDs, and he's smiling like she's the most wonderful thing he's ever seen. It's catching; under my collar I find the corners of my mouth turning up. I walk past them and cross the road towards the red tiled entrance and the echoing warmth of Camden tube station.

I love the London Underground. I love the quiet stations with the dark tunnels that could be hiding anything, and the mice that live in their shadow. I like to sit sometimes and watch people coming and going to and from work, on day trips or nights out, wondering where they've come from and where they're going to. I'm lucky enough that I can usually find the quiet trains, and I always, always mind the gap. When I was a child, my cousin told me that monsters lived in the gap, and they would reach up for you as you stepped out of the carriage. I laughed, but since then I've always stepped a

little further than I need to. Of course, I'd never admit as much to him. Today, there aren't going to be any quiet trains. Not this close to Christmas, and not with the weather about to turn nasty. The press of bodies is intense before I even reach the barriers, and my normal sense of calm in this place is impossible to summon. I tug my Oyster card out of my pocket and hold it tightly in a clutching hand like some kind of talisman as I'm buffeted about like a human pinball on my way to the barrier. I press my hand against the yellow circle of the reader and step forwards, expecting the barriers to swing open in front of me, and walk straight into an unyielding plastic wall. Almost immediately the woman behind me in the chaos of the queue slams into me, stepping down hard on the back of my heel. She swears, looking at me in disgust, and pushes her way to the next set of gates. Desperately, I swipe my card over the reader, which returns only an unhappy red light. On the barrier in front of me, the words 'Seek Assistance' glitter in the battered digital display. I swipe again, willing the machine to do something different. Behind me, curses ripple from the already agitated crowd at my back, as I stand in front of the closed barrier, red faced and waiting for help. As I stand, shuffling from foot to foot, a young boy leaps the barrier next to mine in a smooth, practised motion; hood pulled tight around his face, rucksack slung loose over thin shoulders. He disappears into the crowd, one soul among too many to make him worth the attendants finding and apprehending. A little ember of rebellion urges me to join him, to slam both hands down on the cold metal of the machinery and launch myself over the plastic gates, free in the knowledge that I won't be stopped, not here and not today. It's just a daydream. The ember goes out with a sigh, and I turn around to move to a different gate, trying to make myself as small as possible, and rather more impossibly attempting to keep out of the way of the crowd.

Despite my embarrassment, the comforting anonymity of the Underground soon swallows me, and I'm alone again in the pressing crowd. No one here knows my name, or cares, and there's something relieving about that. Other passengers avoid looking at me as they jostle past, trying unsuccessfully not to touch anyone as they scurry down into the welcoming warmth of London's belly. The air dragged by the trains rushes through the tunnels, lifting my hair and catching my breath. I head down a familiar route, feet leading and mind elsewhere. Posters on the wall encourage me to pay attention to the dangers of closing doors, escalators and trip hazards, but they register only on a background level, along with the gentle drone of announcements and the voices of the other people crowding the passageways. I reach my platform as a train pulls away, and weave my way along to the very end to peer into the darkness as I wait for the next one. A part of me knows it's not safe to lean out over the rails, but I don't care. Somehow I always know when the trains are coming, even without looking up at the LED displays that would tell me how long I have to wait for the next arrival, or without hearing the approaching rumble of the carriages. Janine thinks it's weird; in fact her exact words were 'freak train senses', but honestly I've never understood how people *don't* know. It's like a long familiarity with this place. Maybe I just know it well enough that its behaviour is as instinctive as my own.

I pull my head back in a moment before the vibration of the tracks heralds the approaching train, and wait for it to shudder to a halt in front of me. The crowd surges onto the carriages, fighting past the people who are trying to disembark, and I allow myself to be swept forward with it and squeezed against the plastic partition that separates the seats from the doors. People lean in against each other as the doors slide shut. The damp heat of so many bodies borders on unpleasant, and there's something anxious hanging in the air like a bad feeling. My guts begin to churn with nervous tension as though I'm about to do something vitally important – something terrible or wonderful. Without knowing which, or understanding what's going on, I clutch at the grab rail next to the door and hold tight as the train lurches forwards.

Three stations pass before I even look up. The press of bodies swims in and out of the train around me, and as I fight the sickening feeling of rising tension, I stare at the dark passage of the tunnels in the transitory light that spills out of the carriage windows. Wires and cables flicker past in the gloom, supported in blackened brickwork that's barely visible as we pass. The tannoy announcement as we pull into Old Street jerks me from my daze and I glance around nervously. A handful of tight faced passengers force their way out of the doors, and more pile in. On the platform, a young man in jeans and a suit jacket sweeps the end of his long scarf up into one hand and steps forward as though to push his way in, then backs away with a look of confused discomfort, and I wonder if he can feel it too. His face is locked in an unhappy expression; a strong jaw with the patchy failure of a tight blonde beard and startling green eyes that meet mine as the doors slide closed between us. He watches for a moment as the engines drag the train forwards, and I see him shake his head as if to clear a fog. I try it myself as he disappears, but it doesn't help. Around me, people clutch at rails or seat edges; one old woman looks like she might even be crying into the contents of her handbag. At the far end of the carriage, I hear someone trying to be quiet as they throw up. The smell of warm vomit spreads quickly through the carriage and I hold my coat sleeve over my mouth, trying to breathe through the thick material to block out the stink.

At Moorgate, the carriage empties in a rush. A few people decide to tough it out and huddle with me at the opposite end to the smell. Even though the air is now revolting, the twisting in my guts seems to leave the carriage with most of the other passengers, and when the familiar signs for Elephant and Castle swim into view over the end of my cuffs, I burst out onto the platform to suck in cleaner air.

By the time I reach the surface again, the strange discomfort of the train journey has slipped away from me altogether. I stand for a moment despite the chill, breathing in the cold air of the street and watching the traffic buzz past. Above me the clouds have blackened, and there's the faint rumble of approaching thunder. That's enough to convince me to leave, and I slouch my way south east, under the railway bridge and past boarded up blocks of flats that are curtained from the road by the naked fingers of trees. Five minutes later, the first icy drop of rainwater strikes my cheek. With well over a mile still to go on foot, and no real way of drying out my clothes without making everything in my bedsit damp, I cross my fingers that I'll make it home at least mostly dry, and pick up the pace. One by one, the few people still on the street do the same as the heralding drops of water fall, and soon the world is moving at a different speed. I glance at my watch, then up at the sky ahead of me to find my hurried pace is not enough. The rain is coming down like a sheet, sweeping down the street towards me. Ahead, I can see people diving into doorways, pulling jacket collars over their heads, or holding bags of gifts tightly against their chests to protect them. My mood sinks as the rain rushes towards me. I really don't want to get that wet - there's got to be some dry sanctuary where I can wait this out, preferably with a drink. With only moments before I'm soaked to the skin, and without looking at what I'm doing, I reach out one fumbling hand for the nearest doorway. I connect with a cold metal handle that delivers a stinging static shock across my fingertips, and I stagger inside, rubbing at my hand and swearing quietly to myself.

It's like being a stranger walking into a Wild West saloon. There's an open fire reflecting brightly into the dim light. It's warm, and I feel the outside chill fall off me in a wave. I've made it into a pub, although not one I've been in before even on the familiar route home. Four men are stood around the bar including the bartender, all clearly paused in mid conversation, and all staring at me with expressions that run from bewilderment through shock to outright disbelief. I half expect to see a piano player, stopped slack jawed in mid note over the keyboard, but I'm disappointed by his absence. I

glance down at myself, run a hand over my face and hair to check for something strange that they might be looking at, but find nothing. This isn't really what I expected in here, but I know what I'm expecting through the door at my back, and it's cold, wet and miserable.

The tension breaks suddenly as the pint the bartender is pouring spills out over the top of the glass, coats his hands with foamy beer, and slops onto the floor. He grunts in surprise, fumbles for a second and grabs at the tap, flicking it upwards, spraying one of his patrons with the froth from his hands.

"Careful Chris, this is Italian silk!"

I shake off my discomfort and head for the bar. The bartender looks at me with an expression of unguarded curiosity, while the others pretend not to notice me with varying degrees of success. I lean on the bar, determined not to leave just yet and get drenched.

"Are you serving?"

"Sure. Sorry about before. We uh... we don't get many people in."

He smiles. He's a big guy, possibly the tallest person I've met; his shoulders have to top six foot tall and he has a thick scar that seems to run nearly all the way round his neck. His skin looks like it was weather beaten while it was raining rocks, but his smile is transporting, and before I know it I'm grinning back like there's nothing wrong.

"I did kind of burst in. It's really coming down out there."

He flips the top off a bottle and pours it for me without asking what I want. I look down at my glass suspiciously; it smells invitingly like raspberries, and little bubbles rise and pop cheerfully in it. My mouth waters.

"House special." He says, still smiling. "You look like you needed it. On me."

"Watch out sweetheart, he'll charge you double for the second." Another of the men at the bar laughs; his voice has the faintest trace of an accent, maybe eastern Mediterranean.

"Sod off, George." The bartender turns to reply, and I slip away from them to a table by the door.

The seats are pretty comfortable, and I settle as best I can, starting to work myself out of my damp coat so that I can sit in my grubby work clothes which are at least dry. The pub is heavy on ironwork; intricate metal filigree, delicately wrapped around the legs of tables, the front of the bar and the narrow staircase leading up to a small balcony hanging over the opposite end of the room. The wall of the balcony itself has fantastic images in the same style; a knight on horseback, a medieval castle, a Minotaur. The light isn't good enough for me to make out the rest, and there's no way I'm going up there to look right now. Maybe I'll come back another time, but with company. Janine probably wouldn't like it in here though, and God only knows what she'd make of the customers.

A movement by the fire catches my eye and I realise there aren't four other people in here, there are five. The last one is an old man built with the slick athleticism of a runner, shielded from the heat of the fire by a formal suit that seems to glow red in its light. He stands in the middle of a brick semi-circle picked out neatly on the floor in front of the hearth, and I wonder for a moment how I didn't see him before. His hair is grey and smartly cut around a thin face that carries half a week's worth of stubble. There's something off about him; something *unpleasant*, like Charles Dance at his most villainous. The hair on the back of my neck prickles as he looks up at me with eyes as pale as the December sky, and sees me, really *sees* me. He sees the best and the worst of me, and somewhere far away I'm glad I'm sat, because I'm falling through space while he sees everything I've ever done. He knows where I *would* have been, but for the grace of God, and he understands where I *should* have been, if I'd only tried to get there. The chances missed through inaction or indecisiveness, the opportunities avoided through laziness or a lack of motivation. I could have been so wonderful, if only

I'd tried. I could have been so terrible, if only I'd wanted to be. I can't look away. I can't move, can't even breathe. It's like being suffocated in a rising wall of my own memories, and I'm dying, I must be, with one hand locked in a tight grip around my glass, sat alone in a place I don't even know the name of, when if I'd tried or failed just a little more, I'd be somewhere else right now. He looks away, and it's like being dropped from a great height into the now silent room. I start to gasp for air, and realise that I'm breathing normally, heart rate steady, skin still cool, coat half way off. My mouth is now hanging open, but that's all that's changed. I stare over at him, open mouthed.

He nods at the barman, and then all five of them are looking at me at once.

"Are you sure?" The barman asks. He looks concerned, and more than a little unhappy.

"Unfortunately Christopher, I am quite sure. Her being here at all should have been enough of a clue."

"We haven't met anyone new for a long time, Nicholas." That's the man with beer on his shirt talking, pale face turning towards the fireplace.

"I have never been wrong; she's like us. She'll do nicely."

And that's it, I'm freaking out. Coat still half off, I bolt for the door and out into the rain. Behind me, unseen, my pint glass wobbles precariously on the table, and no one tries to catch it as it falls.

DREAMS & LIES

By the time I make it home, I'm drenched. I throw my wet clothes in the shower and climb in on top of them to wash them and me all at once. I hang them up the best I can when I'm done, pegging my underwear onto the makeshift line strung across my tiny bathroom, and draping jeans and jumpers over radiators.

I catch sight of myself in the mirror as I shuffle past with an armload of wet clothes and a damp towel. I'm a bedraggled mess; dark blonde hair sticking up at odd angles where my rough towelling has left it looking like stalagmites jutting up from my skull. I pause despite the cold and run my free hand through the short and tangled mass. My fingers are so pale as to be almost white, fingernails slightly blue in the harsh glare of the bathroom strip light. I watch my face twist into a disapproving scowl as I run an assessing eye over my reflection, comparing my figure to Janine's. Despite being the same height as a pixie, she's proportioned perfectly; long slim legs and a stomach so flat you could land aircraft on it. Her freckles extend down her shoulders and upper arms, making her look like some kind of exotic science fiction alien. Where Janine is slim, I'm skinny. My fingers are too long, my hair and skin unmanageable, and the closest thing I've got to exotic is a faded appendix scar. Standing on the cracked linoleum, I realise that my lips are turning the same colour as my fingernails. I wrap my free arm around my wet things and head into the bedroom, snagging the tiny portable electric heater from the hallway as I pass. I crank it up to full power, shivering violently as I huddle in front of it under a blanket. My skin dries slowly and my fingers warm in the tiny cone of heat. I watch little patches of red form where the circulation flows back in until my hands are their normal colour again. The smell of damp clothing rises from the radiators and permeates the air until my home smells like a laundrette. Every now and then the heater cuts out because of the stupid safety mechanism that stops it overheating. I twist the heating dial up and down and jab repeatedly at the on/off button until it flickers unhappily back to life.

At quarter past eight, knowing Janine will be early, I pull myself away from the tiny patch of heat and use yet more electricity beating my hair into submission with a pair of straightening tongs that catch and pull on individual hairs as the ceramic plates hiss in the not quite dry mass. My preparations for the impending night are performed with the same level of enthusiasm as I might have if I was getting ready for a funeral, finishing in the bathroom where I look myself up and down in the mirror. At least now my skin doesn't look quite so much like I've spend a week wandering naked around the arctic, although I'd probably have had more luck with my makeup if I'd thrown it into the air and waited for it to fall on my upturned face.

When my doorbell rings, I'm slipping coins into the electric meter so that the freezer doesn't cut out while I'm away, even though I'm sure it wouldn't make much difference given the temperature in the kitchenette. It's strange; the bell makes the same noise every time someone pushes the discoloured little button stuck to the outside doorframe, but somehow I know when it's Janine. There's an insistence about it that's unmistakable. I pull on a jacket, shouting through the door that I won't be long. I hate letting Janine into my bedsit – I know she doesn't do it on purpose, but she always manages to make it look like she doesn't want to touch anything in case she catches some kind of disease. I can hear her tiny feet stamping impatiently in the cold outside the basement level door, and I have a moment of uncharacteristic anger: *I like* it here. She calls it poky, but so what if it is? It's my little haven, *mine*, no one helped me get it or keep it. How dare she judge my home and my life from her safe little position of privilege? I glare furiously at the door.

"Come on Mallory! The taxi's waiting!"

I sigh and let myself out, pulling the door shut behind me and locking it. Janine is halfway up the worn concrete steps to the street. She looks back at me, gesturing for me to hurry, and I clatter up the stairs, trying not to trip in my heels. Janine yanks the door of the taxi open and waits for me to get inside. I pause on the threshold, looking at the other passengers with dismay, caught between what I'm now certain will be a drawn-out and unpleasant night, and facing the explosive wrath of the tiny harridan behind me. Janine forces me to make my mind up, pushing me forwards with one perfectly manicured hand.

I stumble forwards, and position myself in a huddle on the pull-down chair behind the driver, trying not to look unhappy about the presence of three people sat on the back seat. Two of them are locked tongue deep into each other while Alaister, Janine's boyfriend, somehow manages to lounge on a third of the seat like he's stretched out on a sofa. He's a pro rugby player, and he looks the part: tall and heavily built with a jawline that could have been the life's work of a master sculptor. He's had his nose broken twice, once on the field and once in a drunken brawl, but somehow that enhances his face instead of marring it. I've always thought that the two of them look a little odd together, but I keep that to myself. Alaister has never forgotten that I had a crush on him in our last year of school together, and he never misses an opportunity to remind me that I once made a rather fumbling drunken pass at him. He sneers when he sees me.

"Jan, you didn't tell me we were picking up Mallory. Not that it's particularly difficult."

I flush a hideous red colour as Janine neatly blocks my exit by sliding into the last remaining seat, and sealing us in with a slam like a tomb door swinging shut.

"What?"

"Nothing babe." Alaister smiles at her, a picture of adorable innocence that I know to be totally false.

As we pull away into the night, Janine, ever the socialite, leans across to attract the attention of the other two passengers.

"Sarah! Jo! Have you two met Mal?"

The two girls unwind themselves from each other and look over at me. Sarah is one of Janine's university friends, although I can't remember what it is she does there. I've met her twice before and didn't like her either time. She grunts an acknowledgement, but doesn't make eye contact. Jo, who I'm pretty sure I haven't met, leans across the limited space in the back of the taxi and extends a hand.

"Hey, I'm Jo." As she introduces herself I see the glitter of a silver tongue stud.

Reflexively, I reach out my own hand. "Mallory."

Jo's grip is firm and pleasantly warm around the cool metal of her thick rings and bracelets. Dark, swirling tattoos contrast gently against her wrists, disappearing under her sleeves as we break contact.

"Nice to meet you." She says, with a smile that seems far more genuine than Alaister's.

I open my mouth to reply, then Sarah coughs impatiently, and my voice catches in my throat. Jo grins at me and shrugs an apology, then leans back into Sarah's arms, murmuring quiet nothings.

The journey is blessedly short. Janine carries most of the conversation as always, and I'm happy for her to do it. It's probably one of the reasons we've stayed friends for so long – she's a talker and I'm really not. I alternate between looking at Janine and staring at the floor, not wanting to make eye contact with Alaister, in case I invite more sarcasm, or

the single entity that Sarah and Jo are trying to become, in case they think I'm staring. Janine reprimands them as the cab pulls to a halt and she opens the door.

"You two would find it easier to make conversation if you both only had one tongue in each of your mouths."

Sarah extends a middle finger without looking up, and Jo's embarrassed laugh drifts into the frost of the street as we climb out into the glare of neon and the pounding of bass, distorted through doors and walls. The steady pulse tugs at my chest invitingly, and as my heartbeat rises to meet it I start to think that maybe tonight will be alright after all.

We wander between clubs, spending a little time in each one, and more than a little money. Eventually we settle in a basement club with dusky pink walls. The DJ, a tall thin man in his early forties, plays mostly good music and doesn't talk too much. Jo heads to the bar while we claim a handful of chairs on a raised area running along the side of the dance floor. A transparent screen baffles a little of the sound from the car-sized banks of speakers, and we only need to shout rather than scream at each other to be heard. As a fresh song starts, Janine grabs Alaister and Sarah enthusiastically by a wrist each and drags them after her to dance. I watch them, not sure if I want to go after them or not. After a few minutes, Jo flops down into the chair next to me and hands me an open bottle of comparatively cheap beer. For a moment, I get lost in the memory of little bubbles and the smell of raspberries.

Jo looks at me, one eyebrow raised. "Not dancing?"

"I don't really know this song."

"Me neither. You having a good time hun?"

I nod. My smile's a little forced, but not much; Jo's been good company so far tonight, although we've not spoken much.

She smiles, leaning in as we continue to shout at each other over the music. "Janine said you were pretty quiet. It was nice of her to invite me, I don't think I've met her more than a couple of times. Still, it feels good to get out and have fun, y'know?"

I yell back an agreement, feeling myself warming to her as we try to communicate.

"I just can't seem to burn off all my energy these days." She shouts. "I don't know what it is, but the last couple of months it's just been like someone lit a fire under my whole life. Everything seems faster, brighter, somehow *more*. Like someone put me under a magnifying glass, y'know? I don't know if it's good or bad to be honest with you. I think I've been pissed every night for a fortnight, and the sex..."

I blush at this unexpected change of topic, but we're so close that I don't think she notices. She glances over at Sarah for a moment, still dancing with Janine and Alaister.

"Sarah isn't really my type normally. She's got a good side, but she can be a bit nasty to people, and I don't like it. I normally go for girls like... well, like you to be honest. Quiet ones. Bit more genuine. You know, people who are good company."

I shuffle about under a strange embarrassed pride, not sure if she's still talking about me. "I, uh... thanks. I think."

Jo laughs; a warm and drunken sound. She wraps an arm around my shoulders to hug me, and it's such an obviously genuine gesture that I find I'm hugging her back. Over her shoulder, I glance at the steps that lead down into the club and my heart skips a beat. Standing at the top of the stairs, looking out of place and even more uncomfortable than I did at the start of the night, is one of the men from the bar I ended up in on the way home. The bartender: Chris, I think. My whole body tenses.

"You okay?" Jo pulls away from me and looks into my face, one hand still resting lightly on my shoulder.

"Uh, yeah."

She twists round to look in the same direction as me, trying to see what it is that I'm looking at, and laughs.

"Wow, he's big."

I just nod. A tingling like electricity rides up my neck and over my scalp, and I'm certain that all my hair must be standing on end. The club lights ripple up the stairs and the scar on his neck is picked out as a bulky white line, almost a ragged reflection of his collar. His suit looks expensive, maybe even hand-made; its fit is perfect, and even at this distance it makes it apparent just how big the man is; he'd likely stand a full head taller than Alaister, and he's built like he's made of steel, with the torso of a comic book hero. He stands out, and he's starting to draw attention – more people than us are staring at him; bouncers assessing him in case he's trouble, drunks working out if they could take him in a brawl, punters watching open mouthed. He takes a couple of uncertain steps down into the press of people in the club, eyes scanning the room. As his gaze moves over towards us, I spin back round to glare fixedly at the table, almost able to feel him moving down the stairs behind me. Jo turns back to me, and squeezes my shoulder with a look of real concern on her face.

"You sure you're okay, hun?"

I'm not. I feel like a rabbit startled by headlights, remembering what they said before I bolted into the street. Is he here for me? Or is it just coincidence?

"I have to go to the bathroom. S'cuse me."

I stand up suddenly, pulling my shoulder out of Jo's hand, and almost run for the ladies, all the time hearing my brain screaming at me to walk slowly, not to attract any attention.

I hide in the blue anti-drug lights of one of the cubicles, perched on the edge of the toilet with my feet pulled up and my knees tucked under my chin, listening to people come and go, and wishing I'd brought my drink with me. After about ten minutes, when I'm sure that the room is empty, I let myself out, and lean heavily over one of the sinks.

"Want to tell me what you're doing?"

I stifle a scream as I realise that it's only Sarah. She's standing near the door, still enough that I've missed her completely, leaning against one wall with a lazy expression on her face.

"Jesus," I laugh nervously. "You scared the shit out of me."

"I asked you a question."

"What?"

She pushes herself forwards and comes towards me, slowly. I back away until I hit the wall, my previous relief quickly draining away.

"What do you think you're doing with Jo?"

I shake my head, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't think I didn't see you with your trampy little fingers all over her."

Sarah pushes her face up close to mine, and I feel a rising sense of panic. Her breath smells of aniseed, and her eyes are unfocussed. Even with her feet spread wide on the floor, she's still bigger than me. She brings the index finger of her right hand up and punctuates each word with a hard jab in the middle of my chest.

"She's mine. Do you understand?"

"You've got the wrong idea."

"Jo's *mine*," She hisses. "Mine. I won't have you taking things that are mine. I know you only came with us to fuck

me about.”

“Sarah, it’s not like that. Janine asked me to come. Jo and I were just talking.”

The jabbing finger worms its way into the fabric of my dress like a fish hook. The sickening feeling I had on the subway comes back, slipping into my stomach like spoiled cream.

“You know Janine only asks you to come out because she feels *sorry* for you.”

“That’s not fair.”

She sneers. “What are you going to do about it?”

Any other day, any other time, I would have shrunk under that, but I don’t. Maybe I’m just buoyed up by the gut churning sensation of being on the edge of something, but I suddenly understand what Jo said about being under a magnifying glass. With a sense of total disconnection, like watching someone else do it instead of me, I push myself forwards with my hands using the wall like a spring board, and bring one knee up hard between Sarah’s legs. She drops like a stone, face screwed up with pained confusion and hands clutching at her crotch. As she collapses, I stagger forwards under the remains of my own momentum, and nearly go to the ground with her. I catch myself on the edge of the sink with one hand and stumble but stay upright, finding myself running for the exit for the second time today. Behind me, Sarah starts swearing with a linguistic diversity that would impress even Janine as she tries to stand up.

I burst through the swing doors and out into the club. The bartender is gone from the stairs – no sign of him in the crowd. I dart over to the table and mutter some unheard excuse as I snatch up my coat and purse, and hurry off into the cold air outside. Jo follows me as far as the top of the stairs, but I’m out of sight when she gets there. None of the others even move.

When I get home, I double check all the locks on the doors and windows before stripping off my dress and throwing it angrily into a corner along with my shoes. Muttering hateful nothings, I stalk around the bedsit like a caged animal until my bitter rage subsides into depressed isolation, and I find myself sat alone on the edge of my bed, listening to the disembodied voices of the people in the street outside.

Determined not to see in Christmas feeling sorry for myself, I grab the remains of a litre tub of ice cream from the freezer, and find the biggest spoon I can lay my hands on. I eat until I feel slightly sick, curled up in a nest of blankets and cushions, watching mindless movies until I drift finally into a restless sleep with my mouth open and the remaining ice cream slowly melting on my lap.

I sit by a long, dry desert road. The sun beats down like a mallet, and it’s hard to breathe. There’s a city in the distance, white walls waving and bending in the heat. It’s so hot that I’m sweating in my pyjamas, but the turtles will see me if I change, so I have to stay as I am. They watch judgementally from inside their shells, shaking their heads on long, wrinkly necks. Alaster pulls past me, driving a double decker bus full of passengers that stare at me with black eyes that look as though they’ve been hollowed out. Santa climbs off at the bus stop and comes towards me, face expressionless. He carries a bag over one shoulder that drips some kind of dark liquid onto the sand, where mechanical scorpions fight to drink it.

“I have never been wrong.”

It’s not Santa. Not really. It’s someone I’ve seen before; dark suit, thin face, pale eyes. His face doesn’t move but I know what he’s saying. I know what he’s thinking, but it makes no sense.

The side of the road gives way and tumbles down like an eroding cliff. He watches me as I scramble for the edge and fail, and then I’m Alice, falling, tumbling down the rabbit hole into voices and hot darkness, while stars spin above me.

I hear the beating of wings, and the roaring of some ancient monster. I'm so close to knowing what it is, stretching for the echo of memory to help me

"She's like us."

I can feel something looking for me, something with claws stretched wide. I try to shout for help, but nothing comes out of my mouth except snakes; I pull at them, but they just keep coming no matter how hard I pull, slipping out of my throat and choking me, brightly coloured, twisting angrily, covered in little bells that ring insistently as I pull and pull and pull.

"She'll do nicely."

The smiling cat hands me a telephone, but I can't answer it with my mouth full of snakes, and no matter how many times I pick up the receiver, it just won't stop ringing.

My mobile wakes me, face down on the bed with a mouthful of pillow. I stumble across the room to where I left it, pulling on my dressing gown and untangling my right foot from the sheets, one hand peeling off the spoon that's become stuck to my face with an unladylike combination of melted ice cream and drool. I catch the call just before the voicemail kicks in.

"Euguh?" It's meant to be hello, but my mouth still feels like it's full of bedding - or something worse.

"Mally, sweetheart, it's mum, I didn't wake you did I?"

"Oh, no, no I was watching telly. Didn't hear the phone." I'm trying to listen, but all the time I'm thinking about the lies we tell our parents, and the way we do it so easily. She keeps talking and I do my best to hear what she's saying, still partly in the dream, partly thinking how there's a silver haired man somewhere in the city that knows every lie I've ever told, apart from the one I just spat out now. That one is all mine.

The conversation is dull but pleasant. My brother has arrived for the holiday with his girlfriend and their two kids, my Dad's already half way down a bottle of sherry despite it not quite being ten a.m. on Christmas Eve, and has been sent off to the living room where he's singing raucously with the children - I can hear occasional shrieks of laughter at the other end of the line. Mum's been wrapping last minute presents in the bedroom and is apparently still doing so while she's on the phone. Am I still planning on coming to them for dinner tomorrow, do I need a lift, have I spoken to cousin Richard, he's coming for three and I could get a lift with him, it's only a little bit out of his way, and so on, and so on. I tell her about getting soaked yesterday. I don't mention the pub. I'm still not entirely certain it wasn't just part of the dream, brought on by mild pneumonia or the disastrous night out. She makes me promise to call my cousin. I lie again, and tell her I will. I'm still thinking of that ten minutes later when the battery flattens out.

I scrub the ice cream off the bed covers, and make a half-hearted attempt at tidying up, pausing as I find screwed up clothes in little piles, pulling the clean and dry ones on as extra layers and throwing the rest into a corner. I'm taking the little heater back into the hallway when the doorbell rings. I shout for whoever is there to wait as I pull a second pair of socks onto my freezing feet with one hand, still holding the heater in the other, and half walk half hop towards the door.

When I glance through the peephole, my stomach lurches forward. It's the bartender again, in a thick jacket and jeans. My breath catches and I stand in the hallway with my face pressed to the door; silent, still.

Nothing happens.

We can't be more than half a metre apart, separated by just my door. The only sound is the faint *tick tick tick* of

the hallway clock.

He knocks again, and I jump, stifling a squeak of alarm.

"Miss Jacobs?"

I swallow, but say nothing. In the cold air of the hallway, my breath starts to condense on the plastic of the door.

"Mallory? I came to explain. You know... about yesterday."

His tone is apologetic, his voice lowered to an almost intimate conversational level. He's looking down at his feet. How does he know where I live? How does he know my *name*?

"We didn't mean to scare you, and none of us mean you any harm at all. Nicholas didn't... well, he can have a bad effect on people like us, and he's not good at... what I mean is... well it's just..." He sighs, rubs at his scar.

My heart rate has sky rocketed. This is messed up.

"Look I'm not good at explaining this kind of thing, and no one ever believes me until they see it anyway. Can I show you something?"

There's a silent pause. I wonder how long it will take the police to get here if I call them – if there's even enough charge on my mobile to do that.

"Mallory? Sorry about this, it's probably going to..." his voice drops away almost to nothing, replaced by a high pitched whistling noise and a feeling like I'm being stretched upwards, then, "...startle you a bit."

And oh God he's *behind* me. Shock fills my stomach like ice, and I wheel around to face him, realising with horror just how much bigger he is than me; without my shoes on I don't even come up to his shoulders. A noise half way between words and screaming makes it into the back of my mouth before I swallow it into silence.

There's a moment, a few heartbeats where we just look at each other in the tiny space that we're sharing, without moving or speaking. Then he starts to raise his hands, and I don't wait to find out why. I swing the heater up in a line between his arms, connecting hard with the very end of his blunt jaw. His head jerks sharply backwards, and his skull strikes the wall behind him with a thunderous crack. I barely have time to dive out of the way as he collapses with startling speed, landing with his shoulders jammed up against the front door and his legs wedged neatly against the opposite wall. My brain clouds with panic. This giant of a man fills my little hallway almost entirely. Since the bedsit is in the basement and there are bars over the window in the main room, that door really is the only way out. With a sinking feeling, I realise I'm trapped in here with him.

I catch my bottom lip between my teeth; I must have hit the guy pretty hard because there's blood on his face. What if he's dead? Deciding I'm not getting personal enough to start messing about looking for a pulse, I crouch down a few feet away and check for the rise and fall of his cavernous chest. I hold my own breath while I wait for his, and am relieved to find out I haven't started Christmas by killing someone.

I turn on my heel and sprint for the bedroom, trying to think of someone I can call that'll get here faster than the police. Maybe if I can drag him out of the way, I can get out of here and go somewhere safe, somewhere nearby, but where? My upstairs neighbours are away on holiday, I'm pretty sure next door are running some kind of meth lab and probably don't want interrupting, and they're the best of a bad bunch so I'm not knocking on anyone else's door. If I run down the street screaming for help then someone might, *might* glance nervously at me before hurrying away. This is London after all. I don't even know where the nearest police station is. Still, anywhere will be better than here right now.

I'm reaching under the bed for my left boot when I hear movement in the hallway. I have no idea how long it should take someone to come round - in the movies, the bad guys always *stay* down once they get hit, so it hardly seems fair that I'm trying not to fall over while I pull my last boot on, looking round for something I can use as a weapon as his

slow footsteps get closer. By the time he makes it into the doorway, I'm stood on the bed clutching the detachable handle from the vacuum in one hand, and my still uncharged mobile in the other. He pulls back into the corridor as I launch the phone at him: it misses completely, smashing into two separate pieces on the wall.

"Could you stop that please?" His voice floats in from just out of sight. "I only want to talk to you."

"You just broke into my home, you mental bastard!" I shriek. "I'll do whatever the hell I want!"

There's a pause.

"Yeah. Yeah I kinda did, you're right. Look, I'm really sorry, but I need to talk to you. Can you just let me do that for a couple of minutes? Then I promise I'll leave. I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't important."

I say nothing.

After a moment, he pokes his head tentatively back into the room, then when he realises I'm not throwing anything else at him, he takes a half step inside. With me standing on the bed, we're about the same height, and I'm starting to feel slightly ridiculous, standing here hanging on to my makeshift club. I shift my balance between my feet, and the ancient springs creek unhappily under me.

"What do you want?" I shake the detached handle at him, trying to look fierce.

"Honestly?"

I nod.

"We need you to help us fight a dragon."

I snort. "Yeah, right. Then we'll go have tea with the elves. What do you want, arsehole?"

He rolls his eyes. "It would be nice if just *once* someone believed me when I told them about this."

"You're crazy. You *and* your weirdo friends."

"Come on, I just teleported into your flat. I think we're way beyond crazy now."

"You..." I blink at him, then trail off into silence. I'd been so panicked that I hadn't even given it a second thought, but he's just appeared out of thin air in my hallway. I try desperately to think of a way he could have pulled that off as some kind of trick or stunt, and fail.

"We do need your help." He says, voice gentle. "But you need ours too. People like you and me don't just get to wander around unnoticed for long. Eventually you'll get spotted, and please believe me when I say that without us you could be in very serious danger."

"I don't... I don't understand." My voice sounds whiny and confused. I feel a little bit like I might throw up.

"You're like us. It's a little hard to explain, but very simply, you can perform miracles."

"I don't think so. If I could perform miracles I'd be a lottery winner."

"That's not a miracle, that's just common luck. A miracle is something ordinary people *can't* do. Something beyond what you should be naturally capable of. Like getting into my bar."

"Come again?" My arms are starting to ache, and so is my head.

He leans heavily on the doorframe, right hand questing around his jawline. The blood from his chin smears onto the tips of his fingers. "I'm going to tell you something else you won't believe, so first of all let me remind you how I got in here in the first place."

I nod. I'm not saying 'teleportation'. It sounds so stupid.

"The bar doesn't exist."

That's just a bit too much, even when I'm trying to be open minded, and I laugh. It's a short, harsh noise.

"It doesn't. Not the way you'd think of it, anyway. I can prove it. I'm going now. I'm going back to the bar, and I'm

going to go on foot this time. If you want answers, then come with me. If not... well I guess that's up to you." He shrugs and turns to leave, pausing on the way out and looking back at me. "I'm sorry about, well, you know. Breaking in."

Then he leaves. I hear him walk to the end of the corridor and try the locked front door. There are a few colourful murmured words, then silence. I wait, standing on the bed, listening to my own breath. The tap in the kitchenette drips slowly; little splashes of water that sound like crashing waves in the quiet. Eventually I step down, and look nervously into the hall. It's empty. Dust motes hang undisturbed in the air like tiny imperfections in the light. Clutching my equally imperfect weapon in one hand, I step over the wreckage of my phone and out into the hall, pulling the door of the main room shut behind me to silence the tap. I'm sure he's left. He'll be about halfway down the street now, but I have to be certain.

I check the postage stamp sized bathroom by pushing it open with one foot and glancing inside suspiciously. Empty. Even Janine would find it hard to hide in there.

One door left.

The locked front door.

I stand in front of it for a moment, thinking, then reach over pull the door key off its little metal hook. I bounce it in my palm a couple of times. He's been in and out without even unlocking the door; the security chain is still on. I want to know how he did it. If he can... well I *know* he can teleport, don't I. There's no point arguing with that. If he wanted to hurt me, he'd have done it already. I got lucky with the heater: if he came at me, if he was ready for me, I wouldn't stand a chance. I lean the vacuum handle against the wall. It would have been about as much use as strong language if he'd actually attacked me. If he changes his mind later, can I even hide from him? He found where I lived, and he knew what I was called.

So far, this Christmas is definitely *not* going the way I expected. Worry sinks tiny claws into my stomach and pulls at it insistently. What if he was telling the truth? Could I be in danger? There could be other people out there like him who know who I am and where I live, and who won't apologise for breaking in and then just leave.

I let myself out, lock the door quickly behind me, and run down the street after him.

MIRACLES

Tiny flakes of snow are falling through the still air. My street is always strangely quiet at this time of day, and the eerie half silence is not helping settle my nerves. I trail after the bartender, keeping him in front of me where I can see him, and scrutinising him with narrowed eyes. Despite his size, he seems so *normal*. If he wasn't a giant, he'd be the kind of guy you could just walk past in the street without a second glance. He looks uncomfortably over his shoulder at me every now and then, like he's not certain if I'm still there.

After a few minutes, he stops and turns to me. "This would be much quicker if you let me carry you."

For a moment I'm sure I've misheard him. "Carry..?"

"Not in the sense of picking you up and throwing you over my shoulder. I'm not a cave man you know."

"Of course you're not." I snap back at him. "You're the handsome prince and I'm the dumbass little princess you're going to ride in and save. Want me to sing a song and get all my animal friends to come sew me a ball dress? I don't have any glass slippers, so we'll have to make do."

He sighs. "Look, all I'm asking you to do is take my hand." He holds his out to me. It's got to be bigger than my face.

"You want me to hold your hand? I was right, you *are* mental."

"Try to trust me Mallory. I know it's hard, but this will help things make sense."

I shake my head, unable to believe I'm doing this, and reach out for his hand like it might explode at any moment. The tips of my fingers rest nervously on his palm for a second, looking tiny and fragile, and then his hand closes gently around mine, and everything changes.

Blue light like sunshine under water spreads out from our joined hands until I can't see anything else. The sensation of being stretched comes back, making me feel slightly light headed. I realise that the whistling I heard earlier, before he appeared behind me in my hallway, is distant high pitched singing. The closer I get to it, as I'm stretched further, the more beautiful it becomes. I feel tears pricking the surface of my eyes, although I can't see enough for it to make a difference. There's no sensation of being stood in the street any more, the only physical thing is my hand in his, and it is like being carried. I feel like a child with the arms of my parents around me; sheltering, comforting, strong. I'm safe, truly and completely, so long as he has my hand.

Then I have ground under my feet and mundane sensation returns; cold air on my skin, the familiarity of socks and shoes, the label of my jeans poking into the small of my back. With that comes logic; the light and the singing are gone. My eyes are closed, fingers still cupped in his palm. Still safe.

"Mallory?"

"Mmm?"

"You can open your eyes now."

And reluctantly, I do. The world around me has changed from an open and deserted street to the close proximity of brick walls, and the unpleasant smell of a London back alley. I snatch my hand back and step away from him, out onto the open pavement. This is the route I take to work. Even on Christmas Eve it's a busy main road, lined by buildings whose shapes are familiar and whose faces have formed a comfortably ignored peripheral blur of colour to my life every day for months.

I frown, trying to remember where the door to the pub was, trying to find the spot I was stood in when I saw that

wall of rain as it rushed towards me. It comes back in a flood of memory: the positions of the other people in the street, the colours of the shop front signs, the rusted grill of a security mesh over the windows of the off license, even the feel of the cracked and uneven pathway under my feet. With a snort, I leave the bartender behind me and march towards the place I know the door has to be.

"Doesn't exist, my arse. I'll show you doesn't exist. It's right here.... oh..."

But it's just a wall; crumbling brickwork and old stale paint. It must be twenty or thirty years old, and there is no door. I take a few steps backwards into the street, jaw working silently, desperate for some logical explanation. I try to convince myself I must have been stood somewhere else, but this is definitely the right place. I stepped sideways here and... and... and there's nothing here but *wall*.

"No, no that's not..." I swallow hard, and take a couple of deep breaths, pinching the bridge of my nose with one hand as I try to focus, and not to freak out. "So how do I find the way back in?"

"I don't know how you found it in the first place; it's supposed to be a safe house." He tries to hide it, but he sounds slightly peevisish. "I can take you there, but I want to know how you got in. Go ahead and try."

I run one hand gently over the surface of the wall, then both hands. It's cold and solid, and I can feel little specks of the dry white paint come away on my fingers. It's a wall. It's just a wall. I'm about to turn away when I feel the faintest itch in my fingertips. It's familiar. I close my eyes.

"I wanted to be somewhere dry..."

He doesn't say anything. I feel around with my hands. There's a handle here somewhere. I had hold of it yesterday... my right hand brushes metal; a thick, heavy door handle that tingles against my skin. I laugh aloud at my own success and push the door open without even thinking. My feet pull me forward and as I open my eyes again I realise I'm standing in the pub, wearing a slightly foolish victory grin. Three figures on the balcony turn to look down into the main room. The last is stood by the fire, back turned, silver hair gleaming coldly.

One of them, who I recognise as George, leans out to get a better look. "Ha! I told you Nick, I told you he'd do it!"

"My name is not *Nick*." His voice is a steel thread in the air.

"I don't care what you want to call yourself, you owe me fifty quid, you miserable old git!"

The bartender is only a moment behind me. I know he's there before he touches me gently on the shoulder, but it's still a nice gesture, even if I am beginning to think I'm beyond being startled any more today. The three men on the balcony make their way down to join us.

George is at the front, energetically happy. "You sly little bastard Chris, how did you do it?"

Instead of waiting for an answer, George turns to me with open arms like we're old friends. For an uncomfortable moment I think he's going to try to hug me, but Chris steps neatly between us and leads me to a seat near the bar. It's still in dashing distance of the door like he's giving me the option to run for it if I need to.

"Let's take this one step at a time, shall we?" Chris pulls another seat up near to mine, and points to each of the others in turn. "This is George. He's a foul mouthed old drunkard, but his heart's in the right place."

"My lady," George, who looks to be easily ten or twenty years older than me, bows theatrically.

"This is Demetrius, although we just call him Dem. Don't take it personally if he doesn't say much. He and George grew up in the same town, and I think that he's just used to George doing all the talking." Dem, a dark haired and stocky man who looks to be a good decade George's junior, but with the same olive complexion, nods with an acknowledging grunt.

"Thomas is easier company than those two, but he's had the benefit of an education above the gutter level."

The last of the little trio steps forward and offers me his hand. This is the one who was splashed with beer yesterday; he's tall, slim, and handsome, with a gentle face framed by curly blonde hair. It's a slightly angelic picture which is a little unsettling, but his smile at least is fairly normal. "I'm pleased to meet you Mallory. I'm glad you decided to come and join us."

There's a derisive snort from near the fireplace.

"That, of course, is Nicholas."

With the introductions over, there's a slightly awkward pause, then Thomas takes a seat at one of the iron clad tables and somehow smiles at me like I'm a little girl. "You must have a lot of questions, dear. Start wherever you like, and we'll do our best to answer them."

I know exactly where I want to start. I point at Nicholas's back. "What did he do to me yesterday?"

Nicholas smiles icily over his shoulder, looking right at me, which is somehow worse than him ignoring me. "I read you."

"Which means?"

"I find it hard to believe you haven't got any idea at all. Is intellect a weak point for you?"

I feel a flicker of irritation. The man might unsettle me, but I'm not being talked to like this by him, not when I'm supposedly here to help them. I scowl at him. "I suggest you start being a damn site more forthcoming with the explanations, *Nick*, or you can fight your bloody dragon without me."

He raises an eyebrow. I can feel the others holding their breath. I have an urge to apologise, but I bite it back. Unexpectedly, Nicholas starts laughing. It's a strange sound; almost... jolly.

"Oh George was right; you do have some spine after all. I'll give you your explanation. I am what you would call a *telepath*." He says the word like it's dirty, almost hurrying it out so he doesn't have to be associated with it for too long. "In fact I am a psychic, although I would not expect you to understand the difference. If I so choose, I can read everything about you - absolutely everything, although I think that perhaps you have some understanding of that already. It is the first of my miracles. But," he raises a finger, and the laughter is gone again, as though it was never there, "don't make the mistake of thinking your role will be to *fight* this thing."

"Then what..."

"Do you know what a dragon is, girl?"

"Big fire-breathing lizard with wings."

He sighs and glances heavenward. "Save us from children and their story books. A dragon is a manifestation of disaster. They are not native to this reality, but when they are hungry they will try to push their way in, at points where the barriers are weak. Once here they shed their physical form and exist as a kind of force. Some people can sense their approach in dreams, which is where the myth that you are familiar with comes from. Some fewer, more unfortunate people can touch their minds when they come close. They exacerbate the many flaws of humanity, feeding the flames of war and destruction."

"Wars are caused by dragons?" I ask, voice laced with sarcasm.

"Don't be ridiculous. Wars are caused by *humans*, who need no supernatural interference to embark upon lunacy and genocide, but the presence of a dragon acts as a catalyst. They can make a terrible thing far worse. They are drawn to anthropogenic disasters, but will just as easily aggravate disease or famine or natural disaster. They are monsters of the highest order, and you are simply not capable of fighting one."

"Then why am I even here? I was told you wanted me to help you."

"Are you familiar with the story of Saint George and the dragon?"

"Yeah, sort of. He rode in on his big white horse and saved the day."

His face stays serious. "Well that story is true, more or less, although there are multiple retellings and variations. What generally isn't known is that in the region the dragon was ravaging, a local priest had found a way to traverse the walls between realities.

"The priest had clear visions of dragons, even when he was awake. He was one of the reasons we know as much about them as we do. He kept journals, but regrettably they have been lost. The visions had driven him hopelessly insane, but he'd managed to work out that dragons can sense differences in human gender. Their species appears to have no such difference. There's something about female physiology that fascinates them; it makes them want to play with their food before eating, although whether that's preferable for their victims is debatable. The soldiers he'd sent through to fight had been killed from the air, but when he started sending women through, the dragon actually landed and came to take a look. Your role is really very simple. You will lure the beast in, giving us time to assault it."

"Wait... I'm..."

"Yes dear. You're bait."

My jaw drops open and stays that way. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it sure as hell wasn't that. He looks over at the now quiet George, who mutters something colourful into his drink.

"Wait, wait. You're not going to tell me *he's* the George from the story? He's *Saint* George?"

"As far as patron saints go, he's a little disappointing, isn't he?" Nicholas says, folding his arms across his chest.

At this, George pulls his face out of his pint and swears loudly and extensively at Nicholas. It's an impressive display, apparently fuelled by genuine anger. Nicholas waits dispassionately for him to finish, gloved hands relaxed, and one eyebrow raised. Eventually, George deflates into an awkward silence, and Demetrius puts one hand on his shoulder in a brotherly gesture. George shrugs it off, but without any real feeling.

I cough, nervously. "Aren't saints supposed to be devoutly catholic and able to answer prayers and stuff?"

It's Thomas that answers me. "It helps if you think of stories as behaving like rivers. Over time they pick up tributaries and once that happens the original becomes indistinguishable from the combined whole. This is something we've discussed in depth Mallory, and the best explanation we have is that in simpler times, our actions were either attributed to holier men than us, or in some cases the stories inspired people to do great things. Of course the stories don't always get it right. Saint George is often depicted as a Caucasian Templar on horseback, for example, whereas our George is allergic to horses, and informs me he has never worn a tabard in his life."

"Okay. Okay." I take a couple of deep breaths, and consider just how wrong I was when I thought I was past being surprised. "So you may or may not be saints, you have superpowers but you call them miracles, and you're what, hundreds of years old?"

Thomas smiles and continues. "When we started out, there was no understanding of anything like superpowers; the things we could do were seen as miracles, so that's what we call them. We do live for a very long time. We're not immortal but we don't age the same way as other people, and we're generally healthier, stronger, more robust and slightly faster than normal. Where we've been able to speak to the others, it seems there's a tendency towards developing three miracles, usually related to each other."

I nod. "Well, what are mine?"

"I'll have to ask Nicholas to answer that question. There's no biological differences between miracles, so it's not a subject I can comment on."

Nicholas looks me up and down with the same level of interest as he might show a rather boring set of clothes. "She's a seeker, although that much should be obvious. Some sort of shielding ability as well, not developed enough to use properly. No third."

Thomas leans forward on his seat. "I've never met a seeker before."

"Well make the most of it. If she messes this up and gets eaten, even you won't get chance to chat afterwards."

I gawp at him, trying to work out if he's serious. When he continues to ignore me, I turn back to Thomas with a slightly nervous laugh. "What's a seeker?"

He smiles. "It's what we call someone with a miracle that allows them to find things that are lost or hidden."

"That sounds dull."

"Not at all; it's phenomenally useful, especially if you take the time to train and develop it properly. Let me ask you a question Mallory. Have you ever lost your keys?"

I have to think about this, but not for very long. I shake my head.

"Wallet?"

"No."

"TV remote?"

"Nope."

"That's because every time you turn to find something that's lost, you know where it is. Did you play hide & seek as a child?"

"Yeah, but not much. The other kids wouldn't play with me. They said I cheated – I always thought they were just lousy at hiding."

"Well, playing hide and seek with a seeker, even a latent one like yourself, is a bit like playing poker with a telepath. If Nicholas is right, and of course..."

Here Chris and George join him, chorusing, "Nicholas is always right!"

Nicholas, caught halfway through protesting his track record himself, gives them a sour look and turns his back on all of us.

Thomas smiles. "In fairness, I truly have never known him be wrong, although sometimes he doesn't tell us everything. If he says you're a seeker, then you are one. He also says you have some shielding ability."

"What's that?"

"Shielding covers quite a range of skills. Yours is undeveloped, and probably not particularly strong yet, although there's no reason it couldn't become so with time and practise."

"Is it bad that I don't have a third one?"

He shakes his head. "I don't, and I seem to manage. You may have a third; I couldn't even begin to speculate. It could be linked in with your shielding or seeking, but we won't know if you have it until it develops."

"You know an awful lot about this sort of thing." I sigh, certain I can feel a headache coming on.

Chris passes me an open bottle with a knight in armour on the label. "Thomas is an academic, and this is his field of expertise. If you let him, he'll talk all night, and only half of it will actually make any sense."

"Thanks for the warning. So, what do you guys do then?" I ask, knocking back a third of the bottle.

Chris drains his own and without looking throws the empty over one shoulder, where it lands neatly in the glass bin - his smile is slightly smug as he continues. "Well, George and Demetrius are pretty physical. They're both very strong and very tough, especially Dem, and he's fast too. Thomas is a healer, and we think he's actually immortal - I don't mean

he doesn't get old like the rest of us, I mean he actually can't be killed."

"It wasn't fun finding that one out, I can assure you." Thomas grimaces.

Chris laughs. "He also has a tendency to end up in trouble. If he has a third miracle, he's either keeping it from us or he just hasn't developed it yet."

I jerk a thumb over my shoulder towards the fireplace. "And him?"

"Nicholas is the strongest psychic you're ever likely to meet." Chris says soberly. "It's not what you'd call a good thing though; over time he's developed to the point that it's uncontrollable if people get close enough to him. That's got worse over time and I haven't seen him leave this place in about five years. He has a form of hypnosis - that's what he did to you yesterday - and it kind of... stops everything about a person. It means they normally don't realise he's reading them. It's quite dangerous, so he doesn't tend to use it for long."

"What about you?" I ask, sipping from my bottle again.

"Well, you've seen most of what I can do."

"And do you normally make a habit of following women around London and breaking into their homes? Because I have to tell you, if you do, that's a deal breaker."

Chris turns a lurid shade of crimson, but George and Thomas laugh. Demetrius's face breaks into a wide smile, although he says nothing.

George, still laughing, answers me. "Be fair to him love, we were worried that Nick had scared you off, and we needed your help. We sent Chris to find you and explain stuff to you because, well in honesty, Nick's too much of a pain in the arse, I was pissed, Thomas was crying over getting his shirt wet and Dem's just shite at explaining things."

"Hey!" It's the first thing I've heard Demetrius say.

"What? Come on, you never say *anything!*" George laughs, both arms raised.

Demetrius shrugs his now predictably silent agreement.

I turn back to Chris, who seems to have got his complexion back under control. "So are you... y'know. *Are you a saint?*"

"Not me. I think that kind of thing is reserved for people with more faith than me. I've been around for a while, and I think that the beginning of the story of Saint Christopher is very similar to mine. "

"And the end, mate. And the end." That's George, suddenly serious.

"What do you mean?"

George clears his throat. "Saint Christopher was beheaded as a martyr."

My eyes swivel to the ragged, unpleasant scar round Chris's neck. "How..."

"It was a dreadful shot, and Thomas is *very* good. He was only..."

A sudden crash by the fireplace interrupts him, and all of us turn to where Nicholas has fallen, one hand still gripping the back of the chair he's dragged down with him. His skin is deathly pale, and his eyes are rolled so far back that all I can see is whites.

"What the hell..." I stand, alarmed.

The others are on their feet too as Thomas hurries forward, stopping just outside the bricked semi-circle. He stares at Nicholas, clenching and unclenching his fists, but not stepping any closer.

"What's wrong with him?" I hiss at George.

"It's the dragon, love." He murmurs.

"It's doing it again, Chris!" Thomas says desperately.

Chris puts a hand on my shoulder protectively. "As the Dragon gets closer - well its mind is a lot stronger than yours or mine. Because Nicholas never leaves here, it... we think it knows he's here and it's attacking him. He's a recognisable threat."

"Can you help him?" I ask. "Can't Thomas do something?"

"It's not a physical attack, Mallory." Thomas's voice is laced with frustration. "It's a psychic assault, and there's nothing I can do about it. It doesn't even emanate from the same psychic realm that we're in right now; I'm completely out of my depth!"

George gives Chris an uneasy look. "Any ideas?"

Chris thinks for a moment, one hand rubbing at his scar. "Thomas, you're going to have to get in there and make physical contact with him."

"What? You know what that'll do to him!"

"Yes, I do. It'll form a total and uncontrollable link to you. It might seriously harm him, it'll sure as hell mess him up, but it might also shock him enough to get him back here. Do you think he'd rather have your mind in there with him or that thing? One of us needs to do it, and it'll hurt him least if you do it."

Thomas swallows and nods. He takes a deep breath, then steps towards the fireplace.

On the floor, Nicholas spasms, his whole body going rigid. Thomas, clearly unhappy, drops to his knees next to the other man, one hand outstretched but not touching his shoulder.

"Nicholas, can you hear me?" Thomas turns to look at Chris, clearly unhappy. "I don't think I should..."

Nicholas's eyes snap open and his face twists into an angry snarl. Faster than I can truly follow, both of his gloved hands lash out and pull Thomas down as he screeches gibberish into the younger man's golden face. His spit settles like beads of sweat, but Thomas barely seems to notice. Instead of trying to get away, he grips both of Nicholas's shoulders, and with what looks like genuine tenderness, pulls the two of them together as if in an embrace. Their foreheads connect with a soft thump, then Nicholas stiffens, and he screams. I've never heard a man scream before. It's a ragged, desperate, haunting sound. It goes on until his breath runs out, and I know that I'll remember it forever. His eyes flicker, and struggle to focus on the man holding him. Then he says something so quiet I can't hear it, and his body sags.

In the shocked silence that follows, Thomas looks up at us. "Better start moving Chris."

"What did he say?"

"It's coming."

The bar room explodes into a frenzy of action around me as George, Christopher and Demetrius begin breaking out equipment and locking down cabinets and cases with the efficiency and practised ease of an airline crew. Demetrius hurries past me carrying a heavy looking blade - not one of the pretty, shiny things I've seen in movies but a real weapon; a tool designed for one purpose. One very messy purpose.

"Mallory, can you come here please?" Thomas is still holding on to Nicholas, and is starting to look panicked.

I pick my way round the tables and pause uncertainly at the edge of the bricks. Nicholas is twitching like he's been electrocuted.

"I need you to help me." His voice trembles, like he's on the edge of losing control.

My eyes widen. "Me? Do what? Can't you just fix him?"

"He's not injured, there's nothing to fix. He's not unconscious, or comatose, but something's very wrong. I think he's just gone."

"He's dead?" My jaw is hanging open.

"No, just... *gone*. Like a part of him is missing."

"What do you want me to do?"

He looks up at me and his face is full of desperation. "*Find* him. Tell me where he's gone so I can get him back!"

I open my mouth. Nothing comes out.

"I know you've never done anything like this before, and I am truly sorry to have to ask you to start like this, but I think it's taken him away somewhere and if you don't find out where that is, we'll never get him back. No one else can do it."

Panic floods into my guts, and cold surprise prickles at the small of my back. The greatest pressure I've ever been under has been making sure I didn't mix up black bean beef with satay chicken during a busy shift at work. Now I'm being told a man's life depends on me literally performing a miracle, and I have no idea what to do. My mouth feels dry, continuing to work silently for a moment. I'm about to tell Thomas that I can't help him; how can I? I've known about this for a few hours!

A large and gentle hand settles on my shoulder, and Chris smiles down at me. "Thomas got beer on his shirt yesterday. Where's the shirt now?"

The question is so totally out of context that it throws me completely, and I'm barely thinking when I say; "Hanging up in the back room. Oh..."

His smile widens and he squeezes my shoulder. "You're a seeker. Nicholas is just lost, and you have a talent for lost and hidden things. You *can* do this. I believe in you, and I only met you yesterday."

I swallow hard, and gesture at the brick semi-circle. "Can I, uh..."

Thomas nods. "You can't hurt him right now."

I step forwards and drop into a crouch at Nicholas's head, trying to think about how to start. With no better idea, I close my eyes and reach out for him, like trying to remember where I last saw him. He's lying on the floor but there's something not right. That's not all of him, or at least it doesn't feel like all of him; it feels light somehow. Hollow, even. I cast about, aware that I'm moving my hands around, and trying not to be embarrassed. My brow furrows as I concentrate, trying to see through closed eyes. Christopher is stood behind me, one hand on my shoulder. My fingers brush Nicholas's forehead and a sudden violent sensation runs between the three of us like I'm connected to bunches of hot wires instead of human beings. There's an intense pressure against the sides of my head, and a feeling like the whole room is being pulled in towards me, then the warmth of the fire snaps into a dry cold. The light pressure of Chris's hand vanishes, and the noise of George and Demetrius is swallowed into a sudden and heavy silence.

"Chris?"

Nothing.

"Thomas?"

Nothing.

"Oh God."

I am completely alone.

PART TWO

"In nearly all documented instances of latent sainthood, untrained individuals thankfully lack the ability to trigger complex skill sets.

There exists a significant risk to an unprepared psyche when confronted with so changing an influence: to have one's frame of reference for reality challenged in such a manner invites a loss of emotional and spiritual balance, and has been known in the case of some psychic disciplines to lead to contagious madness."

Savia deHauteville, 1802

THE BROKEN CITY

Slowly, I open one eye, then the other. The bricked floor of the pub has gone and I'm kneeling in ashes while little curls of soot drift slowly through the air around me. I'm outside on a wide, curving road that looks like it used to be a main thoroughfare in a big city. There are buildings on either side that have been gutted by fire, and their remains loom over me; empty ruins that clutch at the sky like skeletal fingers. Here and there tendrils of smoke still curl into the air, but it's cold on the ground.

I stand up, brushing ash from my jeans, and look around. I'm not going to panic. I'm not. I'm *not*. I repeat that like a mantra as I turn slowly in the street, looking at my surroundings. A pair of overturned and burned out cars are locked in a crumpled embrace in the middle of the road behind me. A single wheel on the closest one turns slowly and silently. Shop fronts with smashed windows have decorated the pavement with broken glass that shines dully in the settled ash. Through gaps between buildings I see landmarks that I recognise, and others that look like they might once have had some misplaced familiarity. A few streets over to my left, smoke rises through the shattered dome of St Paul's Cathedral. Further away, the top of the Eiffel Tower stands forlorn over the other buildings, its upper girders twisted and bent. Beyond that the last mirrored windows of the Chrysler Building reflect distant fires. I have no idea where the hell I am, but this no place from the world I live in.

"Don't think I'm in Kansas anymore," I murmur into the grey air.

Truthfully, I've never been to Kansas, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't look like this. I wipe my ashy fingers absently on my jumper, still looking up and down the street, and realise with a sinking feeling that I have no idea how to get out of here. If this is the place that Nicholas has gone to, and somehow I've ended up here too, I need to find him. I'm not sure that his company will be better than being on my own, but maybe he'll know how to get out of this wasteland. I cup my hands around my mouth, calling his name, then the names of the others, until I'm hoarse. The sound dies in the smothering ash fall. With no replying echo in the desolation of the street, there's something unsettling about the muffled sound of my own voice.

Being told I'm a seeker, whatever that really means, apparently doesn't mean I know *how* to find lost and hidden things. I know I've done it before; I knew how to find Thomas's stupid shirt, like remembering where it had been left, but no one mentioned anything about me being able to teleport and no one mentioned me going anywhere. Maybe this place isn't real. Maybe it's some kind of hallucination or dream. Seizing on that idea I pinch at my cheeks and forearms violently, hoping that I'm dreaming and that somehow I'll wake up. No such luck. All I end up with is a pink face and aching arms. I try to think of the things you're not meant to be able to do when you're asleep, and come up with two; tie your shoelaces and read. I glare at my zipped up boots as though they're somehow responsible for this whole sorry situation. Everything in the street is so covered in ash that it's hard to make out words on signs or shop fronts. I walk to the only intact window that I can make out in the street and wipe the dirt from the glass. Letters appear through the grime, and my initial delight at the seemingly random 'EN 7 D' becomes dismay as I clear more of the glass, and reveal the rest:

OPEN 7 DAYS

LOWEST PRICES IN THE CITY

Not a dream then. My disappointment is almost tangible. I can't possibly be here, this place can't be real. It just can't. I peer through the smeared glass at the packed rows of discount junk littering the shelves. At the far end of the room the shelves have come loose from the wall and scattered blue and white porcelain dolls onto the floor. Some are mostly whole amidst the fragmented corpses of their companions. A chalk board behind the counter declares in a bold hand '*If we don't have it, you don't want it! If you don't see it, ask!*' I turn my back to the window and close my eyes. How the hell am I going to find Nicholas and get out of here when I don't even know where here is?

I take a breath and settle myself as best I can. Maybe this isn't Kansas, but I have something Dorothy never did; with or without magic shoes, I'm supposed to be able to work miracles. I stand in the street, hands bunched into fists, analysing what they told me, but it's no good; everything I've done so far I've done by accident, even finding the bar the second time. I consider trying to do *this* by accident as well, and look carefully left and right, one after the other, hoping that one of them will seem like a better option somehow.

Nothing happens.

Both ends of the curving road look equally dark and miserable. With a sense of hopelessness, I choose a direction at random, and start walking, leaving fresh footprints that fill slowly as the falling ash covers them.

My feet make the only sound as I trudge through the jumbled streets. There's no wind, no noise of people. Even my breathing seems somehow muted, but each footfall on the ash is as loud as the crunch of broken glass under heavy boots. I've never walked on ashes before, but I don't think that's normal. Maybe nothing about this place is normal.

I find myself walking in the middle of the road, eyes wide. Buildings that I walk past every day lie in broken ruins, others that seem hauntingly familiar stand filthy and damaged, and among them are places I've never seen, some that look ancient and historical, some modern and cutting edge, but all damaged, all dirty.

I reach a crossroads that stretches out in front of me, open and empty, and wander aimlessly into the centre to stare around and see where the other three paths lead. About a hundred metres down the left hand road, the broken front of a familiar building catches my attention, and for lack of a better option, I turn in that direction. It's one of the least damaged buildings I've come across so far; the grey stone façade of the cinema from the town I grew up in. It looks somehow saddened here, with ashen walls and cracked glass doors, but seeing it still lifts me a little as a crowd of happy memories push forward in my mind. Tattered posters hang on the stonework, faded and unreadable.

I walk up the steps and peer in through the spider web of cracks, but the glass is too dirty for me to make anything out in the gloom. I wipe absently at the door, pulling away too late as I hear the crackle of the damaged glass. It gives under the weight of my hand and collapses around my feet in a deafening cacophony of broken shards. I wince, ears ringing in the awful silent tension that follows the noise, holding my breath to see if anything will happen, though nothing does.

"Jesus!"

My breath comes out in a relieved burst, and I almost laugh as I step carefully over the shattered glass and into the entry hall. I blink in the dim light, and as my eyes adjust to the gloom, my jaw opens, sliding my smile off my face to land with the broken pieces of the door. The inside of the building is gone, replaced with a dark, yawning hole that looks deep enough to have killed me if I'd taken even a few more steps. I have a faint, half held memory of falling down and snakes, and it's a moment before I realise this pit is frighteningly similar to the drop from my dream last night. Everything about it, every crumbling inch of the edge, is an uncanny replica. I look up, nervously, expecting to see whirling stars

overhead, but there's only the stained ceiling with its peeling plasterwork.

I back up into the street, now even more shaken. I can't stay in this place. I have to find a way out of here, even if I have to do it on my own. I just have to remember how I found my way in. Clarity like a bright light floods into me - when I went back to the bar this morning, when I found the door, I was trying to *remember*. I close my eyes and clench my jaw. My mouth sets in a thin, determined line as I remember Nicholas standing in the bricked semi-circle by the fire; silver stubble on his cheeks, eyes glittering in a cold counterpoint to the flames. At first there's nothing. I try harder - thinking about the way he put me on edge, the sneer, the derisive voice. A strange feeling builds up at my temples, a sensation like not being sure if I locked the door, or trying to recall where I left something. I fixate on it. My eyes open wide with surprise as I realise I know where Nicholas is. It's not a clear understanding; it's more a fuzzy, slightly drunken sense of direction, like knowing which way is north. I concentrate until I'm sure I could spin round and round until I was sick and still be able to point towards him. This whole place is something beyond what I can explain, but at least now I have a purpose. I summon my newfound confidence, and begin walking.

The city becomes warmer as I walk, and the land starts to rise. The distant glow of firelight creeps closer until flames become clearly visible in the middle distance. Fires become larger and more wide-spread and the ash fall thickens until the sky disappears above a thick pall of smoke. Jagged shards of translucent black glass glitter where they've pushed up through the road. They're small at first, and I nearly trip over the first one. It's sharp enough to gouge a groove in the toe of my left boot, which makes me unrealistically angry. I stomp up and down on the ground next to the glass, hissing and swearing, wishing I had a hammer to smash the offending thing. I don't clearly remember starting to move again, muttering dark words under my breath as I half walk half prowl down the street. The shards get larger as I head towards Nicholas, and after a few minutes I have to walk around knee high outcrops. Flickering shadows play inside them, unmarked by the sooty filth that covers everything else here, including me. Images of violence and hate ripple across the larger surfaces like dim movie screens, and I stare at them as I make my way past. It's like watching silent television - a couple of times I find myself standing and just looking at them with no idea of how long I've been doing it.

Nicholas stays like a beacon in my mind as I travel. The road remains straight and wide, but changes from a gentle slope to a more obvious hill. Flames curl inside buildings as I walk past them, some reduced to glowing embers, others burning stubbornly, forcing me to move to the opposite side of the road, hands covering my face as I scurry by, feeling the sting of the fire on my skin even at a distance. Some of the larger fires roar unchecked with an unbelievable heat that seems to crackle on my clothes and hair, and I find myself forced to take detours through side streets and narrow, twisting alleys, walking deliberately in the wrong direction to find a circuitous route forwards. My single point of direction doesn't help me navigate these new paths, and after being turned around a couple of times, I start to worry about the possibility of getting very seriously lost. I focus on little landmarks and things in the street to remember in case I have to return the way I've come; a red letterbox turned almost grey, a toppled news stand with papers and magazines spilled onto the pavement, flapping gently in the thermals created by the warmth of the nearby fires.

Choosing paths almost at random, I turn a corner where a half empty glass fronted vending machine offers up cans and packages labelled in a language I can't read. It looks a little like Cantonese, although I couldn't read it even if it was. I can certainly recognise the similarities between this and things I've seen Simon write down at work; thick lines form letters that seems more like brush stroke pictures.

The far side of the machine looks crushed, like something was dropped on it from a great height, although there's

nothing around that looks likely to be responsible. Coins have spilled out onto the ground and I stoop to pick one up, rubbing it mostly clean with my fingers. It's an imperfectly round black disc, with a thick off-gold band around the edge, and a small square hole in the centre. At some point there's been four symbols at cardinal points, although three of them have worn down to metallic smears on the black background. The fourth, still a little squashed, is in the same brushstroke style as the symbols on the cans in the machine. It's an ornate T shape with diagonal strokes coming down on either side of the main upright section. I turn it over idly in my hand a couple of times. The back is a series of ten wave-like lines, one broken in half by a square border around the central hole. It looks old enough to have passed through countless hands.

The lights in the machine flicker on suddenly, startling me, and I half jump backwards, dropping the coin to the floor where it bounces soundlessly and rolls away into the street. The fluorescents stay on for a second or two, blinking angrily, then die in a spray of electrical sparks. By the time I've raised my hand to shield my eyes from the sudden light, it's gone.

Beyond the corner, the road curves away tightly. Ancient looking timbered buildings lean precariously out over asphalt, and New York parking meters stand next to Wild West style horse troughs. The black glass shards poke through walls like the sides of some gigantic, ridiculous spike trap, and I pick my way forward carefully as the path becomes increasingly narrow. The houses crowd closer and closer, looming grey and black walls that seem to sway around and above me, pressing in on me from all sides. It's almost a relief when I see that two of the buildings ahead have actually collapsed into the street, blocking my way. I give some half-hearted thought to climbing over, but the idea of the climb, passing the glitter of black glass in broken walls, only to find myself in a worse situation on the other side, makes my skin crawl. I turn around and trudge back round the curve to the vending machines and the turning to another unexplored path.

When I reach the corner again, I stop, brow furrowed in confusion. Instead of the glass fronted box I passed before, one side broken and dented, there's a tall, solid and familiar red vending machine, covered in text that I can read. I'm certain this is the same place though. I turn in a tight circle, glancing around in case I just didn't notice it before. Maybe the one I remember is on a different corner. I must be wrong; maybe I've come too far, or not far enough. I've been turned around again and I'm lost. I'm strangely comforted by this alternative to the machines being swapped, and I'm about to keep walking when something on the ground catches my eye. Dulled by its age but still less filthy than its surroundings where my thumb rubbed it clean, is the little black and gold coin with the hole in the centre. I bend down to pick it up with a horrible sinking feeling. With the coin in my hand, I look around for the street I just came back down. The timber fronted buildings lean into each other like they're trying to get a better view of the road, but that's different too. Knee height pieces of the black glass have pushed their way through the ground I just walked over. The grainy pictures in these ones are of me, wandering, lost. My throat feels dry as I swallow nervously. This place isn't just confusing and frightening; it's also changing around me, shifting objects and buildings in a silent instant. There's no way of telling how lost I am now, and no sure way of getting back to the main road, if it even *is* a main road anymore. A bubble of angry hate like oil in water rises up inside the fear: I hate this place, I hate being here, and right now I'm not particularly keen on the people responsible for me ending up here either. My stomach knots and my fists clench. I need something to vent on, something to take it out on. In a few long strides I've made it over to the new vending machine, where I pull back one foot and kick repeatedly at the façade with the solid heel of my boot, toes turned upwards.

"Goddamn stupid shitty piece of crap!"

The machine buckles far too easily under the rain of blows, and it's soon as wrecked as everything else in this

place. Panting from the exertion and red faced from the adrenaline, I step away and find to my dismay that the street has changed again. More of the glass now pierces the wall around the broken vending machine; fist sized chunks in a circular mockery of an impact crater. My cheeks twitch around my clenched jaw as another burst of anger surfaces, but this time I control it, fighting to stay clear headed. This isn't right, it isn't like me. Every time I've felt like this, the glass has been there. It's doing something to me, something awful. If it can make me mad enough to attack an inanimate object, maybe it's been pushing me away from the main path somehow, leading me where it wants, keeping me away from my goal. It sounds crazy, but given everything else that's happened today, I'm willing to believe it. I scramble mentally for a bearing on Nicholas: he at least seems to have stayed in the same place. With a final, guilty glance at the wreckage of my temper, I hurry down the next street, hoping to find my way through this changing maze.

It feels like hours before I find the main road again. In honesty, I'm not even entirely sure that it's the same road, but it's as wide as a New York avenue, and blessedly free of glass. Even the windows of the buildings lining the roadside are gone as though they were never there. It's still all uphill, and now slightly steeper than before.

With the fires now behind me, I walk in the middle of the road again, slowly weaving through junctions and around broken, blackened debris. The road system becomes gradually more complex, and eventually my path winds down below an overpass, where there's another shard, this one large enough to pierce the steel and concrete of the road above me. It's the biggest one I've seen, and despite my concern about what these things might be – and more to the point what they might be doing to *me*, I pause open mouthed to look at its mirrored surface. As I watch, my own reflection is drowned out by other images, clearer than any of the misty shadows of the other shards; men with crude weapons pouring out of wooden boats into ocean spray that turns to blood as they rush towards a palisade town, armoured knights on horseback watching impassively as a castle keep is burned to the ground, a figure in an elongated mask passing by barred doorways while the sick and dying lie helpless inside. I blink and miss something, then there's people running for their lives as the sea is pulled back away from the shore to join the onrushing wall of a tsunami, bombs falling towards a populous city, starving children begging for food by the side of a tarmac road in the shadow of a glittering desert palace. The images shift and repeat, mixing together, being replaced by others or playing through a single frame for long silent moments. In the last shot that I see clearly, I can almost feel the heat of the desert. One of the starving children turns to look at me, beckons me closer, and I notice that it's not quite a child. The shape is wrong, limbs too long and head too large, eyes completely black. I shake my head, alarmed that the spindly limbed horror might actually be able to see me at all, but my feet betray me, shuffling forward of their own accord. My mouth opens to shout for help that I know won't come, but only a whimper comes out. One tiny, thin finger crooks towards me and my feet take another involuntary step. Horrified, I watch as my hand raises up in front of me, and a rictus grin spreads across the increasingly monstrous face in front of me. One more step and I'll be close enough to touch the glass. My foot rises to take that last step, and I strain against it. Some deep instinctual reflex screams to me that I must not touch the surface of the glass, and I pull back my outstretched fingers with a desperate effort. The little monster hisses, revealing teeth filed to points. As if heated by the sound, the glass seems to boil. All of the images contort into one, and the shard's surface is suddenly crowded with people; they grapple with each other to reach the front, the able bodied climbing over the sick and dying, crawling forwards with arms outstretched. Endless faces filled with hate and malice, and all looking at me. Their jaws distend unnaturally and a siren like wail composed of a thousand desperate voices rushes into the quiet air. My body comes back under my control with a rush and I fall onto my backside, jarring both wrists as my arms come down at my sides. Something sharp catches my forearm and breaks the skin in a long, hot line, but I barely look down. The glassy

surface in front of me begins to bulge, pushing outwards towards me in distorted shapes like grasping hands and howling mouths. Chest tight with horror, and now bleeding, I regain my feet and stumble into a flat out run.

UGLY THINGS

Panicked, I charge headlong through a changing landscape, with no care for what's in front of me, not checking which way I'm going or where Nicholas might be, just desperate to get away. Familiar landmarks fly past, interspersed with buildings I've seen in the news or in books. The streets of Camden, Greenwich and Hammersmith are mixed in with New York, Tokyo and Berlin, all stacked together on an ever increasing incline.

My breath tears at my throat and my legs ache, but I run regardless; panic keeps me running until I can barely breathe. Blood traces from the long cut on my wrist and mixes with the ash on my hands. The now familiar sense of anger builds as I plough forwards; an anger at my own lack of fitness and the sweating mess I'm in, how I could have been weak enough to almost get dragged into the glass, how I could have been stupid enough to look at it in the first place, how I was clumsy enough to get cut. The eclectic architecture gives way suddenly as the street opens up into a tilted, apocalyptic copy of the Las Vegas strip, and I come to a shaken halt. Gasping for air and choking on ash I whip my head around to make sure I'm not being followed, and fall into a racking fit of coughs that turns pretty quickly into angry tears. Why am I even doing this? I don't even *like* Nicholas, and because of him I'm totally lost in some forsaken hellscape, scared out of my wits and breathing in God knows what. He's been nothing but nasty to me, and I barely know him, but it's *me* that has to come and rescue him. I hate him – *hate* him. I hate all of them, and I'm not going to do it. They can rescue their own damn friend! The anger smothers all the parts of me that would think rationally, building up like hot water coming to the boil. It bubbles up as I stand in the remains of the strip, one arm shielding my mouth to stop me breathing ash as my chest labours to catch up with my pounding heart. My bloodied hand clenches and unclenches, and my toes curl in my damaged boots. Spite blossoms in my mind like a flower, growing stronger. I spit acid curses into the street, and the words sting my lips on the way out. In an abstract sort of way, I know that something's wrong, I just don't care. I could walk away now, just wander into the streets and never come back. I could go back and find the glass under the bridge. I could join the things inside it. I'd never have to see any of them again.

The faces of the saints flicker across my memory: Demetrius leaning over the balcony as I arrive in the bar, George with his arms outstretched like we were old friends, Thomas's distress when he couldn't help Nicholas, and Chris mumbling an apology for startling me, holding my fingers in his palm, the sensation of being safe, being carried. My eyes close and I can feel the gentle warmth of his hand on my shoulder. It's so real I even feel his fingers squeeze together, his calloused thumb resting on the bottom of my neck. The anger drains away. Seconds tick by as my heart rate falls back to normal.

"Chris?" I whisper.

No response. I feel slightly ridiculous, standing in the burned out carcass of Las Vegas, talking to someone I can't see. I glance up and down the strip; I have no idea how I got here, or how long I ran for, blindly panicked, with no sense of direction. It felt like hours, but maybe time here is as changeable as geography.

I wipe my face with the back of one hand, smearing ash across my cheeks. I don't hate them. I don't even hate Nicholas. I don't *like* him, but then I'm not really here for him, I'm here for the others. I'm here because they need him, and maybe that makes him worth it after all. I just wish I wasn't here on my own.

I drop into a huddled squat in the middle of the road to catch my breath. Thinking about it a little more clearly, I'm amazed that I've managed to run for as long and as hard as I have. Thomas did say that saints were faster and stronger than other people. I wonder if I've been like this all my life, and never known about it. Maybe I've had this pool

of potential in me and just never tapped into it. If I can run like that with no training, just adrenaline, maybe I could have been some kind of crazy Olympic sprinter or something. I wonder what Nicholas must have thought when he saw everything about me. All those times when I said nothing, did nothing, just for fear of being the first one to do it, or even out of a fear of success, when I could have been so much more. If he sees that in everyone, it must be awful.

A flicker of motion above and to the left draws my eyes up to the face of the MGM lion, and I turn to look at the blackened ruin that he's become. A car sized hole has been punched through his chest, his gleaming surface is ashy and his face is streaked with what looks like tar. He's just another familiar but broken icon in this place. I came to Vegas with my parents when I was twelve on a road trip across Nevada and California that lasted six weeks and seemed like years. In the normally flat land of Vegas, even in the face of the lights and the shows, the lion was the thing I always remembered. I knew buildings could be big enough that I couldn't see the top, but the idea of a statue of that size threw me quite completely. He was so proud, so regal; to see him like this fills my stomach with a weighty sadness. I'm about to dismiss what I saw and turn away again when something moves in his mouth. Definite motion, undeniable. I squint upwards. Just visible between the part open jaws is a tiny figure, leaning out into the darkening air. The mouth has to be nearly twenty metres away from me, and mostly straight up, but even at this distance I can make out a sleek body with unnaturally long arms and an oversized, baby like head looking right at me. My jaw drops open, slack with dull surprise. It's the thing from the glass, made real and now separated from me only by distance, no longer held back by the bulging barrier it was trapped behind before this. Has it followed me, found me somehow? I freeze, breath held in my throat. As I watch, another figure joins the first, then another. A fourth crawls insect-like up the tar streaked tear tracks, unfurls wings and pushes off into the air where it hovers like a hornet, wings vibrating in rapid tiny circles. These are different then, not the things from the glass after all; they're winged where the one I saw before was flightless. Both were humanoid, but neither are even close to human. The first of these bizarre babies points one long thin arm at me, hissing angrily. The distance between us turns the noise to a veiled murmuring in the stillness. Another joins the group, then another. They swarm in the air above me. As slowly as I can, I push myself to my feet, then begin to move away. One step follows another, moving backwards so that I can still see them, stepping again, and again, faster and faster until I abandon all pretence at subtlety and turn to sprint, leaving the buzzing of little wings to fade into the distance, and wondering faintly as I do if now that I've started running again, I'll ever be able to stop.

The land continues to rise, and soon I'm sweating heavily and sucking in as much air as I can. My clothes dampen but I don't want to take them off and leave them behind. I've seen more than one type of monstrous thing here, and who knows what else there is? I'm not leaving behind something that smells like me, something with a connection to my life, my home. Hot as I am, I keep them on. I pull the neck of my hooded top up over my chin and mouth so that I don't breathe in too much of the ash, and drop back to a fast walk.

I feel out for Nicholas as I go. It's a stronger feeling this time, like he's closer. His presence has a familiar sense to it, almost like the taste of old dark rum; sweet and inviting, but with a strong and bitter undertone. I move one leg then the other, thumping feet in a monotonous and exhausting drive forward. Sometimes I think I see movement, tiny hidden things in windows or doors, crawling or flying out of sight as soon as I turn to look. The occasional faint buzz of wings encourages me to keep up the pace even though my heart is pounding. Legs like rubber, head down, I dig deep for whatever reserve of will I have left, and stumble on.

Even long after I've left the ugly things behind me, I keep up a fast pace, jogging out of the distorted but familiar city of Vegas and into something different. The corpses of trees line the sides of this broad avenue; I have a feeling I've

seen a picture of it, but I can't quite remember where. The tattered remains of paper lanterns are strung over the road, sometimes flickering and lighting up more brush stroke letters on their ragged surfaces. This place must have been beautiful once. I pass a dry fountain whose spouts are clogged with green and brown filth. Curling statues of stylized fish sit on either side, reaching desperately, futilely, for a sun they'll probably never see. Wide footbridges cross the double width road, the balusters of their hand rails like ornate prison bars. Some make it all the way across, some lie in ruins on the ground, overlooked by the battered fronts of abandoned and forlorn hotels and shops.

I walk on, open mouthed and staring, paying no attention to the road itself, and when the broad street begins to descend sharply, it almost takes me by surprise. I stagger to a halt, legs astride to support me, hands braced on my knees. The way in front of me drops down into some kind of crater, and I'm now standing on its lip. Even in the dim light, I can see all the way across to the other side of this imperfect circle. All around the lip, city buildings crest and descend the steep drop. Some follow switch back routes that run in long, gentle arcs backwards and forwards, others are steeper; the buildings collapse down sheer surfaces leaving the scarred crater wall behind them, and lie broken at the bottom. In front of me, the buildings stay perpendicular to my path, tilting further and further until finally they jut out horizontally from the crater wall, creaking and cracking under their own weight. In the centre, dominating the caldera-like depression, is the largest single building I've ever seen. It's a sky scraper by every definition, punching up through the smoke, sleek sides masked by ash and towering outcrops of black glass. I squint at it as though that will help me to see it more clearly. The buildings break down more and more as they get closer to it, and for what must be a kilometre in every direction from the tower, there's nothing but rubble. Nicholas is at the top. I can feel him there, like something out of a vivid waking dream. I daren't try to look for anything else – I'm not sure I'd like what I might find. I definitely don't want to go in there. I don't even want to go towards it, but there could be things behind me that have followed me through the city; claws and wings and angry mouths just waiting for me to give up. I sure as hell don't want to go back to that. I glance behind me, down the gentler slope that leads back the way I came. It carries on as far as I can see it; a labyrinth of mutable streets and changing landmarks. I clench my jaw tightly. If I want to go home, I have to find Nicholas, because I still haven't the faintest idea how to get out of this place. There's nowhere to go but into the crater.

I descend for what feels like days, cursing the fact that I haven't got a watch, although God only knows if it would work in this place. My route downwards steepens steadily and eventually I have to cross backwards and forwards over the road to avoid slipping. I make painfully slow progress, all the time glancing up above me to make sure there's nothing following. In fairness, I'm not sure what I'd do if there was.

The buildings tilt at an increasingly strange angle as I descend, as though someone had taken the street and draped it over a cliff, and I find myself moving slower and slower. Finally, my path becomes a sheer drop into the bottom of the crater. The lanterns that have somehow survived the desolation now hang parallel to the road, their supporting wires like drooping smiles. This bizarre vertical road only lasts about a hundred metres before it hits the flat ground, but I'm no climber, and I'm not sure I can manage it. I chew my lip thoughtfully, staring down into the crater. I could make my way round to one of the easier switch back routes, but for that I'd have to get back up the wall like road behind me, and that would take too much time. I want to find Nicholas and get the hell out of this place. I convince myself that climbing down can't possibly be that hard, and push back the fear that neither of us will have any idea how to get home. Nicholas will know how. Apparently, he's *always* right.

Using the now rotated doorways, windowsills and building edges, I half climb, half crawl my way down the long

descent to the ground. I drop between buildings with as much control as I can manage, landing on walls that should be upright but now lie as horizontal platforms, grabbing for the edges of pavements like a drunk with no sense of up, pulling myself into doorways now wider than they are high. My world becomes gripping fingers and questing feet, no time to think about why I'm doing this, only enough to look for where the next thing to grab hold of might be. I'm quickly breathless, heaving my body over walls and barriers. Drops between buildings become frequent terrors as I brace myself to let go of a solid handhold and fall through empty air to a new footing, never sure if the next wall will be as sturdy as it looks. One grip becomes another, pausing only to rub sweat from my hands or curse the pointed toes of my almost useless boots as unkind gravity claws at me from below. My tired hands search for solid purchases, gripping rough surfaces or sharp edges, ignoring the sting of clinging to these imperfect holds as I take my weight desperately on my fingers, wedging the sides of my feet onto slivers of jutting masonry.

The constant grip and pull on unforgiving surfaces rubs the skin on my once soft hands raw. My palms and fingertips split open and bleed, and I try desperately to ignore their insistent throbbing as I hook them into little hand holds, some sharp and narrow, some wide and flat, others bowl shaped depressions that allow me to hook the last joint of my fingers into something more solid, so that I can take my weight while my feet search blindly below me to identify something to stand on. Grit and ash get ground into my stinging hands, and when I can I wipe them on my clothes. I split my lacerated arm back open, allowing a thin trickle of blood to gradually make its way down my weary arm. I only spare it a glance; a dark red tracery on my skin like a cord, running from wrist to elbow, and changing colour from a near black to bright crimson, seeping out through jagged skin at the start of a long scab. Tiny droplets well up at the point of my elbow and drip thoughtlessly to the ground, leaving a trail of tiny dark splashes to mark the route of my descent.

The bottom of the vertical section gets nearer with each shifting grip. Flat ground is tantalizingly close, but my pulse is pounding and my chest is heaving, I stop and rest, lying flat in a doorway. The painted wooden door itself lies in blue splinters all around me, and I can see into the shadows of what must once have been a food shop. There's a strong smell of rot in the air. I wrinkle my nose and shuffle closer, wanting to check there's nothing in there that's going to leap out at me while I rest.

One of the lanterns outside flickers light through the broken window below me. The contents of the room have piled untidily up against the wall that now acts as the tilted floor. The counter is stained with something dark that's splashed up onto the ceiling, and a faint metallic tang wraps around the rotting smell, which with my head in the room is now so bad I find myself gagging. I pull myself back out to slightly fresher air and sit with my back to the street, allowing my stomach to stop heaving and my pulse to settle. As I pull myself together, I hear a scratching sound behind me that freezes my blood. Slowly, desperately unwillingly, I turn around to find one of the long limbed swarm babies perched on the edge of the doorway, face pointed right at me. Up close I can see clear differences between this thing and the monster in the glass that I ran away from first. It's coated in snake-like scales, fading like my blood from black to red across its stomach and groin. Membranous wings flicker to hold it balanced on the edge, while its thin, elongate limbs quest across the ground towards me. Sharp claws on each of three multi-jointed fingers match the row of needle teeth in its part open mouth, but I can't stop looking at the ruined pits of its eyes. They're red, oozing holes where raw nerve endings writhe in an agonised, angry dance. Pus seeps from the edges of the sockets and slides in glutinous blobs down its scaled cheeks. It sniffs the air and turns its head backwards and forwards. I freeze in place, not daring to move, hoping the stink from the shop behind me masks the smell and taste of my sweat. Clawed fingers dig into concrete, and the baby headed thing pulls itself towards me. Its back legs are near to useless, limp sacks of scaled flesh that drag behind it,

unused. My eyes dart around the enclosed space we share, but its wings almost brush the top of our rotated resting place, and there's just not enough space for me to slip by. I brace myself against the sides of the doorway, and soundlessly bring one leg up between us. I take a moment to aim my heel, then drive it forward into the oversized head with a grunt, striking just above the mouth. I'm rewarded with a satisfying crunch of boot on scale and bone, and the disgusting thing tumbles back out of the doorway.

"Yeah!" I scream, insanely jubilant at this tiny victory, lying on my back and shaking my fists in the air. "Take that, you nasty little shit!"

I start to laugh in slightly hysterical, hiccoughing busts that are quickly cut short by the buzzing of wings. I prop myself up on my elbows and stare out into the street. Two of them; circling in the air like angry insects, no more than ten metres away. I can see the blood on the smaller one's face, rivulets of viscous black tracing down from its snake like nose. It throws its head back and shrieks. The volume is disproportionately deafening, and I scramble backwards, swearing and cursing. No time now for stealth; they know where I am and it's time to not be there anymore.

I take a deep breath and vault gracelessly into the shop, planning to either look for a back exit or at least somewhere to hide. Arms flailing, I land on the heaped debris below me. The pile gives under the sudden impact of my weight and I tumble to the floor in a jumble of rotting cardboard and splintered wood. My breath is driven out of me as I slip sideways and crash into the wall with my right shoulder. I gasp in a new mouthful of air and immediately gag on the stench. One hand flies to my mouth but I'm too late. My mercifully empty stomach heaves, and I dry retch into the corner. It's long moments before I get a grip on my insides. My stomach muscles hurt like I've been repeatedly punched, my eyes are watering, and there's a nasty acid taste in my mouth and nose which doesn't even begin to mask the rotting smell. I shuffle towards the back of the shop to look for another exit, but I don't get more than a metre or so before the smell gets even worse. This time I manage to hold onto my stomach, and I back away as quickly as I can, looking around for another option. The only other way out of here is the window. It's a mess of cracked and broken glass, and looks like it might collapse at any moment. On the other side, looking tantalisingly close, jutting out sideways and bending down towards the centre of the crater, is the broken off remains of a tree. It must have been sturdy once, but now the trunk is burned off at the top. What's left looks solid enough though. I look at the window again, wondering if I could manage to break through it. Probably. Maybe. I shake my head; this is far, far too risky. I glance back up at the door I came in through, deciding that it might be time to climb up rather than down, but sitting in the doorway, clawed hands clutching the edges of the frame, and now beginning a chorus of hissing, are the two swarm babies that had been circling outside. Another joins them, then another. All hissing, and all looking for me with ruined eyes. They crawl forward, clinging like spiders to the walls and roof, tasting the air with serpentine tongues, and I hold my breath, watching them from below. It's clear that they know I'm here; enough of them stay in the door to block it while two of the others press further into the room, tongues flickering. The first one I encountered stays in the centre of the doorway, hissing at the others, its bleeding face the only thing that allows me to tell it apart from its companions. It directs the others with sibilant calls and oddly feeble physical gestures. As they get closer, I feel panic start to build. The scouting pair seem to feel it and both turn in my direction. In the doorway, the one with the broken nose screams victoriously. I have to go, have to get out of here right now. It's not a choice any more. I brace my battered body for a moment like a sprinter on the starting line, then, accompanied by a chorus of screeching and hissing, I make a headlong dash for the window.

Everything around me seems to slow to a crawl. I hit the glass shoulder first, and suffer a moment of terror when I'm sure it's not going to give, that I'm going to bounce back into a room full of sharp little teeth and claws. Then the tracery of cracks in the glass make it shatter around me and I burst out into the street, slivers of glass ripping cloth and

breaking skin. It takes more force than I would have guessed to go through, and I'm robbed of my forward momentum. My arms and legs flail in the air like I can somehow make myself go faster that way. The flickering lanterns in front of me come on for a moment and light up the street around me. The world swims into terrifying focus, every detail lit up in front of me. There's so many colours here; the oddly angled shop front on the far distant side of the road is illuminated from inside in greens and golds, the lanterns themselves are rainbows; purples, oranges, and blues. Every crack and crevice in the pavement is picked out in intricate detail as I fly past, the curve of the curb stone to the side of me, the blackness of the asphalt beyond. I pick up a faint smell of burning and the metallic tang of my own blood. There's red warmth spreading out on my clothes where a shard of glass has pierced my shoulder. My arms extend outwards to embrace the remains of the tree.

I miss.

My outstretched fingernails dig desperately into the near side of the tree bark, but it's not enough. My shocked surprise comes out in a shriek that morphs quickly into a full blown scream as I tumble downwards. My descent is brought to a sudden and painful termination by the concrete side of the next wide footbridge, jutting out at ninety degrees from the pavement further down the drop. I land on my feet and my right ankle buckles under the sudden force, twisting violently as I crumple onto my side, driving all of the air out of my lungs and cutting off my panicked yelling. My head strikes the ground hard, and everything turns to total and immediate darkness.

DAMAGED

I come round on my back with no idea of how much time has passed. A thin layer of ash has formed on my clothes, and I can feel it on my face as well. I start to cough and pain flares in my head like fireworks. I put a hand up to the right side of my face and my fingers come away sticky with blood. The world lurches crazily as I sit up, and for a moment I think I'm going to be sick. I groan and lie back, looking up at the street which is stuck in a gradually diminishing gentle spin.

The falling ash seems like dark snow, twisting in the air as it descends. Individual flakes catch on my eyelashes and I blink them away. Moments pass in this strangely peaceful way as I try to remember how I got here. Memory returns slowly, along with the nagging need to keep moving and get out of here. Gently, I turn onto my left hand side, and pull myself up to my hands and knees. The puddle of blood where my head has been lying is disturbingly large, and I probe carefully at the broken skin. My scalp is pretty mashed up, and my hair is matted with drying blood, but although my skull is painful it seems unbroken. I seem to be on my own; no flickering shadows in the windows of the buildings, and no flying, hissing baby monsters circling above me. If they *can* smell blood, then the stink in that shop must have saved me from being followed down here by them. The backs of my hands are covered with a myriad of tiny cuts from the glass of the shop window, and I can only assume the stinging sensation on my lips and cheeks means that my face is much the same. Through rips in my jeans I can see the grazed mess of my right thigh. Tiny grains of glass glitter where they're embedded in my flesh like decorations alongside the dirt, gravel, and threads of denim. Somehow, seeing it makes it much worse, and I feel my eyes well up as I look at the wreckage of my skin.

When I'm satisfied that the world is mostly steady again, I stand, using the pavement for support. My right leg nearly gives out under me as I take my own weight, and I gasp. Crouching, I roll the bottom of my jeans back tentatively to assess the damage with tired fingers. My ankle is horribly swollen, and darkening with bruises that have started to blossom on my skin like ugly flowers. Gritting my teeth, I test my weight on the leg gingerly, checking if I can walk. It's painful, but thankfully still possible even though each step makes me wince. The ankle is either twisted or fractured, but at least I'll still be able to move. I shudder as I consider what might have happened to me if I'd broken it and been stuck here.

I glance around at my landing place. Fragments of glass from the window I came through lie scattered around my feet. I'm on what has once been the side of an upright concrete slab, shielding the steps up to a bridge over the road. The bridge itself has broken away from the matching supports on the opposite side, and now hangs precariously by a pair of bent steel reinforcements, dangling down from the steps on this side, naked without their concrete covering, and twisting slowly in the air. Balusters, once intricate and beautiful, run downwards like the steps of a ladder. Overhead, I can easily identify the window I burst through. I haven't fallen as far as I thought; it felt like miles, but it's maybe only four or five metres. I stare up at the shop front, thinking about just how lucky I've been, before bracing myself for the final part of my descent.

Cautiously, I lean out into the road and look down. There's a drop of maybe three or four times my own height before the vertical section of road becomes a steep slope that smooths out gradually into the flat base of the crater, but the surface is puckered and pock marked, peeled back in ripped lines and gouges. The dangling bridge that I'm stood on runs all the way to the bottom where it's seemingly wedged between two car sized chunks of fallen masonry. I'm much

closer to flat ground now, but I'm stuck out in the middle of the road and I don't really want to risk a jump back into the shelter of the walls and doorways I was climbing down before. Bruised and battered as I am, it just isn't going to happen. That leaves two options: slide down the broken road on my backside, or try the ladder-like bridge. One last glance down the ruptured asphalt of the road settles it. There's no way I'm sliding down that.

I shuffle round to the edge of the concrete and slip my legs slowly over the side. All I have to do is swing myself back in as I drop, and I'll be sheltered in the staircase. I've done it a dozen times or more on the way down here, but sat here now it seems so much harder. I take a deep breath and try to ignore my hammering heartbeat. I turn onto my stomach, put as much of my weight on my hands as I can, and lower my body as far as my trembling muscles will allow. Eyes squeezed tightly shut, I swing my dangling legs towards the safety of the solid landing, and let go. I land with a heavy thump, taking my weight on my good ankle and rocking forwards into the stairs. The impact is shockingly painful, but my relief at landing where I wanted to has me hugging the concrete stairs and almost crying.

The rotated steps must have been built wide enough for half a dozen to walk next to each other, so I can easily stand upright as I make my way over to the dangling main section of the bridge. The balusters are mostly intact down the side of the bridge nearest to the road, but some are smashed clean away, while others are worn through to their rusted metal skeletons; thin steel bones that once held the shapely concrete forms in place. I plan my descent, complicated by painful hands and only one working ankle.

I slip my legs out to one of the rungs, letting my swollen right ankle dangle unused below me. Taking most of my weight on my arms and using my knees and my left foot for balance, I begin a slow and torturous descent. My skin is clammy with cold, drying sweat, and the only sound is the staccato bursts of my breath. The twisted supports that hold my ladder on to the steps I landed on groan unhappily with every change of my grip, and the bridge twists gently as my added weight stresses the metal even further. I stop looking down, focussing entirely on my gripping arms.

When I reach it, the ground comes as a pleasant surprise dulled only by fatigue. I slip over a wedge shaped chunk of fallen roofing, which must have fallen from the buildings above me, and sink down onto my knees on the flat ground, catching my breath before I start into the caldera. It's impossible to judge the passage of time in this place. Even though the sky has darkened, I don't know if it's because the smoke clouds have thickened or if it's finally night time. A thin, pale mist is rising across the bowl of the crater; it clings to the ground, and the tower rises eerily above it into the hazy air. With my destination clearly in front of me, I start walking.

There's no sound as I move across the wasteland between the crater wall and the tower except for the quiet crunching of my feet on the ash, glass and debris that litters the ground. Every limping step sends a hot lance of pain through my ankle and up my leg, and my pace is painfully slow. The mist thickens as I go, and by the time I'm halfway across the bowl I can't see more than a metre in any direction. The fatigue that's built up in me oozes its way behind my eyes, and I find them closing as I walk. I stumble forwards, lurching with every other step, trying to work out how long it will take me to reach my destination, finding that even the simplest calculations roll away from me like waves on a beach. Knowing I wouldn't be able to sleep even if I stop, especially now that I'm in the open, I keep going, telling myself I'll sleep when I get to the tower. I'll sleep when I find Nicholas. I'll sleep when I get home.

"Mallory."

Sudden fear flushes the fatigue out of my mind and my drooping shamble stiffens into an upright position, feeble

fists raised defensively. Ahead of me, only just visible, a human shape is coming towards me. The voice is strangely familiar, but distorted somehow, and I squint at the figure. It's almost on top of me before I realise who it is.

"Janine?" My voice is thick with incredulity. The mist pulls back from around her tiny frame, trailers of it slipping from her hair and clothes as she stops in front of me, seeming to seal the two of us in a grey bubble. "How the hell did you get here?"

A thoughtful look crosses her face. "The others are looking for you."

"Others...?"

"You are keeping them waiting."

"I... don't..."

"It is time to go home now."

"Home?" I rub at my eyes to check I'm not making her up. My mind feels dull and sluggish, and I can't seem to work out what's going on.

"It is time to leave."

"I can't, I have to find someone."

"Go home, Mallory." There's a pressure behind the words, and it pushes at my skin.

"I have to find... find... someone..."

"No."

"I should..." but I can't remember what it is I should be doing.

She puts out a hand, encouraging me to turn back the way I came. Still not certain, I allow myself to be moved, turning in the circle of her arm. Coldness seems to leak out of her; a chill I can feel even through my clothes, and I deliberately avoid touching her. Something's not right, but although I strain to work it out, I can't do it. I can't even seem to remember where I am or what I'm doing here. The temperature around Janine continues to fall until my breath starts to condense in the air and my joints ache.

"Why is it so cold?" My voice sounds plaintive, slightly whiny.

She doesn't answer, just walks on. I follow her, not wanting to be left alone in this place. I might never find my way home without her. Janine makes her fast pace look easy, but I fight to keep up, although my gait is more of a one sided hop. I try to remember if I've ever seen her move this fast, but all I can think about is mist; cold mist and going home. I'm sure she was shorter than me before, but she's so tall now. It doesn't matter though; it will be warm when I get home.

We walk in silence. Sometimes I forget who she is and panic, convinced that I'm following a stranger. More than once, I find myself turning to go the other way, certain that I left someone behind, someone who needed me. Then Janine calls my name and I wheel back around to follow her again, grateful that she reminded me. Every burst of emotion elicits a curious glance from her and I try to control myself, feeling guilty for distracting her when she's obviously here to help me. The cold helps me think clearly, helps me remember that I'm just going home. My friend is taking me home. I'm sure that's what I wanted all along.

The ground becomes uneven, full of rubble and the smashed remains of buildings, and I clamber over them easily. A faint jarring sensation tells me that I shouldn't be able to do this, that it should hurt, but I don't remember why. Janine bends around the obstacles like she's made of silk, flowing around rocks and over rubble. Her long red hair comes away from her head in matted clumps that drift to the ground around and behind us. They spin in the air on bloody lumps of scalp, the hair waving like stalks of wheat in the wind. Frost springs up on whatever they touch; beautiful and delicate. I

try not to step on it in case I destroy it. The ground becomes more and more difficult to follow her over. I stumble and trip as I try to keep pace. I fall behind a few times and have to scurry to keep up. Finally my right foot lodges neatly under a twisted metal bar, poking up acute to the ground, and wrenches my damaged ankle, tipping me to the ground. My mist-soaked confusion burns out in an instant, and I howl as it's replaced with a sudden, burning pain that races through every nerve ending in my lower leg; I realise I've somehow been walking with my full weight on my twisted ankle. Janine turns and looks at me with a dispassionate curiosity. There's something not right about the look; it's like she's never seen someone in pain before.

"You are damaged."

I just gawp at her, suddenly aware of how crazy following this flawed and decaying copy of her actually was, amazed that I just accepted the horror of what was happening to her body without any kind of alarm or concern. I wrap both hands protectively around my ankle. Janine frowns and makes a thoughtful noise in the back of her throat. It's a slightly wet sound that makes me think of stomach acid, and all the little hairs on the back of my neck prickle upwards as I look at her. Her head tilts to one side and a thin tendril of mist wraps itself around the remains of her hair. Her skin turns to red and black scales where the airy fingers make contact with it.

"You should go home."

"I think I ought to find my friend first."

"I am going to eat your friend. He is mine. Go away."

Her teeth have turned to sharp points in her jaw, and they tear dark ribbons of flesh from her mouth as she speaks. Blood spills out over her lips and dribbles down her chin. Panic grips at my guts like a tight fist and frightened tears prick at the surface of my eyes. I'm all alone with her, and I can't even run away. She steps towards me with a considering, slightly calculating look on her face, and I scramble backwards in an ungainly dodge.

"Perhaps I will eat *you* first."

"Get away from me!" Spit and tears fly from my face as I shriek at her.

"But I am hungry." Her voice is so matter of fact, so reasonable.

Janine reaches out for me with one arm; fingers now clawed talons, jaws opening up like a snake. My hurried backwards scramble connects with a rocky obstacle, and I'm quite suddenly deprived of any place to escape to. With an aggression inspired by pure panic, I lurch sideways, scraping one battered palm across the ground, and coming up to one knee with a handful of ash, glass and gravel. Air rushes out of my lungs in an inarticulate shout, and I fling the debris up into the distended jaw in front of me. Janine recoils in surprise and the claws pass over me, chilling my wounded head. My lack of balance tips me towards her, and I swing one angry, frightened and tightly balled fist at her thigh. It passes straight through, hitting nothing but freezing air, and turning her mid-section to swirling dust as it comes out on the other side of her pelvis. Before I can even think to yank it back, my arm is in the dust up to the elbow. She looks down at me as I crouch horrified in front of her. Her face is emotionless as the transformation to dust spreads, consuming her totally. Her disembodied voice echoes strangely in the air, and as her face fades away her words are like whispers.

"So very hungry..."

My arm is cold enough to make my bones hurt, and frosty patterns have formed on the skin like pale scales. Sobbing, I scrub at my skin, blowing on my hands to warm my knuckles. I shudder, tears still leaking from both eyes. What did it want? Would it really have taken me home? Or was it just trying to stop me getting to Nicholas? Would it actually have eaten me? Now more than ever, I want to get out of here. With a semi-practised ease, I feel out for Nicholas and realise with an alarmed dismay that I've allowed myself to be taken as far back as the crater wall again. My ankle is a

throbbing mass of pain as I pull myself to my feet. The walk back to the tower isn't going to be easy – in fact I'm not sure I actually can walk that far at the moment. I turn to search for something to use as a crutch, and spot the metal bar I tripped over earlier. It takes me a while to work it free from the ground as I sniffle back the remains of my tears, but it's perfect; about the length of my leg and twisted over at the top like a deformed walking stick. It's pretty sturdy too. I swing it experimentally through the air a few times, strangely comforted by the dull whooshing noise. I strike out again with as much determination as I can manage. I'm getting out of here, and I'm taking Nicholas with me. Most importantly, I'm not going to get eaten.

A light breeze flows through the basin and the mist starts to clear. I rest heavily on my metal support with every other step, almost hopping my way back towards the barren land that lies all around the base of the tower. The breeze builds up slowly, lifting away the remains of the mist, and the improved visibility makes the walk a little easier, allowing me to spot flatter ground or areas that look too hard for me to navigate with my makeshift crutch. At first I make good time, covering the ground more quickly than I'd expected, but I soon have to squint into a rising head wind. I leave behind the fallen buildings and jumbled masonry of the crater wall as I gradually approach the centre. Boulders give way to rubble, then sharply edged smaller rocks and pebbles, and finally to an abrasive fine grained sand that stings where the wind drags it across my many cuts and grazes.

The sand becomes harder and harder to walk on as my feet sink in to the granular surface with each step. The closer I get to the tower, the stronger the wind becomes. It howls past me, threatening to push me backwards, and I lean into it, fighting to move on. I use my crutch almost like a gondolier's pole, stabbing it into the ground in front of me and dragging myself forwards. The sand is funnelled up into the air around me, and soon the visibility is as bad as it was in the mist. The screams of the wind take on an unsettling human quality, and when the voices start I'm not sure if I'm imagining it. I grip the handle of my walking stick tightly, determined to swing it at anything that comes towards me. Snatches of words and harsh, derisive laughter seem to hang in the air before they're dragged away on the rushing wind. Some I can't understand; they're in different languages, or too quiet, or there's just not enough left of the words to make them out, but the ones I can hear say the same thing in so many different words, over and over again: *'turn back'*.

I try to keep track of Nicholas to guide me towards the tower, but the storm makes it difficult to concentrate. I get vague sensations of direction that switch about like I'm so blindly drunk that I can't remember which way home is. Unable to keep up a useful awareness of my goal, I stop every few minutes and fight to focus. My path meanders backwards and forwards across the crater as I pause, focus, adjust my direction and move forward over and over again.

As I get closer to Nicholas, the storm worsens. I bunch my hands into fists inside my sleeves, gripping the cuffs tightly, and cover my face with my free arm. I can do nothing for my legs, open to the air through my shredded jeans, and the whipping debris scours my skin like it was red hot sandpaper. Breathing becomes a challenge in the face of flying grit and gusting wind. Here and there in the swirling air I make out tiny flashes of lightning; filaments of blue and white that streak across the edges of my vision. I start to estimate the distances left between me and my goal with each burst of concentration that I manage as I press forwards.

Fifty metres to go: each step sinks me further into the shifting sand. I lean more and more into the punishing wind just to stay on my weary feet. The hood of my sweater is pulled back off my head and the storm tears at my already broken skin. My eyes squeeze shut and I fumble for the edge of the hood, pulling it back up and gripping its edges as tightly as I can.

Forty metres: the wind becomes strong enough to push me from side to side and pull me upwards; gusts of air tug at me with the strength of a circus elephant. I'm pulled forwards, backwards, sideways. Each little step becomes a challenge of balance and an act of attrition against my rapidly dwindling determination. I drop my body closer and closer to the ground to avoid being knocked over, ending up in a slow scuttle like some malformed, three legged crab.

Thirty metres: a gust of wind hits me so hard that I'm taken off my feet. I roll sideways across the sand, struggling to arrest my motion. My hands pop out of their sleeves and claw desperately at the ground to find purchase. When I finally stop, I dig my fingers into the ground as best I can, and lie face down. I fight to focus on where Nicholas is. He's close, but so high above me that I can no longer use him as a frame of reference. I need something on ground level, something I can use as a mental landmark to guide me in. There's only one other thing that I can think of to use – the black glass outside the tower. No sooner have I thought about it than a clear image of the sentinel-like glass shards punches into my mind, and I'm overtaken by an anger so hot I think I might be on fire. I lift my head and scream into the storm, heedless of the damage the flying grit does to my tender lips and tongue. Spurred on by rage and vaguely aware that I'm still shrieking, I crawl forwards towards the glass, dragging my right foot behind me.

Twenty metres left: the force of the wind becomes too much to withstand. I'm lifted bodily into the air and sucked into an uncontrolled spin, scrabbling to maintain some kind of grip on the inconstant ground. My crutch is torn from my hand as I'm flipped over. Flailing and panicking, and now without even my anger to hold on to, I'm tossed around just out of reach of the crater floor, then dropped unceremoniously back to the sand. I roll as I drop, trying to keep my injured ankle off the ground. The force of the wind cuts out suddenly and totally and I slide to an ungainly halt and lie panting on the floor, staring up at a window of open sky above me. No ash fall, just beautiful, clear blue. It's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. The storm that was such a barrier to my progress has actually thrown me closer to my destination. I start to laugh, but it quickly turns into a racking coughing fit which brings up all the dirt I've swallowed getting here. My skull pounds like a Taiko drum with each spasm.

Behind me, the eye wall forms an unnaturally neat, circular boundary, encompassing the tower completely. On the other side of the wall the storm spins in a violent, sickening rollercoaster pattern of dips, loops and eddies. I push one experimental finger back into the wall, feeling the grating sting of zipping glass and sand. There's something unsettling about the smooth, sudden change from chaos to calm, and I pull my hand back uncertainly. Still coughing, I drag myself awkwardly away, and turn to look at the tower. It's a modern day fortress of glass and steel, each dark window pane a neat and precisely formed mirror for the storm. My own reflection is a battered ruin, bloodied and almost unrecognisable. The building rises over me to a giddy height, and I realise with dismay that I still have to get to the top to find Nicholas.

The tower itself is the only undamaged building I've seen since I arrived here. Outcrops of the black glass sprout upwards from its base in jagged, angry thrusts, climbing its sides and spreading out like creeping crystalline mould. Their surfaces are not as smooth as the larger pieces I saw in the city, but I feel the same tugging fascination as before, the same edge of anger. The hypnotic quality of them is far stronger here, more raw somehow, and I pull my gaze away to stare at the floor.

It's hard to avoid the glass altogether as I make my way across the sandy ground towards a revolving door that marks the entrance to the tower like a gaping maw of darkness. It pokes up from the ground at odd angles, sometimes covered in sand, sometimes rearing up to knee or waist height. A creeping sense of angry indignation trickles into my mind and I push it away, desperately trying to think of happier things, *better* things. I sing snatches of songs, hum little verses of nursery rhymes and recite nonsense doggerel to distract myself.

I hurry between the two massive upright shards that stand like sentinels on either side of the door, covering my eyes with one hand to block them out. Even so, I can still feel them, like magnets for every angry thought I ever had. I whine unhappily, not wanting to be blind in this dangerous, glass strewn place, not wanting to risk looking at them. I spread my fingers and risk a glance forwards, realising to my horror that with my eyes covered I've nearly walked into the door itself; half a dozen polished glass panes in a smooth steel framework like spokes in a wheel. I freeze, squeezing my eyes shut, pulling my arms in tight.

This is the only way forwards, I remind myself. It's this, or turn back. Don't stop now. Don't.

I take a few deep, shaky breaths. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't stop; the thing that tried to eat me might still be wandering around in the storm.

With carefully extended fingers, I push at the frame of the door. It spins gently, quietly drawing the glass around in a neat and inviting circle. Swallowing hard, I step into the rotation, with nervous sweat beading on the back of my neck.

The entrance of the tower smells sterile and uninviting. It's clinically clean; richly coloured marbled floors stretch away from me into a vast open space. The only thing in here is a grand staircase, carpeted in white. It rises up to a landing where thick mahogany double doors bar further view. I step into the foyer, mouth slightly open as I look around.

A shadowy figure detaches itself from the wall to my side, quicker than I can really follow, and a blur of black and silver flashes across the space in between us. I turn to look but I'm just too slow. The figure strikes me hard in the throat with one hand, fastening onto my neck with fingers that seem to be made of iron. As my hands fly up to claw at this unexpected and agonising pressure, my attacker sweeps one leg back through both of mine, knocking them out from under me like bowling pins and tumbling me backwards onto the hard floor. They're on top of me quicker than lightning, one knee digging into my hip and the other into my shoulder while I'm still fighting to breathe against the crushing grip that holds my head in place like a bug on a display board. Their free hand stalls halfway through a neat and probably devastating strike, and a look of surprise crosses a familiar face as I stare up, struggling to breathe.

"Hm." Nicholas looks at me with one raised eyebrow. "How did *you* get here?"

COMPLICATED

Nicholas releases his pinning grip and stands, looking down at me from his not inconsiderable height. I pull myself up onto my elbows and scramble away from him until my back hits the frame of the revolving door. I've seen one person I know turn into a monster in this place, and I won't be fooled again.

"Well?"

The question takes me by surprise. I open my mouth to speak, setting off a fit of coughing as my throat reels in a delayed response to his first strike.

He sighs, and waits for me to finish. "How did you get here?"

I say nothing, staring at him, looking for the things I should have noticed with Janine, but Nicholas is absolutely pristine; hair neat, skin clean, even the creases in his clothing are deliberate and precise demarcations. My bruised and torn body, sweat stained clothes and matted, bloody hair seem somehow like an affront to both him and this place.

"Have you somehow been driven mute? Or are you simply too dull to speak?"

The attitude is familiar enough, but I know where Nicholas is; I can still feel him about five hundred metres straight up from here. I don't care what the person in front of me looks like. He simply can't be Nicholas.

I pull myself to my feet. My voice, when I find it, is hoarse and croaky. "Don't give a damn what you are. Keep away from me."

He frowns. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'm here for my friend. Then we're leaving."

"Your *friend*?" He actually looks amused.

I point one trembling finger at his face, feigning a confidence I just don't feel. "Keep out of my way if you know what's good for you, or I'll deal with you the way I dealt with the other one, out there."

He folds his arms across his chest as he watches me circle him, trying to head for the stairs without turning my back on him or getting too close. I creep my way across the room, limping heavily even when I try to hide it, and hoping desperately that I don't have to deal with anything else the way I 'dealt with' the thing I met in the crater. One heel connects with the bottom step, and I fumble behind me for the bannister, using it to pull myself up. The man in the foyer doesn't move, although his eyes follow me.

One step at a time, I pull myself backwards up towards the great double doors. The white carpet is thick and soft under my feet as I ascend, and my feet sink down comfortably into the pile, leaving dirty footprints behind me. I imagine myself just lying down on it and going to sleep. I'm so tired – sleep would be so very, very good right now. As the banister starts to curl round and the stairs widen, I know I've reached the top. I wheel around and grab the door handles, tugging, pushing and twisting, but nothing happens.

"It won't open for you."

Nicholas is stood right next to me. I blurt out a squeak of surprise, and lash out with one open hand to push him away. He moves like flowing water; angling his lean torso away from the push, and trapping my extended hand against his shoulder with his own. I stumble forward with the weight of my unstopped momentum, and his free arm snakes out and delivers a light but stinging slap across the bridge of my nose that makes my eyes water. In the half second that it takes me to flinch my head backwards away from him, he's turned my trapped hand palm outwards so that my little finger now points upwards at the ceiling, and uses it as a painful lever to force me down onto one knee. I try to pull away

but Nicholas presses down, increasing the already tight and unnatural angle of my wrist. I let out a series of childish noises:

"Ow! Ow! Ah! Gerrof! Yah!"

"Do be quiet."

"You're *hurting* me!"

"I'm so glad you're awake enough to notice."

"Get off me!"

"Shut up."

He squeezes down on my wrist; only the tiniest bit more pressure but the pain is incredible. I do as I'm told, and shut up.

"I know you're not mentally agile, Mallory, so I'm going to explain this very slowly. We are going to have a conversation. You are not going to run off. You are not going to try to attack me. You are going to sit down, and answer my questions, and then I will attempt to answer yours. Is that clear?"

Little tears of pain are pricking at the surfaces of my eyelids. I nod.

Nicholas untwists my furiously aching wrist slowly, almost gently, then he lets go altogether and steps back. My skin has gone pasty and pale, with little red blotches standing out where his fingers and thumb have been. I glare at him, but say nothing.

He sighs, slightly irritably. "It's not broken."

"Well it bloody hurts." I push myself round so that my back is against the dark red door and cradle my wrist in my lap.

He crouches in front of me, all perfect lines and tidy hair. "Let me see."

"Sod off."

"Don't argue with me. Give me your wrist."

Sullenly, I extend my arm out towards him, remembering the first time I gave Chris my hand, and thinking how different things would have been if this man had come to my home instead. He takes my arm carefully, and probes at the joint with long fingers, then turns my wrist in a series of little controlled circles that help to reduce the ache.

I sniff. "Aren't you supposed to freak out if you get this close to people?"

"That's a delightful way to describe a total and uncontrollable psychic connection to another person."

"Sorry."

He sets my arm down so it rests on my knees, and stays in his crouch, looking at me.

"Now then. You know I'm at the top of the tower – I suspect you've been practising. You don't recognise me because you're looking for the wrong thing. Try looking for all of me. Not just the bits you remember."

I shake my head. "I don't understand."

He sighs. "You're looking for the part of me that you remember speaking to you before, and that's insufficient. Just try to look for all of me. I will attempt to help you."

"Uh... okay..." Uncertainly I feel out again. I feel a little foolish, but I try anyway. Dreamlike, I almost see Nicholas, unmoving, straight above me.

"Now find the rest of me." It's a whisper, so gentle that I almost don't hear it. My forehead creases into a tight frown as I try to apply the one simple trick I've learned. Slowly, I realise there's a sense of him outside the tower, too vague to really grasp hold of, then with a sudden clarity that raises all the little hairs on the back of my neck, I realise the

man crouched in front of me is *also* Nicholas. I open my eyes and stare at him in dumb confusion. Another wave of tiredness hits me and I'm suddenly aware of just how much everything hurts, and how much I really, really want to go home.

"Well, that will do for now I suppose. Now let's go back to my first question. How did you get here, Mallory? You have nothing that should allow you access to this place, even if you could comprehend what it is."

"Well... I just sort of... turned up I guess. In the city. I don't really know. What is this place anyway? Not just the tower I mean. All of it."

"It's complicated."

"That's not an answer. You said you'd answer my questions too, remember?"

The edge of a smile pulls at his face. "Yes, I did. And I told you the truth – it *is* complicated. The simplest way to explain it is that it represents a defence mechanism. Touching you makes no difference because we're beyond that now. You have been walking through my mind."

"Seriously? That's your brain? Wow, you're a mess."

He raises an eyebrow again; by now it's a familiar gesture of disapproval. "And you are a rude and impertinent child."

I bark laughter. "Rude? After what I came through to come help you, you hit me in the neck then nearly snap my hand off, and now you're going to lecture me on rude?"

He raises a warning finger. "Don't travel down this route with me little girl. We have very limited time and you are woefully ill equipped for what lies ahead."

"You see? You see what I mean? You're doing it right now!"

He sags down into a tired looking cross legged slump, and puts his face in his hands. "I am not used to having to explain things to people. I was expecting one of my companions; men who have spent centuries honing their skills and pushing their capabilities, whose ability to withstand psychic attack, whilst imperfect, is at least tried and tested. Instead, *you* fall through the doors of my mind, bloodied and battered but by some extraordinary feat, still in control of yourself."

"Hey, I had to..."

"You've been aware of what you are for only a few hours, and you are not ready for something like this. If that is rude then so be it, but it is the truth. Telling you that you *are* ready will likely lead to both of us being trapped in here forever, and that will eventually drive the pair of us hopelessly insane, provided that we aren't devoured first. We have no choice but to wait here for one of the others to find a way in."

There's an uncomfortable silence while I fail to deal with his rather brutal honesty.

"No." I shake my head and pull myself to my feet using the heavy door handles.

"Pardon?"

"You heard me old man. You like the truth? Well here it is: no one else is coming to save you. You might think I'm stupid or feeble or whatever, but I've got this far on my own without centuries of training, and I am all you've got right now. It's just me, and I am *not* staying stuck here forever. I don't like you much either, but we're stuck with each other for now. I am going home, and I'm taking you with me because someone I think I actually *might* like asked me to help you. Now get up, and let's get out of here."

"It's not really that simple."

"Don't care."

"George was right about you. You've got all the common sense of a grape, but you're brave."

"That's rude and nice at the same time, but I'll take it as a compliment. Now get off your arse."

I hold out an arm and he takes it, although I'm not really much help in pulling him to his feet. I turn back towards the stairs but he stops me.

"Where are you going?"

I point mutely towards the revolving door that will lead us back out into the sand storm.

"I'm up there, remember?" He raises one finger to the roof.

"But you said..."

"I said it was complicated."

"I could learn to hate hearing that." I sigh.

"I'll explain on the way."

"You want to start by explaining how to open the door?" I strain against both handles again to show him that they won't open.

He leans past me and pushes the heavy mahogany back as though it were feather light.

"Oh." I say, looking confused.

"It's *my* door. Did you truly think it would open for someone else?"

We step through into a richly furnished cavern of a room. Doors line the walls like bookshelves in a library. Curling spiral stair cases at regular intervals lead up to sections of wide balcony that wrap around the walls, allowing access to more and more doors. The balconies are a range of seemingly random lengths, each one with delicate marble railings, and more stairs leading up from those. I step into the room, open mouthed.

"What is this place?" My whispered words are hollow in the vastness, dying away to silence almost as soon as they're spoken.

Nicholas steps up close behind me. His voice is a murmur. "Most people's minds are untidy. They're cluttered collections of twisted timelines and paths of half remembered thought patterns that don't quite make sense. They over or under exaggerate memory, and twist it, either deliberately or accidentally, until it's quite unrecognisable. My mind is not like that. It's organised."

"So this is... these are like your memories?"

"Clearly there's hope for you yet."

I take a hobbling step towards the nearest row of doors, and realise with an icy shock what I'm looking at. Each one is an imposing slab of opaque black glass, each bearing an ornate metal plaque with a complex, angular inscription in some language I can't read. I flinch away from the glass with a gasp, covering my eyes with a hand.

"What are you doing now?" Nicholas asks impatiently.

"This place is full of that glass!" I hiss, refusing to lower my arm. "It does something to me, it makes me psychotic, and there's things in it that... they scream at you and they try to make you go in there with them!"

Staring fixedly at the floor, I see the toes of his shoes come into view, then feel one hand on my raised arm.

"Not in here." He says, quietly. "They won't trouble you in here. Not while you're with me."

"Are you sure?" I swallow hard and look up at him, embarrassed. "I... they scare me."

"I'm sure. Look at them."

Heart pounding, I turn to stare at the closest door. Shadows flicker inside it as though there are things moving in the room beyond, but there's nothing on the surface, no grasping hands reaching for me, no hungry mouths with rows of

animal teeth. I glance left and right, then turn to look at more of them, but they're all the same. The plaques are elaborately decorated with fantastic but unmoving images; people of every race and creed, animals and beasts I barely recognise, mathematical equations or complex scientific formulae, maps and landscapes beyond counting.

"You're sure they're safe?"

"Quite sure. Now follow me closely please, and don't overcomplicate matters by *touching* anything. Having someone else trampling around in here at all is quite uncomfortable enough."

The room extends up into a near darkness above us. Nicholas leads me past three identical looking spiral stairs and up a fourth. My pace is slow but once I reach the stairs I use the cool marble railing like a stationary crutch to pull myself upwards, hoping that it doesn't count as 'touching'.

We walk in silence for a while. The route Nicholas takes is hard to understand and I soon realise that it would be almost impossible to backtrack without him. Some balconies lead to only one or two doors, while others run the length of the room and have ten or twenty rising spirals up to the next level. We travel up, across, down, sometimes seeming to double back on ourselves, other times climbing straight up for minutes at a time. Eventually the silence becomes too much for me to stand, and I blurt out the first question that comes into my mind.

"So, so you're really old, yeah?"

"Compared to you."

"Well, then why is it that the middle of your brain looks like a skyscraper and not a castle or something?"

"Don't ask stupid questions, girl."

I stop on the stairs and look up at him, mimicking his posture of disapproval with my arms-folded, and one eyebrow raised. He looks back at me, frowning, and for a moment we're like statues in the hall of his memories; eyes locked, neither wanting to give.

Eventually he throws up his hands and turns away. "I like modern architecture. Let it go."

I laugh at the simplicity of the answer, and it comes out in my words like little bubbles. "All right, but you promised me an explanation of what this place is. I got chased by these horrible little flying baby things, and I really hope for your sake that they don't live in your head all the time, because that's... that's just..." I shudder. "The little bastards swarmed me, and I had to kick one of them in the face."

He blinks. "You attacked one of them?"

"Yeah."

"That was very stupid."

"Well I didn't exactly find a guidebook lying around out there telling me not to kick your ugly brain pets. They freaked me out!"

"They're not pets, and they're not mine. They're a type of psychic parasite."

"What, like mind fleas?"

"Do try to take this seriously, Mallory. They hunt by and feed off emotion. I'm not sure how you managed to escape them, especially if you attacked one of them. They have a very simplistic form of hive communication, and they tend towards quite brutal aggression if hurt."

"I had to jump out of a window to get away." I hold up the backs of my damaged hands to show him the cuts made by the glass.

"They would still have been able to follow you. How did you evade them?"

"Dunno really. I fell quite a long way, hurt my ankle and bashed my head. When I came round they just weren't there anymore."

"Then you've had a narrow escape. It's likely that they couldn't detect you while you were unconscious, although I don't know why they stopped looking. They exist in this particular psychic landscape because of the presence of the dragon; think of them like small fish swimming around a whale and cleaning it. They receive an inadvertent level of protection from the whale and essentially eat its leavings or things that are too small for it to really bother with. Your inability to control your emotional state, and a complete lack of training meant that you probably presented an ideal prey for them."

"Leavings that are too small to bother with. Gee, thanks."

"Making them swarm usually attracts the presence of larger predators."

I shudder, thinking of Janine's teeth tearing at her mouth as she came towards me, arms outstretched. "I think I saw one of those, too."

"Then you're exceptionally lucky to even be alive right now." Nicholas tips his head slightly to one side and looks at me, his eyes narrowing. After a moment, he turns away again, continuing to push forward through the austere gloom. "We should keep moving."

I nod and follow him. Below us, the floor of the library disappears into gradual darkness. I lean out over the balcony rail staring out into the labyrinthine maze of Nicholas's mind.

"This place goes on forever. Don't you ever get lost?"

He opens his mouth, but I hold up a hand to interrupt him. "Sorry, that's another stupid question. Of course you don't get lost. It's *your* memory."

He turns to look out into the vastness with me, both hands gripping the rail. For a moment he seems old and tired, and I feel a sudden burst of unexpected sympathy for him.

"I've been lost in here before. There are things in here that I want to leave behind me; doors I haven't opened in many years. Sometimes I come in here just to make sure they're secure - the locks have rusted shut, but I still hear the echoes of the past when I stand outside. I remember everything I've ever seen, everything I've ever heard. You are right; I am old."

I just look at him in uncomfortable silence. I wasn't quite expecting that.

He breathes in sharply and stands up; the old and frail man seeming to vanish behind sharp eyes and quick, clever fingers. "I promised to explain to you how I can be both here and so far above us at the same time, I think."

I just nod.

"Are you familiar with any of the various theories regarding super-consciousness?"

There's a pause while I decide if it's worth lying to a psychic while I'm stood in his mind. Eventually I just shake my head.

"It's probably just as well. There are some very strange thoughts on it, and at least I can be assured you will approach this without preconception."

"Uh huh."

"You are at least familiar with the concept of conscious and subconscious thought, I hope?"

"Just about."

"I'll simplify the explanation then, although it will be grossly imprecise. I maintain a deliberate separation of the aspects of my mind: all advanced psychics do this. It facilitates a deeper understanding of one's self, and also acts as a

barrier to telepathic reading. My current situation is that the layers of my mind have been forcibly prevented from interacting. For example, my conscious mind is being held at the top of this tower."

"Held?"

"Don't interrupt."

"Sorry."

"This part of my mind, the one which is interacting with you now, is unable to leave the library and the lower tower. It could be loosely termed my super conscious mind."

"Your what?"

"Shut up."

"Sorry."

"The concept of the super conscious has been touched on by a vast number of philosophers and mystics, some of whom have been significantly wide of the mark in terms of accuracy. The reason I refer to it by that name is that it is the most recently noted terminology, and the phrasing I think you will comprehend most clearly. The super consciousness reflects a higher, more enlightened form of being - think of it as that part of my mind which deals with the miraculous rather than the mundane. Do you understand?"

"Sort of."

"That will do. My super conscious mind still has control and is capable of defending itself, but only in a discrete area. My subconscious mind is, in a way, represented by the landscape you have travelled through. It's reflexive and largely without the same controls when separate from the whole. It is comprised of instinct, and guided by memory and experience."

"You didn't strike me as the Nevada type."

"I've never been there."

"Then how come there's a smashed up replica of the Vegas strip out there?" I jerk one thumb back down the stairs, with no real idea of which direction it's pointing.

"Because *you've* been there. You're in here with me. Every place that's made an impact on you in your admittedly very short life is here because you brought it here with you. If you stayed here long enough you would begin to damage the tower as well. You are essentially a trespasser in my brain."

"Wow, you really know how to make a girl feel welcome."

"It really isn't my intention to make you feel welcome: you are not. You are wandering around in sections of my mind that have remained private for decades, and it is an unpleasant experience. My intention is to guide you through the most expedient route to your goal, so that you can leave."

"Fine by me. So where's my super-thingy in all this?"

He leans over and taps my forehead gently. "It's here. You perceive yourself as a physical being in this environment, but you are in fact an amalgamation of all aspects of your mind, including your super consciousness. Your body is utterly irrelevant. As a psychic, I have an exceptional understanding of all aspects of my mind, whereas you do not. Your mind is a mess."

"Hey!"

"A comparative mess."

"Thanks, that's so much better."

"Mallory, your mind is an atrocious chaos of emotions, self-delusions and cluttered, twisted memory. You're in my

mind right now. Look around. I'm currently being assaulted by an enemy capable of turning the whole world to flames, and do you see so much as a speck of dust in here?"

"I just think it's a bit harsh, that's all."

"When this is over, we'll go for a walk through your mind, and I'll show you the difference."

"Well, why can't you just... you know." I waggle my fingers in what's meant to be a supernatural swooshing motion, and point upwards a couple of times.

Nicholas rolls his eyes. "Because your lack of mental development means that you require a more rational representation of your environment in order to interact with it. If you were capable of separating your mind as I do, then we could indeed travel instantaneously to our destination."

"Can't you just show me how to do it then?"

"I've been instructing the others for nearly a century; George is utterly hopeless, Christopher only grasps the rudimentary aspects, Thomas is capable although he struggles with it a little, Demetrius is closest, but even he hasn't mastered the technique. Tell me, did you expect to be able to perfect it by the time we reach the top of the building, or significantly before that?"

"You make me feel so confident."

"Shall we continue?" He gestures towards another winding spiral.

We climb without speaking. The pain in my ankle and my monumental exhaustion makes the few minutes seem like days. Eventually, I pause and drop my weight against a wall between two doors. Nicholas looks at me, as if he's trying to work out what I'm doing.

"I'm knackered, and I hurt everywhere. Physical body or not, I need to take a break." I tell him as firmly as I can.

I expect him to argue, but he only settles himself neatly onto one of the steps, legs crossed and fingers steepled as though he's meditating. I slide down to a distinctly more messy slump, resting the back of my head against the wall.

"Does this count as touching things?" I ask.

"It's acceptable."

"Good, because if you want me to move right now, you're going to have to carry me."

He sits and watches me while I catch my breath, assessing some quality that I either can't see or don't understand. As I'm about to demand to know what he's looking at, he turns away and stares out into the library. I close my eyes and try not to think about how much I want a shower right now.

"What I don't understand," I say. "Is how I'm supposed to be bait for a thing that until this morning was only a fairy tale. Are all the monsters real? Do I actually have to start checking under my bed now?"

He snorts; a single humourless sound. "Where do you think the fairy tales come from? Humanity doesn't have enough imagination to come up with something like that on its own. All of the stories you ever heard are well crafted lies, and the best lies are based in truth."

"But... dragons...?"

"Are real, and dangerous, and made more so by the fact that no one believes in them anymore. The influence of a dragon becomes more pronounced as it pushes its way into our reality. If we are unable to deal with it expediently, we should expect increased unprovoked violent crime, a rise in damaging geographical and geological phenomena, the failure of crops, drought, the development and spread of diseases, and the worsening of political and religious conflicts."

"But if you know that, then they must have come before. That must mean they can be stopped, right? I mean, you can beat this thing, can't you? *Before* it eats me?"

"Perhaps. The beast is neither unintelligent nor foolish. It is aware of the presence of enlightened and semi-enlightened beings that have the potential to turn back its advance. Its mind is exceptionally strong; even here it threatens to overwhelm you completely, and it challenges my own defences. A lesser talent would be driven insane, even suicidal by the impact of such an alien presence in their thoughts, but I am not a lesser talent. Unable to destroy me, the beast has sought to isolate me instead."

His arrogance is annoying to the point that I just want to slap him. "Why?"

"Because I am one of the most enlightened beings on the planet." He sneers, face filled with a concerning zeal. "I have seen civilisations rise and fall, treated with Kings and Emperors, and seen wonders that would strike you dumb with amazement. I have travelled all across the skin of the world, and led men and women to repel half a dozen approaches by dragons. It is right to treat me with fear."

I snort derisively. "Can you even hear yourself right now?"

He turns to me, eyes blazing, but I know he needs me as much as I need him, and his smug superiority has infuriated me.

"Nicholas, if I've got this right you're laid out on the floor of a pub that doesn't really exist, twitching like a lunatic after shock therapy. Don't you think that you should tame the ego just a little bit? I don't think this thing's scared of you, I think it's been smart enough to hit you right where it hurt. None of the others had the first clue how to help you even after your centuries of stupid lessons, and I have no idea how I got here. You're leading me through this place like you're the one doing me a favour, but it's all show. You're just an old man with a god-complex. You know you'd be a lot less unlikable if you weren't shouting about how mighty your brain is while your body's drooling onto the brickwork."

He stands. "You ignorant little..."

I pull myself to my feet and raise one finger in warning as my voice builds to a shout. "Don't. Just don't. You have no idea, none at all, what I've been through today. I don't care how old you are, or how many 'beasts' you've lead the charge against. Right now you are just the miserable bastard who's responsible for me having to limp my way through a goddamn sandstorm, covered in my own blood, after nearly being killed!"

I advance on him, finger thrust up towards his face accusingly. He's actually backing away from me up the stairs. My head throbs unbearably, and I wonder distractedly when it got so very hot in here.

"You want to see what I've done for you today? You want to see? Go ahead and look! You're an enlightened psychic, go ahead!" There's spit flying off my lips as I shout. My muscles feel like they're bulging under my skin.

Nicholas looks shocked and pale. He shakes his head. "Stop."

The pulse of anger gives out suddenly and completely. My words choke into exhausted, angry tears, and my arms fall to my sides, where my fingers curl into impotent fists. The look on his face is unreadable. He steps forwards and raises his open hands slowly, one to each side of my face. My silent tears run over his old knuckles.

"This will feel strange." He says, far more gently than I've heard him be before.

It's like taking Chris's hand in the open street. Light spreads out from his hands, brilliant and white, building until I can't see anything else.

Mallory.

My eyelids flutter open. The world is a disorienting continuous white, and I'm floating disembodied in an endless, calming light, with no frame of reference for up or down. There's a sense of being free from all physical restraint, with no boundaries to hold me in place. Nicholas is here with me, and I can still feel the gentle touch of his hands on my face, even with no real understanding of how that can be when I have no body. There's a bizarre sensation of overlap between

the two of us. It washes in and out like a tide, and I know that if I step into it, if I allow myself to just fall into it, I'll have a complete and total understanding of him, and he of me. There wouldn't be a boundary between us any more, physical or otherwise. It's an inviting but slightly frightening thought, and the part of me that remains individual, that makes me who I am, fights back against it. I try to ask where we are, but my question has no words, only a glittering modulation of the whiteness that shows my curiosity.

We are nowhere. This is a place which defies definition. Nicholas's rich voice reverberates in the stillness.

And somehow that makes sense. This place couldn't possibly be real. This isn't my mind, or his, or any mix of the two.

Mallory, I have to explain something to you now, and it will be hard for me.

Curiosity, glittering.

No shape or definition, nothing beyond a vague sense of self and the fleeting wisps of my emotions.

A sense of freedom, like flying.

I know what you have done for me. How could I help but know it? You are inside my mind, and there is nothing that you could hide from me here, not inexperienced as you are. I should not have chosen this path to lead you through the tower. I gave no thought to what being in my mind would do to you, only what it would do to me.

I don't understand. A cloud of confusion flows unsteadily out from me.

It is this.

Shards of black glass rip into the clean white air, tearing through the world and bursting, jagged and hateful around us. I try to scream, but there isn't enough of me here to do that with. I have no eyes to close and so no choice but to look. Each facet of each shard contains the same single image; a repeated reflection of the man who brought me to this white place.

The glass is not full of monsters, only memory. I am not old Mallory, I am ancient, and I have a profound anger. It shapes me, defines me. It is what makes it so easy for the dragon to attack me, and now you are trapped in here with me. My mind is clean because I have pushed these things away from me to hide them, and you have walked through them to come here, unknowingly dragging them after you.

It has touched you and you have brought it here with you. I cannot remove it from you any more than from myself. I thought I could protect you, but I was wrong. I am unused to admitting weakness. I am unused to any mind being this close to me. Your presence in the world is a challenge to people like me, and your presence here is almost intolerable. With only the very smallest lapse of my concentration, the assault on my mind has taken control of you. It is already damaging you, and if left unchecked the effect will accelerate out of your control very quickly. This is the most basic of our enemy's weapons.

An image of London painted in red, a whisper of anger that spreads until the city, and then the whole world, is drowning in it.

Fear.

Then... then nothing.

I have placed a barrier around your mind that will separate you from the danger for now, but I cannot leave the barrier in place for very long. Without it, you will be consumed by my anger and become irreparably insane. Because of where you are, that will spread to me, mutated beyond my ability to control. It will quite possibly leak out and affect the others. I won't allow that. The barrier itself is almost as dangerous. If I simply leave it in place for too long, you will first lose your ability to feel emotion, then your sense of self will fade, followed quickly by your will to survive. In short, we have only a

limited time left before either your presence in my disjointed and assaulted mind drives both of us mad, or the very thing preventing that from occurring causes you to simply give up, sit down, and die.

THE LAST DOOR

I wake from a dazed sleep I didn't know I'd fallen into. The world rocks neatly backwards and forwards with a rhythmic jarring motion. Even when I open my eyes it takes me a moment to realise where I am. There's a flash of silver grey stubble above me, and I recognise Nicholas. His arms are tight bands around my shoulders and thighs, carrying me pinned against his chest as he runs. For a moment I just let him carry me. His breathing is heavy but not laboured, and I'm a little surprised at how strong he must be to run so easily with me cradled in his arms. He doesn't look like he should be that strong. His face is set into a determined grimace as he sprints along walkways and up twisting stairs. I try to reconcile what he's told me about the barrier and its potentially fatal consequences, but I just can't seem to muster more than a muted sense of concern. That in itself should frighten me, I know it should, but it doesn't. I understand the need for haste only in a distracted way, like it's happening to someone else.

"Why are you carrying me?"

"You fainted."

"Oh. Sorry."

Nicholas glances down at me. "Can you walk?"

"I suppose so."

He slows to a halt and lets me down. The flare of pain from my ankle isn't as sharp as I would have expected. I test my weight on it carefully.

"You won't be able to feel it the same way now."

"Because of the barrier?"

He nods once. "Thomas will be able to help you properly when you leave."

I frown. "I thought this wasn't my physical body?"

"That's correct, however it's common for significant injury to translate out of a complex psychic construction especially with an untrained participant."

"Is that what this is? A psychic construction?"

"Yes." He nods sharply. "A highly complex one."

"How much further is it to the top?"

"Not far. We're nearly there now."

"And after that I'm on my own?"

"Yes."

I follow him, glancing out into the void. The levels below us are hidden in shadows. Above us I make out fine points of light, like stars, and I can see how few levels remain. Our route is straighter now; along and up, along and up.

Nicholas, slightly in front of me, turns his head as we walk and addresses me over his shoulder. "I wanted to try to prepare you for what happens when you leave here, but it may well be as different from this place as the city you came through was. I can't begin to describe what you will see because I myself can't see clearly beyond here. I suspect that my conscious mind will be unable to deal with your presence in the way that I can. You also won't have the benefit of the barrier, since I don't know if he'll be able to remove it, so I will have to withdraw it as you leave."

"It's really weird hearing you talking about the parts of yourself like they're different people." I muse.

"It's simply a model to help you understand, although it may actually help you to think of them as different people

while I'm separated like this."

I frown. "Aren't they all you though?"

"Tell me Mallory, have you ever thought something unpleasant and then regretted it or wondered how it even ended up in your mind in the first place?"

"All the time."

"That happens because there is a filtering system that is always present, regardless of a person's mental capabilities. It stops you saying those things, or acting on those impulses. It's much stronger in some people than others. You don't know where the thoughts come from because you're not able to view the parts of your mind discretely, so they essentially operate as one. It's a ready example of how the many parts that make up who you are can bear no resemblance to their combined whole, even in a mind like mine. You have been witness to the dangers of a person's subconscious mind, and I've explained the dangers of you being here with this aspect of me. As altered as they may be by external forces, I have no idea what state the other aspects of my mind will be in."

Even under the stars the light here is dim compared to the levels below, so when I come out of the top spiral, I almost turn straight past the familiar face embossed onto the metal plaque of the door in front of me.

"Nicholas?"

He turns back to look at me again.

"Is this Thomas?"

Nicholas's face falls. "Yes."

"He looks so... young."

And indeed, the picture in front of me is of a young boy. His smooth features are entirely angelic; big trusting eyes and tightly curled hair. It's undeniably Thomas, but it's a little surprising to see him look so small.

Nicholas clears his throat. "Thomas is the youngest of us. *Was* the youngest, I suppose. He was little more than a child when I met him."

"What was he like?"

"Innocent."

"How did you meet?"

"Come, we're nearly there."

I shrug and follow him as he presses on, taking a punishing pace. Around us, the last level of the library runs the full perimeter of the room, its far side lost to darkness. The doors on this level are much more widely spaced than those below, and far more ornate. Each plaque carries the image of a single person, somehow more detailed than even the most intricate portrait. Among them are other faces I recognise, seeming to watch me placidly from their metal housings. Christopher, looking only a few years younger, stands in a wide and raging river up to his waist. The scar on his neck looks fresh, and there's blood on his bare and heavily muscled chest. A few doors further down is George, carrying a pitted sword almost as long as he is tall. His skin is burned and his clothes are ragged, and tiny tears stand out on his inanimate face. Demetrius stands on the next door, looking down at his hands in wonder. The skin of his lower arms from elbow to fingertips is covered in a rock like armour.

We hurry past the doors, and I have very little time to look at them in any great detail. Eventually the far end of this walkway swims into hazy view. It's not another winding stair, but a softly curtained archway next to one last door. The

walkway widens into a semi-circle around them, and we slow to a halt between the two. The picture on the door is in the same style as the others on this level, with one single exception; the woman borne on its surface is picked out in brilliant colour. I hesitate uncertainly in front of the curtain as Nicholas steps up to this last door.

The woman stands in a white gown under a drooping blossom tree, its pink petals stark against her clothes and lightly tanned skin. One hand lies by her side, a single blossom flower held between delicate fingers. The other is held up so that the skin of her palm seems to push out towards us. Nicholas's face is a choking mix of emotions that I can't quite follow. Her black hair frames a flawless oriental face, the tilt of which means that her eye line perfectly meets his.

"Who is she?"

"Omoikane." His voice is a whisper.

He raises one hand to the door, placing his palm flat against hers. For a moment, a few unbelievable seconds, the colour spreads out like fire, rippling along the walls and the walkway. The gloomy light of the library gives way to bright sunshine, and we're stood in the open courtyard of an angular, whitewashed castle. Blossom trees shake loose petals onto the hard packed earth beside neatly built stone walls. The edges of the castle roof carry carved fish whose curving bodies reach up to the sun as if in celebration. Distantly, I can hear the sound of urgent voices calling to one another and a gentle breeze carries both the taste of spices and the faintest smell of the sea. Now lifelike, and nearly my height, Omoikane looks up at Nicholas without smiling, and says something in a language I don't understand.

"Shōnen o mitsukete."

He shakes his head. "I can't leave you. Not now."

"Shōnen o mitsukenasai." Omoikane's face flickers with neatly controlled emotion. "Go, Nikorasu."

He wrenches his hand away from hers and the two of us are stood in the silence at the top of the library again, his fingertips a breath's distance away from the door. The falling petals pause in their drifting descent. Her hair is picked out in lines of unmoving paint, her face still and serene.

I breathe out hard, not sure if I imagined it. "What was that?"

His eyes narrow as he looks at me carefully. "You saw?"

I nod.

"You should not have been able to see that."

"I did though."

"Yes. I wonder about that." His face is still caught in a perturbed frown. "Mallory, there are things you need to know before you go. I have delayed speaking about them because I don't truly understand them myself. I had hoped that I would gain some insight by contemplating them as we travelled."

"Well, then tell me what you *do* know."

Nicholas nods his assent. "Whatever your third miracle is, and I do believe that you have one, it's something I haven't seen before, at least not in person. That might not signify a great deal to you, so think about this; in all the long years I've lived and travelled and taught others like us and learned from great masters, despite hearing tales and stories, I have never actually witnessed anything similar to what you can do – to what I think you may be able to do."

"What is it that you think I..."

"I don't know the wisdom of telling you until I'm sure, but if you survive and I do not, you will need to understand something of it at least."

"We're both getting out of here." It's harder than it should be to summon the determination that that sentiment had at the bottom of the tower, and a thin trickle of fear works free of Nicholas's barrier and spirals into my brain.

Distractedly, I think how strange it is that I can still almost see my emotions as colours and patterns.

"Precautionary measures are harmless if we do both leave. If not, then they're a good use of our time. Omoikane was a visionary; the first of her miracles allowed her to see into the future in her dreams, although not always with any great clarity or accuracy. Sometimes she would awaken with a terrible sense of urgency for events that would not occur for years, or even decades, and other times her visions would take place the same day. Her second miracle was the ability to see into the past, and to make sense of it. It sounds like the lesser of the two, but it was far more use to her. She could see the history of a person or item by simply touching them. She gained great renown as a spirit of wisdom, and people would travel thousands of miles to hear her speak, or to have her settle some matter of injustice."

He pauses, looking over at Omoikane's door. Even dampened as it is, my sense of urgency prickles at me.

"Nicholas?"

He shakes himself loose of his reverie. "Omoikane was a keeper of lore and history, as you'd expect for someone with her particular talents. She told me about a rare handful of individuals who could control the miracles of other saints, linking them together for greater effect, or simply co-opting their abilities all together. I accepted it as fact because I'd never known her to be wrong, and because I trusted her. We were... close."

"And you're saying that's what I can do?"

"I'm saying I'm not entirely sure, but there's certainly some kind of overlap between what we can do while you're in here. Much more than I would expect. For example, I would expect for me to be able to see what you see, but not the other way around. There's also the matter of how you got here in the first place, and that puzzled me a great deal, but if you inadvertently linked Christopher and myself, then that would go some way to explaining how you got here. There are two further things that concern me far more at this point, however. The first, and most immediate, is your lack of control." He raises a hand as I start to protest. "That's because no one has taught you how to control it yet, not because I think you are inept. When this is over, you will need to work on that. It could be dangerous to the people around you, and they are people I care a great deal for. If I am able, I will help you with that. My second concern is one of secrecy. Unless you have no choice, you should keep the possibility of this third miracle entirely between the two of us."

"Why?"

"Imagine the power wielded by a handful of miraculous individuals. Imagine what they're capable of, when pushed. Even those few of us you've met are more than enough to bring mighty nations to their knees. Now imagine what will happen if the others find out that our little family is harbouring someone potentially capable of controlling what they do. Wars have been fought, vast atrocities committed over far, far less. Thomas and Christopher may only have met a few hundred others, but there are many thousands more than that out there, and they are not all good people, Mallory. Hard though you may find this to believe, there are some of them who are even less pleasant than me."

It might be the first time we actually smile at each other. Nicholas laughs, but it's a quiet, slightly desolate sound that's eaten up by the vast emptiness of the library as soon as it passes his lips.

"People will try to kill you, or worse, they will try to control you. If you can even touch on this miracle, you will be in very serious danger. The others will help you if I cannot, but for now tell them nothing."

I step up to the archway. The curtain is soft and black. It almost whispers as it ripples in a breeze that I can't feel. With one hand twisted into the velvety fabric of the curtain, I find I don't want to go through it. I look at the last door in all of his memory and suddenly wonder if it *is* the last. We've climbed up an unimaginable distance to get here, but the route might be just that; the most direct path between two points. What I've been thinking of as the last door might well be the twelfth, or the ninety-second. Or the first. "What was it Omoikane said to you? I heard it but I didn't understand."

Nicholas looks back out over the vast library of his memory and sighs. "Have you ever done a bad thing for a good reason, Mallory?"

"I've done plenty of bad things for stupid reasons. Does that count?"

He almost laughs. "No. No it doesn't. Omoikane had a vision of Thomas and Christopher before I met either of them; before Thomas was even born. She told me that Christopher had some important role yet to play, and his death would have prevented him from doing that. I don't know what it is. I asked her, but she wouldn't tell me. She sent me to find Thomas so that we could save Christopher, but when I found him, he was little more than an infant, and he had no idea what he was potentially capable of. Just a child, and I made him..."

He pauses, fists clenched at his side. Just as I think he won't say any more, he continues.

"The others think I have two miracles. They are correct, but they have also been misled. Only Thomas knows the truth. I am a psychic of the highest order, and I have encouraged the belief that my capacity to see what people are capable of, their potential for good or ill, is a separate skill, and not simply a facet of my psychic arsenal. In truth, my second miracle is the ability to take a person to their maximum potential in a heartbeat."

My jaw drops open a little. "That's incredible. Why don't you just..."

"People aren't meant to have their maximum capability forced onto them like that. It's vast power without ever having to work for it or understand it or learn about it naturally. The psychological implications are enormous - it can affect you, change the way you see yourself and the way you see the world. I did that to Thomas, because otherwise Christopher would have been dead. I pushed a six year old boy to the maximum potential reach of his powers and in essence asked him to reattach someone's head."

There's an uncomfortable silence.

"Do you know what the worst part is? He didn't even cry. He just did as I asked. Then while Christopher was vomiting into the sand, Thomas looked up at me, covered in blood, and asked if he'd done it right. He was six. He was a *child*."

"You saved Christopher's life."

"And I condemned Thomas. He'll live forever. Long after the rest of us are dust, he'll cease to thank me for what I did, and come to hate me for it. It's too dangerous, Mallory. I won't do it again."

His shoulders sink. I watch him for a moment, feeling the passage of time but failing to care.

"You should go."

"I suppose so." I pull the curtain back and stare into a total darkness without any real sense of fear.

"Mallory?"

"Hm?"

"I may have been wrong about you."

I raise an eyebrow.

"You stand a very real chance of becoming at least marginally useful, and I'd like to see that. Don't mess this up."

I pull myself through the curtain while I still can.

I realise the barrier is failing a second before it does, but it's not enough time to be ready. The crashing wave of uncontrolled emotion almost takes me off my feet. All the furious anger and baseless hate, every moment of joy or passion, every cruel thought and mindless petty action, all the sorrow and pain that I've ever experienced flares in my mind like a burst of brilliant light. As quickly as it comes, it's gone, and I stagger forwards in darkness. The breeze that

ruffled the curtain is a full throated wind here; loud and cold. My ankle starts to give under my weight again, and with a sinking feeling, I realise I'm not going to be able to walk much more. I lower myself down to one knee, letting my injured leg trail out behind me, and feel around to get my bearings. The floor is wet and leaves a cold and oily residue on my skin that smells slightly rotten. My fingers push through what feels like soaked old matting as I grope around blindly. I shuffle forwards on my knees, feeling the battered denim of my jeans soak up liquid from the floor as I go. From my crouch on the floor, I feel out for Nicholas, trying to focus on the part of him I know to be at the top of the tower. I'm surprised by how close he feels, and I concentrate on him, trying to get a clearer image. It's like playing hide and seek in the dark, using a torch to find someone in camouflage.

"Nicholas?"

The reaction is immediate and unexpectedly violent. Some kind of psychic backlash streams along the connection between us like electricity through water, and hits me with a force strong enough to lift me off my knees and throw me backwards. I roll as I land, trying to grab hold of something to slow myself down. I bounce over sharp edges and hard corners that dig in like unexpected blows to my ribs, shoulders and face. My outstretched right hand catches on something, bending the nails back on the outside two fingers as I slide to a halt. I lie on my back on the oily floor and paw gently at my damaged face. The skin across the bridge of my nose feels broken although the cartilage and bone feel intact, and I've taken a sharp edge of some kind to my left cheekbone, but nothing serious this time. My fingers feel like they're on fire, but I can still move them around. Stars shine on me from a strange angle, and the wind ripples the front of my grimy clothes. I sit up and find myself near the edge of a broken section of wall. The hole looks out over the crater, horribly far below me. The thick clouds have worn themselves down to grey and smoky wisps that hang in the air below me, while the twinkling lights on the edge of the crater wall shimmer in the distance. It seems so much further away from here.

Using the faint starlight, I look around to see where I am. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I begin to make out the battered ruin of the top few levels of the tower. Stars shine through more ragged holes in the walls that seem to threaten the support of the last remaining floors above. Open concrete stairs lead up to the next floor; from here I can't see the roof itself, but I know it has to be close now. The whole place is like a construction site that's been left to rot. I've been lucky in my blind roll; the floor is littered with broken glass and shattered concrete. Here and there voids open up that disappear off into a dark nothingness. I know that the many levels of the library are directly below me, I know that there are soft carpets and ornate balustrades, and a dim but gentle light. Even without looking I can feel the receding presence of that part of Nicholas's mind. I know that the room below me is as real as this one, but staring down into these holes I can hear the faint dripping of water, and see nothing but blackness.

The light isn't good enough to safely navigate the floor, so I crawl on hands and knees towards the shape of a crumbling stairwell outlined in the gloom, feeling out with my fingers as I shuffle over the filthy floor. Without the barrier around me, I can feel a hard and unyielding determination to get out of this place. It sits in the pit of my stomach like a warm weight, encouraging each small bite into the distance between me and the roof. By the time I make it to the steps, my palms are thick with slime. I try not to think about what's actually on the floor, or what that says about the state of mind that this aspect of Nicholas will be in when I get to him.

In the thin light, I make out the broken pieces of the stairs. They must have once sat at the corner of the building, and whatever has torn a hole in the wall has also ripped out a chunk of stairwell; the gap is too wide for me to jump across, and the price of failure is too terrifyingly high to consider climbing round. In the remains of the near edge, thick

rips like claw marks are gouged into the concrete. I set my jaw, swear under my breath, and turn back into the building, crawling around pitfalls and debris.

I shuffle around in the gloom until I find the empty lift shaft. The doors are fully recessed into the walls on either side, with the right hand one juddering as it tries to close. Occasional sparks fly from the inside mechanism, accompanied by a smell of burning plastic and scorched metal. There's no sign of the actual lift. The shaft yawns downwards like some abyssal chasm, funnelling the wind into a low, moaning sound that makes all the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. At the top, faint light catches the rungs of a ladder. I stare at it, trying to assess how sturdy it would be under my weight, then, trying not to look downwards, and with nearly all of my weight held back from the drop, I feel around on the inside until I find the rungs at my level. They're cool and solid under my testing grip. They also represent my most likely way straight up onto the roof. I wipe my hands on the cleanest part of my clothes I can find, then turn my attention to my boots, which are slick with filth. As clean as I can be, I slip out into the shaft.

I pull myself up one rung at a time, not looking up or down. My forearms ache like the tendons are on fire, and each successive grip of my hands is weaker. The pulsing pain in my right fingers becomes an insistent throb. I force my arms up to the next rung, and the next, and the next, with nowhere to go but up, until my mechanical reaching is suddenly met by nothing but air. Panicked, I look up, half covering my face, and I realise I've reached the roof. I laugh harshly - a sound I barely recognise, and work my hands, elbows, and torso over the lip of the shaft, dragging up my legs behind me to lie face down at the edge; filthy, exhausted, and too tired to be cautious. I'm only still for a moment, just a second or two, but it feels as good as ten minutes in a steam room. Still, it's not long before I remember I'm lying at the edge of a precipice, and come up to my knees. I can see better here; a distorted moon picks out shadow monsters among the pipes and the ventilation housing, and I flinch each time the light reveals an imaginary fang or talon, startled into staring about me wide eyed until I'm once more certain that I'm alone.

Off to one side is the ruin of an ornamental garden. Delicate statues lie in broken rubble on the shredded grass, and I'm reminded of the claw-like marks in the stairwell below me. Worried about another backlash, I look for Nicholas the old fashioned way, holding back seeking like trying to stop myself hiccupping, concentrating on multiplication tables to stop myself doing it accidentally. It takes more time than I'd like until I see a human figure, curled up at the far edge of the roof near a crumpled water tower. It's him. It must be. It has to be.

My footsteps barely disturb the muggy quiet. It's a short walk, but right now I can't feel anything that doesn't hurt. I rub at my swollen face and look down at my aching hand, realising with a whimper that I've also torn one of the fingernails most of the way off the bed. I continue with the hand held out in front of me as if that will help. This last part of Nicholas is barely conscious. He's trembling and murmuring under his breath. Rather more disturbingly, he's completely naked. I crouch next to him, not wanting to touch him. Any contact I make with him will be skin contact, and I don't know if that's as safe here as it was in the library. I have to find some way to shield him from that, just in case. I yank my sleeves forward to enclose my battered hands, swearing through sudden tears as the cuff snags on the remains of my injured fingernail and pulls it away altogether. Awkwardly, artlessly, I wrap my covered arms around Nicholas's torso, and start to drag him back along the edge of the roof to the lift shaft. Maybe if I can bring him down to the other part of him it'll fix him somehow. Nicholas, naked as a baby, starts to form actual words.

Not words; one word.

One word I don't want to hear.

"...Dragon..."

I start to look for it, and find it almost reflexively. With a sick feeling, I realise where it is; hovering about twenty metres up; silent, motionless, and very, very real. Cold shock fills my guts with a wrenching twist. Somehow, until now, I've managed to convince myself that it was just a story, or even a metaphor. But it's not. Now I know it's real because it's right above me, looking right at me. Its eyes are a kaleidoscope of crystalline colours set in a long scaly head, heavily plated over the back of its wide skull. Smoke clings to it, drifting away in tiny wisps. I watch as it curls round in the air, graceful and deathly like a shark in water, and lands with neat precision on the far side of the roof, claws gouging chunks of the building out and tumbling them away into the far distant crater. It moves far too gently for something of its size, the muscles in its snakelike body stretching and contracting while silky wings furl across its back as it prowls towards us, blocking our exit. With slow deliberation, it reaches its long tail forward and wraps it around the walls bordering the lift shaft, then squeezes. The noise of cracking masonry sounds like cannons firing in the quiet tension of the rooftop. The dragon hunches back, poised as if to spring, and opens its mouth. A roiling stench of decay bursts out over three rows of bloody teeth, each one the size of a butcher's knife. It rolls over the roof in a visible cloud, and I'm immediately choking on fumes. Nicholas gasps for air in his loose sling. How did they ever think they could fight this thing? My mind chokes with fear. I search desperately for somewhere to hide, and find nothing. There's the gentle touch of a hand on my neck and I almost scream. The touch becomes a feverish grip, and Nicholas pulls my face down towards his. My eyes never leave the monster in front of me.

"You are ... *seeker*." His voice is weak and hoarse.

"There's nowhere to go!"

"Silly girl," he whispers, although not unkindly. "*Find yourself.*"

"I don't know how!"

The corners of his mouth twitch upwards and his fingers become like hot needles along the top of my spine; seeming to dig into flesh and bone. My muscles spasm and I scream silently as the air disappears from my lungs. I'm hit by a cleansing moment of clarity as sharp and hot as lightning. The world lights up in a bright, summer green, and Nicholas's voice booms in my mind as his fingers work deeper and deeper into my spine.

This is power. This is danger. This is our only path. Perhaps in the library I would never have attempted this, but the enemy is here with me, and I feel no such compunction. The others must be warned.

And suddenly it's all so very simple; I know how to touch him without hurting him, and how to make it so that lasts. I know how to get us home. It's like I always knew; it's instinctive, as simple as breathing in and out. I gather him up as best I can and stagger to my feet, limbs trembling at his weight. The dragon watches us, flanks sucking in and out as it breathes. I step carefully backwards and up onto the lip of the roof, pulling Nicholas with me. I look down behind me at the dizzying drop.

"Time to go home." I whisper, jaw clenched.

The nightmare thing on the other side of the roof lets out an enraged roar that seems to shred the air around me, beating against my ears until I'm sure they have to burst. I stagger, one heel over the edge of the roof, and almost drop Nicholas in my desperate need to block out the noise. Fractured slivers of masonry tumble away, and I swallow hard. The sound cuts off so suddenly that I'm sure I've been deafened, then I hear the scraping of clawed feet across concrete as the thing that's surely come to kill both of us readies itself to spring.

Now, Mallory!

The roof shakes as the monster lurches forwards, claws outstretched and teeth bared. Holding Nicholas tightly, I close my eyes and lean backwards into nothing but air, and we plummet down into the empty drop and the crater below.

PART THREE

*"Are we not as the angels? Has not God granted us these miracles to do His good work, and to
guide the souls of men towards the light?*

The Holy Father tells us that this is the case.

I disagree.

*I fear that we are demons, sent to plague the huddled masses, and I quake to think of the
damage that we could do, if but a handful of us declared this to be so."*

Savia deHauteville, 1365

FOURTEEN HOURS

We fall through darkness as thick as treacle and as black as hate. I reach out for myself with an ease I wish had come to me in the streets we're leaving behind. Christopher's safe haven pulses like a light house beacon in the void that we're falling through, and I feel out for him as well, knowing how close he is to that part of me that I left behind to enter Nicholas's mental landscape.

From outside of everything that's real or physical, as we surely must be here, I can see how Chris is woven in to the place like a spider in an intricate web. I grasp for the strands and pull us, struggling, through what feels like a thick membrane shielding the bar. The momentum of our fall drops away almost completely, and with a noise like the breaking of the world I find myself unceremoniously dumped back into my body. Nicholas jerks on the floor like he's been shot, and I tumble forward and land on top of him. The brick tiles around us rupture as an expanding shock wave bursts out into the room. Thomas, crouched over the two of us, is thrown bodily back into the nearby stone surround of the fireplace with a sickening crack, while Christopher is taken off his feet and lands gracelessly on his backside near the bar, his expression a bizarre mix of concern and confusion.

For a moment I'm not able to convince myself we're back, and I lie sprawled across Nicholas: my cheek on his chest, his shoulder digging into my stomach. His heartbeat is a steady, quiet th-thump th-thump against the side of my head. Everything else seems a distant blur, like I'm underwater. I can't seem to hear properly past the buzzing, whining sound that's lodged in my ears.

Strong hands take hold of me and I'm rolled over into Christopher's arms. He's shouting something, and it must be important because it's the same few words over and over again, but I can't seem to understand him. There's blood on his face; it's flowing out of his nose and over his lips. Tiny spots of it hit me as he shouts and I raise a hand to make him be quiet, pawing feebly at his face.

"Shhh..." It's the closest I can get to real speech right now.

Christopher stops shouting and pulls me into a tight hug, heedless of the fact that he's now bleeding into my hair. The world slowly swims back to the surface. Everything still hurts. Why does everything still hurt if I'm home now? With my swollen face pressed against Chris's shirt, blurred noises become words and bits of conversation, still too distorted to recognise voices or know who's speaking.

"What... bloody hell..."

"...alright mate?"

"... clavicle's broken ... in a minute."

"...what about ..."

"He's alright... out cold but ... all there. I don't know how she did it..."

"Maybe ... take a look at that collarbone?" I think that's George, but it's hard to tell.

"Mallory first." Thomas; I think that's Thomas.

There are footsteps, then Chris's grip loosens, and I find myself sat on the cracked tiles next to Nicholas, surrounded by the others.

"Are you alright, Mallory?" Chris asks me.

That must be what he was shouting earlier. I look down at my hands, pocked with little cuts and grazes and one fingernail torn clean off. Somehow my clothes seem fine, but underneath my undamaged jeans I can feel the ache where

my thigh has been scrubbed raw by blasting sand, and the pattern of bruises around my swollen ankle. The side of my head feels like someone hit me with a hammer, and my nose hurts like I ran face first into a wall. All told, I feel like a car wreck.

I shrug. "Been better."

Thomas takes a knee and looks me up and down. His brown eyes are deeply serious, and I think about the little boy he must have been when he met Nicholas. His brow furrows. "Where did you go, Mallory?"

"Go?" George leans in to get a better look at me. "She didn't go anywhere, there was just a bloody loud noise and you lot were all on the floor."

Thomas shakes his head. "She's about fourteen hours older than she was a few seconds ago, and she's picked up injuries she couldn't have taken from falling onto Nicholas. Look at her: she's not just cut, the blood's coagulated. These are injuries that she picked up hours ago, and she's covered in them."

George frowns, but says nothing.

I just shake my head. "I think it was in his mind. It was... it was pretty awful."

Chris shifts on his knees and squeezes my shoulder gently. "You're back now. You're safe here."

My throat contracts and I feel the start of tears of relief pricking at my eyes. He's wrong though. This place isn't safe; if I can get in here so easily, maybe something else can as well.

Thomas takes a gentle hold of my stinging hands. "With your permission, I'm going to mend most of this damage. I can't take it all away safely though; you've had it too long for me to just remove it now."

"I don't understand."

"Then I'll explain it while we go. Can you try to trust me Mallory?"

There it is again, being asked to trust someone I barely know. It should be hard, at least as hard as it was to take a stranger's hand in the middle of a London street after he'd broken into my house, but I feel like I know enough to make the right choice. I look down at Nicholas and feel my lips crack as I smile.

"No."

Thomas looks taken aback, like he hadn't quite expected that. There's a quiet pause while I draw breath.

"I mean yes. I mean, I know I can trust you, and I'll let you do what you need to do, but not yet. Let's get Nicholas off the floor, and you're not touching me until you've fixed your clerical bone."

"Clavicle." Thomas's correction comes out as a slightly stunned murmur.

"That one then. Also, Chris, could you please stop bleeding all over me?"

"Huh?" Chris frowns, uncomprehending.

George nods. "She's right mate, you're spilling claret everywhere. I thought it was just hers at first." He waggles his tanned fingers around his nose and Chris mimics him, his own hands coming away sticky with blood. He grunts in surprise.

Thomas looks at Chris, then at me, frowning like he's trying to work out something complicated. "Did you hit your face on anything when you fell?"

"No, nothing." Chris says. "I didn't even notice it."

"You want me to fix it?"

"Please."

"Done." Thomas doesn't even blink.

"Thanks." Chris looks down at the ruin of his shirt, shrugs, and starts to wipe his face clean with his sleeve.

Thomas turns his attention to Nicholas but George interrupts him, one weathered hand outstretched to stop him. "Don't even think about it sunshine. Fix your bloody shoulder and leave the heavy lifting to the big boys."

He crouches down and is about to slip his hands under Nicholas's shoulders when he pauses and looks up. "I'm not going to hurt him, am I?"

I'm shaking my head before I realise he's not asking me.

"No more than he's already hurt. Make it quick though." Thomas's voice has a slightly grim edge to it as he answers George.

George slides his hands under Nicholas with surprising gentleness, and lifts him into a seated slump before scooping the older man's body up in his arms.

"Dem, get the doors mate?"

"Sure."

I watch them leave through a door on the far side of the bar. By the time I've turned back, Thomas is rotating both arms in small circles, clearly having fixed his broken bone. He looks down at me gravely.

"Now then, let's have a look at you young lady."

"Is this gonna hurt?"

He shakes his head, golden hair shining in the fire light. "No, no it won't hurt. It will feel very strange, and maybe a little uncomfortable, but I promise it won't hurt."

"Good."

Thomas slips into an easy cross-legged position in front of me.

"Now then. Some of these injuries are older than I would ideally like for fixing them fast. The superficial cuts and scrapes, even the ones that hurt a lot, we can just get rid of, but you've got a couple of nasty fractures."

"My ankle?"

"Yes, that's the worst one. It looks like you were walking on it? The other fracture is your skull, which could be dangerous if we don't look at it today. Would you tell me how you got that?"

"I fell."

He raises an eyebrow. "It's useful for me to know more details, but if you don't want to tell me I'll understand."

I feel my face screw up as I try to think of the best way to put it. "Well, it's like there was this city, but in his head. In his mind I mean, or in part of his mind. You know about his whole super conscious thing?"

Chris snorts. "Oh yes. It's a source of constant annoyance. Nicholas has been trying to teach us about it for what feels like an eternity."

Thomas smiles. "Go on, Mallory."

"Well I was sort of walking about in his subconscious, or at least I think so. There were these things that attacked me. He said they were some kind of psychic parasite. A part of him said that. The super bit, although that was later on. I didn't know what they were at the time. Anyway, I got cornered and had to throw myself out of a window, that's where I got most of the little cuts. I twisted my ankle and cracked my head when I landed."

Sat in front of a warm fire with other people as I talk, I'm aware of just how ridiculous it all sounds. If it wasn't for the injuries, I'd think that none of it had been real at all.

Thomas at least doesn't seem put off. He nods encouragingly while I talk, and there's no trace of disbelief or mockery on his face. "Well I'll get you fixed up before I start badgering you for more details, although I am very interested how you ended up there without Nicholas actually taking you there himself."

"Dunno, sorry." I lie, not wanting to mention Nicholas's theories about my potential third miracle.

Thomas nods. "Let's get started on these fractures then."

He leans towards me and reaches out to my ankle with both hands. I flinch, although he doesn't actually touch me. He closes his eyes and a prickling sensation like mild pins and needles ripples across the surface of my bruises. I'm suddenly intimately aware of every tiny bone and strip of muscle in my ankle. It's strange, bordering on unpleasant, but not painful.

Thomas keeps talking while he works, voice calm. "I'm doing this very slowly because you've never experienced it before. It can be disconcerting the first time."

"Uh huh." A mental picture of Thomas as a little boy springs into my mind: blonde curls bobbing and little face furrowed in concentration as he reattaches Chris's partly severed head. For a moment, I'm sure I might vomit. I swallow hard and try to concentrate on the sound of his voice.

"Some injuries are serious enough that you carry them mentally as well as physically. It's not healthy for you to have those removed quickly, because your mind needs to heal from them in a similar way to your body. What I'm doing now is accelerating the normal healing of your body rather than just fixing the damage."

Still hovering over me without making any contact, one of his hands leaves my ankle and runs up my side to my face, close enough that I can almost feel his skin. Abstractedly, I notice that his fingernails are flawless, and his hands don't have a single blemish or wrinkle. The tingling sensation spreads out across my head, and I can feel the difference between the cartilage and bone in my nose, and the swollen tissue around them. Rather more disturbingly I'm now aware of the suture lines between the joined plates of my skull. The structure of the thin barrier between my brain and the outside world isn't something I've ever really given any thought to before, and I shudder.

Thomas rocks back onto his heels and opens his eyes again. "You'll find that there's still some associated pain, especially on the ankle, but you should be able to manage that with normal painkillers if you want to. It'll feel like you wrenched it rather than fractured it. As for the cuts and grazes, you won't even remember they were there."

I look down at my hands, surprised to find that the skin is healed. I'm still caked in dried blood, but a quick pat down of my face and legs tells me that's now pretty much all I have to worry about. I stare at my fingernails; all ten of them.

"I didn't feel you put that back." I say, voice quiet with wonder. "I felt the stuff with my head and my ankle, but not that."

Chris smiles at both of us. "Told you he was good."

The stinging in my skin has faded to a memory like a bad dream. I peel back my sleeves and run my hands over my forearms, feeling the unbroken skin. Tiny scab heads fall away under my fingers like old disturbed dust. Thomas stands and slips away, and I barely notice him go.

Chris leans forward and offers me a hand, pulling me to my feet with an easy smile. "Better?"

I nod, still a little surprised at feeling so normal again, and test my weight on my ankle. It's sore, and holding my full weight on it is difficult but it feels like I hurt it days ago, not hours. I walk in a circle around the nearest table, one hand hovering over the iron lattice work in case the joint buckles under me again. My free hand probes experimentally at my head, which is tender but touchable. I look around to find Thomas has left me and Chris alone in the room. The fire crackles happily behind me.

"It's amazing, I feel... I feel great."

Chris grins. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you still look like you went ten rounds with Demetrius."

His smile still has a contagious quality to it, like he leaves all the world behind when he does it. "Yeah, I need to wash all this shit off me."

"There's showers upstairs if you want to use them."

I consider it. The bar is warmer than my place will be, and the company is good, but I need to be outside. I need to see the things that remind me I'm in normal, boring, plain old London again. I want to go home. I want all my mundane and reassuring possessions; the mess in my room, little stuffed toys and mindless things that have an emotional attachment that's totally unexplainable but totally genuine. I want the cold linoleum of the kitchen floor under my feet, and the awkward shuffle to close the door of the tiny shower room behind me once I'm in there. I want my own towels, my own shampoo; God, shampoo sounds nice right about now.

"I'd rather go back to my place. Thanks though."

"Sure." For a moment, and it is only a moment, he looks worried, like he thinks I'm not coming back. For all he might be able to perform miracles, he'll never be a gambler.

"I'll come back. I just need some... some normality I guess."

"Am I that obvious?"

"Little bit, yeah."

He laughs, and I join in. It's warm, but short lived, and followed by a slightly awkward pause.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

I'm about to refuse when I realise what I look like. I don't really want to walk home from here covered in dried blood. "I'd like that, thank you. Do you mind if I check in on Nicholas before we go?"

"Sure."

He leads me through the door that George carried Nicholas out of earlier. To my surprise, it doesn't lead into an internal corridor, but rather outside onto a square courtyard. A red tiled roof hangs out over a paved path running around the outside of the square, past leaded windows and unmarked doors almost like the fronts of little terraced cabins picked out in deep red bricks. In the centre of the courtyard is an intricately cultivated garden of rocks and sand, open above to bright summer sunshine and the distant noise of birds. Although there aren't any trees, there's a pleasant smell of pine, and the joyful prickling of hot sunlight on my skin.

"Whoa."

Chris, not having realised that I've stopped with my mouth hanging open, turns back to me. "Hmm?"

"I thought this was a *pub*."

"It's lots of things really. Mainly it's just a safe place. It's from my third."

"Third?"

"Third miracle. It took me nearly a century to create anything more complex than a cave with a dry floor. I've been working on this one for nearly a decade. Do you like it?"

"You... you made this? Just *made* it?"

"Well, Nicholas looks after the garden."

I close my mouth, and think about how Chris had seemed to be woven into the place as I pulled us in. If he made this place, then it really is a bit like a spider web. When I took hold of the strands of the web and used them to help us get through, I must have used one of his miracles to move us. It would make sense in a way, if I can touch on what other people do. With a sinking feeling, I realise that means I probably gave him that nosebleed doing it, and I know I need to

speak to Nicholas about this before I end up really hurting someone.

"It's this way." Chris leads me around the edge of the courtyard, under the overhanging roof.

I run one hand along the rough bricks of the wall. "So your third lets you make things?"

"Something like that. I can make safe places, although they don't actually exist in what most people would recognise as reality. The whole thing is rather complicated, sorry. I tend to work with it on an intuitive level, rather than looking for an academic understanding of it, like Thomas would, so it's hard for me to explain."

"So they're not like Nicholas's psychic brain place?"

He shakes his head. "He says there's some similarities, but this is different in that you exist here physically, not just mentally. You're actually here, just outside of what you'd normally think of as reality."

"Why do you call it your third? Why not your first, or your second?"

"Because I found out about this one last. Most people tend to discover their first by accident, and sometimes their second as well, but finding out about the third one, if they have one, is nearly always deliberate. It's usually less obvious than the others."

"Did you find out about your teleporting first or second?"

"Second. I'll tell you about it some time, it's a good story. Oh, but don't call it that in front of Nicholas, it winds him up. He has a thing for proper names."

"Well it seemed kind of descriptive to me." I frown. "What does he call it then?"

"Translocation."

"Sounds dumb."

Chris grins, and comes to a halt outside a door on the opposite side of the courtyard to the one we came out of. Inside I can hear the quiet murmur of low voices. He taps on the door a couple of times with one extended knuckle, and pushes it open.

The space inside is plainly furnished but well lit. Demetrius and Thomas are stood by a wooden bed in the centre of the room while George sits slouched on the chair he's pulled out from under the matching bureau. A window in the far wall has been opened to let in the faint smell of the sea, and as the door closes behind us, the gentle birdsong of the courtyard is replaced with the harsh call of gulls. Nicholas has been laid out on the bed; someone has tugged off his shoes and jacket, but otherwise he's thankfully still dressed.

Chris steps up to the bed. "How is he?"

Thomas shifts to a sitting position on the edge of the mattress and smiles at Chris, then at me. "He's going to be fine, thanks to Mallory."

I step up beside them and look down at Nicholas, who now seems to be resting peacefully. A quick check for all of the different aspects of his mind reassures me that he's all there. I look over at Thomas. "Um, how can you tell?"

"I've spent some time working with him on connections between the physical and psychic selves. I recognised a few indicators before that are thankfully no longer present."

"Okay." I nod. "Okay. But if he's better, then why is he still unconscious?"

Thomas leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Because I haven't woken him up yet. The injuries he's sustained aren't physical, they're psychic. I've done everything I can for him, stabilised him so that when he's ready he can just wake up, and you've made it possible for me to do that, but Nicholas's mind is very different from yours or mine, and it's a little beyond my ability to truly comprehend. Physical damage I can repair, even mental damage to some extent, but psychic damage is... difficult to understand. It would be an awful risk to bring him round if he's not ready. I could do it,

but it would likely cause more problems than it resolves.”

“Any idea how long it will take?” Chris asks.

Thomas just shakes his head.

George shifts on the chair. “We *are* running on a schedule here. We need him back now, mate.”

“I’ve explained this over and over again George,” Thomas looks down at the unconscious Nicholas, the muscles in his jaw twitching with irritation. “It’s not safe to bring him round. If he’s not ready we risk doing irreparable damage. We don’t *know* how tight the schedule is, and I’m not prepared to risk it. We have no idea if he warned us about the dragon coming for him in isolation, or for us all. We have to assume the former at this point.”

George throws one hand up in the air. “Even if we do assume that, and I think it’s a bloody stupid assumption by the way, we’re running blind without him. We need him. We have no idea where it is without him.”

“That’s not true.” My mouth’s open and the words are out before I even realise I’ve spoken. Four pairs of eyes turn to look at me, and my jaw snaps shut as my face flushes with embarrassment.

George stands up, face grim. “You can find it? You know where it is?” He’s changed from being the happy, enthusiastic semi-drunk I met in the bar earlier to being entirely, fatally serious.

I *can* feel it. When I think about it, I can feel the awful thing as a background presence, crawling around on the edges of the world, looking for a way in, looking for its escaped meal. Looking for Nicholas, and looking for me. I nod.

Chris clears his throat in the quiet tension of the room. “She’s a seeker, George.”

George’s face is drawn into tight lines. “No offence love, but you found out about that half an hour ago. How could you possibly know how to find a dragon?”

I shake my head. “It might feel like half an hour to you, but apparently I just spent fourteen hours walking around in someone else’s brain, trying to find a single aspect of their mind when I didn’t even know it was possible to have more than one. I picked up a few things. Plus I saw it, so I know what I’m looking for.”

He strides over to me, covering the space between us in a few easy steps, and takes hold of the tops of my arms. Behind me I feel Chris tense up.

George’s grip is as hard as his voice. “You *saw* it?”

I nod, a little bit afraid of the tension in his fingers.

“Tell me where it is.” Each word is slow, like he’s working to stay in control, and I’m suddenly concerned about what he’ll do if I don’t have the answer he wants.

“I don’t think it’s here yet. It feels like it’s sort of scratching at the surface, trying to get in. I don’t think it was happy that I took Nicholas away, and it’s still looking for him.”

His grip loosens the smallest amount. “Then we have some time.”

I don’t move. “So what now?”

There’s a moment’s pause, like they’re waiting for something. This must be the real reason they need Nicholas. He’s in charge – it’s almost like they’re lost without him.

Behind me, Chris breaks the silence. “Now, I take you home, and you get some rest. Keep feeling out every now and then, and if anything changes, call us. I’ll give you my number.”

“Okay. Oh, wait, I can’t. My mobile is broken.”

“Take mine.” George, flipping mood once again, lets go of my shoulders altogether, and fishes in a pocket, pulling out a slim touch screen phone which he hands to me with an easy grin.

“Um, thanks.”

He pauses, not quite releasing the handset, and raises one eyebrow. "How'd you break your last one?"

I blush as Chris answers, wryly. "She tried to kill me with it."

George laughs, right from his stomach, and the noise pushes all the tension out of the room. "Try not to do the same thing with this one love, I haven't got a spare."

"Are you sure you don't mind...?" I half offer him it back.

"It's fine, so long as you're not planning on using it as improvised weaponry. It's pretty user friendly, and there's only a couple of numbers in it. Chris is top of the list, so just call if you need us."

"I will. Thanks."

"No worries love."

I turn back to Nicholas and pat him on the shoulder. "Told you I'd get you home, old man. I *told* you."

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Chris leaves me in my hallway after checking twice more that I'm alright, and making sure I know how to use George's mobile. The singing and stretching sensation are gentler this time as he vanishes right in front of me, somehow more familiar and expected. I can almost pick out snatches of words in the singing, but there's still something distracting about seeing a man that size simply disappear. I wait for a slow count of ten, then feel for him. It's quicker this time, more reflexive and much clearer. Whatever Nicholas did to me before seems to have made the whole seeking thing much easier, even though I'm sure I'm still groping around with a serious lack of grace and precision. I concentrate, eyes screwed up, fists bunched tight, until I can actually feel him moving around his bar. There's a semi-visual quality to it, and I can't quite decide if I'm imagining things to help the feeling of location make more sense, or if I'm really seeing it. I relax and let go of the image, and slope down the hallway to my bathroom in my blood stained clothes.

It takes a few minutes before the clattering pipes spit hot water out of the showerhead, and steam starts to rise and gathering in the peeling corners of the ceiling. I tear off my clothes, throwing my jeans and jumper into the corner.

I catch sight of myself in the bathroom mirror, and pause to consider how different I look compared to yesterday. One half of my head is plastered with matted red-black hair, making me look like some kind of zombie. It's no wonder Chris was shouting; if it's weird to see him vanish, it must have been pretty disturbing to see me go from normal to this. Or worse than this I suppose. It occurs to me with a sudden burst of guilt that I haven't even thanked Thomas for helping me. I scramble through my jeans pockets for the mobile and hunt through the address book for Thomas's number. My fingers drum on the side of the sink while I wait for the call to connect, and I wonder how mobiles even work in the bar, or whatever it is. I'm cut off in mid thought as the phone is answered on the second ring.

"Hello Mallory, is everything alright?" Thomas's voice is calm and even.

"Hi Thomas, yeah I'm fine, I just... well I was... thing is I never..." I take a deep breath and start again. "I realised that I never said thank you."

"Thank you?"

"For fixing me. My ankle and everything."

"You're more than welcome." I can hear the fact that he's smiling; it changes the sound of the words.

"I should have said straight away, sorry."

"Please don't worry about it. It can take people a little by surprise the first time. I'm just glad you're alright."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine now. It's kind of nice to be home though."

"Well you get some rest and we'll see you later. Don't forget you can call us if you need anything."

"I will do. Thanks Thomas."

"You're welcome, my dear."

I hang up and put the phone back on the windowsill as I step into the shower. The water is scalding hot, but I step underneath the showerhead anyway, revelling in the stinging heat as my skin turns pink and the blood washes out of my hair like red dye, pooling around my feet and diluting before draining away completely. Soap and shampoo turn out to be just as good as I expected, and by the time I climb back out into the bathroom, I feel refreshed and almost whole.

I switch the TV on in my room to the news, and I'm surprised to find out it's not even midday on Christmas Eve

yet. I dry myself while I watch weather reports of thick snowfalls, freezing fog and black ice, traffic reports of jack-knifed lorries, derailed trains and motorway closures. I change channels to hear about rocketing crime rates, the highest on record, matching abnormally high suicide rates and hospital admissions. All I can think of is a monster on a rooftop; decayed breath washing over me, teeth like knives. If they're right, that thing is making all this worse. Even if I wanted to walk away from all of this, I don't know if I could now.

The wintery sky is darkening when I come round after a couple of hours of restless sleep with stiff muscles and an overwhelming need to eat. I also realise I want someone to talk to. Someone who will be able to rationalise all this, and help me make sense of it. Someone normal. I snatch up George's mobile and head for the kitchen, dialling Janine's number from memory. I'm halfway down a packet of biscuits when she finally answers.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"Jan, it's Mal, can you..."

"Mallory! Who's number is this? Why haven't you been answering your phone? Where did you go last night?"

I roll my eyes as I reach for a multipack of cheap crisps, still talking with my mouth full. "Jan, calm down. My phone's broken, a friend lent me this one."

"Who?"

"You don't know him. Look, you would not believe..."

Janine interrupts me again as I reach for a tub of sandwich spread. "Him? Who? Where did you go last night? Sarah said you hit her! Did you hit her? Why would you do that?"

I abandon trying to find bread that hasn't passed its sell by date, and pull a spoon from the cutlery rack to shovel spread into my mouth, still talking. I don't ever remember being this hungry.

"Janine, shut up."

There's a stunned silence at the other end of the line. I'm a little surprised myself. I don't think I've ever told her to shut up before.

I start again. "Look, why don't you come round. Some weird shit happened to me last night and I could use a friend right now, ok?"

"Oh... okay. I'll see you soon."

I wonder what colour Janine's confusion would be. I hang up without saying anything else, and abandon the spoon to shovel tuna mayonnaise spread into my mouth with my fingers.

Janine reaches my front door in record time. I follow her progress with a vague interest as she makes her way across the city towards me, while I clear the kitchen of every edible source of food I can find. By the time she reaches the end of my street, my face is smeared in jam and my hands are a disgusting sticky mess. Empty and half empty cans, jars and packets litter the kitchen sideboard, and I'm only just approaching satisfied. One more thing I need the saints to explain. I hope I'm not always going to be this hungry because the food bills are going to be staggering. I clean my hands and face in the sink as best I can, and sweep all the containers into the bin.

I snag one more bag of crisps as Janine takes the final steps towards my door, and I'm there in enough time to pull it open as she raises one dainty finger to the bell.

She stifles a shriek. "Mallory! You scared me!"

"Sorry Jan, come on in."

Janine raises an eyebrow. "You hate me coming in."

"Well, it's Christmas. Plus, you're letting out what little heat there is in here. Get inside."

She scurries obediently past me into the hallway, and I close the door. There's a pause where she looks uncomfortable and I find myself wondering how I ever let myself get pushed around by her when it was this easy to just put my foot down.

It occurs to me that I should be polite. "You want tea or something?"

"What kind do you have?"

"The kind that comes in little bags with perforations in them. Is there another kind?"

"Never mind, I'll do without." She turns on her heel and walks down the short corridor to the main room.

I shudder, thinking of the last time I saw her walking away from me, over the glass and rubble of Nicholas's caldera, bending like she was made of gossamer. I shake my head. That wasn't her. I don't know what that was, but it wasn't the tiny woman in front of me now. The memory is pretty fresh, but Janine thankfully lacks the other-worldly quality of either the place or the thing that was wearing her face.

When I tell her, Janine doesn't believe me. I shouldn't be surprised, given how unwilling I was to believe Chris. She tells me that I must have had something slipped in my drink, which would also explain my unprovoked attack on poor Sarah in the bathroom, or that I must have dreamt it all. She doesn't go as far as to accuse me of making it up entirely, but we dance around the edge of that for a while. I abandon trying to reason with her and try the same tactic that worked on me.

"I can prove it."

"Mallory, this is stupid."

"Really, I can. You know the thing with the trains? How I know where they are?"

She nods, slowly, like she's humouring a crazy person. I do feel a little crazy.

"It's not just trains, Jan. It's everything. I can find anything. Pick something, anything you like and I'll tell you where it is."

"Don't be silly."

"I'm serious."

"Fine." She pauses, thinking. "Where's my purse?"

"In your inside coat pocket. Too easy; pick something I couldn't know. Something no one but you could know."

She rolls her eyes wearily, but plays along anyway. "Where have I put Alistair's Christmas present?"

I nod. This one will be harder, although I was with her when she bought it for the overgrown jerk. I close my eyes.

"Mallory, this is ridiculous."

"Quiet. I'm concentrating."

There's a gentle slapping noise that has to be her raised hands coming to rest on her knees again as she lets out an exasperated sigh.

I open my eyes. "It's at your mother's house. On the top shelf of the walk-in wardrobe."

Janine's mouth falls open. "How do you know that? I didn't even tell my *mother* that!"

My shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. "I told you that already, and you didn't believe me the first time round. Give me another one."

All of the sarcasm has drained out of her face, along with most of the colour. "Mallory, you're freaking me out."

I should probably leave it alone, I know I should, but too much of me is enjoying the slightly frightened look on her face. I feel a little bit predatory; it's a new sensation, rich and enticing. "Come on, I don't want you to think I cheated. Give me another one."

She swallows. "Where are... where're my pink flower earrings? The ones my Dad bought me in Switzerland."

Knowing what they are makes it easier, but there's something different this time. I frown as the sense of location splits, and I realise each one is in a different place. The images are clearer this time, like I'm getting better every time I try it.

"One of them is in on top of your dresser, in your room. The other one..."

"Okay stop it."

I don't really hear her, I'm too busy concentrating. "The other one is underground. Not deep though."

"Shut *up* Mallory."

My voice drops to a whisper. "It's at Camberwell Cemetery."

Janine's face tightens into a look of stony fury and she stands up fast enough that she knocks her chair over backwards.

"Jan, I..."

"Shut up shut up *shut up!* It's not enough that you run off in the middle of a perfectly good evening and ruin it for me, you have to play nasty little tricks on me as well?"

"It's not a trick Jan."

"Then someone told you. I don't care how you did it. Either you're a cheat or you've been spying on me, or you're some kind of crazy circus act, and whichever it is I don't care. You're a stupid bitch and I hate you! I've *always* hated you. I hope you freeze to death in your nasty little hole of a flat! No one will find you here for months because you're too much of a cow to let people in. They won't know you're dead until spring when you thaw out and start to stink!"

Janine's voice rises to a full blown shriek as she speaks. Her whole face has turned an ugly shade of red. She finishes and stands panting in the middle of my room for a moment, hands balled into tight fists, eyes wide. Then with an unexpected suddenness, she half turns and picks up her chair which scrapes across the floor as she pivots and flings it at me like an Olympic hammer thrower. I raise both hands to protect my face, and as the wooden legs of the chair smash into the backs of my arms, there's a burst of green light that fills the whole room for a moment. The chair bounces off my unhurt forearms and clatters to the floor.

"Oh my God." Janine's words come out as a choked whisper.

I stare at my arms, then up at Janine. My mouth is hanging open.

"I..."

Her eyes are wide with shock, but her voice comes out flat. "Don't you ever come near me again, you fucking freak."

She bolts from the room and out into the street, leaving my front door swinging open. I don't try to stop her going.

The sky over London is cold and clear. Here and there I can see stars glittering above me, even through the haze of street lights and shop fronts. With my hands stuffed in my pockets and my chin tucked firmly under my raised collar, I trudge along wet streets with the hiss of early evening traffic on waterlogged asphalt keeping me company. Christmas music pours out of shops and bars, and revellers starting early stagger past me, holding each other up and stinking of

alcohol.

My mood stays bleak; the last twenty four hours have turned my tiny, safe little world completely on its head. Now with no one I can think of to talk to about it, I have to figure this out on my own. I try to pin down the sensation of that green light filling my room. It came from me, it couldn't have come from anywhere else, but try as I might I can't seem to work out how to set it off. On the rooftop with Nicholas, it was as easy as breathing in and out, so why is it so difficult now? Whatever it was he did to me, it's either worn off, or I just don't understand how to use it.

The seeking part still seems to be relatively easy at least, and I practise as I walk, focussing on people, places, things. I find my family clustered together in my mother's living room, my niece curled up asleep on her father's lap. Every time I look for something, the images are sharper, less like distant memory and more like a television set playing in the background.

Eventually my wandering, aimless path leads me into Hyde Park, and I stop on Dell Bridge to look out over the water. It seems strange to me in some way that I should be so busy looking for things that I don't remember the route I took to get here. The lights and sounds of the winter fairground drift over the water towards me as I lean on the pale stonework. Why would Nicholas have told me that changing me might be dangerous and then do it anyway? Why even bother if I still can't do anything other than find things? It doesn't seem to have any really dangerous applications that I can think of. Maybe Janine was right – maybe it is just a trick. I don't feel any different. No, that's wrong: I *do* feel different, but it's subtle, like I've stood up straighter and I feel taller for it. Even so, I still don't feel like I can perform miracles.

I don't know what makes me decide to head further into the gloom of the park on my own, but it's not long before I seriously regret it. He veers out onto the path in front of me, hands in the pockets of his scuffed leather jacket, face reddened by the cold. I barely notice him until he's alongside me, and I'm not quick enough to get out of his way as he stumbles into me.

"Hey, watch it!" I catch myself before I fall, and straighten up angrily.

His hair hangs down far past his eyes; brown curls that should be beautiful, but instead draw all my focus onto his cold-cracked mouth. His lips curl into a smile as he pulls his hands out of his pockets.

"If you scream, I'll gut you."

My mouth drops open with shock, and my stomach fills with ice as I realise one of his hands has a firm grip on an oversized pocket knife; small enough to hide easily, big enough to puncture everything I consider vital.

I back up nervously.

"Don't go anywhere baby, we ain't even started yet."

He advances on me as my legs turn to jelly, reaching out one hand towards my face. I slap him away with a panicked sweep of one arm. His face clouds with anger and his hand clenches into a fist, which he swings at me alarmingly fast. I raise both arms defensively, mind frozen with panic, hoping that something useful will happen; some colourful miracle to save me. Instead I take a heavy blow to the side of the head that rattles my skull so hard that I don't even realise I'm falling until I land in a heap on the floor.

The world spins as I try to figure out which way is up, and for a moment the only real sensation is dirt and gravel under my palms. As my vision lurches back to normal I realise I'm lying on the edge of the path with this man standing over me. I scurry backwards, trying and failing to get to my feet. He chuckles as he lopes after me, and I start sobbing as

panic gives way to terror. He twists his knife idly in one hand as the other goes to his belt buckle.

"I'm gonna really enjoy this."

His belt is undone and fly half unzipped when he pauses and turns away from me, mouth twisted with an almost petulant, interrupted confusion. There's a noise like scraping stone that builds in volume rapidly, then he's suddenly taken off his feet and flung backwards across the darkness of the park. The thing that hit him stands in his place for a moment; human shaped, but wrong somehow, too bulky, too rough. For all its alien appearance, there's something horribly familiar about it; something I can't quite place. My mouth falls open. Has this monster followed me through from Nicholas's mind? Maybe it's some aspect of the dragon come to kill me for stealing Nicholas away from it, given a physical form and pulled into this reality. It towers over me, looking at me carefully, assessing me as if it's checking I'm unharmed. I blink up at it in dull shock. Then it's gone as suddenly as it arrived, following my attacker into the darkness, kicking up wet mud in a spray behind it, moving so fast it's a blur.

I don't bother to wait and find out who or what it was. Muscles trembling with adrenaline and face streaked with tears, I drag myself to my knees, scramble to my feet, and run like hell. In the darkness behind me I hear a deep and throaty cry of pain that cuts off suddenly with a wet crack.

I pound forwards, tears freezing on my face in the cold air, shaking fingers fumbling in my coat pocket for George's mobile phone. It almost slips out of my hands as I run and I stumble as I catch it. Holding the phone out in front of my face I jab at the key pad with dirty fingers as I close the distance on the edge of the park.

Distracted and with my vision blurred, I get practically no warning that the stony monstrosity is now coming down the path towards me, its earlier terrifying pace now a controlled but determined stride. It stops only a few metres away from me and I freeze like a rabbit in headlights, not sure which way to go. It's like a man made of rocks, or covered in them somehow, bulky enough to make Chris look like a child, and dressed bizarrely in tracksuit bottoms and a t-shirt stretched to the point of bursting over its chest. Muscle forms are picked out along its arms in brown and black twists of stone, shot through with veins of silver. The rough shape of a head sits over the massive torso, with no apparent features other than a pair of depressions where eyes should be. Behind it I can see the twinkle of lights and the comfort of the open street; there'll be other people there, normal people. I glance at the phone, wondering how quickly I can find and dial Chris's number. An unhelpful little instinct makes me wonder where the camera on this thing is. Then the face splits open where a mouth should be, and a human voice comes out of it.

"Mallory."

My jaw drops, and so does the phone, tumbling out of my hand and towards the ground, camera unfound and number undialled. With unbelievable quickness, one rock like arm flashes out towards me. I squeeze my eyes shut and clench my jaw although I'm sure it won't do me any good when the blow comes.

Nothing happens.

"Here."

I open my eyes to find it's now stood right in front of me, arm outstretched with George's mobile phone nestled delicately between monolithic fingers.

I stare at it blankly.

The crack line that passes for a mouth splits into what can only be a lopsided smile. It gestures towards me with the hand holding the mobile.

Fingers trembling, heart pounding, and with my world still spinning at a crazy angle, I reach out and take the phone. The second bulky hand closes over the top of mine too quickly to allow me to pull away. I stare down dumbly at

joints and knuckles defined by bumps and ridges. In the dim light I'm not sure when I first notice the rock begin to fade away like fast melting ice, revealing tanned and weathered olive skin underneath. Mouth still hanging open, I look up into warm hazel eyes.

"Demetrius?!"

The crack mouthed grin again, this time on an increasingly human face. He just nods. My whole body is shaking, and I think I might vomit. Tears well up in my eyes again. My throat contracts, and I burst into racking sobs.

He puts both hands on my shoulders and bends at the knees to look me in the face. "You okay?"

I pull forward out of his hands and wrap both arms tightly around his torso. "Thank you, thank you so much."

After a moment he puts one arm around my shoulders and makes gentle 'there-there' noises. I hold onto him like he was a life raft, crying noisily into his now baggy t-shirt.

Eventually I manage to get myself back under control, and I look up at him. I sniff. "Were you following me?"

He just nods.

"Why?"

"Chris asked me."

"Why?"

"Wanted to make sure you were okay. Didn't want to make a big deal of it."

"Why didn't he just..." I swallow the question, worried that it might make me seem ungrateful for the rescue.

Demetrius is ahead of me. He grins. "Couldn't do it himself."

"Why?" I'm beginning to feel like a stuck disc.

"Did you look for him?"

"Well, yes a bit."

"That's why."

"Oh, I see."

"You might have looked for Thomas. And George isn't fast enough. So, me. People don't look for me. It's useful."

I let go of him and step back, wiping my face on my coat sleeves. "Thank you."

"You pissed?"

"Am I what?"

"Pissed off. That I followed you."

I laugh; a short, incredulous sound that's a little too loud in the darkness. "Don't be ridiculous. I don't think I've ever been happier to see anyone in my entire life."

Demetrius grunts.

"Will you walk me back to the bar? I know it's a long way but I want a bit more air."

We've almost reached the gates of the park before my heart rate is anything like normal and the little bubbles of tears that rise up from my stomach have settled down. Demetrius is silent that whole time, I find myself desperately thinking of some way to carry or start a conversation, something clever or interesting to say. Eventually, something stupid comes out instead.

"So, you... uh... turn into rock, huh? Neat."

"Yeah."

"How'd you find out you could do that?"

"Nicholas tried to cut off my hand."

"What?! Why?"

He shrugs, like the whole conversation is the most normal thing in the world. "To test my third. It had to be a surprise."

I'm gawping, staring open mouthed at him as we walk, but he doesn't seem to have noticed. I roll the idea of it around in my brain, trying to work out a justifiable way for Nicholas to be attempting to lop bits of his companions off, but it just won't fit.

"Demetrius?"

"Hm?"

"Would you mind telling me the whole story? It's not that I find the idea of Nicholas going a bit psycho hard, I just don't see him aiming it at you."

"Sure," he says, laughing.

By the time he starts talking again, I'm almost sure he's forgotten. As I open my mouth to remind him, he takes a deep breath.

"George and I... we grew up together but we hated each other. We fought like dogs when we were children. He became a noble man, and I became a thief and a murderer. We didn't see each other for a long time. When we did meet again it was because of Nicholas. They were crusading together against a dragon. They were outmatched. Nicholas found me. Persuaded me to help. We killed it, but I got hit pretty badly. Wasn't sure how I survived. Already knew I was different; too fast, too strong. Nicholas told me what my third was. I didn't believe him. So he took George's knife and tried to cut off my hand."

I wait, a little surprised at how much he's just said, but he's quiet again.

"Did it work?" I ask.

He lifts his left arm and waggles his fingers at me. "Still attached."

"So, what, it just turned to rock?"

"It's complicated. But yes."

On a whim I reach out and take his nearest hand, turning it over curiously in my own. The skin is normal, heavily tanned and nicked with the little cuts and scars that come with just being alive.

"Does it hurt?"

He shakes his head, lifting the hand so I can see it clearly. The skin darkens, turning black and brown, then it hardens visibly, growing and seeming to swell. A pebble like pattern pushes upwards and grows into rough nodules. Thin, glittering veins trace through and under the raised surface. He clenches his fist a couple of times, then holds it out to me. I take hold of the outstretched fingers, slightly nervous. They're rough under my own, but still warm like his skin. A noise that's not quite a laugh escapes my mouth as I turn his hand over.

"That's amazing."

"Thanks."

I let go and Demetrius shakes his arm like he's flicking off water. When he raises his hand again, it's just skin.

The silence feels less uncomfortable after a while, and when I open my mouth again it's because I want to know something rather than because I feel like I should.

"Nicholas is pretty important to you guys, isn't he?"

Demetrius nods, his face serious.

"Is it hard? To have to wait for him to come back I mean."

"Yes."

"I don't mean to, y'know, pry or anything. This is all pretty new to me."

He smiles. "It's hard without him. We just don't have the knowledge. It's worse for George. He's the closest to this. The most involved. He thinks of killing these things like his absolution. Because he wasn't in time to save her. The girl."

There's clearly more to this story than I know, but getting information out of Demetrius is, rather ironically, like twisting blood out of a rock. Or maybe a whole heap of rocks. I'll have to ask the others what really happened with the dragon and the princess and the priest. And that's it, of course that's it. An idea bursts into my mind like a glorious golden sunrise.

"Demetrius, wait."

He halts abruptly and looks down at me, waiting. I tug George's still undamaged mobile out of my pocket.

"I'm going to call Chris. We need to go back right now. I think I have a plan."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Trust me, this is where I start being at least marginally useful. You're going to really like this."

I ignore his quiet confusion, and dial with a spreading grin.

DRAGON KILLER

Firelight fills the bar with a sleepy warmth. Demetrius rolls the coals idly with a long poker while Thomas and Christopher take seats on one side of the brick semi-circle and I stand on the other like I'm about to be interviewed. George, so drunk I'm sure he can't actually stand, is slumped over the bar next to a collection of bottles and glasses, only one of which has anything left in it. I take a deep breath, working nervous fingers into the shoulders of my coat, draped over the back of the nearest chair.

"Okay, so, the idea itself is simple, but I want to explain how I came up with it first. It's about me being bait, and why you need bait in the first place. This thing... you think that it can't understand gender, right? So you need a girl, someone female, to essentially distract it, because it'll come and have a look before it, y'know, eats them?"

Thomas nods. "That makes it sound a little brutal, but it's correct in essence, yes."

"Okay, good. Well, then we might have to change the plan a little bit, since it's already had a look at me, and I think... I *think* it may have done it more than once."

George picks his head up from the bar top and turns bloodshot eyes to me. "Whassat?"

"When I was in Nicholas's mind, he said it was the dragon that had tried to separate him from you because it understood he was a threat."

"Arrogant bastard." Still a little slurred, George turns on his stool and looks pleadingly at Thomas. "Give us a hand mate?"

Thomas rolls his eyes and the alcoholic flush evaporates from George's cheeks. His eyes, now free of broken veins, focus sharply on me. "Go on."

I nod nervously, and continue, finding myself explaining more to George now than to the others, describing in stumbling detail my encounter with the thing wearing Janine's shape.

"I think it was trying to keep me away from him. It spoke to me though, and I think it was confused about me being hurt."

George shakes his head. "It was probably just a bigger predator. You get all sorts of psychic vermin."

"I thought so too at first, but now I'm not so sure. It felt different somehow. I can't really explain it, but there was much more, I dunno, much more intelligence I think. More than the parasites. What if that was just an aspect of it? Like it split itself up the same way Nicholas's mind was split. There's no reason why it would have to do it the same way, is there? I mean, this is a monster, this isn't a person. They're probably not the same."

"It would make some sense, George". Thomas folds his arms across his chest and frowns. "We don't fully understand them, and there's no reason that that couldn't be the case. If it could break itself into smaller facets, each one would be less powerful. That might explain how Mallory was able to drive it off."

"There's one way to be a bit more sure, I think." I glance over at the blonde man, now chewing thoughtfully on his bottom lip. "Do you know if one of these things has ever just attacked a woman outright?"

George snorts derisive laughter. "We don't keep a catalogue of their behaviour love, they're monsters. We just kill 'em."

I flush an embarrassed shade of crimson.

"What are you thinking Mallory?" Thomas asks, coming to my defence with a rebuking glance aimed at George.

"Well, when I saw it properly, before I brought Nicholas back, it looked how I would have expected it to look.

Y'know, all scales and teeth and big wings and stuff."

"Wait. There's something I don't understand." Chris raises a hand like a child in school, and despite being nervous, I feel my face break into a smile.

"What?"

"You're a seeker. You can shield. So I understand how you found Nicholas in the first place, and I can pretty much work out how you were able to touch him without sending him into some kind of psychic fit. But how did you actually get back out? I'm assuming there was some kind of psychic backlash that pulled you in there, but even with the state Nicholas is in at the moment, I don't see how he could have got you out and not himself. Am I missing something?"

There's a pause that quickly becomes uncomfortable, with all of them looking at me.

I swallow. "I have a third. I used it to get back. I actually thought I'd pulled both of us out, but it looks like it wasn't enough to bring Nicholas all the way home."

"So?" George demands, bluntly. "What is it?"

"I... I can't tell you."

"Well that's just bloody stupid." He throws one hand up in the air and turns back to the bar, draining his drink and then slamming the glass back onto the bar top hard enough to make Chris wince.

Thomas makes an attempt to calm the tense air that's filled the room. "We can discuss this more later. Right now I want to hear more about your idea Mallory."

I'm a little angry at George for snapping at me, but I carry on. "Where was I? Oh yeah, this thing, it should have come and had a look at me, right, should have investigated a bit? Well, on the rooftop it didn't bother - it just made a lot of noise and launched itself at me. That wasn't investigation; it was going to kill me. If it wouldn't have done that without working out what I was first, then we know I'm right, and it can do something you didn't realise it could. On the other hand if I'm wrong, and it didn't see me before I was on the roof, we know your theory about using bait is wrong too."

I look around at them and shrug, trying not to sound like I'm accusing them of something. "It's so confusing it makes my head hurt. I barely know what's fact and what's fiction any more. Either way, we don't understand the thing we're supposed to be fighting, and I have to tell you, seeing it scared the crap out of me. We need more information."

George flaps a hand dismissively. "What's your point? So it knows what you look like, and we think it might be able to pretend to be other people. Big deal. It won't matter a damn after we're through with it."

"My *point* is that you wouldn't be using me as bait; you'd be sending me in there as a snack. If you can't answer a question on what it's capable of or how it behaves, how do we work out what it wants? Do *you* know what it wants?"

"What it wants?" He opens his mouth like he's going to laugh. "Sweetheart it's a monster. Understand? It wants to eat you. It's not interested in a nice conversation about shopping or the weather. Its presence causes natural disasters and wars, and you want to go do research? For God's sake, this isn't the discovery channel."

"I just think that we should..."

"And of course you're the expert now, even though we've been doing this longer than you can actually imagine. It's a goddamn dragon, it doesn't give a rat's ass what you think or what you know, any more than you care what a turkey thinks when you're eating Christmas dinner. Go on, what's your grand plan then? Shall we go round and knock on its door, ask if it has a few minutes to fill out a questionnaire?"

"I think we should get the diaries."

He blinks at me, face screwed up in confused frustration. "What diaries?"

"The priest's diaries. Nicholas mentioned them. From the guy that could see between realities."

All the colour drains out of George's face. His grip on his glass, still sat on the bar top, tightens until I'm sure I see cracks. Demetrius stands up, and I'm suddenly worried that I might have crossed some kind of unseen line.

When George opens his mouth to talk again, his voice is thin and very strained. "He's dead."

"We only need his diaries. Can't we look for them?"

"You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know what you're asking."

I lift both my hands up, not sure if I should carry on or just shut up. "I know I haven't done this before, but with Nicholas down, you guys seem to be almost as lost as I am. We have no idea how long it'll take for him to come back. This is at least somewhere to start, George. You're just going to have to trust me."

"This from the girl who won't tell us what her third is. If you don't trust us enough to tell us that, how can you ask us to trust you back?"

An angry flush fills my cheeks "I think I've done more than my fair share of trusting people recently, thanks. Now I've come up with an idea while you're sat on your backside getting hammered and relying on someone else to sober you up, so don't start getting all pissy with me unless you've got a better idea."

The glass in his hand explodes. He barely seems to notice; just stands up and turns to look at Chris, his voice still quiet. "Explain it to her."

"George, she doesn't know."

"That's why you should explain it to her." He doesn't look at me at all on his way out of the main door.

Chris turns rather unhappily to look at Demetrius. "Can you...?"

"Course." Demetrius pauses on his way past me and pats me on the shoulder. "Plan's good."

Then he's gone too, leaving Chris and Thomas looking guiltily at each other.

"Someone want to explain to me what just happened?" I ask angrily, face flushed and hands balled into fists. "Because I feel like I'm stuck in one of those weird dreams where you're on stage and you can't remember the lines, and I've just about had enough of this."

"Let me get you a drink." Chris stands.

"I don't want a drink, I want to know what's going on."

"For this, you'll need a drink."

"Is that your answer to everything?" I snap.

He actually looks hurt, and I feel a burst of guilt for snapping at him. Somehow, that only seems to make me more irritable.

Thomas slides into the seat on the opposite side of the table to me. "George is a good man. Really, he is. He's coarse and vulgar and foul, but inherently he's a good person. Dragons bring out the worst in him, much more than anyone else."

"Because of the whole disaster thing?"

"There's an element of that, but for George it's much worse, because of his background."

Chris takes a nearby chair and spins it on the back legs so he can sit straddled across it. "You know the famous story of George and the dragon, everyone does. That's because there were more witnesses there than we could really contain, and the story got out. It was slow, not like it would be today, but it got out all the same. The popular version is mostly right, but then all the best lies are based on truth. The version that most people know lacks a lot of detail.

"We weren't really together as a group at the time, but Demetrius, Thomas and I were heading to northern Africa with Nicholas. He was pretty sure that was where that particular dragon was coming through. George got there first - he

only lived a day's ride from where Nicholas wanted us to meet. I wasn't able to cover distances the way I can now, so we had to go in steps, which was pretty exhausting. Thomas helped a lot but I just didn't have the ability to get us there any faster."

He falls into an unhappy silence that I don't have the heart to break. Thankfully Thomas picks up the story. "George was a long way from home at the time, settling some local dispute. Those kinds of things sprang up all the time and he had a reputation for resolving them. With the dragon coming, they were much worse and much more frequent. So he'd ridden off in the night, leaving his wife behind him, intending to be back in a few weeks.

"He was gone for months, just riding around stopping petty fights escalating into wars. He sent messages home when he could, and got replies far less frequently, so when he found out that his wife was pregnant with their first child, she was already well past mid-term. I don't know how many horses he went through trying to get home, but he was nearly there when Nicholas told him it was coming and where it was going to arrive. He detoured to see the lay of the land, planning to get us as much of a head start as he could. He arrived about three days before we did, but he was still too late.

"By then the priest had completely taken leave of his senses, and he'd started persuading the locals that his original idea of sacrificing livestock to appease the monster wasn't good enough. He'd started sending through people instead."

"Through?" I ask.

"Between realities. They overlap like layers in a cake: all part of the same whole, but predominantly discrete. I don't know if he was able to push people through as a miracle, or if he'd found some other way to do it. Regardless, once he started sending people, he found out about the gender differences. When George's wife, Sadra, found out what was going on, she was horrified. She travelled to the city where this was going on to speak to the priest; I think she'd intended to persuade him to stop sending people through and get him to wait for George to return. She knew what George really was, what he was capable of, and she had an idea about the rest of us as well.

"Instead, somehow the priest convinced her to go through with the next group; maybe he'd told her she could speak with the damn thing and try to stop it herself. Whatever the reason, it was a disaster. George was about eight hours behind her. By the time he got there and made the priest send him through as well, she was already dead. George managed to kill it, although he nearly died himself. The priest was terrified of him, and although he could have brought him back, he'd just left the poor bastard there to rot."

It's the only time I've heard Thomas swear, and his voice is laced with a bitter anger.

"He was there for days with nothing but his wife's body for company. Chris pulled him back out but healing him was difficult and he just wasn't the same afterwards. As far as we know, it's the only time anyone has ever taken one of these things on their own. He's never told us much detail, and we haven't pressed him for it. Nicholas probably knows. It's possible that it was injured when George got there, but what he did was breath taking, even for one of us.

"As for Sadra... there was nothing I could do to save her. Her body was riddled with poisons, she was badly burned and her legs were crushed. She'd been gone for days. So had the child."

He takes a breath. "I'm not telling you this to make you feel bad, only to help you understand why George behaves the way he does. It's been a very long time since this happened, and although there haven't been many, when these monsters do come it rakes open old wounds for him that the rest of us just can't help him with. Nicholas would take it away if George wanted to, but I don't think he can bear the idea of losing the memory of his wife, even with how much it hurts him"

"Demetrius helps a little bit I think," Chris says, gesturing towards the door with his free hand. "because they've known each other so long. There's a lot of shared history there and George never feels like he has to explain anything to him, so it's easier."

I think about telling him what happened in the park, how Demetrius saved me, how I might have been dead myself if not for him following me at Chris's request, but it seems wrong to do it. Chris didn't want me to know I was being followed, he just wanted me to be safe. More than ever I want to tell them about this third miracle that Nicholas thinks I have.

"I... I had no idea." It's the only thing that will come out of my mouth.

Thomas smiles at me sadly. "How could you have? George is flighty at the best of times, but since we've known this was coming, he's been up and down like a rollercoaster. We indulge him, although doing that probably isn't good for him. Don't be surprised if he's laughing and joking when he comes back. He'll spend a lot of time drunk until this is over, but at least we know his liver is pretty safe so long as I keep an eye on it."

I nod. "What did you think of the idea? Of getting the diaries I mean."

"Demetrius was right," Chris nods. "It is a good plan. We do rely too much on Nicholas for information, and it can't hurt to know more about what we're dealing with."

Thomas coughs uncomfortably. "There is... there's something you have to know first. Something you simply *cannot* tell George. Christopher and I have kept this from him for a long time. Nicholas knows – this was actually his idea – and I think Demetrius suspects."

"What is it?"

They share a look that I can't work out. It's Chris that turns back to me while Thomas smooths out invisible creases on the thighs of his trousers.

"The priest isn't dead. We told George he was, because otherwise he'd just have killed him, and I don't honestly think that we'd have tried to stop him. Nicholas wanted him alive because the guy is like an early warning system for dragons. It sounds a little cruel to deceive George like that, I know, but it's probably saved a lot of lives over the years. The only problem is that he's completely insane. The priest, I mean. I doubt he even knows much about what's going on around him; he's in a private facility in the USA."

"Oh, okay. So we still can't really talk to him."

"Thomas and I check in on him from time to time. We'll go over there and see how he's doing, see if we can find out where his diaries are. Unless you think you can find them without that?"

I try it, concentrating until I give myself a headache, before I give up with a shrug. "Sorry. I just haven't the faintest idea where to start. I don't really know what I'm doing yet. If I had some kind of idea what I was looking for, or some sort of connection to it, then maybe that would help. If I come with you and meet him, that might do it."

Chris nods. "Okay. Let me clean up this broken glass, then we'll go."

"Sure. Do you mind if I go out back? I could use some air."

"Help yourself."

The golden light of early sunset shines down into the courtyard. I stick to the walkways, breathing the heady scent of trees and clean air for a while, until I find myself stopped outside Nicholas's door. After a moment's thought, I turn the handle and slip inside, closing the door quietly behind me. Under the distant crying of gulls, I stand by the bed and watch Nicholas's chest rise and fall. George's words ring echoingly in my mind: *if you don't trust us enough to tell us...* I glare

down at Nicholas, lying peacefully under a linen sheet. Someone has stripped him out of his perfectly pressed clothes and put him into the bed, which makes him look rather vulnerable. The warm breeze through the open window lifts the thin hair around his temples and flicks it back and forth in a gentle wave. Even unconscious, the hard lines of his mouth look tight and angry, and I realise I've clenched my own jaw stood watching him. I sink into the bureau chair, still sat by the side of the bed, and fold my arms on top of the covers with a sigh.

"It's not just them now, old man. I hate to say it, but I need you too."

He says nothing, just lies there breathing steadily.

"If what you said is right, I should just be able to reach in there and, I dunno, use your own telepathy to talk to you, right? Or, or, Thomas is a healer and you're a psychic, so I should be able to pull the two things together and fix psychic damage, which should let you wake up, right?"

I reach out one hand and tap him gently on the forehead.

"Hello? You even listening to me?"

Nothing.

"Nicholas, I can feel this monster pressing on the edges of everything. I think George might be right about us being on a schedule, and even though you're an annoying, arrogant git, you know more about any of this than the rest of us. I can't start second guessing this stupid third miracle thing, and the others are going to stop trusting me if I keep having to refuse to tell them what it is. What kind of help am I to them then? What if something happens and I use it by accident? I hurt Chris the first time. I don't want to do it again. It might even be worse. How do I know I won't kill someone?"

I drop my head forward onto my arms and mumble into the sheet. "You can't ask me not to tell anyone about this, insist that it's dangerous, then not bother to come back and show me what to do with it or how to make it safe. It's not fair. I know that sounds petty but it's *not fair*."

He doesn't move except to breathe. Outside, the gulls have gone quiet, and I know it's time to leave. There's too much to do to indulge myself by staying here. I glance backwards at the sleeping figure before pulling the door shut, and whisper one last parting sentiment.

"Come on, old man. Get your lazy ass out of bed."

Thomas is waiting for me outside, face serene. The fading golden light of the garden makes him look like he might really be a saint.

"How is he?"

I shrug. "He's asleep. All there as far as I can tell, but beyond that, you're a better judge than me."

"Not so much with this. I've never dealt with this kind of thing before. Normally I'd ask Nicholas for his help, but..."

He trails into silence, looking down at his hands. Above us, the setting sun turns the sky red.

"Is Chris ready?"

"Yes, but I wanted to speak to you first. Before we go."

He pauses, seeming to collect his thoughts while I wait for him. The temperature drops as the light fades, but it's still comfortable here.

"Mallory, you need to understand that being around Nicholas has an effect on people. It's good and bad. In some ways, you become so much more; he'll show you things about yourself you never really understood, help you grow and truly master yourself. But at the same time, you become quite dependant on him. He knows so much about so many

things that eventually you stop looking for the answers yourself and rely on him to lead the way.

"George, Demetrius, Christopher and I, we're all so much stronger than we were before we met him. We could never have done the things we've done without that, but you can see for yourself how damaging it is when he's not here. I desperately want him back. It's like a lead weight in my guts knowing he's lying there, just there, and I'm too afraid to help him."

He gestures at the door behind me, face now lined with care. "If I do it wrong, if I make it worse... what if I kill him? How do we fight this thing without him? If we get so close to having him back and then..."

I wait for him to finish, but he changes direction instead.

"If I had to guess, I would say he knows what your third is, and he told you not to tell us."

"Yeah, something like that."

"I know he must have helped you. I don't see any other way that you could have found your way back out. I know what he can do, Mallory. How he can 'improve' people. Is that what happened?"

I nod mutely.

He carries on. "I see. You know that this is another thing you can never tell George about, don't you?"

"I don't..."

"George might like to think that we're brothers in arms and that we share everything, but even brothers have secrets. Think about what happened to Sadra. What would George think if he knew that could have been prevented?"

"How?"

"Christopher was developing his translocation skills. He could manage a few hundred miles at a time, but it hurt him to do it. Translocation is fairly rare and takes a massive toll on the body. He pushed hard enough that he nearly died. I had to keep him alive while he was doing it. You hear talk about cats having nine lives; well Christopher has been through a few more than that. If Nicholas had pushed him, we might have made it in one single jump. We'd have been there well before Sadra left, and we could have gone in her place. She would have survived, as would the child. Think what knowing that would do to George. What it would do to Christopher."

"Nicholas said... he said it was dangerous to do it."

"Did he tell you why?"

I shake my head, a little stunned that Nicholas would have allowed George's family to die, and hoping the reason is a good one.

"I was the first person he did it to. I was very young, so I think the side effects were perhaps limited in my case. Maybe I had time to grow into it, maybe the fact that I was still maturing physically and emotionally meant I was able to deal with it more naturally. Whatever the reason, the second time Nicholas did it, things didn't work out quite so well. It was after Sadra died. We were travelling through southern Europe at the time, and there were a few more of us then, although we didn't have Chris, which was part of the problem. We got caught up in a riot in Constantinople. It was horrific. Two of my friends died because I couldn't reach them – I tried to help them but there was so much death. I missed them because I was helping someone else, some stranger I'd never met before."

He stops for a moment, one hand rubbing at his temple. I wonder how much death and suffering and pain I'm going to see and cause now, just by being with these people, but how much more I might cause by trying to learn about these things on my own.

"One of the men with us, Francis, could control instinctive behaviour. He'd got good with animals, and had started branching out to humans, but anything with a rational mind was harder for him, so he'd almost given up on it. Nicholas

pushed him as far as he could, and told him to control the crowds. Francis did it; he was incredible. I think there's a moment after you're pushed where you're capable of things actually beyond your maximum reach. It's like a euphoric high. That's how I saved Christopher - I'm not sure I could do something like that again. Anyway, Francis suddenly realised he was in the middle of an angry mob that he could play like puppets. It did something to him. We got out, but afterwards Francis started behaving differently.

"The first time we realised he was doing anything bad was when we found him with a pair of girls that Nicholas said were 'screaming inside'. The things he was doing to them, making them do, were inhuman. He'd developed a real talent for pain, and he was too far gone to reason with. Nicholas tried to bring him back down, but Francis had a variation of shielding; he'd never been particularly adept at it, but with the boost... Nicholas's miracles just slid off him like water, like he was invisible to them. He disappeared the same night that Nicholas tried to stop him."

"Where is he now?"

Thomas shakes his head. "He disappeared. I have no idea where he went, but he must either have learned some subtlety or changed his tastes, otherwise I doubt he could hide himself away and do the things he'd come to enjoy. It changed Nicholas too. It's been hundreds of years, Mallory, and in all that time, Nicholas has never stopped watching me like a hawk. He watches all of us to an extent, but me more than the others, because of Francis."

"Is he going to watch me now?"

"Yes, I'd say that's something you can be assured of. How much depends on how far he pushed you."

"Don't you ever get sick of it? Of being watched?"

Thomas shakes his head with a very small smile. "There's a good reason for it. After I saw what Francis had done to those girls... I know I would want to be stopped if I changed like that."

"Why do you think he did it? Francis I mean."

"I think something inside him broke. Maybe he was always like that and he never had the opportunity to do anything with it before. Knowing you can do the things you want and that no one can stop you is a very powerful feeling."

"You ever feel like that?"

"All the time. I could walk through every hospital in London and miraculously cure every person in every ward, regardless of what's wrong with them. After I finished with London, I could do the whole country, then the continent, then the world."

"What stops you then? I mean, wouldn't that be a good thing to do?"

"I did try to, once. It was a long time after Francis. I met someone else who could heal people. She was amazing, so full of energy and so giving. We decided to give up the lives we had and just wander the world making it a better place. At first it worked; we saved so many people that we lost count. We didn't need much food or water because we could essentially sustain ourselves, but the people we met were sometimes grateful enough that they loaded us down with supplies, or tried to give us money or livestock."

He laughs, the sound a delicate counterpoint to the gathering gloom. "One man tried to give us his chickens. When we refused he followed us for days with those squawking birds in little cages under his arm. Eventually we had to take him home again, then sneak away in the night."

"So what went wrong?"

"Not everyone wants to be saved. Eventually we started finding out about people who killed themselves after we saved them. People who'd suffered enough and were afraid to face the possibility of a long drawn out death again. Then

we ran into trouble with the church and witch hunters. Being able to heal people doesn't make you run faster or make things hurt less. It doesn't mean that you can get away when they come after you on horses. Eventually they caught us, and we were burned at the stake as witches. That's how I found out I can't be killed. I tried to keep her alive, I did, I tried so hard, but she kept screaming and I couldn't stop it hurting her. I had to let her die. I let her die."

He chokes into silence and I step forward to wrap my arms round him. He's taller than me and better built; absently I notice muscle definition and a strong heartbeat through his clothes. He squeezes me gently then steps back out of my arms.

"Thank you Mallory, you're a sweet person."

I colour a little. "Uh, thanks."

"You need to hear the end of this, then I promise no more terrible stories today. When she died, I think the same thing happened to me as happened to Francis. Something snapped. I realised that I could do dreadful things to the people who were burning us. What I do isn't strictly healing, that's just the easiest application of it. It's a form of biological manipulation. I hated them all so much for what they'd done to her. I don't know how many people I killed, I don't even really remember doing it. I know I couldn't get out of the fire, and my eyes were gone so I was blind, feeling for people like little lights in the darkness and snuffing them out. Nicholas came for me afterwards, cut me down and took me away."

I'm glad I'm not still hugging him in case he'd felt my shock; I wonder if he can feel the cold surprise in my stomach even now.

"The world doesn't want to be healed. It runs on pain and hate as much as it runs on love and beauty. If you upset the balance, terrible things happen." He sighs. "There's also the matter of the Canon."

I raise an eyebrow. "The cannon?"

"People like us don't really live by the normal rules of society. Most of us want to be kept secret and allowed to have normal lives, but there are those who see these gifts as an opportunity to gain and hold power. The Canon are a group of the oldest saints, the most powerful. They're very well connected and they keep our existence quiet. They're not a ruling body as such, they're just a group of people who make enormous gain from being who and what they are. They started out with good intentions, I think, but now... Well, anyway. Nicholas managed to keep what I'd done from them: they don't like it when people do things that make them stand out. Now that the world is digital, anything we do that *would* make us stand out will be global in seconds. Every single one of us would be identified, and those of us who've amassed wealth or power would likely lose it. The Canon make sure that never happens. They're ruthless and they're very, very efficient."

"You know, every time you lot tell me something new, it's bad. Isn't there something good about suddenly being part of all this? Like I get money off chocolate cake or something?"

Thomas laughs. "Sadly, there's no discount on confectionary. But you're not likely to ever meet the Canon or any of the people that work for them. Of all of us, I think only Nicholas actually has, and I'm not entirely sure about that. The timing of your exposure to all this could have been better; you've arrived in the middle of a struggle and so you have to learn fast, which means a lot of the bad news all at once."

We turn towards the door back into the bar, and he holds it open for me. "There is free beer though."

"Thank God. I think I'm going to need it after all."

DISTRACTIONS

Easily the strangest thing about suddenly arriving in America is the time difference. I know that the bar isn't really in London: how could it be, with the summer pines in the courtyard, the windswept coast outside Nicholas's bedroom, and the comforting warmth of a winter log fire rolling through the air in the main room. Somehow, though, I've managed to convince myself that it's just a trick of the lighting; that the whole place is just off Walworth Road. Here, under the open sky, coming out of the woodland opposite a set of tall and modern metal gates set into a smart brick wall, there's no denying the difference between where we were and where we are now.

Bright sunshine spills through the freezing air and I pull my arms tightly around my chest, shivering and wishing that I'd thought to bring my coat. Thick snow hangs from branches of nearby trees and lies in sheltered drifts against the foot of the wall. The road, which we cross to approach the gates, has been neatly cleared as far as I can see in either direction.

"Chris?"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing. It's just... that's really amazing."

"Thanks." He smiles.

"Are we really in America?"

"About twenty miles inland from the coast of Maine."

"How far is that?"

Thomas responds, looking around absently. "From London, around three thousand miles I think."

"Something like that, yes." Chris grins, leaning heavily on the last of the trees with one hand as he steps forward into the road.

Nothing in my life is ever going to be the same. Not now that travelling thousands of miles takes no more time than stepping between rooms.

Ahead of us, through the gates and at the end of a long tree lined gravel driveway, is a grand whitewashed building. The sun catches on solar panels lining the roof, incongruously modern against the building itself, which looks like it should belong to some rich southern Colonel with a big white hat and spurs. Chris steps forward to the gates, and presses a key fob against a discrete panel in one side of the brick wall. After a moment the gates swing open and the three of us step inside.

"This place is almost entirely off the radar." Chris says, tucking the fob back into an inside pocket. "Nicholas owns it and has it run privately. There's a couple of other patients but they're mostly camouflage. The place pretty much exists to house our boy."

Our feet crunch snow as we head for the house. I tuck my hands into the pockets of my jeans and try not to shiver.

"Chris, is it okay to talk here?" I ask, nervously. "About... y'know. Other things."

He nods, but I still glance around in case anyone's watching. Thomas's warning about the secret saint police has me a little worried.

"If this guy is hundreds of years old, which I suppose he has to be, how do you keep him secret? I mean, he hasn't aged right? Just like the rest of you? Surely you have to have staff here and doctors and stuff."

Chris clears his throat. "Nicholas comes over every couple of years and... uh..."

"Oh, I see. That's a bit harsh, isn't it?"

"Would it surprise you to know that Nicholas agrees with you?"

"Yeah, it kinda would."

"Nicholas is very keen on using miracles responsibly." He says, scratching at his neck. "He doesn't like the idea of... well I guess he'd call it 'inflicting' them on innocent people. He'll also be the first to tell you that innocent is a very relative term, but I suppose he understands how we need to control ourselves, because he knows what happens when it goes wrong."

I look up to meet his eyes. "Because of Francis?"

"You know about him?"

"Yeah." I glance over at Thomas, but he's staring off into space like he's utterly fascinated by something in the middle distance. "And some other stuff too."

"Well, Nicholas is very much an end-game person; he can plan decades in advance – never take him on at chess. He knows that you have to do things you might not like just so that you can keep the people you care about safe. He's always been prepared to do those things, but that doesn't mean he does them recklessly or without understanding the consequences. It's easy to misjudge him because he comes across as hard, but it would be doing him a disservice to suggest he does it without caring."

"Uh huh."

"It's hard to apply black and white rules to anything he does. Take what he's created here as an example: it's essentially a prison where we keep a human being as a living early warning system and prolong his life for our own ends. It's also a place where a very sick man gets an exceptional level of medical care, whilst allowing us to plan in advance to take on things that potentially hurt everyone in the world. Nicholas protects the staff here by making it so they never realise who it is they're looking after. It keeps what we're doing a secret, and what we're doing saves countless lives. Nicholas can be very subtle when he needs to."

Thomas, lagging behind us, makes a non-committal grunt. I'm a little surprised that he hasn't weighed in, but maybe he's just avoiding telling me more stories, like he promised.

I sigh. "I'm sorry Chris, I know you all love Nicholas very much, and it's great that you think so highly of him, but I do find him a bit difficult to like."

Chris laughs. "He doesn't make it easy, I know. He's very protective of our little family - I wouldn't want to see what he'd do if he was properly driven to it. He's a very dangerous person."

"Aren't you all very dangerous people?"

"Yes, I suppose we are. But not like him. Maybe it comes with age."

"How old is he?"

He shrugs his mountainous shoulders. "I honestly don't know."

We fall silent as we come closer to the building and a vast expanse of flat white coated lawn rolls into view behind the treeline. The surface is pristine, glittering in the light like icing sugar. A flagged patio, brushed clear of snow, disappears down one side of the house with antique looking chairs and tables nestled under large sun parasols with barrel like bases. My head is starting to throb, and I wish I'd thought to bring pain killers for my tender skull, as well as my jacket. I grit my teeth against the dull pulsing sensation and concentrate on what we're here for.

"Chris?"

"Yes?"

I point up at the building. "What do we call him?"

"He's just on the books here under Priest."

"Seriously? That's not very imaginative."

"Hey, I didn't think it up!"

We reach the main doors, and Chris looks over his shoulder at me as he steps forward to ring the bell. "Thomas and I will go and check on him. He wasn't well last time we were here. He was quite agitated, and he had to be restrained. There's a big waiting room just off the main reception. Wait for us there and we'll come and get you when we know he's settled. I don't know how he'll react to someone new if he's not happy, but hopefully you can talk to him, and it might help you find the diaries."

Thomas catches up with us as a thick set orderly in a smart white uniform opens the door and lets us in, clearly recognising the two men I'm with, welcoming them back and telling them it's been too long since their last visit. Chris signs all three of us in at a reception desk that looks to have come right out of a five star hotel, still chatting as he takes a white key card from the orderly and hands me a visitor's pass. Thomas looks over the flyers and signs tacked to the notice board, mind clearly elsewhere. Chris has to pull him away by the shoulder to break his reverie, and there's still a weirdly dreamy look on his angelic face as the two of them turn to head off through one of the internal doors.

Almost as an afterthought, Chris pauses in the doorway and turns back to me. "Can you find the waiting room on your own?"

"I..."

But he's already gone, the door swinging shut behind him. I raise an eyebrow, surprised at him abandoning me while I was still talking, but the headache I felt starting earlier has begun to settle in with an unpleasant gripping sensation right between my eyes. I probe the side of my head where the bone was fractured earlier, but can't feel anything there apart from tenderness.

There's a water cooler next to the reception desk and I fill one of the little plastic cups, pressing it to my forehead. The orderly that let us in to the building glances up long enough to smile politely, then goes back to typing on the keyboard of a slim computer, filling the air around him with tiny, rapid clicking noises. A doctor crosses the reception hall, reading from a chart on top of a stack of papers. I fumble for my visitor's pass to look like I belong here, but she doesn't look up as she walks by me.

The waiting room is easy to find. A pair of heavy doors stand slightly open opposite the reception desk, and I poke my head in to see a room big enough to fit my whole home into several times over. I turn slowly around a couple of times to take in the room, wondering how Nicholas affords to run this place just to hide a dragon-alarm. I can barely afford to rent somewhere with a private bathroom, so the idea of owning something like this is a little stunning.

Large oil paintings hang on the walls, showing bright landscapes under pale clouds. Comfortable warmth seems to rise from the floor, even though the wide fireplace sits empty under its intricately decorated hearth. One whole side of the room is floor to ceiling glass that looks out over the patio to the smooth whiteness of the gardens. Ornamental fountains lie shrouded under the snow, and the shape of a summerhouse pokes shyly out between trees that are just visible in the distance. Behind me, lost somewhere in the building, someone has begun playing the piano. I find an expensive looking armchair near the window, and slip off my shoes to curl up in it. With my eyes closed against the tightness in my skull and my chin cupped in one hand, the warmth and serene music soon lull me into a light doze.

I don't know exactly what wakes me up; perhaps the noise of footsteps or just the presence of somebody else in the room. Still relaxed, I open my eyes to find another orderly crouched next to the armchair, looking at me with gentle concern.

"Are you alright?" He's handsome; wide eyes in a thin face, a long jaw under high cheekbones and a cheerful mop of dark hair. There's a restless energy to him even though he's still - it makes me almost want to stand up. I glance at his name badge: James, apparently.

"Fine, thank you. I'm just waiting for my friends. We're visiting Mr Priest."

He raises an eyebrow. "Mr Priest doesn't get many visitors."

"Yeah, well I uh... I'm his niece." It's a stupid lie, and I don't know what possesses me to say it. For all I know, Priest could look twelve years old, and could be down on record as having no living relatives.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the orderly lets my claim slide. "Have you visited before? I don't think I recognise you, and I've been here a while."

"No, first time. They signed me in as a guest." I lift the pass out of my pocket and show it to him.

"I see." He smiles at me. "It's a pity you won't get to see much of the grounds because of the snow. You should come again in the summer. People think Maine's most beautiful in the autumn, but for me it'll always be the summer. There's so much life here. It's amazing."

His voice has a relaxed slur to it. I'm not sure if it's just the local accent or if it's unique to him. The bizarre thought flits through my mind that there's so much of the world I haven't seen yet.

"I'd like that," I say, stifling a yawn. "Maybe I'll come back and visit again then. It's nice to look at now though. We don't get snow like this at home."

"You know you can sit outside if you like?"

"Don't be daft, I haven't got a coat. I, uh... left it in the car."

"There are little heaters under the tables. I can turn one on for you? They're pretty cosy. They have to be used under supervision, but I don't have to be anywhere for a while, so I can keep you company if you want?"

"Sure, I'd like that."

"Give me a minute to get one of them started up then."

He slips outside to set up the barrel shaped heater while I pull my shoes back on. He's almost silent; when I stand up, he's already outside with the glass paned door closed behind him. I make my way out to join him before the heater is ready; it's as cold as I expected and I shiver, waiting to warm up. Thankfully it doesn't take long and we're soon sat in a little haven of artificial heat, only a few metres from the thickest snowdrifts I've ever seen.

James carries a conversation comprised almost entirely of polite small-talk, and I find him remarkably easy to listen to. The more I relax, the less my head hurts, which makes it even easier to enjoy his company.

"So you're from England?"

"Yeah."

His face breaks into a broad, winning grin, like he's taking part in a private joke that we've shared forever. "Have you met the Queen?"

"Yeah, we have tiffin and Pimms every Sunday. We're best mates."

I watch him while he chats with an enviable confidence. I already feel like I could talk to him for hours. I know that I should be concentrating on what I came here for, but until Chris or Thomas come back for me, there's nothing to do but

wait. I fade in and out of listening to the conversation, carried along by the musical quality of his voice, somehow still tired enough that my thoughts won't seem to stay in a straight line. I stare at the brickwork of the main house and then out at the lawns, thinking how nice it is in the little pool of warmth cast by the heater, how beautiful the pale and naked trees are, how empty the sky looks, wondering what it would be like to kiss the man sat in front of me, to have his arms around my waist. I resist the sleepy urge to reach out a hand and run my fingers along the ridge of his cheekbone, then I realise I've been asked a question and snap back to paying attention.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said, how about a game?"

"A game?" I feel myself pull a face. "Like dominos or something?"

"Not quite. I play this with a lot of the visitors. It makes people think. I tell you three things about myself; one will be completely true, one will be completely false, and one will be deliberately misleading. You have to tell me which is which."

"I don't really understand."

"Let me give you an example then. If it was my turn, I could tell you that my shoes are yellow; that's obviously false. I could tell you I think you're pretty, which is true, if you don't mind my saying, and I could also tell you that there are secret tunnels under the summer house that lead out to the sea. That's misleading because although there are tunnels under the summer house, they only lead back to the main building and they're almost entirely collapsed. Do you understand?"

I nod, still a little red faced from the 'I think you're pretty' comment. I shuffle in my seat to sit on my hands in case they betray me and act on my earlier impulse to reach out for him.

"Well in that case, since I gave you the example, you should go first."

"Uh, okay. Well, let's see. I was born in London. I play tennis on Saturdays. I, uh... I'm very good at finding things."

He looks at me sharply and for a moment, just a split second, the easy smile slips away. It changes his whole face, his whole appearance, giving him a temporary manic intensity that's difficult to look at. My sudden discomfort is matched by a returning burst of my headache, then the easy going grin ripples back into place, broad and happy under the thin nose, and all the unhappy thoughts flutter out of my mind like tiny butterflies.

James looks at me shrewdly. "Okay, I think London's the lie, you *are* good at finding things, and you do play tennis but not on a Saturday. Maybe on a Tuesday or something?"

I grin, somehow massively pleased to have beaten him. "I've never played tennis in my life; that was the lie. I *am* pretty good at finding things. I live in London now, but I was born in Oxford."

"Wow, only one out of three. I must be slipping. Okay, my turn." He clears his throat and pauses for a moment, thinking. "I'm thirty eight years old. I like working here." Another pause. "And I'm psychic."

My stomach does a backflip. No one mentioned what I was supposed to do if I ran into another saint. I smother my panic and try pretending to be ignorant.

"Well, the last one's obviously a lie. There's no such thing as psychics."

"You know that's not true."

"What am I thinking then?"

"You just wished you'd been told you what to do if you met someone else like you."

I stand up, all the colour draining out of my face. All the things they've told me, all those terrible stories, all the things I'm meant to keep secret: can he just pull them out of my head?

"I have to go." My voice is shaking.

"No, please don't, I didn't mean to upset you. If it makes it any better, I'm really not very good at it. I can get strong surface thoughts and that's about it."

I don't go, but I don't sit down, either. Mentally, I start singing nursery rhymes as loudly as I can, my face twisted up into an unhappy pout.

"You're actually very hard to read. Do you have some kind of training, or shielding? It would have to be shielding I suppose. Please stop that, it's like being shouted at, and I always hated that song."

And there's that smile again, making everything alright. I'm smiling back before I know it, and I stop singing, feeling a little bit foolish.

"I really didn't mean to upset you." He tips his head to one side.

"It's okay. Sorry, I guess I kind of overreacted. You just took me a bit by surprise."

He shrugs, the rise and fall of his shoulder a gentle, fluid motion. "I don't think you can break that kind of thing to someone gently."

"No, I guess not. How did you find out?"

"About me, or about you?"

"Well, both I guess."

"Well, I found out I was psychic by hearing voices when I was a child. I'm not strong, like I said, so it never seemed to get me into trouble, and it always seemed natural enough to me. It meant I was good at telling when people were lying and it gave me enough of an advantage to know when not to mention it, which is nearly always as I'm sure you can imagine. Surface thoughts are usually much more rational or more important than deeper ones, so I was able to hide it quite well without making myself look unusual. It helps with the people here, and it's nice to be able to use it for something positive."

A sadness touches the corners of his eyes, but he pushes on regardless. "As for you, you're difficult to read at all, but when you said you were good at finding things, I got a very strong burst of images; underground trains, little pink earrings in the shape of flowers, a door in the rain, and falling; falling down a long way while you were holding onto something precious. Not the kind of things I would have expected in someone more mundane. Besides, if I'd been wrong I could always have claimed that was the lie."

"What else do you do?" At some point I've taken my seat again without realising it, and my body is warm again.

"I can see things that other people can't see; they're real but they're not always physical, which makes them a little hard to explain, like trying to describe colour to someone who's blind. The last one is that I can distract people. The better I know someone, the easier it is to do that, but it takes a lot of practise to do it subtly. It's a little like breaking a person's concentration and not giving it back to them."

"Oh, that's cool." Something's not right, not right at all. My headache has returned, pushing insistently at my brain.

James smiles at me again. "What about you?"

"I can find things. They call it seeking, and apparently I can shield too, although I don't seem to have any control over it."

"That will be what makes you so hard to read."

"I guess so."

"What's your third?"

I struggle not to let the image of Chris's bleeding face and the spider web strands of his safe haven take a hold in

my brain. It's much harder than I would have imagined, and I try to think of other things. I concentrate on the memory of the taste of food, multiplication tables, the feel of the hard chair under my thighs.

"I don't have one."

"I don't think that's true."

"Maybe it's not, but it's also not really any of your business."

He laughs again and I've already forgiven him for asking. "And how did you find out about your own miracles? Or is that none of my business as well?"

I shrug. "It was mostly by accident. I was trying to keep out of bad weather and found a secret door."

He asks other questions; how long have I known, is it something I think I've always had and never noticed, how did I find out about the shielding. We talk about Christopher and the flavour of beer in the bar and what I like to drink, how Thomas fixed all the injuries I had. It's so nice to talk to him; his voice is so relaxing, and I barely notice the answers I'm giving him. I just can't shake the pressure that's building up around my skull though, and I rub at the centre of my brow, massaging the skin gently.

"How long have we been out here?"

James glances back at the main house. "Oh, about an hour."

"Jesus, what's keeping them? They should have come for me by now."

"Don't worry about them, they're fine."

I nod. He's right. He must be right.

"You were telling me about how you hurt your ankle."

"Yeah." It's like having my skull squeezed by heavy hands; an insistent pulse in my brain.

"Are you alright?" His face is strained, like he's concentrating.

"Yeah. No. Sorry, it's just a headache, it's just really distracting."

And like that, the penny drops.

My mouth falls open. "What are you doing to me?"

"What do you mean?" Tiny beads of sweat are standing out on his forehead, and his fists are balled up tightly. I can't understand why I didn't see it before.

"You're trying to distract me."

"Everything will be fine, just sit down and relax." He clenches his jaw and for a moment everything flickers into a soft focus, all gentle and soothing.

"Stop it, just... stop." The pounding in my head somehow pushes all the fuzzy edges back, making the world sharp and hard again. I focus on it, using the unpleasant sensation as an anchor, clinging on to it against the waves of false calm.

James shakes his head. "You lied to me; the patients here don't have any living relatives."

"You've spent the whole of the last hour lying to me, tricking me into telling you things that I shouldn't have. At least I only did it once."

"Then no more deception between us. No more lies."

My teeth are gritted. "Fine."

Immediately, I realise just how cold I am. My bones seem to hurt with it, and I know the whole idea of warmth was just another distraction. There isn't a heater out here - I've been sat outside in the cold for an hour in a thin t-shirt and jeans. Flakes of snow have settled on my shoulders and my hands have turned blue. I start to shiver violently; could he

have had me sit here until I died? Would I have gone out believing I was warm and comfortable, or would Chris and Thomas have found me in time?

My eyes narrow. "Where are my friends?"

All the friendliness is gone from his face, which is now hard and as cold as my skin. "You might be able to defend yourself against this, but it works just fine on them."

I push back, gaining more control over my defences with every passing second.

James leans forward over the table, face intense. "I don't mean you any harm, Mallory. This whole thing will be much easier if you just relax." Once again, he presses against my mind, trying to distract me. This time I'm ready for him, and his miracle slides off my shield ineffectually.

I stand up, slamming both hands down onto the table. "Listen asshole, pack that in right now or I swear to God I'm coming round there and kicking you until you cry like a four year old. I'm pretty sure none of your miracles will stop me doing that. Now tell me," my voice drops almost to a growl. "*What have you done to my friends?*"

He looks down at the floor between his feet, looking slightly ashamed. "I just made sure they didn't get very far."

He's done it well – with even a perfunctory effort I can feel that Chris didn't make it more than ten metres past the doorway I last saw him in. Thomas barely seems to have made it more than a few steps before stopping. Keeping my eyes locked on James, I straighten and cover the very short distance back to the patio doors. He sits still, hands folded on his lap, eyes downcast; the perfect picture of misery. I feel no sympathy for him though, just a dull sense of distaste.

"If you've hurt either of them, your nose is going to be spread all over your face."

I leave James behind and slip back through the waiting room into the main reception. Tiny spots of water mark the places where snowflakes drift in through the open doors, and melt in the presence of the under floor heating. The orderly at the desk doesn't even look up as I march past him, and I wonder if he's actually disinterested, or if James has numbed his brain to what's going on around him. I push the door open with my heart in my mouth. It was my stupid idea to come here in the first place, what if I can't make James turn this off? I'm barely into the corridor they're stood in before I'm next to Thomas. He's humming softly, one hand idly rubbing the back of his neck, the other holding one of the flyers from the reception noticeboard at about my head height so he can read it. As the door swings slowly shut behind me I step close enough to him that I'm almost stood on his shoes. I'm not actually touching him, but I'm so close that it would be uncomfortable under any other circumstance. His focus stays on the piece of paper in his hand.

I turn my face up to his. "Thomas?"

"Mmm." His focus hardly wavers.

"Thomas, snap out of it."

"Yeah."

I click my fingers in front of his face. "Thomas, c'mon. Time to go."

"He can't really hear you." James has slipped into the corridor without me noticing and I spin round, one accusing finger raised.

"What have you done to him?"

He shrugs. "He's just distracted. Whatever he's reading has his attention so completely that you could fire a gun next to his head and he would barely notice."

I step away from Thomas and stride over to Chris, who is looking down at the backs of his hands like they're the most fascinating things he's ever seen.

"Chris. Chris! CHRIS!" I raise my voice to a hoarse shout.

His mouth barely opens. "Mallory."

"Yes! Yes, come on Chris, let's go."

He shakes his head and returns to inspecting his fingers. I take hold of his arms and tug at them, trying to persuade him to come with me, but it's like trying to drag a truck. I give up and stand in front of him, helpless and frustrated. Unable to think of any other way to get his attention, I raise my hand and slap him across the cheek as hard as I can.

He drags his eyes to meet mine like it's a massive effort. "That hurt. Please don't do that." Then he goes back to looking at his fingers again.

"That's very impressive." James is staring at me like he's trying to assess my value. "I wouldn't have expected him to be able to talk to you even that much."

"Turn it off. Now." The words come out through my clenched teeth in a hiss.

He ignores me, inclining his head towards Thomas, who is still totally engrossed in what he's reading and doesn't even seem to have noticed the presence of two more people in the corridor. "This one has always been harder to work with; I had to start with him as soon as you all arrived. As for your friend the giant," he shrugs, looking over at Chris. "He's changed over the last few years, become much easier to work with. It's almost like he wants the distraction."

"Let them go."

"First tell me why you're really here."

I take a deep breath. "We're looking for some diaries that Priest used to keep; there's information in them that we need."

He narrows his eyes, looking at me suspiciously. "You only came for that?"

"Yes."

"All three of you?"

"Yes." I'm having to fight hard to stay calm.

"But you're a seeker, why not just find the diaries yourself?"

"I couldn't. I tried but I just couldn't. I think I need a connection of some kind. They brought me so I could meet him, see if that would work."

He listens, nodding carefully. "Alright. I believe you."

"So are you going to let them go now?"

"Not yet."

My hands ball into fists.

"There's no need for that. I'm not going to let them keep wandering about. I don't like them, either of them. Especially not this snout nosed blonde who everyone thinks is so good and pure. He's got some black smudges on him, let me tell you. You're maybe worth helping, but not them. Not him. You're not like them, not like me. Not yet. You will be, eventually, but right now you're not coloured by it, by all the years spent watching and hating. You're more honest because of it. It's an innocence you should work hard to preserve."

"I don't really understand what you mean."

"Exactly. Exactly!"

I shake my head. "If you say so. Look, help me find what I need, let these two go, then I'll take them away with me when I leave. Then we'll all be gone and you can just get on with your job without us being here. I'll even ask Thomas not

to come back again."

His mouth twists as he chews at his bottom lip in concentration and long seconds slide past us as he thinks it over. His face is a little desperate. Now that he's not trying to distract me I can see deep lines around his eyes, and when he finally looks back at me he seems tired and frightened.

"Alright." He nods, slowly. "I'll show you where the diaries are, but you'll have to retrieve them yourself."

It sounds too easy and I know there's almost certainly some kind of catch, but I don't have much in the way of choice. I look back up at Chris, still lost in the mental fugue that James has inflicted on him. I lace my fingers through his and squeeze. "Don't go anywhere, ok?"

I take a breath and turn back to James. "Where are we going?"

"Outside. We can go out through the patio again."

"Fine."

There's an uncomfortable lump in my throat as I sweep past him, fingers brushing Thomas's arm. I don't look back until I've reached the double doors opening onto the back gardens.

James isn't far behind. He stops next to me, looking out over the snow. It's falling more heavily now; fresh flakes spinning in the doorway before they melt in the warmth of the room. "You're going to get very cold."

"Apparently I don't have much choice." My voice is laced with bitterness. "Can we get on with this please?"

"Try not to be too angry with me, Mallory."

"I might do better with that when you're not holding my friends hostage."

His skin flushes. "Are you sure that you want these diaries? Not everything in them is good. Not everything in them will help you."

"Well, I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

"As you like. I felt like I had to warn you."

"Where are we going?"

"The summer house." He points out over the lawn at the distant shape in the treeline.

"Can I at least get a jacket or something?"

He shrugs.

"You're so helpful, it makes me want to spit. At least tell me the diaries are neatly arranged on a bookcase."

"It's not that simple."

"No." I sigh. "No, it never is."

PENANCE

By the time we make it to the summer house, the drifts are up to my mid-calf, and my lower legs are caked in snow. James follows me, muttering quietly to himself. I catch occasional words, like names in a list of some kind, but I say nothing; the cold takes up most of my conscious thought.

The wooden frame of the building is in a bad state, and I push the door open nervously, hoping nothing will fall down or collapse on me. Inside, the peeling paint on the walls and ceiling hang over the bare floor boards of a large main room. The wall opposite me hosts a compact unlit hearth, and odd pieces of broken furniture sit in lonely isolation in the muted light. Next to the hearth, heavy drapes muffle what must be veranda doors leading back outside, while the entrance to a kitchen stands open to the shuttered gloom of the room beyond.

A faint smell of rotting damp makes me wrinkle my nose as we enter. "Why is this place so badly looked after? The main house is lovely."

"No one comes here."

"Why not?"

"I make sure no one comes here." He looks around. "You're going to need to light a fire."

"You what?"

"There's wood and coal in the kitchen."

I raise both hands in exasperation. "James, I want to find the diaries, not get cosy by the fire."

He looks at me silently, and I drop my hands in mute surrender.

The kitchen proves to have not only enough fuel to burn down a small village, but matches and firelighters as well. The pantry shelves are lined with dust coated tins and cans, while wooden crates have been crammed against the back wall, packed with straw that pokes out of cracks and corners. Crockery is neatly tidied away in cupboards and cutlery in drawers. The whole room has a strange sense of abandonment, as though whoever used it last expected to come back and finish unpacking, but never did.

I drag what I think I'll need through into the main room and start trying to build a fire. It's frustratingly time consuming, and the occasional semi-helpful comments from James serve only to irritate me further. Eventually, with the help of a stack of the firelighters and a few handfuls of straw from the kitchen crates, tiny flames flicker into life in the grate, eagerly wrapping around smaller pieces of kindling.

I rub my hands together in the strengthening glow, warming my fingers as I look up at my strange companion. "So, are you going to tell me what I need a fire for?"

"You'll need it to get dry."

"Dry?" I ask, certain I'm not going to like the explanation.

James just points over at the drapes, silently. With an exasperated sigh, I pull myself away from the fire and yank open the moulding curtains. I blink in the sudden rush of daylight, dazzled for a moment. As my vision clears, my heart sinks. Leading away from the double glass doors of the summerhouse is a sturdy wooden jetty which pokes out into a frozen lake. It must be a hundred metres across, with a tiny islet in the middle, poking up like a kneecap in a bizarre bathtub. A little wooden boat has been moored next to the jetty, now held fast by the ice; oars missing, wooden frame split by frozen water and long neglect. The hull looks to have once been coloured a cheerful buttercup yellow, and a

hand painted name has faded to illegibility on the back of the vessel's only seat.

"Try looking for the diaries again, Mallory." James's voice is very quiet, and out of the corner of my eye I can see him watching me carefully.

I press one hand against the glass in front of me, and with a haunting expectation of failure, reach out for the diaries. My success comes as a shock; almost like just being close to someone who knows about them has been enough to make the connection I needed. I have a sudden vivid sensation of terrible cold and incredible pressure, a smell of sweet oil and the feel of soft cloth in darkness, and a horrible understanding of what I'm going to have to do to get the diaries.

I sag forwards, forehead hitting the doors with an audible thump.

"You've got to be joking." I groan. "Who puts their diary at the bottom of a goddamn lake? Can't he just keep it in his bedside cabinet like a normal person?"

"They had to be hidden."

"Whatever. How am I going to get through that ice? It's got to be six inches thick."

He just shrugs.

"Well aren't you just the most helpful man in the room."

I slide open the doors and step out into the bitter cold.

The ice of the lake is at least as thick as I thought it would be, even where it thins to a lip near the shoreline. I stomp on it ineffectually, hearing only the strange echoing of my feet bounced back at me. In a snow covered lean-to clinging to one corner of the building I find a neatly packed collection of heavy gardening tools, and pull free the ones I can best use to break through the lake's solid surface; an axe whose head is spotted with age and rust and a pair of thick gloves so big that I could fit both hands into just one of them and still have room to spare. As an afterthought I reach for a coil of thick rope, looping it over one shoulder and pushing the door of the lean-to shut with my foot.

James is waiting at the end of the jetty, watching me with a strangely dispassionate curiosity. It gives him a very downtrodden air, almost like he's being dragged along unwillingly. It's a demeanour that I find very irritating, considering that he's the reason I'm having to do this on my own in the first place. I try to ignore him, kneeling on the end of the wooden pier and pulling on the gloves to give my freezing fingers better grip on the haft of the axe. He watches me as I start to smash my way through, body warming as I work. The snow stops falling without me noticing and soon droplets of water are flying into the air each time I raise the axe. Slowly, I break open a hole big enough to slip into and out of with relative ease. When the first hole is done I head a little further back towards the house and start again, breaking a fresh entrance into the waters of the lake.

"What are you doing?" James is watching me with a puzzled look on his face.

"Making sure there's plenty of ways back up."

"But you're a seeker – won't you just be able to find the hole?"

"Yes, but I don't trust you not to put something over the top of it so I can't get back out."

He looks hurt, but doesn't say anything else, letting me smash up more and more ice without interrupting. I work until there's three holes, one emergency hole on each side of the walkway, and the primary hole at the end, closest to the diaries. The water looks dark and unwelcoming and I shudder, thinking about what comes next.

With a sigh, I start tying the rope to the frame of the jetty, wrapping one end around the corner and knotting it over and over. I hear James open his mouth to ask, then shut it again. I answer him anyway, since I'm pretty certain what

his question would have been.

"The diaries are dry. Don't ask me how I know that, I could just feel it. That means they're inside some kind of container. I have no idea if I can swim back through water that deep dragging something with me, and God only knows what the cold's gonna be like. If I've got the rope then maybe I can pull them up after I've reached the surface."

He's quiet as I tug the final knot as tight as I can, then rock back onto my heels. There's nothing else left to be done now, only the dive down. I pull off my trainers and socks to keep them dry, then realise I'm not going to want to sit around and dry off the rest of my things when I get back out of the water. It's not like anything I wear in the water is going to keep me warm enough to matter anyway. I pad back into the main house and strip down to my bra and pants, folding my remaining clothes into a neat pile near the fire place.

Strangely, I don't feel as self-conscious as I would have expected when I head back outside; James has already seen what I'm thinking, so the idea of him seeing me half-naked isn't that much of a concern.

I'm already shivering hard by the time I reach the end of the jetty, skin almost glowing in the light reflected from the snow and ice. I stand for a moment, trying to slow my breathing and calm my hammering heart. I've never really dived deeper than the bottom of a swimming pool before, but I know I'm going to need to conserve all of my breath. I close my eyes and try to relax my body, breathing slowly and deeply.

"Mallory?" James's voice is almost a whisper.

"Mm?"

"Be careful down there."

I don't answer him, don't want to distract myself now I've made up my mind about going in. Holding tightly onto the loose end of the rope I take in one last gulp of air that stretches my lungs almost to bursting point, pinch my nose shut with my free hand, and half step half jump forward to plunge feet first through the makeshift hole and into the freezing waters of the lake.

The cold hits me like a fist. My whole world turns to shock and I nearly gasp, fighting to keep my mouth shut and my lungs under control. My arms and legs flail helplessly, turning circles in the water and for a moment I'm totally disorientated, uncertain even which way is up. I force my eyes open. Everything changes speed; every motion is slowed down by the embrace of the water, senses reduced to faded light, and muffled sound. I turn my body, still gripping the rope, and force my way down into the dark.

The pressure of the water quickly grips at my skull, holding it in a painful vice. With my free hand I pinch my nose shut and squeeze air forwards to equalise the pressure, faintly remembering lessons my cousins taught me as a child.

Under the ice the lake is stunningly beautiful: in the gloomy light that filters through from above, the water has an unearthly, alien feeling to it, and the underside of the ice is an austere ceiling on the world. Below, everything turns rapidly to darkness. It's like being in a dream, or stuck on the edge of a nightmare. The only real thing is the cold, so bitter that it's painful. The bottom of the lake is dark enough that without a light I can't see anything, and I have to seek for the diaries the way I found Nicholas in his damaged subconscious.

I equalise again as I force my way towards my goal. Despite the cold, the pressure, the darkness and the ever present fear of drowning down here, alone, finding what I'm looking for is easier than before. I reach out and my fingers hit something solid. A moment's hasty feeling around tells me it's a heavy box, almost like a pirate treasure chest. A sturdy clasp holds it closed at the front and two thick handles jut out from its sides. I tug at one of them, preparing to pull it up after me, happy to have found it so quickly, and still fairly sure I can make it back out of here before I run out of

air.

It doesn't move.

I tug again, and again. The box barely shifts. My pulse is starting to pound on the inside of my head. My icy body seems to weigh more than it should, responding to me sluggishly, slowed by cold and made stupid by darkness and a lack of fresh oxygen. It has to move, it *has* to! I have to get these things out of here. My crushed lungs are starting to rebel against their punishment, straining for air, begging me to breathe, just *breathe*. The pressure is like having Demetrius kneeling on my chest with rocklike legs. I twist the rope around my hands in frantic panic, and it's precious seconds before I realise what I'm doing. I clamp my teeth together hard and wrap the end of the rope around the nearest handle on the chest, forcing tired and treacherously cold fingers to work and tie a knot, then a second. I don't want to have to come back here, not today, not ever. When I'm as certain as I can be that the knots will hold, I pull my body into a crouch, and push off towards the surface from the corner of the chest with feet so cold they feel detached from the rest of me. The gentle, beckoning light of the surface seems so far away, the holes I made to climb out of so small. I climb upwards, knowing I've miscalculated – I'm not going to get out in time. I force myself to slow down, to equalise again, feeling my body burning what little remains of my energy just to keep me alive. My brain seizes with panic, hot and terrifying against the sting of the water. I'm not going to make it, I can't get back in time, I have to breathe, I need air! I fight to control it, knowing that eventually my body will take over, force me to open my mouth and breathe, and when it does...

There's a burst of light above me, brilliant and calming like the rise of the sun, and I know it's James. I can feel the panicked parts of my brain quieten as though they were thinking of something more important and I know what he's doing. As I push my painfully slow way to the surface he closes away the panic, distracting me from it, giving me something else to look at; the light, his light. My heart slows, the desperate need for air fades a little. I relax. Faintly, I can hear him shouting my name, see him standing over the hole, distorted by the water as the distance between us shrinks. I break the surface in a rush, sucking in air with a noise that's more like a scream than a breath. My hair plasters to my face as I pull myself, shaking and exhausted, back up onto the jetty.

For a moment I stay there, on my hands and knees, trembling and soaked, sucking in air, coughing and choking with the combination of panic and sudden relief.

James drops to a crouch next to me. "I'm so sorry, I know I promised I wouldn't, but I could feel you panicking. You were coming up too fast and I... I didn't want you to die because of me."

He puts out a hand, but doesn't quite touch me. Still shaking, blue tinged skin covered in droplets of the icy water he helped me get back out of, I look up at him. Not wanting to waste energy on words, I force as much of a smile as I can, and raise one thumb. I let him work the rest out on his own.

Even when my skin is dry, huddled in front of the fire, I can't seem to stop shaking. It's so hard to think in a straight line that at one point I convince myself that James is doing something to me, but he just paces up and down on the jetty, wringing his hands and looking guilty. I pull on my clothes over my still damp underwear, gratefully wriggling my toes inside the solid familiarity of my shoes. Eventually I tear myself away from the fire, and force my aching legs to carry me back outside.

Ironically, James seems totally distracted as I pull the oversized gloves back on, take a tight grip on the rope, and pull. At first nothing happens, and I'm certain my plan isn't going to work. Then there's movement, and I half feel half see the box shift upwards. Hand over hand, I haul on the rope. Each straining pull is an act of attrition against my dwindling

stamina, and I try not to think about what will happen if the knots around the handle come loose, or if the handle isn't as sturdy as it felt and it pulls free from the box. I can't go back down there, I don't have the energy for it.

Time fades to nothing as I pull and pull and pull. Finally the box breaks the surface in the same place as me, although with less panic and far less noise. I drag it up onto the jetty with some difficulty and no small amount of swearing, then flop down next to it, panting heavily and waiting to catch my breath again.

I carry my prize back inside to the arc of warmth made by the fire to investigate its contents. The lock proves no match for a single heavy blow with the axe, although I miss twice, leaving ragged bites in the floor. The lid is tight fitting, and I bite my lip nervously as I wiggle it open and reach inside carefully, fingers brushing oiled leather. A gentle, sweet smell rises out into the room.

"Be careful with them, they're old." James, apparently now interested again, is peering into the chest behind me. I've got used to his quiet movements and sudden appearances now.

"What's in here?" My fingertips are greasy with whatever is coating the outside of the leather.

"Four books, individual pages in wooden covers, bound with leather cord. All hand written." His tone is hushed, like we're talking about some kind of family heirloom. "They're wrapped to protect them, so you'll have to be careful when you look at them. Wear gloves if you can."

I take out the top volume and open it cautiously to the first page, intimately aware of my damp fingers and the fact that I haven't stopped shaking since I pulled myself out of the water. Inside is a beautifully illustrated manuscript in a language I can't read. It's hauntingly familiar, but as unable to think straight as I am right now, I can't place it. I stare at the drawings; scrolling borders and an intricate dropped capital at the start of the page like some ancient biblical tome. My lack of understanding doesn't bother me badly; one of the others can probably read it. I look up at James. "Is that everything? Is there anything else?"

"That's all of them."

It's just as well. It was difficult enough to carry the heavy box in here, and getting it back to the house will be yet another trial. The books must be massive, each as thick as my thigh. I tighten the cloth around them and tuck them back into the box.

"Then let's go."

The patio doors are a welcome sight. My arms ache from supporting the box, and my fingers are frozen to the point of pain. My ankle, still sore from my fall earlier, throbs uncomfortably and my skull hurts just as much. Shaking with cold, I put my bundle down on a table inside the waiting room and glance back out over the once pristine garden, now marred by my dragging footprints. Only mine though; my companion hasn't left a mark.

"No footprints." My voice is trembling as I point back at the lawn.

He looks at me curiously, head on one side.

"You don't leave any footprints. Why not? You're not a friggin' elf are you?"

"Elf?"

"Never mind. Why are you *still* lying to me?"

"It's not a lie, it's just the only way I can speak to you. I'm not a strong enough psychic to just talk to you mentally without giving you something to focus on. That takes real power. If I make it seem like I'm here, give you a frame of reference, it focuses your mind and makes you easier to read. Without that... well we wouldn't be having this

conversation. In fact, I don't know if I could read you at all without doing this."

"So, you're not actually here?"

"No."

"Where are you then?"

He shakes his head, eyes downcast, but says nothing.

Tired, and cold as I am, my patience suddenly gives altogether. "Fine, sod you then. I'll work it out myself."

Finding his body is fast, almost instantaneous, and I turn on my heel, striding out of the room. I check directions as I go, looking for a route as well as a target. I slip uncomfortably past Thomas, who is singing quite loudly and unashamedly in what sounds like it might be Latin, and step over Chris, now sat cross legged on the floor picking dirt out of the bottom of his boots - I snatch up his abandoned key card as I pass him.

A left turn, up a flight of stairs, then another left, swiping the key card angrily through discretely built locks and waiting impatiently for doors to open, then down a long corridor that must sit above the waiting room. Bright sunlight glares in through a long line of windows and onto widely spaced doors with little numbers and name plates like offices or personalised hotel rooms.

"Wait! Wait!"

James is in the corridor behind me as I approach the last door. I ignore him and try the handle. The door doesn't budge. My jaw tightens and I ram the card into the door slot.

"Please don't." His voice has dropped to a whisper.

The room is clean and painted in calm, soothing colours. Easily visible in the clinically white bed is another copy of James, curled into a semi foetal position. He twitches every few seconds, talking quietly to himself, repeating the same list of names I heard him reciting earlier. Still holding the door open, I step back and look up at the name plate: '**PRIEST., J.**'

I stare back into the room.

He appears next to me, even while I'm watching his body. "I didn't want you to see me. Not like this. There's so little of me left now. A tiny part of me is clear, lucid, but that's nearly all gone. The more I focus on it, the less I seem able to maintain it. It slips away from me like the memory of a dream, or a speck of dirt in the eye. I'm fading away, and soon I'll be no more use."

My throat feels dry. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid of what you might do, of why you might be here. I thought that you might have come to kill me."

"What? Why would I do that?"

"Because I didn't see it coming this time. I saw it in you, when we first met. You weren't just falling, you were falling away from... from one of those things. And you were carrying *Him*."

"Him? You mean Nicholas?"

He nods. "He saved me. He chose to keep me alive so that I could warn Him when... when the dragons were coming, but I'm so weak now, I wasn't able to see this one at all until now. I didn't know you when you arrived but I was frightened because you were someone new. When I realised you knew... Nicholas, I thought my usefulness had come to an end."

"I don't think he'd do that." And that's true; for all I might find it hard to actively like Nicholas, I don't think he'd discard this man so easily after all this time. James has such reverence in his voice that it's almost difficult to listen to.

He smiles. In the bed, his body smiles too. It's disconcerting to watch. "It's probably no more than I would have deserved. Being here is my atonement, my penance, for what I did. All those people, sent to their deaths. I remember all

of their names, you know. All of them.”

“You must have brought the diaries here yourself then, when they put you here.”

“Yes. This isn’t the first place I’ve been, but it’ll probably be the last.”

“I don’t understand how you hid the books from Nicholas. Especially if you had to do it more than once, I mean, he’s pretty good, right?”

He looks at me like I said something offensive or blasphemous. “He’s more than ‘pretty good’, Mallory.”

“Then how?”

“Because I let Him have everything else. I didn’t fight, I just let Him into my mind. When He looked for the diaries I just pushed something else forwards to seem more important. I suppose I let Him distract Himself.”

“Was it difficult?”

He shrugs. “I had to be extremely subtle, but I was at the height of my power back then. I’m older than He is, you know. I’ve never been as strong, but I’m older. I suppose that doesn’t really count for much anymore.”

“But, but if he’s so great, why hide the diaries from him in the first place? Why not give them to him? I’m sorry, I just don’t understand.”

“I told you. Not everything in them is good. Not everything will help you.”

“So why give them to me?”

He pauses, looking down at his body lying in the bed. “I don’t have long left. I know what’s happening to me. I spent too long in the shadow of monsters, and it corrupted me, it poisoned the well of my soul. I’m not dying, just... slipping away. If I want to pass on the knowledge, I have to do it now. If you came back later, maybe even tomorrow, there might not be enough of me left to even show you where they were.”

I stand there, trying to think of something, anything to say, but nothing I could say would make it any better. The only sound is the murmuring of the man in the bed.

Eventually he turns back to me, features still bleak. “I’m so sorry for what I put you through, Mallory. I never meant to hurt you, only to keep you busy until I worked out what to do. I didn’t mean to put you in any danger. Maybe I just wanted to speak to somebody new. I know I have no right to it after what I did, but I miss the company of other people. I’m so alone here. Will you come back again, in the summer, like you said? I’ll show you the woodland, if I still can.”

Even if he wasn’t psychic, I don’t know if I could bring myself to try and lie to him now. “I don’t know.”

“I hope you do. You’re a good person, I think. Keep hold of that, no matter what you have to do. Be a good person Mallory. Be better than I have been.”

I look over at the wreckage of a man, murmuring the names of the people he condemned.

“How long have you been alone?”

I turn round when he doesn’t answer, but the corridor is empty, and I’m alone myself.

I make my way silently back downstairs, still shivering, almost unable to remember what it’s like to be warm. I hear Chris shouting before I see him, calling for me with panic in his voice. I don’t shout back; somehow it feels wrong to do it. I just head towards him, arriving in the downstairs corridor at the same time as him.

“Mallory!” He sprints towards me, relief pouring off him like a wave. He wraps both arms around my shoulders protectively, then pulls away to look at me, even more concerned. “You’re freezing! Why are your clothes damp? And is your hair actually wet?” He turns around before I can answer and bellows down over his shoulder with an impressive volume. “Thomas! I found her! Get in here!”

"Chris, I'm okay." His intensity is jarring; all I want right now is quiet.

"Your skin is almost see-through, you're shaking, and your hair and clothes are *wet*. Well, bits of them anyway."

"I'm okay, really. I'm just cold. I'll explain everything."

Thomas bursts through the door from the reception, running hard. "Is she alright?"

"I'm fine."

"She's shaking. Take a look will you?"

I give up trying to argue with them. At least I have them with me. At least I'm not alone.

Thomas's eyes widen as he looks at me. "Mallory, how exactly did you get hypothermia?"

"*Hypothermia*?" Chris demands, becoming even more agitated.

"It's still in the initial stages, and her system is fighting the symptoms, but yes."

I hold up both hands. "Guys, please calm down."

They fall silent.

"We can go home." I sigh. "The diaries are in a box on the table in the waiting room."

"What?" Thomas looks incredulous. "How?"

I shrug, mind preoccupied with what time and horror have done to James, too tired for subtlety or nicety.

"You were both distracted. James did it. Priest. The priest. He couldn't distract me because of my shielding; it sort of kicked in and stopped him. We talked, then he helped me get the diaries. They were in the lake. Please, please can we go now?"

They bluster a little, by turns concerned at how easily they were duped and worried about my having to get the diaries back on my own. They discuss checking in on James; I try to persuade them it's not necessary, and eventually have to plead with them to just leave it. Thomas heals the damage to my body; I still feel cold, but I do stop shaking. Eventually I convince them there's nothing more to be done here.

I collect the diaries in their ancient chest, clutching its weight to me like a strange comfort blanket, not really paying attention to Chris's murmured conversation with the orderly at reception as we go. Flakes of snow are spiralling downwards through the air again as we trudge away from the house and out through the main gates. The road outside is as empty as it was when we arrived. Thomas takes the diaries from me; at first I'm reluctant to let go of them but I hand them over, glancing back at the house as Christopher prepares to take us the thousands of miles back home.

In the road behind us, surrounded by flawless, unmarked snow, James raises a hand in farewell, and I barely have time to raise my own before we're gone.

UNDER SIEGE

George is waiting for us in the bar when we arrive, bouncing the tapered end of a garishly decorated pool cue on the palm of one hand.

"It's about time!" He snaps, as we step out of a seemingly solid wall and onto the iron clad balcony.

Demetrius, lounging on one of the padded seats near the main door below, raises a hand in greeting.

"Do you know how long we've been waiting?" George continues, irate. "One of you needs to help me out here, because Dem's bloody useless."

The two men with me look at each other, clearly as confused as I am. Thomas puts the chest down carefully on top of a nearby table, then makes his way back down to ground level with Chris and me in tow.

"I'm sorry George," he says, blonde curls bouncing as he shakes his head. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"I'm talking about the fine and subtle art of applied physics." George grins, tapping the collar of the cue against his forehead.

"You know I don't play." Thomas says, sternly.

"Come off it, you're an educated bloke, aincha? You know about vectors and momentum and all that bollocks, right?"

"George, an understanding of the forces involved, however complete, does not mean I am going to attempt to apply that knowledge in the confines of your smoky little pool den. It reeks in there."

George's face creases indignantly. "That's *ambiance* you cheeky little sod!"

"That's not *ambience*, it's tobacco abuse."

Chris leans against the bar with a grunt, raising one hand to press his palm against his temple.

"You okay?" I ask.

He nods. "It's just a headache. Nothing to worry about. Do you play pool?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty good. My Dad has his own table; I've been playing since before I was tall enough to reach the felt."

"Don't let George know," Chris murmurs. "He'll hound you forever."

"Too late, too late!" George sings, practically dancing across the room towards us, spinning the cue around his body like some crazed majorette. He comes to a sudden halt with the blue chalked tip levelled between my eyes, and a manic grin on his face. "I challenge you to a duel!"

I raise one eyebrow. "How long have you been playing, exactly?"

"Longer than you've been alive, love." His eyes twinkle.

"Doesn't that give you an unfair advantage?"

"Overcoming adversity is good for the soul. Let me grab my beer, then we'll get you a cue." He pulls his own cue back close to his body and begins an exaggerated march across the room, humming loudly and happily. His exuberance is something of a relief after the last few hours, and as the warmth of the fire works its way into my skin, I start to feel better.

Chris slides into a seat, grimacing, with both hands now pressed against the sides of his head.

Thomas looks over at him in concern. "Are you alright?"

"It's just a headache."

"Want me to...?"

"It's okay, it'll pass. Grab me a glass of water, will you?"

Thomas smiles. "Sure."

He fetches a glass of water from behind the bar and brings it back round, but as Chris stands to take it, he staggers forwards. The glass tumbles from Thomas's hands and smashes on the floor as he reaches out to try and catch the bigger man, and they go their knees in a bizarre embrace.

"They're trying to get in." Chris slurs, looking badly dazed.

Thomas takes a firm hold of Chris's chin and looks into his face, one arm still wrapped around his torso. "Something's not right here. There's nothing wrong with..."

"Dem, look out!" George's yelled warning is far too late.

Something lashes out from the wall behind Demetrius, taking him out of his seat with enough force to throw him across the room. He twists in mid-air, stone flesh rippling over his shoulders and neck, then smashes into the neat row of optics and shelved glasses, and drops out of sight behind the bar in a shower of broken glass.

"What the hell?" Thomas stands suddenly and Chris makes a grab for his leg as a support.

Pushing itself into the room as though the walls were nothing more solid than thick honey, is a horrific skinless figure. It must stand at well over two metres in height, with a bulky torso supported by wide, conical legs and two pairs of thick tentacle like arms that reach almost to the ground where they end in jagged claws. Teeth that look like slabs of corrupted marble jut from its snout under mismatched bulges that lie close to where eyes might have been; the only identifiable features in an uneven head that might have been moulded sloppily from putty.

The teeth smash together twice, and it makes a wet, slobbering noise. Its whole body oozes as it shuffles forward, leaving a smeared trail of blood and fluid behind. Long arms reach out towards the bar and Demetrius.

George raises his pool cue above his head and roars. There are no words to it, just a shout of angry defiance. The cue begins to glow and little red flames dance along its surface as the slobbering thing turns towards him, arms still outstretched.

"C'mon you piece of shit, come to daddy." George snarls, shifting his feet into a balanced stance.

It breaks into a run, scattering chairs and swatting aside heavy iron tables with a terrifying ease. George turns his torso away, eyes narrowed as he tracks his opponent. The creature gets closer and closer, and I'm about to scream for him to run away when he finally moves. It's a single smooth rotation that starts with his hips, dragging his upper body around with a stunning build-up of momentum. Torso, then shoulders, then arms follow round in a smooth arcing circle with the glowing pool cue at its end, leaving a shining crimson afterglow behind it. The cue connects across the middle of the racing monstrosity, slicing it cleanly in half. It topples to the floor, one part on either side of George as he spins the cue neatly in one hand and lands it with a gentle bounce across his shoulders.

An incongruously bright smile lights up his face, and he turns towards the bar as though nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

"That's how you do it, mate." He chimes.

Demetrius, now using the bar top to pull himself to his feet, flicks two fingers at George but says nothing.

"What was that thing?" Jaw still open, I blurt out the question to the whole room.

Thomas takes a knee next to Chris, one hand on his forearm. "If I remember correctly they're just called 'skinless'. They're a highly aggressive psychic parasite, capable of ignoring mental barriers and constructs, which will be how it got in; straight through the wall. Thankfully they're normally solitary. I assume they're different from the ones you saw

before?"

"Yeah, the ones I saw were like little scaly flying toddlers."

"Hmm. That sounds like a standard variform parasite. If we've been attacked by a skinless you can guarantee we'll see those too, if they find a way in."

"What did it want? How did it find us?"

Thomas frowns. "If I had to guess, I'd say it was actually attacking Christopher. It's a gross oversimplification, but the building is essentially a psychic extension of him. That would explain his current state, especially given that there's nothing physically affecting him. As to how they found us, I'm sorry but I think that's possibly down to you, at least in part."

"Me? What did I do?"

"Nothing that you could have avoided; whilst you were finding Nicholas, you've had some interaction with them. You're completely untrained so it's likely that anything you do leaves a trail for them to follow. Nicholas has been training us for centuries so we have an advantage, although psychic parasites are drawn to very high levels of emotions like fear or anger, so it's unlikely to have just been you." He glances over at George and shrugs.

"What do we do now then?" I ask nervously.

"I don't know. It's possible that we have some time before we see any more aggressive activity. These things are only really a threat here once they've found a way in, and they're practically useless in a real physical location. I suggest that we gather what we need and leave."

George points at the main door. "That aint happening just yet."

With a sickening feeling, I turn to look where he's pointing. All across the walls of the bar, the limbs and heads of a dozen skinless are pushing through into the room. Clinging to them with teeth bared are the swarm babies, wings furled on their chubby little backs, claws scrabbling for purchase on their slick, bleeding mounts.

I turn to yell at Thomas. "I thought you said they were *solitary!*"

He grabs me by the wrist and pulls me under a table. "Stay low, keep calm, and try not to draw any attention to yourself."

I huddle there wordlessly while the bar erupts into a chaotic cacophony of shrieking, slobbering and panicked shouting. Little talons grip and then release the table edge, rocking it gently. I take a tight hold on the single central leg and try to keep as still and quiet as I can.

Feet and flesh pass around me, and I recognise first George's boots and then his voice as he pauses with his back to me. "Wake up the big guns!"

"What?" That's Thomas, practically screaming to be heard over the noise of the room.

"Get Nicholas!"

"I can't - he'd be defenceless!"

"Now isn't the time to be gentle with him, drag him back here if you have to, we need him! We'll keep him safe, we just need him up and swinging!"

"George these are psychic parasites! Waking him up without his defences would be like taking a man with no immune system into an infectious diseases lab and asking him to start licking the petri dishes! You can't protect him from that by punching things!"

Something heavy lands on the table above me and I stifle a squeak, trying to pull myself further in. On the floor nearby, Chris makes an attempt to get up, eyes unfocussed.

"What are you doing? Get down!" My voice comes out as an alarmed hiss.

"Too dangerous here. More coming. Can feel them. Have to get us out." He pulls himself to his hands and knees, face full of grim determination.

"Can you even do that right now?" I ask.

He shakes his head as if to clear a fugue, and blinks at me. "No choice. Don't worry, I'll keep you safe."

"It's not *me* I'm worried about you idiot!"

I feel him reach for the move before he makes it, but I'm not fast enough to stop him, even if I knew how to.

"It's okay, I've got th...."

With an audible POP, he disappears in front of me. I scurry forwards without really thinking about it, and find myself suddenly out in the open. Panicked, I turn to hide again, and find my face level with the bloody knees of one of the larger skinless. I look upwards, hoping it won't have noticed me, knowing I just won't be so lucky. Shining strings of drool hang from its protruding teeth, and it makes a sucking, wheezing noise as it starts to close all four limbs around me. I scramble backwards, but I'm not going to be fast enough to get out of the way. As I open my mouth to shout for help, a massive fist erupts through the middle of the advancing fleshy torso, spraying a globular rain of gore over my face. Squealing and moaning, the skinless is lifted into the air as Demetrius picks it up and flings it with neck breaking force into the far wall.

He looks down at me, face like a mountain, voice like a landslide. "Hide."

I shake my head. "Chris has gone."

"Where?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and look for him, wishing I'd thought of that straight away. "Nicholas's room. I think he's unconscious."

He holds out one oversized hand, still coated with guts. I take it anyway and let him pull me to my feet.

"Stay with me." His grip encircles most of my lower arm, and he squeezes my wrist with terrible gentleness.

I nod. There's no way I'm going anywhere on my own right now, and as well as the others seem to be doing, more and more of these things are pushing their way into the room, hopelessly outnumbering us.

"George! Thomas!"

Pool cue still in hand, George turns to look at us, face lit with frightening intensity.

"Chris jumped – it went wrong. He's with Nick."

George nods and starts to back towards us, still fighting as we retreat towards the interior door. Thomas grabs the back of his shirt and steers him through the gauntlet of overturned furniture, keeping his body low to avoid the whirling spin of George's makeshift weapon.

The air above the rock garden vibrates with the buzzing of wings and the sky is dark with tiny deformed bodies. We run for the room on the opposite side, scurrying under the imperfect cover of the walkway. I throw the door open to find Chris lying on his back on the floor next to the bed.

Thomas leans in next to me and puts out a hand. "Wake up!"

Chris's eyes snap open, and I feel him trying it again.

"Don't!" I yell, but it's too late.

Another pop, and he vanishes for perhaps half a second before he reappears in almost the same place, landing back on the floor with his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Oh my God, is he alright?"

Thomas looks shaken. "He's fine. He's stupid, but he's fine. I don't know how you realised what he was about to do, but it's a pity neither of us saw that sooner. He shouldn't have tried to jump – not while these things are essentially in his mind. They're not stopping him translocating, they're attacking him much more directly than that, but I think it'll stop him using any of his miracles. I'm not bringing him round in case he tries to move again and something worse happens. It might destroy this place with us inside it."

"How are we getting out of here then?" I don't really want to ask, I'm worried I won't like the answer.

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry Mallory, I don't know."

"Can't we just go out of a door?"

"There's only one main exit, but we're going to have to fight if we want to get back into that room."

Behind us, George shouts in alarm, and we turn together to see a thick carpet of swarm babies come crawling over the rooftops. The door we left the bar through bursts off its hinges and skinless begin to force themselves out into the open, tearing at their own bodies and fighting with each other in their eagerness to get to us.

George half turns towards me, face grim. "Get in there and bar the window and the door. Don't come out until I tell you."

He pushes me backwards through the doorway with one open hand, and turns back to the hideous wave of flesh and teeth now rushing over the courtyard towards us. I don't waste time arguing with him – there's nothing I can do out there except get in the way or get killed.

I slam the door shut so hard it actually bounces, and I scabble for the handle again, pushing it tight shut. With trembling legs, I kick Chris's feet out of the way, and start dragging the bureau towards the door to block it.

Outside I can hear a frightening cacophony of noises; shouting and screeching wrapped around the sounds of heavy impacts and tearing flesh. I vault across the bed, neatly missing Nicholas, and throw my weight against the heavy wooden wardrobe, straining to move it across the floor to block the window. It won't budge. I slip my fingers underneath the near side to push it over, face reddening with the effort. Finally, with an unhappy creak that matches my own wordless noises of effort, the wardrobe tips past its centre of gravity and crashes down into the opposite wall. The wood splits and the far side door flies open, spilling clothes and shoes onto the floor. The window is now at least mostly blocked, but there's an impressive impact crater smashed into the plaster of Nicholas's wall.

"Shit." I glance guiltily at the man in the bed, but he hasn't so much as twitched.

I run back across the room and scramble up onto the bureau, pressing the side of my head against the door, listening to the sounds of the struggle outside. I can hear George's voice, raised in a steady stream of abuse, but no indication of the other two. I close my eyes and try to focus my vision on the courtyard. Bright images leap into view behind my eyelids; there's a sickening double sensation of wood against my face at the same time, but it only lasts a moment.

George is swinging the pool cue around like a pole arm, using it to cut swathes through the press of bodies that reach for him with sharp talons and hungry mouths. He fights aggressively, seeming not to bother with any thought of defence, taking blow after blow that shreds through his clothes and turns his skin to bloody ribbons. He's separated from the other two, further into the garden and much more in the open. Each sweep of his arm cuts down dozens of the awful things that press forward with no regard to their own survival, but more press in, climbing on the bodies of the dead, and swooping down at him from above. Deep cuts open on his forearms and head, and it's quickly impossible to determine whose blood it is that's covering him.

Demetrius is planted firmly in front of Nicholas's door with Thomas beside him. His stony limbs flash out faster than I can see, obliterating targets with every terrifying blow. Every movement is precise and deliberate, and I wonder how fast he would be moving if he wasn't clearly protecting Thomas and the door at his back. Parasites have attached themselves to his legs and chest, tearing ineffectually at his armoured skin, and rather horribly I wonder whether it will be him or Thomas that is the last of us to die here, and what will happen to them if Chris dies first.

Unlike the others, Thomas isn't moving. He's down on one knee with one hand thrust palm outwards towards George. As soon as wounds open on the other man's skin, they close, but he's not as fast as he needs to be in the press of bodies; as soon as he has to stop to heal himself, more injuries appear on George, injuries he can't seem to keep up with. The two of them slowly take more and more damage, and even the speed of Demetrius's defence isn't enough to keep them safe.

"No..." I breathe the word out, glancing back at Chris, stirring on the floor. He can't get us out of here, and there's no one coming to save us, which really leaves only one option.

I have to do it myself.

I look from Chris to Nicholas. I promised to keep my last miracle a secret, but if I keep that promise now, we might all die. As it is I might end up killing us all anyway, but we're running out of options. Maybe, just maybe, I can pull us all out. There's a burst of glass behind me and a buzz of wings as a pair of scaled swarm babies begin to push themselves through the poorly barricaded window. A movement in my peripheral vision gives me a split second warning, and I throw myself to the floor, cursing as a chunk of hair is pulled free of my scalp by one of the larger skinless that has got past the men outside and is pressing itself through the bedroom wall. I land with a painful crash and almost bounce into Chris. There's no choice now. Not anymore.

I roll over on top of him, legs straddling his chest, fists gripping his shirt. "Please don't die. Please, *please* don't die."

There's seconds to act - maybe less. With the drone of wings and the slobber of open jaws behind me, I close my eyes and look for the spider web strands of his safe haven. There have to be similar threads for his second miracle. There *have* to be. The vision burns like having something caustic in my eyes and I hear myself growl in concentration, focussing everything I can into this desperate act. I gather the saints in my mind like holding delicate, precious things, reaching for the diaries almost as an afterthought. With no real certainty that this will even work, I grasp manically at what I think are the controls of Chris's miracles, and *pull*. The beautiful song of his translocation is replaced by a discordant shriek, and the calm blue light is streaked with green like mould growing through paint. Instead of being pulled gently upwards, uncountable hands seem to grab at me and pull me in all directions at once, tearing, twisting and ripping with bone shredding force. The world is laid out in front of me like a map, expanding outwards at a terrifying rate that rapidly extends past the surface of the earth and into a starry void. Satellites and space debris rush past, then asteroids and planets, becoming ever smaller as my vision takes in more and more. I struggle against it, not ready for what must be the full extent of Chris's range, and I scramble mentally for a safe place that we can go. Somewhere I know, somewhere I remember.

"Mmmmmuuuuuhh...." My own low groan of effort jars against the high pitched shrieking.

Then wet sand is soaking the knees of my jeans. Everything spins like I'm badly drunk and I swallow the urge to be violently sick. The tearing hands let go and my perception shrinks back to just my own senses; the chill of salt water on my legs, the cry of gulls startled by our arrival and the smell of the sea. Chris lies semi-conscious under me, heart beating hard against the wall of his chest, hot skin warming the bottom of my fists through his thin shirt. The gentle push of the

tide slaps water against his face, washing away the second nosebleed I've given him today as he stirs unhappily.

Dazed but whole, I stare around to make sure we're all there. George is on one knee with one hand on the ground and the other balled into a fist raised in the air as though he's been pulverising something. He looks slightly feverish and his clothes and skin are splattered with red; for a moment he's still furiously screaming words that I can't understand, cutting off suddenly when he realises we've moved. A little further away but still close enough to easily read the surprised look on his face, Demetrius has one rock-arm across Thomas's chest like he's protecting him. Three wide lacerations across the smaller man's face are rapidly closing as the two of them blink away shock. Next to me, Nicholas, still perversely calm, is lying on his back in his nightwear, oblivious to the water pooling around him.

I open my mouth to speak but my throat fills with the taste of hot metal, and I gag. I turn my face in time to stop my first reflexive cough spraying my blood and spit across Chris's face. Vaguely I notice the others are staring at me. George's mouth is hanging open and Demetrius has gone very pale. I raise my hands to my face and my fingers come away crimson. I feel suddenly quite cold and light headed.

"I don't feel so good."

None of them move. I can't understand why they're not rushing to help Chris, or Nicholas, or even me.

George breaks their tense silence, his voice hoarse from shouting. "That's not possible. That's myth."

"Apparently not." Thomas is looking at me like I've done something terrible. "She's a nexus."

PART FOUR

"Vanderpool is more than just a nexus of Saintly ability; he represents the totality of everything the Canon have feared and worked against.

He is brutally powerful, growing more so every day, and he is utterly without moral or ethical consideration; a monster in the truest sense. He cannot be reasoned with, and he cannot be saved.

He must, without regard to cost or consequence, be stopped."

Savia deHauteville, 1491

NEXUS

The noise of the rough sea hangs in the air around me, switching from the boom of waves crashing into rocks and distant walls, to the murmuring hiss as the greedy undertow sucks water back away from the shore. A harsh wind whips across the beach front, and the rooftop I've chosen as a seat offers no protection from it.

Below me, when I choose to look for them, I can feel the saints, sitting or standing in the abandoned chalet that they've broken into for shelter. George pulled the lock off the door with the same ease as he might have plucked a loose thread out of his clothes. None of them have really spoken to me since we arrived, they just kept looking at me like I'd grown a second head. It wasn't long before I slipped away and scrambled precariously onto the sloping roof.

In the distance, the lights of the little seaside town twinkle, nestled in the sheltering arm of the headland. I came here when I was a kid. I remember ice cream and donkey rides, sandcastles with little paper flags, penny arcade machines, and hunting for starfish in little rock pools. Now all I can see is worn down buildings with rusted railings wrapped around them like string around unhappy Christmas presents. Faded graffiti has been scrawled hastily on every upright surface; unreadable and unlovely. The few lights in this part of the bay are muted copies of the reflection of the moon in the angry sea. It feels like the place shrank while I was away.

"Do you mind if I come up?" I lean over the edge of the roof to find Thomas looking up at me guiltily.

"Suit yourself." I shrug and return to my cold huddle, knees pulled up tight to my chest.

Thomas gets onto the roof faster and more gracefully than I did, managing not to scrape his knees and palms. He sinks down next to me, crossing his legs and lacing his fingers together in a rest for his chin. He sits in silence for a moment, both of us facing out to sea, then unhooks his fingers and drops his hands to his lap.

"I looked at the diaries."

I grunt, still upset about their bizarre behaviour towards me since we got here.

"I can't read them. I don't understand the language they're written in, none of the others do either. It's odd because I'm familiar with all the languages the priest should have known, but this one..."

He reaches into his shirt and pulls out a rolled sheet of paper, which he holds out to me. It's yellowed with age and although he's got a firm grip on it against the wind, he's clearly being careful not to crush it as he hands it over.

"This was a loose page in the back. The lettering looks the same, but there're only half a dozen words on it."

Curiosity overcomes my slightly petulant determination to ignore him, and I take it as gently as I can manage, sheltering it in between my torso and my thighs as I unroll it. A single line of spidery words is scratched haphazard across the centre of the page in an unreadable but familiar language. It's a moment before I realise where I've seen it.

I stare at it, brow creased. "I recognise this."

"Can you read it?"

"No, but I've seen it before. It was on the doors in Nicholas's memory." I shrug again and hand the paper back carelessly. "I was in there a while so I had plenty of time to look around while I was rescuing him for you."

Thomas flushes with colour. "I think we owe you a fairly serious apology, Mallory."

The muscles down the side of my jaw tense. Somehow I hadn't worked my way round to angry yet, but it must have been closer than I thought.

"And you didn't think you should *lead* with that statement?" I demand, eyes narrowed.

He turns his eyes down. "Mallory, listen..."

I let go of my knees and turn on him furiously. "No, no, *you* listen. I've been dragged into this, in the middle of a fight I wouldn't even have believed in two days ago; *your* fight, and all because you wanted to use me as bait! I've been lost, hurt, frightened and asked to trust you all over and over again despite having little enough to back that up with, and I've done everything I've been asked, even when I haven't understood it. I've helped you again and again, and now when I use this stupid third thing to save all our asses you treat me like a frigging leper, with absolutely no explanation! So yes, I'd say you owe me a pretty goddamn major apology."

I'm breathing heavily, fists clenched at my sides, and I realise I'm right on the edge of actually lashing out at him. Rather more horribly, I'm almost enjoying the sensation of being this angry; it's carrying me forward with a fierce, bright energy and it's like being more alive than ever. I know it isn't all mine; I'm pissed off, but I shouldn't be anywhere near this furious. Somehow, knowing that makes it worse, like losing control sliding down a steep slope.

Thomas turns completely to face me, features calm. Quite suddenly, everything goes slightly numb and my focus softens. My pounding heart steadies and I find myself back in control of my breathing again.

"I've taken the edge off." He says, face full of concern. "I've had to do it for all of us, especially George... and Nicholas. This thing is eating away at all rational sense, but I think it's worse for you because you've been in its presence. Please understand, I can't stop you being angry at us, and I would never assume to do that even if I could. I'm just masking some of the worst physical symptoms, so that you can manage it more easily. It's a sedative effect, I've essentially told your brain to produce a soporific. It's completely natural, just greatly accelerated. It'll wear off in a couple of hours, by which time you'll be able to keep control again. I'm sorry that I've done it without your permission, but you seemed to be suffering. Is that alright?"

I nod, only just understanding what it is that he's done. The burning anger seems like a distant memory now, replaced with a more realistic irritation, and a sense of wounded pride.

"Everything you say is true." Thomas continues. "You've helped us a great deal, and when you acted in desperation to save all of our lives, doing something which I can only imagine was both difficult and frightening, we've reacted in a manner which must appear very strange. I'd like to explain, if you'll let me?"

"Okay."

He looks down at the backs of his hands, seeming to gather his thoughts. "Our lives, and by that I mean myself, Christopher, George and Demetrius; our lives are very straight forward, and normally very quiet. Peaceful, even. Inaction can become addictive after a while, so we've allowed ourselves to be led for a very long time, and we've been comfortable with it. Nicholas is... well he's a very strong person. I think that if any of us foresaw a situation where we'd have to deal with something like this without him, we dismissed it out of hand because it was easier to do that. We don't know what we're doing without him, and it's frightening for us, both to see that and to admit it. We're not used to being frightened like this, and it throws us. Add to that the mental effects a dragon has, something we're certainly not immune to, and you have a recipe for trouble."

I nod, shivering against the cold and the damp now that I no longer have my anger to keep me warm.

"The others will find it hard to deal with what you can do." Thomas continues. "We all will. I understand why Nicholas told you to keep it a secret. You saw how we reacted to it, and as you say, you'd just saved all of our lives. It's a rare and dangerous power; something you'll have to use carefully."

I rub at my cold arms. "If it's so rare, how does everyone but me seem to know about it? I keep getting told how awful it is, but no one seems to want to go into any detail."

"I did promise no more sad stories." He smiles, gently.

"I think I may need to hear this one."

"As you like. There's not much in the way of factual history around people with the nexus miracle, just rumours and speculation really. It's sort of our version of the bogeyman. Nicholas told us what happened to the last one; he actually created a psychic framework to show us, so it was like being there in a way."

"Like when I was in his mind?" I ask.

"A lot like that, yes, although there are apparently some subtle differences. It's much more effective than just telling someone. I'm afraid what I can offer won't come close to that, but I can try to describe it, since he's not available."

"Well, we could always wake him up." I say, suddenly thoughtful.

"Mallory, I..."

"No, wait, hear me out. I know you can't fix psychic damage, and I know you said this thing was dangerous, but what if I could link the two of you together? I thought about this before: he's a psychic and you're a healer. Wouldn't that work? Isn't it at least worth a try?"

"Well theoretically I suppose it's possible, but I don't know if it's really safe."

"No, it probably isn't safe, but we're on the run now, aren't we? We've gone from free beer and a roaring fire to breaking into some abandoned beach chalet to get out of the wind, and finding out that I'm the next bogeyman. That's a pretty long way down. We've already come under attack from things out of nightmares, we can't read the diaries because we don't understand the language, and we just don't know what to do next. If there's a chance, even a little one, that between us we can bring Nicholas back, don't we have a responsibility to do that? We have to stop this thing before it gets here Thomas. You can't keep us all calm forever, and I don't think even you're good enough to keep a leash on the whole human race when they reach boiling point."

"The others won't like this."

"Oh screw that! So far all I've done is fall from one accident to another and I'm sick of it. Now I have a chance to really do something, to contribute to this fight in a way that none of the rest of you can. I'm so tired of sitting here *waiting*."

He's nodding slowly while I'm saying it, and I know I'm close to winning him round to agreeing with me.

"Later you can frighten me off with tales of what happened so long ago I can't even grasp it, but right now let's use this thing to help the one person who might be able to decide what we have to do next. Let's get Nicholas back."

"I'd like that a lot."

I stand up, brushing dirt and wet sand off my clothes, and offer him my hand. "Then let's do it."

A flickering light from the doorway easily marks the chalet that the others are stood in, as we make our way back to join them. They're huddled around a tiny fire that they've somehow managed to scrape together enough dry kindling to light in the disused sink. Nicholas is laid on a worktop in the recovery position; arms and legs pushed in tightly to his body to allow him to fit on the cramped surface. His eyes are still closed, and he's been wrapped up in the bloodied shirts and jackets that the others have taken off to cover him.

George is complaining loudly as we approach, and his voice wraps around the worn concrete. "It's bloody freezing. I think my nipples might actually fall off. Where the hell are we, Siberia?"

"We're somewhere on the north east coast of England. Yorkshire I think." Chris has little bits of bloody rag stuffed up both sides of his nose, and he sounds like he has a bad head cold.

"Well that explains it then. Can we go to Siberia? It's probably warmer."

"Either of you got your wallets?" Chris asks. "We could try to find a hotel."

George snorts laughter. "What, stripped to the waist, soaked up to the knees, you looking like you head butted a wall, me looking like I just gutted an angry pig, and Dem carrying an unconscious man in pyjamas? Yeah, what hotel wouldn't let us in?"

They fall into an awkward, slightly guilty silence as Thomas and I enter.

Thomas clears his throat nervously. "We're going to bring Nicholas round."

"Thought you said you couldn't do that?" George asks, hands still outstretched over the metal basin of the sink.

"On my own I can't, but I think with Mallory's help, I might be able to."

Chris shuffles his feet, looking uncomfortable. "Is that a good idea?"

"We've run out of options." Thomas tells him, still standing next to me in the doorway. "I think it might be time for a little bit of crazy."

There's an uncomfortable pause while the three of them look at each other, doubt written plainly on their faces.

George is the first one to speak. "Fine. Do it."

"I... I didn't think you'd like it." Thomas is clearly surprised.

"Of course I don't like it. For now let's ignore the fact that I'm sick to the back teeth of waiting for the old man to come back on his own. A new nexus in the world can only mean problems ahead, and deliberately using that power is like asking for trouble." He looks at me and half raises an open hand. "I don't mean you any offence kid, but you don't know the half of the danger we're all in now, you more than any of us. Still, I didn't like the idea of bloody psychics when I found out about Nicholas, and I got over that. Besides, we need her. None of you lot can play pool worth a damn, and she might be able to."

Demetrius makes eye contact with me and nods, face impassive.

I turn to Chris, watching him thinking about it. Somehow, the idea that he's scared of something I can do is much worse than it coming from any of the others. The few seconds that he takes to think seem like hours. Eventually he looks up at me seriously. "I think George is right, but this is something you're going to have to be very careful with. It's potentially very dangerous, and I don't want to see you get hurt, Mallory. I'll help you as much as I can - you've clearly already got some idea what you're doing with this, although I'd prefer it if you could stop making me bleed all over my clothes every time you turn it on."

"Sorry."

He crosses the distance between us in a single step and pulls me into a tight and welcome hug. I wrap both arms around him, wrinkling my nose against the smell of salt water and blood on his cold skin.

"You okay?" He asks.

I nod. "You?"

"I'm fine. I was just worried."

"Sorry about your face."

"I've looked worse."

George laughs. "What he's trying to say is that you scared the bollocks off us love. Please don't do that again, at least not without warning us first."

I grin at him, still holding onto Christopher. "I'm not done yet. Let's wake up the old man."

At first, without the desperate motivation of being attacked by monsters, I struggle to work out what to do. I stand

awkwardly between Nicholas and Thomas while the others watch, still pressing themselves as close as possible to the tiny fire.

I lean towards Thomas, voice lowered. "Y'know, I have no idea what I'm doing."

"When I was learning, it helped me to apply an analogy to what I was doing. Think of it in practical terms – what did it feel like last time?"

"Like pulling on strings."

"That's a good place to start then. Close your eyes. Looking at what's in front of you hasn't helped, so you're going to have to work from your imagination."

Obediently, and very glad of his help, I shut my eyes. "Now what?"

"Well, I suppose you could try looking for strings in me and in Nicholas. Find some way to connect them. Go slowly, and if I feel you do something that worries me, I'll let you know."

I reach out tentatively, gradually squeezing my eyes tighter as I concentrate. In the darkness behind my lids, gentle threads of clear white light fade into view, twisting and weaving, forming the outline of Nicholas like a wire framework. Eyes still closed, and aware that my mouth is now open in a slightly surprised 'o', I turn to see the others. Their outlines form faster than Nicholas's did, golden threads for Thomas, Christopher picked out in blue, Demetrius and George in similar shades of red. In my own body, a pulse of changing colours sits in the centre of my chest. Each heartbeat pushes them out across me like multihued lightning strikes, fading almost as quickly as they become visible. Every fourth or fifth pulse is the vibrant colour of evergreen trees.

"Thomas. Hold out your hand."

The golden framework in front of me tilts its head slightly, then extends an arm towards me. I take it, already turning away to reach out for Nicholas. Filaments of gold and white wrap around my wrists as I connect the two of them like closing a circuit. A prickling sensation spreads up my arms and across my chest. I open my eyes and look down at the bright threads wrapped around me, fully visible now, glittering in the paltry light of the fire.

"It's beautiful!" There's a building sensation like a slow release of adrenaline as the tingling builds up.

I'm so caught up that I barely hear George whispering to the others. "What's beautiful? I don't get it."

"I don't know. Shh!" Christopher replies in a hiss.

The gold and white threads contact each other in the middle of my torso, and I hear Thomas gasp as though he's been gripped by icy hands. His eyes are closed – he looks surprised but not alarmed. Then, gently at first, I feel him working, spiralling around the lines that stretch through my body and into Nicholas. I'm bridging the gap between them. It's actually *working*.

Nicholas's eyes snap open very suddenly, and I jump back in surprise, pulling my hand away from him in case I hurt him now that he's awake. The connection between him and Thomas terminates immediately, and Thomas's grip on my hand tightens for a moment. I can still see the threads, hanging in the air as though they were being supported on a breeze. I push them away and they fade into the gloom. It doesn't matter. I know how to pull those threads back any time I want to.

Nicholas sits up in a smooth, unhurried motion and looks around at the five of us, apparently not concerned by his mismatched clothes or our derelict surroundings.

"I've missed some developments, clearly. Thomas?"

The blonde haired man steps forward, failing to control a happy smile in an attempt to look serious. "Go ahead."

The focus of Nicholas's eyes flicker as his irises expand and contract. He makes a thoughtful hum low in his throat.

Finally he stops and looks up at me. "Very interesting."

My cheeks flush, but I manage what I hope is a nonchalant shrug. Nicholas's presence now that he's awake is palpable, almost jarring. None of the others seem to be bothered by it and somehow that makes it worse.

"Thomas is correct, you need to know what happened to the last nexus."

"Right now?" Chris asks. "Is that totally necessary? She's been through a lot."

"She needs to be aware of the dangers. Will doing it later help her more?"

I raise a hand. "Maybe first you could actually explain what a nexus is? I have some ideas already, but it would be nice not to be scrambling around in the dark with this thing, especially if it's dangerous."

Nicholas folds his hands on his lap. "The simplest expression of it is to activate the miracles of another saint. This normally works only on targets with weaker minds, those with less training or those who are unconscious or otherwise mentally compromised. If that is undertaken carelessly or with limited understanding, it can result in injury – although that is something you've already discovered."

"Uh, yeah."

"The advanced application will allow you to temporarily borrow another person's miracles. Since they are not being forced to use them, there is no method for resisting that. It's cleaner and more efficient, but far more difficult to learn. At first I would expect that you would only be able borrow from people in close proximity to you physically. There have been suggestions that a fully realised nexus can permanently access other people's miracles. I believe that to be theoretically possible."

"So why is that dangerous? If I can do it without hurting other people, isn't it just like any other person doing it? If I learn to fix people like Thomas does, what's the difference to him doing it himself?"

"The dangers are threefold. Firstly, there is a maintained fear of this particular miracle, because of its potential for power. Thomas has told you about the Canon; they are likely to consider you a threat if they find out what you can do, and kill you at the very least. In fact they are more likely to kill all of us to set an example of what happens to individuals who harbour a nexus. Secondly, most people develop their abilities slowly, building up a natural resilience to any side effects. You saw a little of that when you worked with Christopher; he is used to that scope of vision whereas you are not. It's impressive that you managed not to drop all of us on the moon or some other equally lethal location."

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. The fact that Nicholas knows what I saw when I pulled us all here doesn't really surprise me, but the realisation of what might have gone wrong is very unpleasant. If I'd known about that earlier, I might not have even tried to get us all out of there.

"The third risk is one of addiction. If you have power and no one truly capable of restraining you, it can become intoxicating. That is why I am going to show you what happened to the last nexus."

"Were you there?"

"Thankfully not, however I was able to piece together what happened from other people's memories, as well as more reliable sources."

I find myself thinking about a painted door and delicate, falling blossoms. Nicholas nods as though I'd mentioned it to him aloud. "That is correct. Are you ready?"

"Guess so."

"Then we'll begin. Ordinarily, I'd have you anchor yourself through a biological connection by holding on to one of the others, but given that we know you've created accidental nexus pathways before, I don't think that we'll try that on your initial deliberate projection."

"You know I only understand about half the things you say, right?"

In the corner, leaning against the wall, George snorts. "Half's good sweetheart. Took me nearly a century to get that far."

"That is because she pays more attention than you do. Your mind rarely raises above an animal level."

George just winks at me.

Nicholas snaps his fingers loudly and I look up at him. He locks eye contact with me and I find that I can't look away. In my peripheral vision, the world starts to peel away like old paint; wide strips and little curling flakes, rolling back to reveal bright sunshine.

Nicholas glances over my shoulder and his hypnotic stare breaks. "Come, we don't want to be stood in the path."

He steps past me as I gaze around open mouthed. I'm stood on a hard dirt track that curls tightly around the edge of dense woodland to my right. On my left, neat fields full of fruit trees and low shrubs roll away across gentle hills into a cloudless horizon. Birds are singing sweetly, darting in and out of the treetops, and the blessedly warm sunlight is intense enough that I have to shield my eyes against it. Muffled by the woodland, I can hear what sounds like the noise of approaching hooves.

"Mallory. Move."

I've barely started to step off the path as a colossal black horse comes pounding around the corner, flanks slick with sweat. Startled, I throw myself sideways, landing in a sprawl on the floor next to the unruffled Nicholas. The horse's rider doesn't seem to notice me, although he glances back over his shoulder as he spurs the straining animal onwards.

Nicholas glances down at me sourly. "Do try to be careful. However much being here might feel like being in a dream, you're not. The occupants of this projection may not be aware of your presence, but you're already aware that you can sustain significant physical injury in a psychic landscape."

"Can I die here?"

"Of course you can. If your brain believes you have expired, it can quite easily shut down vital functions. If you are foolish enough to stand in the way of a blade here, you will most likely suffer some kind of fatal cerebral or coronary failure outside of the framework."

"You didn't think you should maybe warn me about this before we came?"

"Are you planning on doing something so foolish?"

"No."

"Then a warning would have been without merit."

I roll my eyes. Clearly, arguing this kind of point with Nicholas is a waste of my time.

"I'll provide a little background for the purposes of the lesson. This is Portugal in the early years of the renaissance. The gentleman whose horse you nearly threw yourself under is a shipwright by the name of Bosero. Three weeks ago, he accepted a large sum of money to observe the movements of one of his customers. Bosero is a relatively greedy man, although nothing unusual, so he didn't ask any questions. Unfortunately, for him, the customer found out he was being spied on, so Bosero has done the only sensible thing he can; he's stolen a fast horse, and fled for his life."

"Couldn't he have just, I dunno, said sorry and split the money with the customer?"

In the woods along the opposite side of the path, countless birds erupt upwards in panicked, noisy flight. An enraged, animalistic howl pre-empt the arrival of another figure, this one on foot, emerging out of the trees.

Nicholas flicks one long finger towards the howling man. "*This* is the customer, and as you can see he is somewhat disinterested in fiscal remuneration."

The second man, who can't be much out of his teenage years, leaps onto the path, moving fast enough that he's almost as quick as the horse was. His clothes are torn and his face dirty. He slides a little on the hard packed earth of the path as he turns in the landing, putting him almost on all fours. His arms, which I realise suddenly are too long to be normal, dig into the ground to stabilise his body, making him look slightly ape-like. He pulls himself mostly upright and screams Boseró's name. His weight shifts for what must be the last part of his chase, then he slows to a bizarre halt, one foot paused in the forward push, one arm still extended downwards, lips very slightly parted, body hanging perfectly still in the bright air.

"What's he doing?" I look up at Nicholas, but he's already striding over to the path. I scurry after him until we're standing only an arm's length from the frozen man.

"He isn't doing anything Mallory. This is a psychic projection and I have chosen to arrest its progression while I explain the relevance of this man."

"Wait, if you can do that, couldn't you have stopped that horse?"

"Of course I could."

"Well then, I wasn't really in any danger, was I, so was that lecture entirely necessary?"

"Mallory, the speed with which you veer from intelligence to stupidity is sometimes quite breath taking."

I don't answer. I'm not sure if that's insulting.

"I could have stopped the horse had I considered you to be in any real danger, however that does not make the lesson any less valid. There are perils here that you may not comprehend, and if you are being cautious, you are much safer."

"Oh, okay. Can I touch him?"

Nicholas rolls his eyes. "Yes."

"He's not going to move, right? He's not going to suddenly leap on me or anything?"

"Not until I release the projection. I will warn you before I do."

Slightly nervously, I step forward and extend one slow finger. As it connects with his bare skin, I yank back my hand: his skin is hot enough that he feels feverish.

"Jesus, he's burning up! What's wrong with him?"

Nicholas stands impassively in the path, arms folded across his chest. "This is Vanderpool. He was the last nexus, before you. Take a closer look."

I step a little nearer and put my hand onto his shoulder, feeling the waves of heat pouring off his skin. It's hot enough that I'm surprised he doesn't look ill. I avoid standing right in front of him, peering in from the side to inspect the man's face. A slightly haughty demeanour, visible only in this paused moment, lies buried under layers of brutish anger. His hair is ragged, as though he's cut it himself with a poorly sharpened knife, and there's patchy stubble on his cheeks and neck which fails to completely cover a number of small scars on the line of his jaw. His eyes, narrowed to slits, take most of my attention. Ringed by bloodshot whites, his irises shift colours like oil; purples and blues and greens swimming across grey and black. It's the only thing about him that moves.

"Mallory."

One hand still on Vanderpool's shoulder, I look up at Nicholas. "Yeah?"

"Stand still, and remain calm."

"Uh, okay." I reply, immediately tense.

To my horror, Vanderpool starts to move, slowly but with increasing speed.

"Nicholas..."

"Stay still."

Vanderpool's inhuman eyes flick left and right. His muscles bunch as he holds his charge, pausing for a moment to sniff the air like a hunting dog, then rather horribly, he turns to face me. The depth of his focus rests perfectly on my face. His mouth opens, revealing a double row of sharply pointed teeth, curving slightly inward like a snake's. I flinch, pulling my hand off his shoulder. All the hairs stand up on the back of my neck and I have to fight the very determined urge to run.

"*Nog een..?*" he hisses, looking right at me.

Vanderpool returns quite suddenly to his unnatural frozen stall. Nicholas steps forward and bends to assess the other man's eye line. "Interesting. I do believe you've just provided the answer to a long standing question."

"What did he... what question?"

"The same one every person I've ever shown this to asks. One of two that you were about to ask. Firstly, you want to know what he said, which translates to English as 'another', although you might find the context a little complicated. You can ask the second question now."

I shrug, not sure I like Nicholas pre-empting my questions like that. "What did he mean?"

"Until now, I've never been sure, but I now believe he may have been aware of the presence of another nexus, even through a psychic framework like this one, from hundreds of years in the past. Quite impressive. Still, it didn't render him any assistance on this particular day."

"Woah, woah. He can see me?"

"Of course he can't see you. Don't be ridiculous."

"Then what..."

"He was likely only aware of a... well I suppose you might try to think of it as an echo of your presence; echoes move in more than just a straight line after all. Vanderpool was only a partially realised nexus, so he may not have understood the implications of what he felt here. Step back please, I'm going to release him."

I hurry out of the way. Vanderpool, suddenly mobile again, switches his gaze back to the path and tears away after Boser. I realise the birds aren't singing any more.

"Do we need to follow him?"

"Yes."

"Um, he's pretty quick."

In fact, Vanderpool is out of sight by the time I turn round to see Nicholas looking at me slightly pityingly, like I'm a small child trying to work out something difficult.

I fold my arms across my chest. "Go on, tell me why what I just said is stupid. I know you want to."

"Work it out."

"You're a real prat, you know that?"

He says nothing, he doesn't even change his expression. I try to ignore him, working out how we're going to catch up with Vanderpool and Boser. It doesn't take long.

"We're in a psychic thing. Landscape. Projection. Whatever. You can essentially stop time here. He can run as fast as he likes, we're still going to catch up with him."

"Very good."

"Don't be condescending."

"Work these things out faster and I will have no basis for condescension."

I consider sticking out my tongue, and decide it would be childish.

The walk takes only a few minutes before we come to a steep hill. Before we reach the top Nicholas pauses.

He looks at me carefully. "Mallory, it occurs to me that you have precious little experience with violence and bloodshed."

"Yeah, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"That's not a choice people like us are able to make for ourselves. What you are about to see may be... difficult for you."

"Nicholas, are you *worried* about me?"

"A little."

"Oh God, this is going to be awful, isn't it?"

"You may think so. It's perhaps fortunate that Vanderpool lost his mind fairly early on in his life, otherwise he would have been a lot more dangerous. He had a fascination with more physically obvious miracles, which made him brutal, but not subtle."

"Ah, shit. Come on, let's get it over with."

As we crest the hill, I understand why he was worried. I smell it before I see it; a slightly sweet fragrance that makes the hairs on the back of my neck start to rise as some deep animal instinct insists that something bad is ahead of me. Over the rise, Bosero's horse lies in a vast, dark pool. The stink of blood and the sight of the cloud of unmoving, frozen flies that have already gathered over the steaming corpse forces a hand over my mouth and nose.

At first I can't seem to pull my eyes away from the broken body, staring shocked and motionless at the wide blue sky. Whatever killed it has hit it hard enough in the back to snap its spine. It lies twisted on the ground, bent at an unnatural angle as though it died trying to bite the base of its own tail. Long wounds on its sides have mixed blood with sweat, soaking the black body and matting its hair. Its flesh has been torn so deeply that intestines have begun to ooze out of its ruptured belly in slippery pink and blue ribbons. A trail of bloody footprints, spaced far apart like sprinting steps, lead to the bizarre frozen tableau made by the two men on the edge of an otherwise beautiful, tree-lined valley. My feet are moving towards them without any real conscious effort, guts churning. I know I have to see properly, to understand, I just don't want to.

Bosero has clearly fled from the ruined body of his mount, feet sticky with its blood. His eyes are wide with terror, mouth open in a silent shriek. Hanging in the air behind him as though about to land on his victim from what I know has to have been a single leap, is Vanderpool. His face is a perfect counterpoint of delight to Bosero's horror; lips pulled back, shifting eyes wide. His unnaturally long arms are stretched out towards the other man, even longer now than they were when I first saw him. His fingers are stretched too, each one twice the length of my own, joints bending them like spider legs, fingernails extended like talons. His mouth is wide open, bottom jaw down almost to his chest, thick forked tongue tasting the air. There's nothing human about his features, just a joy in what he's doing. It's no wonder the others were so disturbed when they knew what I'd done; they've seen this display as well, they've seen this warning. This has to be what Nicholas brought me here to show me, the danger they've all been trying to tell me about. Being a nexus means turning into a monster.

THE GOOD KIND OF MONSTER

My stomach starts to rebel, and I turn away from Bosero's frozen execution. For a moment I fight my rising gorge, breathing hard and squeezing my eyes tightly shut, then I give in and go to both knees, emptying my stomach onto the grass.

As I cough up the last parts of my earlier kitchen raid and clear my nose noisily, Nicholas drops to a crouch next to me.

"There is more." He says, seemingly unconcerned by my shabby state.

"I... more?"

"Bosero might be incidental to this story, but the people who paid him are not. They knew their spy would become careless, and they expected Vanderpool would give chase when he fled."

"I don't think I want to see it, Nicholas." I plead, miserably. "Can we just leave?"

"It is important for you to be aware of what happened next," Nicholas says, gently.

"Why? Why now? Why at all?"

"Because of what you can do, and because there is so little time before you may have to utilise it." He sighs. "Because of what I did to you on the tower."

I turn to look at him. "Why'd you do it?"

"Without it, we'd both have perished. My superconscious mind perceived your increased capability to be preferable to that. We will both have to live with that decision, since it's irreversible."

"I didn't... I don't feel any different."

He smiles. "If someone gave you the ability to fly, but didn't tell you *how*, would you know about it while you were walking on the ground?"

"I suppose not."

"Just so with this. You need to know what the risks are, both to you and to the people around you, and the lesson cannot wait. I wish that it could. If you prefer, I can influence what you do and don't see."

"Like the staff in the institution?"

"Like that, yes. It's a level of interference that I like to avoid unless it's necessary."

"How do you decide when it's necessary?" I ask. It's a weak excuse to delay the inevitable return to the lesson, and we both know it.

"When there is no one capable of controlling you, of ensuring that you conform to a group morality, then you must learn to determine what is right and what is wrong yourself. You must become your own moral guide, your own ethical standard, even if others do not understand what you do or why. It is both a blessing and a curse. This is the only way in which I will compare myself to Vanderpool: I have created a moral framework, and I act within it. He did not, and this was the result."

Nicholas stands, offering me his hand, and I let him pull me to my feet. Somehow, as I stand, I already feel better.

"I suppose you'd better show me what happened next, then."

He nods. "The Canon do not accept threats to their power. There was no way of controlling Vanderpool, so they set up a scenario whereby they could distract him. In essence, they fed him Bosero, and attacked whilst his guard was down."

"They used him as bait? That's awful! How could they do that? That's... that's..."

"That's exactly what we would have done with you. You're aware of it beforehand, but otherwise, there's very little difference; we're risking a human life to combat a perceived threat. Be careful before you judge the Canon's actions in this. Vanderpool killed more than just Bosero, and inflicted a far greater level of suffering on most of his victims."

"Did the Canon kill him?"

"Yes, although it was difficult. His fixation with physical miracles meant that he was exceptionally robust, and felt practically no pain. His body was capable of withstanding massive injury and still functioning normally, and he healed at a prodigious rate. His end was costly."

The scene around us shifts away rapidly, moving under my feet with a sickening pace until we're stood on a nearby hill, overlooking the valley.

"We will view the rest from here. You should find that if you attempt to focus upon any part of the scene, the distance will not prohibit clarity."

He's right: Nicholas releases the frozen moment as I look unhappily down at the valley, and I see Vanderpool land on Bosero's shoulders, driving him to the floor. I sense the vague disruption in the air that a scream would have made, then the nexus leans forwards and begins to eat his still living victim, clawed fingers tearing out chunks of flesh. My vision slides away from him as each raking strike lands, leaving me with only the distorted memory of blood and bone. It's still horrific, but somehow far more manageable than before.

A woman steps into the space between me and Nicholas; she's a sharp and jarring intrusion into what has become an almost dreamlike fugue. Her face is hard; old and deeply lined features under silvering hair, mouth set in a look of disgust. She's short enough that I can look over the top of her to stare quizzically at Nicholas.

"This is Lady Savia deHauteville." He says, voice almost a whisper. "She was instrumental in the formation of the Canon, and it was she who masterminded this operation."

deHauteville's eyes narrow, and she snaps a single crisp word. "*Now.*"

The air comes alive with the crack of black powder rifles firing; the tree-line around the edge of the valley seems to boil with thick smoke, but the noise doesn't stop.

Vanderpool howls his indignant rage, dropping Bosero's corpse to the floor and standing. The storm of incoming fire seems to do little more than irritate him, and as he turns he makes eye contact with deHauteville. His inhuman features blacken with hatred, and he drops to a quadrupedal sprint, heading straight for her. There are other figures, men and women racing down the slopes and ignoring the gunfire, but Vanderpool seems to see only the woman stood next to me. Even dulled by Nicholas's gentle guidance, my brain screams at me to run away from the unholy predator racing towards me.

Then deHauteville vanishes completely.

Vanderpool skids to a halt only a few metres away, confused and angry. He sniffs at the air, and spins, racing off towards a tiny, feminine figure on the opposite slope.

"How did she do that?" I ask.

"Savia can create duplicate copies of herself, and recall them to her at will. In essence, she can be in more than one place at once. She shares multiple sensory experiences when so split, and to my knowledge the only limit to the number of copies is her ability to handle those experiences."

"*Can?* She's still alive?"

"Oh yes."

Again and again, Vanderpool races towards a copy of the diminutive leader of the Canon, only to have her disappear in front of him before he can land a blow. Every time, another duplicate steps out of the trees or throws off clever camouflage to reveal its presence. His rage burns through him, and all sense of intelligence seems to have fled from him altogether. He screams incoherently in a dangerous, almost childish tantrum. The gunfire slows, but the nexus is clearly damaged now, dark blood running down his skin and the remains of his clothing. I realise that the other people running into the valley aren't chasing him, like I first thought: they're coming in from multiple angles and making for a central point, carrying strange devices wrapped in wires and valves. Vanderpool ignores them, focussing instead on deHauteville, and I realise with a start that she isn't just keeping him busy, she's deliberately herding him towards the centre of the valley.

As the racing Canon meet at their destination, one of them raises a hand, mouth moving like he's saying something. The air next to him seems to ripple, and he pushes his other arm into it, then yanks backwards, pulling another copy of deHauteville back out next to him before he staggers and collapses. One of the others catches him as he falls, then Vanderpool is sprinting towards them, jaws wide. There's a flurry of activity as they arrange the devices in a rough circle around deHauteville, then she nods and speaks. The others pause, then turn and run, one of them carrying their companion's limp body.

Nicholas dips his head towards me as I watch the scene. "Bitzer was their only translocator, and he was sadly restricted in that he could only move very small things to his current location. Even so, he was both talented and highly intelligent. Pulling deHauteville into the centre of the trap meant going far beyond his safe limits. Savia believes he was dead before he hit the floor. The others were meant to be chosen by lot, although in the end they all volunteered. They knew the likely outcome of their actions."

"Why did he have to do it?" I ask. "Bitzer, I mean."

"To bait the trap. They knew Vanderpool hated deHauteville."

"How come?"

"She attempted to reason with him a few years before this, then when she realised how far gone he was, she tried to bring him down herself. He thought he'd killed her; in fact he only killed a copy. Savia recommended the Canon's euthanizing Vanderpool; while the rest of them deliberated, she faced him a further five times, attempting to divert his attention from either populated areas or specific individuals. He became paranoid about her presence."

"What happens when the copies die?"

"Apparently it is the equivalent to a recall."

"So..."

"Yes. She has full sensory recollection of her own death at Vanderpool's hands, six times."

"Holy shit."

"Indeed."

I breathe out heavily. "What're those things they're carrying?"

"Explosives. Far beyond the normal capability of what should be available in this time period: they have been miraculously modified."

I look at the figures fleeing the valley in front of me as the nexus bears down on deHauteville. Their faces are desperate.

"Will they make it out?" I ask, quietly.

Nicholas shakes his head. "They spent a long time working on these weapons, and they had to be sure they would

work. They can't run fast enough to escape."

"Are... uh... are we safe here?"

"We are in no immediate danger. The valley was chosen because of its capacity to contain the blast."

I watch as the doomed Canon sprint away from deHauteville, while the nexus gets closer. She stands with her arms by her sides, features calm.

Vanderpool leaps for her, the same way he did for Bosero, his face lit with victory.

She smiles.

The earth around her explodes upwards in a cacophonous blasting circle of dirt and flame that's loud and bright enough that I'm still trying to decide whether to shield my eyes or my ears when the shockwave arrives, and the rushing wall of hot air hits me hard enough that I fall backwards as the air is swept out of my lungs.

It's over surprisingly fast. I sit up, blinking, and try to brush the soil out of my hair with my fingers. Faintly, I can hear the riflemen fleeing through the trees.

"Come, there's one more thing for you to see." Nicholas says, brushing dirt from his clothes.

He sets off towards the burned centre of the blast; a ragged circle of torn ground that extends well past where the escaping Canon had managed to run to. Their bodies litter the floor, twisted and broken. Some are burned almost beyond my ability to recognise them as human, but my focus seems to glaze as I look, and I step over them with a false detachment. There's no sign of deHauteville.

A little way from the centre, carried backwards by the blast, Vanderpool lies filthy and blood soaked; his body is raked with broken fragments of metal that have torn him open with brutal efficiency, but his face is somehow calm, and I know that Thomas, George, and Demetrius can only have thought of this when they saw me, sat bloody and uncomprehending on top of Chris after I moved us all.

Nicholas looks at me sternly, clearly aware of my train of thought. "Given the little time in which they've known you, the others already care for you a great deal. That's not something to take lightly, and I expect you to treat it with the respect it deserves. They've struggled to reconcile that care with what you can do, but they are all good men and even if they are afraid of what you yet might become, they have not abandoned the start of their friendship with you."

I nod, not entirely sure if I'm being told off or somehow comforted.

"It will take time for you to fully comprehend what you are capable of, and I will try to ensure that you are trained to control it. However we have no time for kindness or gentleness right now, so you will need to be resilient; we both know that you're capable of that. We will talk at length when we have the time. You've done well so far; much better than I would have expected for someone of your limited experience."

"Okay."

"And Mallory?" He puts one hand on my shoulder as the world turns grey, and looks down at me seriously. "Thank you."

I slouch against the doorframe and watch the saints talk to each other, trying to ignore the taste of vomit in the back of my throat. I'm not sure I want anything to do with this nexus miracle after what Nicholas has just shown me, but control would be good. Especially if it means not being the next person to be targeted by the Canon.

Nicholas's history lesson feels a little dreamlike in the gloom and chill of the beachfront, but the sharpness of his voice is unmistakable as he asks Chris what state the haven is in.

Chris shakes his head. "It's completely overrun. We could try to take it by force but I would recommend that we

don't attempt it until after this is over and the parasites disperse. We just can't handle the weight of numbers right now."

"What do we lose if you shut it down completely?"

"What, altogether? You mean destroy it?"

"Yes."

"Well, nothing we can't replace I suppose. We have the diaries with us here. There'll be some expenditure involved, especially for you and me, and there's some sentimental value to a lot of items that just won't exist anymore."

"That's acceptable."

"I'm not sure it is," Chris shakes his head, looking worried. "We have no base of operations without the bar, and it'll take days for me to replace it – weeks if we want something practical. A complete rebuild might take months, possibly even longer."

"Then we'll simply have to cope without it. It's hazardous for you to translocate while you're open to attack, and make no mistake, with a swarm that size watching for you, you are very open indeed. Having the ability to travel is far more valuable to us than having a base of operations. Four members of our group have homes outside of the confines of the haven. One of them might make a suitable place to rest while we make use of the additional information source we now have."

George shrugs. "My place is probably biggest, feel free to use that. I'll have to go back there anyway to pick up my kit."

"Very well." Nicholas drums his fingertips together slowly. "Christopher, how long will you require to collapse the haven and be ready to move?"

Chris purses his lips thoughtfully. "Well, the collapse itself won't take long, but there's going to be a couple of hours afterwards where I'm pretty much useless, even with Thomas's help. Overall, we're looking at two, maybe two and a half hours before we can move a distance like that."

Nicholas is nodding while Chris talks. "Then start making your preparations please. Do you need anything?"

"No, just a little quiet, and somewhere to rest afterwards."

"This environment is hardly ideal. Mallory, do you know anywhere else we can go?"

Startled by suddenly being involved in their conversation, I stumble over unhelpful words and noises for a moment. "I, uh, I, well, there's..." The others wait fairly patiently, Nicholas with one raised eyebrow. I swallow and start again. "There used to be a lot of hotels and guesthouses and stuff round here, but like George said earlier, I don't know if we'd be allowed in, not the way we look right now."

Chris raises his hand again. "I really don't need a hotel Nicholas, I'll be fine here. I've done harder things in more dangerous environments, and you know it. The time we might spend trying to find somewhere comfortable would be wasted, and I think you want us to move quickly now?"

"Very well," Nicholas looks unconvinced, but he nods curtly. "Begin when you're ready."

"I'll start now then. You and Thomas will need to keep an eye on me, just in case. I haven't collapsed many of these things, and never when they were full of aggressive parasites before." He slides down to the floor with his back against the wall and his knees drawn up in front of him.

Thomas sinks into a cross-legged position facing him. "Ready?"

Chris nods. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, then his skin flushes and beads of sweat stand out on his cheeks and forehead. "Ok... this is gonna be... harder than... I thought..."

Thomas and Nicholas share a glance, their expressions changing as though they're silently discussing something.

Heavy veins stand out on Chris's neck and temples, and as his hands clench into fists, I find my own mirroring them. Quite suddenly, his whole body stiffens, face strained like he's had some kind of electric shock. His back arches and his head connects sharply with the wall. Thomas puts one hand on his knee, still sharing silent glances with Nicholas, whose face is lined with deep concentration. I go to step forwards, not able to watch and do nothing, but Demetrius puts a firm hand on my shoulder.

"He'll be alright."

"But I..."

"He's in good hands."

I chew my lip, watching them work. Chris settles a little, chest heaving, skin pallid, hands still balled up tightly. Unable to watch any more, I slip outside into the dark.

As cold as it is, the chill here is nothing compared to the icy waters of the lake I took the diaries from only a few hours earlier. This time I pull myself up onto the roof more easily, knowing better where my feet and hands are best placed to haul my body upwards. I drag my knees up to my chest to keep warm, and stare out to sea, worrying first about Chris and then about myself.

Seconds tick past, then minutes, turning gradually into hours, lost in the rushing sound of the sea. So much upheaval in such a short time; already the world I lived in only a day ago seems like a distant memory, and I can't help but think about what happens next. When all this is over, do I just go back to serving takeaway food in Camden? There has to be something more now, something bigger that I can do. Or was that what Vanderpool wanted – something more, something bigger?

"You alright sweetheart?" George, who I haven't noticed approaching along the top of the wall behind the chalets, hops neatly across onto the roof and flops down next to me. Despite still being stripped to the waist, he's somehow managed to procure a portion of chips wrapped in newspaper, and the vinegar tinted smell of hot food makes my mouth water.

"Yeah. Can I have one?"

"Sure."

He holds out the paper and I have to fight the urge to snatch it away from him as I realise just how hungry I am. I take a more polite handful and ram them into my mouth almost all at once.

George's face splits into a grin. "Hungry?"

"Starved. I can't understand it; I can't seem to stop eating. I mean, I threw up when Nicholas was showing me what happened to Bosero, but still. The same thing happened yesterday. Do you all eat like this all the time?"

"Not unless we want to get fat. Not that you'd have to worry about that, runt like you."

"Runt?" I raise an eyebrow in mock surprise, still shovelling chips into my mouth.

"Grab some more, I don't mind." He holds out the paper, and I take it from him gratefully. "Thomas has this theory that miracles take up a load of energy. Basically, it means that when you do freaky things you get really hungry. It gets much more manageable as you get used to it, like any kind of exercise. Don't worry love, my fridge is pretty well stocked."

"Is Chris going to be okay?" I ask, mouth still full.

"He's awake, that's why I came to get you. He'll still be pretty knackered mind, although he'll probably sleep that off later without too much difficulty. His stuff is just more tiring than most people's I guess, and he's pushing pretty hard

at the moment. Seems like things that affect just yourself are the easiest, things that affect other people are next, then things that affect your environment are worst. Chris's tricks are hard on him, especially the kind of thing he's just done."

I swallow and wipe grease off my lower lip. "But I've seen him jump around all over the place and not bat an eyelid."

"That's 'cause he's tough as steel, and he's good at hiding it when it drains him. Mind you, he hides a lot of things pretty well."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, me and Demetrius spend a lot of time together. Nick's the least social person on the planet, although Thomas still hangs around him anyway, but Chris... well Chris is kind of alone. We've had other people work with us or stay with us a while, but they always move on, it always ends up with just the five of us again. We all love him like a brother, but I think he's just lonely. The guy hasn't left the bar much since Nick got stuck in there." His eyes twinkle mischievously and he nudges me with an elbow. "Maybe he could use a little female company? Eh? Eh?"

"George, don't even think it. I've known him for about a day."

"So? Romeo had another girlfriend twenty minutes before he met Juliet, and look at those two!"

"Yeah they both *died*."

"Bah, you're killing my point."

"Did you actually have a point?"

"Of course I do sweetheart, and it's pretty simple: quit worrying. You're sat here fretting over the bogeyman when he's been dead for hundreds of years. You're not him. At your core, in the part of you that matters, you're a different person, and you'll make different choices. You're meant to be here, you're meant to help us, and we couldn't ask for a better weapon than a nexus, even one as skinny as you."

"I don't..."

"Consider this, then. Chris makes safe havens that don't exist in what you would normally refer to as reality, but somehow, without any training or any idea what you were really doing, you managed to walk right through his door."

"I just wanted to be somewhere safe."

He shrugs. "I'd guess that's not the only time in your life you've wanted that, but this time you found not only a safe place but also a guy with superpowers, one of which is to *keep* people safe. That might not mean anything, and even if it does I wouldn't know how to explain it, but I don't believe in coincidences. You might also want to dwell on the fact that you found a way to save Nick when none of the rest of us could have done it, and it hasn't slipped anyone's attention that he's stood in a five foot space down there with three other people and he's not gone psycho crazy like he has done for the last couple of decades. Whatever you did so that you could carry him back home, he's found a way to make it stick. You followed up that little piece de resistance by coming up with a plan when the people around you were panicking, and then you saved all of our lives by pulling us here. Your choice of location could have been better, mind, it's bloody cold here, but there's a very real possibility that we'd all be dead if you hadn't done what you did. If you're gonna turn into a monster, then maybe you'll be the good kind."

"There are good monsters?"

He jerks a thumb back over his shoulder with a laugh. "You've met the old man, right?"

"Well..."

"Look kid, 'monster' is relative. I've seen bad people and good people and I've taken a turn at being both myself. The fact that you're actually worried about what you might turn into in the first place probably means you won't."

I don't say anything. Maybe his logic is sound, but I can't shake the feeling of foreboding that's lodged in my brain. I look down at my hands, cradling the rest of the chips in my lap, fingers still slightly greasy.

George snakes an arm around my shoulders and squeezes comfortably. "You'll do fine, runt. We'll keep an eye on you."

"Thanks."

With no more pre-amble, he pushes himself forwards, and drops neatly off the edge of the roof. I lean out after him to see him looking back up at me from the first floor walkway. "Come on down if you want, it shouldn't be too long before we can set off now."

I stuff the remaining chips into my mouth and slide my body forwards to the edge of the roof. Cheeks bulging, I push off with my hands, landing in front of George with all the grace and poise of a half brick.

He laughs, thumping me on the shoulder hard enough that I almost fall over. "Want to try that again?"

I look over at the little pool of light coming from our chalet, then down at the dark ground below us and shrug. "Sure, why not."

He vaults nimbly over the rusty and feeble looking railings, which groan in protest at his additional weight. I shake my head and climb over them far more slowly, pausing on the edge and bracing my body for the next drop. Below, George grins up at me, beckoning for me to follow him. My landing is better this time, and I drop into a half crouch to absorb the impact of hitting the floor. George is about to speak again when a voice interrupts us from the shadows of the stone stairwell.

"You know, some of us are trying to rest."

I turn to see Chris sat on the steps, looking drawn and tired. He smiles at us both, but the strain on his face is easy to see.

George takes a step past me and grips the other man tightly by the shoulder. "You up and running mate?"

"All fine. Quit worrying, the pair of you."

My relief isn't shared by George who snorts derisively, clearly unconvinced. "You've got a shit poker face, mate. It's no wonder I always take your money when we play."

Chris shrugs; he looks exhausted. "Well it beats hanging around here having to look at your ugly mug."

"Pah, you're just jealous of my handsome good looks."

"Have you seen my chiselled jaw? I'm extraordinary."

"They built statues of me in ancient Greece, you know."

"No wonder their economy fell over, they'd obviously seen your face."

Their faces spread into progressively wider and wider grins. George turns to me for a verdict. "Mallory, you have to decide for us."

"Woah, what?"

"Which of us is prettier?"

They both strike ridiculous lunging poses with their chests thrust outwards and heads tilted up. Far from being able to pass judgement, I find it hard to do anything but laugh.

Nicholas's voice echoes out of the darkness. "When you've all finished playing, we do have a task to accomplish."

George straightens up and winks at Chris. "The sooner we go the better then. I'm starving – Mallory pinched all my chips."

Chris staggers as we arrive in the darkened hallway of George's apartment, and all of us reach out for him as his knees buckle.

"I'm okay, I'm okay." Chris lies. His voice is trembling with effort.

"Shittest poker face ever." George mutters, slipping his shoulder under Chris's arm to take some weight from him as Demetrius moves to do the same on the other side. "Mallory, get the light will you?"

Almost without thinking about where the switch is, I take a few steps forward and flick on the overhead lighting. George and Demetrius half carry Chris away.

Thomas beckons for me to follow him, leading the way into what I assume to be the main room. It's a large pale expanse of clean lines and neat furniture on two levels; white walls and a wooden floor leading out from where we've entered, forming a neat boundary to steps down into a seating area with no fewer than three oversized leather couches. Low bookcases recessed into the walls are filled with tourist knickknacks and curios, spoiling the otherwise minimalist feel. Tall windows run the length of the far wall, and the night lights of the city beyond are distorted by the melting splatter of sleet. Above an unused and pristine fireplace, a kite shield and heavy bladed sword are displayed proudly. Both have the look of well-kept antiques; the sword has the same purposeful feel as the ones I saw in the bar earlier, although I realise now that those are probably long gone. The shield looks battered and worn, painted in chipped and weathered white, with the Saint George cross emblazoned proudly across its length and breadth.

Nicholas stops in the doorway next to me with one arm cradling the diaries, looking around with curiosity. "I expected something different."

"Really?" Thomas has already moved to one of the couches, perching on the edge of it like a full colour sculpture. "What did you expect?"

"Something more squalid. Less wood and more velour. Some kind of rotating, heart-shaped bed, perhaps."

I slip off my damp trainers and curl up at the other end of Thomas's perch, trying to keep the wet and dirty parts of my clothes off the furniture. "Have you not been here before?"

Nicholas shakes his head. "George only took residence in Chicago two years ago."

"Chicago? We're in Chicago?" I glance back out of the windows. Whatever building we're in is high up, although as far as I can tell we could be in any city in the world.

Thomas answers from behind me. "George liked it here, so he bought the loft and had it renovated."

"What does he do?" I ask.

"Do?"

"Yeah, y'know. His job. How did he afford this?"

"He, ah... well I suppose you'd call him independently wealthy. I suppose you'd call all of us that. We've had a lot of time to accumulate a strong financial backing."

"Oh, well that makes sense I suppose."

"It helps that Demetrius is something of a savant when it comes to investment."

Nicholas takes a seat on the opposite couch, and begins thumbing through the diaries, face pursed in concentration.

Thomas watches him quietly for a moment, then turns back to me. "How are you holding up?"

"What?"

"I remember seeing Vanderpool for the first time. It must have been much worse for you. Are you alright?"

"Honestly? It was awful. George talked to me afterwards while you were looking after Chris, but I've gotta say I'm

still a bit out of my depth. Everything has moved so fast over the last couple of hours that I barely know what day it is any more."

"That's to be expected; you've been through a lot in a short time." He pauses. "Mallory, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to, I won't be offended. When you moved us, when you took us out of the haven, what was it like?"

"Horrible. I had no idea what I was doing, it felt like having my brain stretched out like putty, and I was terrified that I was going to kill Chris."

He nods thoughtfully. "I think if you learn to use our miracles, you'll have to learn translocation later on. The implications of failure are... well I won't go into that right now."

"Do you think I should do that at all? Learn to use your stuff I mean. Shouldn't I just learn to keep mine under control and leave it alone?"

"Is that what you'd want?"

"I don't know. I don't know what's best." I curl my hands up in my lap, feeling dejected.

"When this is over, we'll have time to work out what your options are. For now, we have to focus on this fight."

"George said I would make a good weapon."

Thomas smiles. "George thinks of everything in terms of its viability for breaking things."

"I don't want to be a weapon, Thomas."

"Weapons are good for more than just attacking things. They can be used defensively as well."

"Still." I shrug. "This whole thing scares me. I don't know what to do."

He pauses, thinking. "Would you take my advice?"

"Sure."

"Well, right now all you can see are the dangers involved in learning more about this thing. The pain you might cause, the injury you might inflict, and the darkness that might come to live in you; your growing willingness to do terrible things and a creeping desensitisation to the horror of your actions. Am I right?"

"I... well, yes."

"I think you have a choice. You could shut your eyes to those things and stagnate by refusing to grow, or you could choose to face them, to accept that they're real, to attempt to grow and become something spectacular, not only in spite of the risks, but in part because of them."

I frown. "If it goes wrong, though..."

"The presence of an abyss doesn't mean you are predestined to fall into it. You need to keep your eyes open when you walk the path, and be strong enough to still remain yourself even as you accept that the darkness is inside you. That darkness is a part of being alive, and it's equally as real for every one of us, but it's not inescapable. The choice can only be yours, of course, but I would urge you not to turn away from this, Mallory. Don't be afraid of the darkness. Come to know it, to know what the dangers are and use them to strengthen your resolve. What you have is very rare and very special, and could do a lot of good in the world."

"I'll think about it."

He stands, smiling gently. "Whatever you decide to do, you won't be alone. We'll be here for you."

With that he leaves me to think, padding softly across the room to leave through a doorway opposite the one we entered through.

Nicholas looks up briefly, then returns to the diaries. I drop my chin into my hand, sitting curled up at the edge of the couch, staring out into the night time of a city I've never visited before, wondering how many people get the chance to really make a difference in the world, and how many of them turn that chance down because they're too afraid.

I doze restlessly in place, dreaming of narrow bridges over vast dark chasms, swinging above the noise of people who call for my help, screaming when I don't respond.

When George, now fully dressed again, taps me on the shoulder, it's almost a relief to be awake, despite how tired I am.

"Come with me." He beckons.

I get to my feet sluggishly, and follow him away from the main room and into a tidy guest room with a bed that looks so big and soft that despite my recent bad dreams I have to stifle a yawn just looking at it.

"Thomas thinks Chris'll be out for at least another eight hours. Well, I say 'thinks', what I mean is, we need him not to fall over every time we go anywhere so he's enforcing bed rest by knocking him out for eight hours because the silly bastard keeps trying to insist he's alright. I'm hoping you're more sensible than him. Can't be having you falling over, either."

"Thanks."

"No worries, runt. There's an en-suite if you want a wash or anything." He looks me up and down appraisingly. "You're going to need some fresh clothes, too. What's your shoe size?"

"Um, five, but..."

He points sternly into the room. "Wash. Bed. Sleep. No argument."

"Kay."

"I'm gonna cook breakfast when you get up. It'll be... oh wait..." A look of real concern crosses his face. "You're not *vegetarian* are you?"

"No."

"Oh thank God. I'm not sure I know how to cook anything except meat."

"Meat is fine." In fact, I think anything would be fine; the chips I took from him earlier have taken off the edge of my hunger, but certainly not dealt with it all together.

"Good. I'll see you in eight hours." He winks at me affectionately, then closes the door gently behind him, leaving me to gratefully deal with my more pressing need for rest.

I pull off my clothes, folding them up on top of a chest of drawers, and head into the little bathroom. Despite having made an attempt to clean myself before, there's still a dark crust of dried blood on my face and neck. I run a bowl of hot water to wash with, watching the steam rise and curl as the bowl fills.

With my body properly cleaned and towelled dry, I lift the covers of the bed and slip in. The sheets are cool against my skin despite the warmth of the room, and I pull the duvet around me tightly, curling up in a ball and closing my eyes to a deep and seemingly dreamless sleep.

BAIT

The unmistakable smell of frying bacon leads me willingly back to consciousness, and I'm mostly awake when the knock sounds on the bedroom door.

I sit up, keeping the covers pulled tightly around me, blearily rubbing sleep out of my eyes with the soft pad of my hand. "Come in George."

"You decent?"

"Provided I don't have to get out of the bed, yeah."

The now familiar face of my country's patron saint appears as the door pushes open.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Same way I know Thomas and Demetrius are in the kitchen, Nicholas is still reading the diaries in the living room, and Chris is in the room next door to this one." I tap my chest. "Seeker."

"Bah, that's cheating. Breakfast'll be ready pretty soon. I can't be too long because I left Thomas in charge of the food, and for a guy with an instinctive understanding of how meat products work when they're alive, he can't cook bacon for shit."

I laugh. "Okay."

George holds up a large carrier bag which looks full enough to burst. "I got you these. I'm pretty good with sizes, and hopefully there'll be something in here you like."

"I... uh... thanks. You didn't really have to."

He shrugs, putting the bag on the floor and nudging it into the room with one foot. "You don't have to use any of them, but if you keep walking around all bloodied and soaked, you'll make us look scruffy. Thank me by turning out to be better at pool than Demetrius. Not that that's gonna be much of a challenge."

I grin over the top of the covers. "Your ass is grass, dude."

"Brave words, runt. Get dressed and come get some food. Provided it isn't all burned." He pulls the door shut behind him as he hurries away.

The bag turns out to have an impressive selection of clothes, all in my size, and two pairs of trainers in a similar style to my own. A slim card box contains underwear and a handwritten note which is signed by George and states: *'don't freak out when these fit properly; I didn't peek, I'm just that good'*. I roll my eyes and get dressed.

To his credit, George is as at least as good as he boasts, and everything I try on fits better than most of my own clothing. I don't spend much time deciding what to wear since my stomach keeps growling about the very inviting smell of breakfast. I pull on jeans, a hooded t-shirt, and the most comfortable of the two pairs of shoes, tuck an expensive looking black fleece lined jacket under my arm, and follow my nose.

With the exception of Nicholas, I'm the last one into the kitchen. Thankfully George has made enough food to satisfy a small army, and as I slide onto a seat next to Chris, my hands are already reaching out for bread and bacon.

Chris looks down at me; even with both of us seated he's still significantly taller than I am. "You alright?"

"Yeah, just really hungry. You?"

"Same. I'm okay now though."

"Really okay, or 'making-this-shit-up-again' okay?"

George laughs across the table. "She's got your number mate."

I tug at the front of my t-shirt with the cleanest of my fingers. "Thanks for the clothes George. I'll sort out paying you back."

He looks at me with a combination of confusion and amusement. "You don't have to."

"I want to."

"If y'like." He's already crammed his mouth full of food, and the word comes out muffled and distorted.

"So," I swallow, rushing out the words so I can carry on eating. "What now?"

"Dffnds nn ht nkkls fnds inna haaries." Thomas mumbles, then rolls his eyes and raises a finger, chewing frantically. He's sat with two plates of food, one partially demolished and the other neatly, almost thoughtfully constructed. After a moment he swallows and repeats himself. "It depends on what Nicholas finds in the diaries. Normally, we'd find a method to lure the dragon in, get it on the ground and assault it, but we've never really had one of them attack us first before, so it might change the plan slightly."

"It changes it completely." Almost as one, we all turn to look at Nicholas, who is standing in the kitchen doorway with an utterly humourless look on his face, and one volume of the diaries tucked under his arm. He joins us at the table, taking the last empty seat.

Thomas pushes his second plate over to him, and Nicholas nods a thank you.

"What have you found?" Chris asks.

"Some new information and a great deal of confirmation of things we already knew or suspected. The diaries are written in a code that was developed by one of the first psychics, hence your inability to read it. Quite frankly I'm amazed that the author was even able to comprehend it; it's rather complex."

I swallow hard to clear my mouth. "So it's like psychic words? Like the landscape thing?"

Nicholas shakes his head. "It's used to express vastly complex themes quickly and efficiently, and it relies on particular abilities unique to the psychic mind. It's only really useful to those of us who have mastered more subtle elements of the craft. In the most part, the diaries are historically interesting but contain nothing new or relevant. However, there are three things of particular importance to us, all in this volume. Firstly, we no longer have to wait for our enemy to come to us. It is possible to thin the barriers between realities to the point where the beast will be forced to come through."

"So we'll be fighting it on our terms?" The look on George's face is hard enough that I find it quite easy to believe that he's killed these things before.

"After a fashion. We'll need to choose an environment where we can thin the barrier and pass through ourselves, and it needs to be somewhere we can monitor afterwards in case there are disturbances."

"How big?" George asks, hands now flat on the table top.

"Only large enough for us all to stand in."

"Then do it here. We'll clear the main room and I can keep an eye on it afterwards."

Nicholas nods. "Very well. The diary documents a fairly complex ritual which involves a lot of ridiculous chanting and the waste of several hundred candles. That will not be necessary since with the exception of Mallory you have all been trained in advanced meditative techniques. I will take you through the barriers at the same time as I pull our opponent in."

"So what do I do?" I ask, raising a hand like we're in class.

"I will assist you." Nicholas says. "The techniques are complex, but I believe you're capable with help."

"Okay."

He barely pauses. "Secondly, there are some theoretical notes on dragon speciation. The more common type, which we've combated before, are relatively mindless. They respond to primary instinctive drives such as hunger. Unfortunately that's not what we're dealing with this time. I believe we're looking at an incursion from a greater dragon. Greater dragons are apparently a distinct subspecies which possess the equivalent of our miracles, and as such are significantly more dangerous. There's a lot of supposition on their origins, even one wild notion that they represent a form of ascension for us."

"Do you think that's true?" Thomas asks him.

"I think it's irrelevant. What we can take from this is that since greater dragons possess miracles, Mallory can affect them the way she did Christopher."

"Woah, woah," I raise both hands. "What makes you think I'm ready for that?"

Nicholas shrugs. "Necessity, and the fact that even if you weren't ready, I don't believe you'd be willing to sit this fight out."

"Why would I have to sit it out? I thought I was the bait?"

"Because of the third discovery. Outside of the constraints of a traditional consensus reality, greater dragons can modify their appearance at will. I believe you were correct in your supposition that the thing you met which took on your friend's form was in fact an aspect of the dragon itself."

"So what exactly are you saying?"

"Two things: firstly, you might be more use against this thing than I originally thought, so we gain another fighter, and secondly, we can be fairly sure that it will attack you the same way it would us. You're no longer suitable as bait because our enemy will recognise you and what you can do. You are no longer a curiosity. Whatever plans we made to combat this thing are no longer sufficient."

Chris leans forward in his seat. "We can't fight it without a lure. Even if we can meet it when we want to, it'll just take off and roast us from the air!"

"Then we need another option." Nicholas folds his arms across his chest and leans back in his chair. "And before you suggest co-opting one of your many social companions, George, I remind you that I simply will not permit the recruitment of someone who is not fully aware of the risks."

"That narrows it down." George frowns, licking bacon grease off his fingers and wiping them dry on the tablecloth.

"There is another option." I say tentatively. "My friend Janine has some idea about what's happened to me."

Chris purses his lips. "Do you think she'd help?"

"I don't know. I kinda freaked her out a bit last time we spoke, but this is pretty important. Maybe if she had a better idea what was going on."

"Very well." Nicholas stands. "Christopher, you and Mallory will go and collect Janine while the rest of us prepare to force the barrier open. We're coming to the end game of this attack now. Make no mistake that this dragon will not be as simple to combat as those we've faced before."

He turns and leaves.

The kitchen is quiet for a moment, then Demetrius looks round at the rest of us with a slightly bemused smile. "Not as simple as the other ones? My friends, we're all screwed."

The clear sky over Sevenoaks holds no threat of snow, and what little of it has settled on the ground has already turned to wet, muddy slush. Thin and weary sunlight does little to warm the silent corner of the street we arrive in, and I'm glad for the jacket George gave me. For a moment I stand with my arms wrapped around my chest, trying to work out what time it is, having left Chicago in the darkness of the early morning.

"Do you know, I think it's Christmas day?"

Chris considers this for a moment. "I think you're right."

"Funny how I just seem to have missed it."

"It's all the sudden changes in time zones, it can mess you about. You'll get used to it."

I laugh. "Assuming we don't all get eaten."

"Assuming." He smiles. "Merry Christmas, Mallory."

"You too." I snake one hand around his middle and squeeze.

We walk a little way like that and I'm grateful for the extra warmth, although I soon end up thinking about George's comments about Romeo and Juliet, and I loosen my grip to walk on my own again.

We turn onto Janine's street with our hands stuffed in our pockets, both of us burying our faces in the collars of our coats. Outside the timbered semi that Janine's parents bought for her, a red Civic is parked illegally across double yellow lines.

"Shit."

"What's up?" Chris asks me.

I point at the vehicle. "Sarah's here. She's a friend of Janine's."

"But not yours?"

"Not so much. Last time we met it didn't go so well. We sort of got into a fight."

"Are you going to want some support in there?"

"No," I shake my head. "I think it's best if I go in on my own. Janine's more likely to help us if she thinks it's her idea, and I think she'd see me turning up with you as coming in a bit hot, maybe even trying to bully her into it."

He nods. "I'll wait here then. Shout if you need me."

I take a deep breath and cross the street, pausing outside the front door. The glass panes have been decorated with fake snow and I can make out little fairy lights twinkling in the hallway beyond. I knock on the door a couple of times and stand waiting, trying to plan what I might say to persuade Janine to stand in the path of a rampaging dragon. I've almost given up when there's a flicker of movement on the other side of the door, and the noise of keys turning in the lock. To my surprise it's not Janine or Sarah who opens the door, but Jo. Her round and pleasant face turns to surprise when she sees me.

"Mal! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, mostly. Is Janine in?"

Jo nods. "She's been telling us what happened. Well, she told us a story about some things that are a little hard to believe. She's pretty upset."

"I kinda need to talk to her."

"Sorry, I shouldn't make you stand on the doorstep. Come in, come in."

She opens the door a little further and I slip past her into the wood panelled hall.

"Mal, Janine said some pretty wild things about you. Are they true?"

"That depends on what they are."

"Well you've been painted by turns as being in the mafia, a government spy, a superhero, the next Bond villain, and an alien. I'm not sure any of those is right, but I think there must be something to it to have got her that upset and confused, and you didn't strike me as the kind of person who would play tricks on her friends."

"I'll tell you all about it sometime."

I let Jo lead me through into the living room. Disappointingly, Janine's reaction when she sees me is rather more predictable than I'd hoped. She shrieks and curls up in a little ball on the sofa.

Sarah, who had been sat next to her, comes to her feet. "What the fuck, Jo? You just let her in?"

Jo takes a seat calmly. "Yes. I want to hear both sides of this. Can you honestly tell me you don't?"

Sarah sneers across the room at me. "I wouldn't believe anything that tramp told me. Didn't you hear me when I said she attacked me?"

"We both know that's not true, hun. I think we all need to calm down a bit and hear Mal out."

"Well you fucking bitch. I can't believe you'd take her side over mine!"

Jo rolls her eyes. "For God's sake Sarah, I'm not taking anyone's side. I just want to hear what she has to say."

"You what?" Face now slightly manic, Sarah rounds on Jo, and I find myself interrupting.

"I really don't have time for this." There's an immediate silence as three pairs of eyes swivel to look at me, one frightened, one angry, one curious. "I don't expect you to believe what I'm going to tell you, but I do need you to listen. It's true, but I know that won't help. I'll try to make it quick."

Sarah's pointing finger comes up to chest level, and her eyes narrow. "What makes you think we want to hear *anything* you have to say?"

"You don't want to hear it. I know you don't. I know you're unrealistically angry right now, possibly more than you ever remember being, and you can't understand it and that probably just makes you angrier. It's not just you. All of us feel it. I think that some people will react to it differently. Jo, you said it was like being under a magnifying glass. Jan, you're upset and scared. Well this is about what's causing that; it's not about what's happened to me. There's a way we can stop this, get things back to normal, but I need your help."

Janine's eyes are bleary. "What... what do you need?"

My shoulders drop. This is the point at which I lose all credibility, and I know exactly how Chris must have felt when he said the same thing to me so little time ago. "We need you to help us fight a dragon."

"Are you taking the piss?" Sarah's fists clench and unclench, and I realise that she's probably fighting as hard as she can to keep control of herself, and loosing. I don't have much time before this goes wrong.

I shake my head. "I felt exactly the same way when I was told about it. It sounds totally ridiculous. It's hard for me to prove any of it without making things worse like I did with you Jan, but I *can* prove it, if you'll let me."

Jo raises both hands, palms out. "Let's assume for a moment that you *are* telling us the truth, however fantastical it might sound. How exactly is Janine supposed to fight a dragon? Or is that some kind of metaphor?"

"No, no it's not." I shake my head. "I've seen this thing and it's terrifying. This isn't going to be easy, and there's a lot of risk involved, but we've all felt what it's doing to the world. It's causing all of this anger and fear and we have to stop it before it gets any worse. Jan, all you have to do is stand there and let it come and have a look at you. You don't have to fight it, just stand there long enough for the rest of us to... well to pile in on it I guess."

Janine looks up at me, face streaked with tears, and shakes her head. Her voice comes out in an unfamiliar whine. "I'm not doing it. I'm not helping you. I told you to leave me alone and I meant it. I want you to go away. I want you to get out of my house."

My shoulders sag. If I can't persuade her to come and help, we're probably done for.

"Does it have to be Janine?"

I look over at Jo, whose brow is furrowed with thought. "Um, well no I guess not. Just someone who has an idea what they're getting into, and is willing to help, knowing the risks."

She nods.

"Oh no. No you don't." Sarah's whole posture has become aggressive; she's dropped unthinkingly into a slight crouch, fists ready, teeth bared. "Don't think you can come in here and spin some stupid story and steal Jo. She's mine. Do you hear me? Mine! *MINE!*"

Somehow, stupidly, I'm not ready for it when she springs forward, launching herself across the room at me. I turn to dive out into the hall and find to my horror that the door behind me has swung shut. I have enough time to wish I'd asked Chris to come in with me after all, and then Sarah's on me, balled fists raining heavy, angry blows down onto me. I don't quite get my hands up in time to protect the more delicate parts of my face, and I feel my bottom lip split as it's mashed against my teeth. I wrap my arms around my head and try to push her off me with my feet but her manic rage is just too much for me to handle. She screams abuse, spit flying through the chaotic space between us, and I shout back as I struggle against her. Discordantly, I can hear Janine sobbing in the background. Then with a suddenness that's as startling as her initial attack, Sarah is yanked off me. Her weight disappears from on top of me and I scramble backwards until my shoulders hit the wall.

Jo has one hand twisted into Sarah's hair to hold her back while she claws at the air in front of her, eyes crazed, desperately trying to reach me, and vent all her enhanced rage. "Sarah, stop it!"

"Let go of me you stupid whore! I'm gonna fucking kill her, and if you don't let go of me, you're next! Get *off me*, you useless slut!"

Jo's face creases with a deep, heart-breaking hurt. "Oh sweetheart, this thing has messed you up bad, hasn't it?"

Sarah's response is inarticulate as she strains forward against Jo, who is now struggling hard to hold her back from me.

"I'm sorry baby, I really am. But you have to stop and I don't think you can do that on your own anymore."

With no more hesitation, Jo yanks back hard on Sarah's hair, and the bigger girl flips backwards, feet skittering out from under her. She drops like a rock, hitting the ground with an unexpectedly loud thud. For a moment I'm sure the landing has driven all the breath out of her, maybe cleared her head, then with an animal snarl, she reaches up for her girlfriend. Jo sidesteps, then drives one booted foot into Sarah's unprotected ribs with a single swift kick that's accompanied by a sharp crack and Sarah's pained, breathless scream.

"I'm sorry Sarah," Jo says, voice trembling. "But you have to stay here. I'm going to go with Mallory and fix this thing. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sarah drags her nails over the oak laminate floor as she pulls herself to her feet, so incandescent with rage that she barely notices her broken bones. Her face is twisted into a look of all consuming hatred.

"Sarah?" Jo whispers, backing away. "Baby?"

"I'm going to kill you." Sarah hisses. "I'm going to tear you to fucking pieces, then I'm gonna find your family and do the same thing to them."

One of Jo's heels connects with the fireplace. She trips, flailing as she falls, and drags the grotesquery of Janine's mixed Christmas and Hanukkah decorations off the mantelpiece. She lands with a soft gasp among shattered baubles, a riot of multi-coloured tinsel, and candlesticks covered in fake snow. As Sarah lunges forwards, Jo lashes out with the

menorah centrepiece, scattering unlit candles across the floor and connecting firmly across her girlfriend's nose.

Sarah reels backwards with blood running down her face, and Jo is suddenly on her feet. Eyes wide with panic, she swings the menorah again, this time hitting the other girl's jaw with a sharp crack. Sarah's body seems to stiffen, and she drops backwards with alarming suddenness.

For a moment, just a moment, there's no sound in the room except for Janine's unhappy whimpering.

"Oh God! Sarah!" The menorah tumbles out of Jo's fingers as she dives to her side, one shaking hand stroking her hair.

Sarah moans, and Jo backs away, standing hurriedly. She looks down for a moment, then steels herself and turns on her heel and extends a hand out to me, breathing hard. "Let's go Mallory."

Mouth open, I let her pull me to my feet. "I, uh... thanks."

"You'd better be telling the truth, otherwise I just assaulted my girlfriend for no reason."

"I am."

"I believe you. Let's go make her better." She yanks the door open and ushers me out into the hallway, unhooking her coat from the rack on the way past.

"What about Janine?"

Jo shakes her head, pulling her mobile out of her coat pocket. "Help her by dealing with what's going on. She'll probably never thank you for it, but you'll be doing her more good that way."

Jo calls an ambulance as we step out onto the front path, still clearly shaken.

"You okay?" I ask.

"No, not really. I've never beaten someone into unconsciousness before."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault. I've known something was wrong with her for weeks, and it's just been getting worse. When she came at me... that wasn't Sarah any more. She's always been a bit of a bully, but never like this. If there's something causing her to act like that, imagine what it's doing to people who are already angry?" Jo freezes as she sees Chris leaning against the opposite wall. "Isn't that the guy from the club the other night?"

"It's okay, he's with me."

"Hmm."

Chris crosses the road to meet us, and looks at me with some concern. "Mallory, you're bleeding!"

I run my tongue over my lips, wincing as I touch the sizeable split put there by Sarah's fist.

"Got into a fight and lost."

"I'm sure Thomas will fix it for you; it'll be good proof that we're genuine."

I snort. "Yeah, because you taking us back to Chicago isn't gonna be convincing enough."

Jo blinks. "Chicago?"

"Yes." Chris nods. "Are you Janine?"

"Jo." She holds out a hand.

"Chris."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise."

I tug the zip of my jacket a little higher. "Jo, a lot of things are going to happen now that'll be hard to follow, but

I'll do my best to explain. Chris is going to... well he's going to move us, then you'll meet Thomas, who is lovely, George, who is an interesting combination of disgusting and lovely, Demetrius, who never says anything so don't be offended if he seems to be ignoring you, and Nicholas, who will probably say lots of things that come across as unpleasant. I'd say he doesn't mean it but he does. He kind of looks at the world through shit tinted glasses, and he uses honesty like a baseball bat."

"Okay. And the dragon?"

I shrug. "Not sure what happens next. Nicholas will probably explain, although if you can keep up with him you'll be doing better than me."

She nods thoughtfully. "Let's do it."

"You know this is risky, right? None of us might come back. We could all be dead in a few hours."

"I'm ready Mallory. I'm tired of being under the magnifying glass. It's killing me slowly, and you saw yourself what it's doing to Sarah. This way I either die fast or we fix it, and help a lot of people on the way. I think that's worth the risk, don't you?"

My throat swells with admiration for her. "Okay."

Chris holds out a hand to both of us. "Jo if you take my hand I can..."

But she's already taken hold of him, folding her fingers around his outstretched palm. "Explain it later, when I can sit down and take it all in. Mal said we were running short on time."

He smiles. I take hold of his other hand and reach out for Jo as the world pulls upwards around us and we leave London behind.

BEST LAID PLANS

Jo is badly thrown by the strangeness of Chris's second miracle. In the clean white light of George's hallway, she turns to him, face intense, one outstretched hand fumbling for the wall like she might fall down without its support.

"What was that singing?" Her voice is a choked whisper.

"I don't know," Chris shakes his head like he's heard the question before. "The first time I heard it I thought it might be angels, although I've come to doubt that now."

"I thought it sounded like angels too, or something like that. I just didn't understand the words."

"I hear it every time, and I've never understood. None of the others do either, and no one I've ever carried has been able to tell me what it is. It always seems like I'm just on the edge of hearing it properly, but I never quite get there."

She looks at me, then back at him, mouth slightly open. "What *are* you? Really I mean. What are you really?"

"We're pretty ordinary, actually." Chris shrugs. "We're a bit older than most people and we can do some unusual things, but otherwise we aren't that different from anyone else. We swear at the TV when quiz show contestants don't know the answers, we drink too much then promise ourselves we'll never do it again even though we know we will, we're grouchy first thing in the morning, and we forget each other's birthdays. Ordinary."

Jo nods slowly, takes a few deep breaths and straightens up with a nervous laugh. "What you just did was very, very far past ordinary."

I reach out and touch her shoulder gently. "Are you okay?"

"I will be." She nods. "Although I don't think things are going to get any less strange today."

"You're probably right there, sorry. Come on, I'll introduce you to the others."

Chris follows close behind us as I lead Jo into the main room. In the time that we've been gone, the floor has been completely cleared of furniture; even the cheap tourist collectables have vanished from the shelves. The only thing in here that holds back total emptiness is George's shield, hanging resolutely above the empty fireplace. He and Thomas are stood in the middle of the room, arguing quietly. Both men are wearing heavy looking armour made of plain metal plates that shine in the reflections of the overhead lights, making the two of them look like fairy tale knights. Thomas is unarmed, but George is carrying the thick bladed sword from above the fireplace, gripped in one gauntleted hand.

I catch the last few words that Thomas says as we come in. "... will easily wash off afterwards."

"You don't know that!" George's sword cleaves through the air as he waves his hands around. "Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"Honestly? I don't think so."

"Then how do you *know*?"

"George, you're being ridiculous."

I clear my throat. "Guys? Is everything okay?"

"Mallory! Thank God, someone with some sense!" George turns towards us plaintively. "Will you please tell this crazed lunatic that it is *not* okay to draw all over my newly polished floor?"

Thomas rolls his eyes. "George, it's chalk. It'll come off."

Behind me, Chris leans over and whispers to Jo. "Would you mind if I changed 'ordinary' to 'a bit eccentric'?"

I ignore George's request. "Guys, this is Jo, who's come to help us."

"My lady." George, argument forgotten, performs a courtly bow. Despite the metalwork, he somehow looks agile

doing it; graceful even.

Thomas extends a hand towards Jo. "I'm pleased to meet you. I'm Thomas, and this is George."

As they shake hands, George straightens up and looks at me in some confusion. "I thought you said her name was Janine?"

"Janine isn't coming." I say, wincing a little as I purse my mouth and my bottom lip splits open again. "She wasn't real happy to see me."

Thomas, who has started to lead Jo down into the main room, pauses to peer at me. "Mallory, what happened to your face?"

"Got in a fight." I shrug.

"You were gone less than twenty minutes, how did you manage to get into a fight?" He demands exasperatedly, gently taking hold of my jaw with both hands.

I grin. "It's a skill."

"One I advise you to give up. Let me fix this."

My face tickles as the swelling in my lip reduces, and I feel the soreness in my neck and shoulders fading away. Jo, stood to one side watching, makes a noise of restrained surprise as I thank Thomas.

"It's fine," he says, frowning at me, "but please do try to take better care of yourself."

Nicholas comes out of the kitchen, followed a moment later by Demetrius. Nicholas has swapped his usual clothes for armour in the same style as Thomas and George, but Demetrius is wearing nothing except a pair of massively oversized shorts tied around his waist with string. His bare feet give him an incongruously summer-time look.

I open my mouth to introduce them, but Thomas is already ahead of me. "Jo, this is Nicholas and Demetrius." He puts one hand lightly on her shoulder, turning to the two men in the doorway. "Janine wasn't able to help us, so Jo has kindly come instead."

Demetrius raises a hand. "Hey."

Nicholas looks at Jo and I hold my breath, waiting for some harsh comment or piece of condescension. Instead there's a moment's pause, then he nods his head. "Thank you for helping us Jocelyn. Are you aware of what we need you to do?"

My mouth falls open and I have to stifle a moment of bizarre jealousy for Jo's comparatively warm reception.

Jo does slightly better than I did under Nicholas's scrutinising stare. I see her throat work as she swallows hard. "You need me to draw its attention while you attack it. The... ah... the dragon I mean."

His face is impassive. "And are you aware that this carries a significant risk?"

"Yes."

"And are you still willing to help us despite that?"

She nods, and Nicholas starts to turn away.

Jo pauses, then half raises a hand. "Wait please."

"Yes?"

"Did you read my mind? You knew what my name was, so I suppose you must have. I haven't used my full name since I left home, and there's no way you could have known it otherwise."

"That's correct." Nicholas says.

"Then, if you don't mind me asking, why not just see for yourself if I was willing to help?"

He smiles gently. "Sometimes even if you think you are prepared to do a thing, it isn't real for you until you are

confronted by it in some way. I think you understand that? Being able to say it aloud, to admit to yourself what we're doing, will help you when you're faced with the reality of the very dangerous task we're about to undertake."

There's a moment's quiet in the room, with all seven of us serious-faced and silent. No one seems willing to speak as seconds slip past us with no way to reclaim them.

Finally, Chris clears his throat. "I ought to get changed."

"There's a set for you in the master bedroom mate." George says, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "Want a hand?"

"Sure." Chris nods, and the two of them leave together.

Thomas turns to Jo again. "I can show you what I was doing with the chalk, if you're interested?" He leads her into the middle of the main room, talking about ideal psychic distances, focal integrity, and other things that just sound made up to me.

I pull off my coat and slump down on the top of the steps that drop into the sunken living area, watching Thomas draw gentle chalk lines on the floor. Nicholas stalks around the room, watching him carefully. After a moment there's the sound of bare feet on the floor, then Demetrius folds himself into a cross legged position next to me.

"Drink?" He drops a six pack of cans between us: some American brand soda that I don't recognise.

"Please."

He pulls one of the cans free of the plastic rings without looking down, and hands it to me. We sit silently for a few minutes, drinking and watching the others. Eventually George comes back in with Chris, now both similarly armed and armoured. I find myself actually staring at Chris; dressed as he is now he looks almost frightening. There's a deadliness to him like this, far more than the others. I know that George at least must have spent a lot of time in armour through his life, and I have to assume the others all have as well, but on Chris it looks natural – almost as though he was born to wear it. I find myself wondering how many times he's gone into a battle where he should have died, how many people he might have killed.

I try to shake it off and turn to Demetrius. "No armour for you?"

"No point."

"No, I guess not. Why the huge shorts?"

He shrugs. "Gonna bulk up. Baggy stuff survives better."

"You didn't damage your clothes before, did you? In the park I mean."

He shakes his head. "Bigger."

"You can get bigger?"

"Much bigger." He grins.

"Oh. Okay."

George and Chris come to stand with us, one on either side like strange guardsmen. Looking up at them from the ground makes them seem huge.

"Pass us one mate." George says, nudging Demetrius's shoulder. He sighs loudly over the accompanying hiss as he opens the can. "I don't remember what it was like before we had caffeine."

"I do." Chris mutters. "It was bloody awful."

I look up at the two armoured men. "There's something I don't understand."

"What's up?" George asks.

"Why are you wearing metal armour? I mean, I assume there has to be some truth to the stories that dragons breathe fire, right? Isn't turning up in a tin can a bit like putting on cooking oil when you're sunbathing?"

A wide and slightly smug smile rolls onto George's face. "It's because of my special skill set sweetheart. How d'ya think I managed to cut a Skinless in half with a pool cue? Wood's not sturdy enough for shit like that."

Chris rolls his eyes. "Don't encourage him, Mallory. His ego is over inflated at the best of times. Basically, he can bless things."

"Bless?"

"Well I haven't come up with a better name for it yet." George says, still grinning. "It makes stuff temporarily unbreakable."

"How long does it last?"

"Depends how much effort I put into it really." He raps his knuckles firmly on his breastplate. "This should be good for about two hours. Makes it almost impossible to break or bend, and much harder to heat up. Thomas has some long winded explanation about molecular bonding or energy levels or some other rubbish."

"Can't you just do it to people? Like on skin I mean. Wouldn't that be easier?"

He shakes his head. "Human body's designed to be flexible. Last time I messed about with that I couldn't move my hand for about forty minutes."

"Oh, okay. Can I ask another question?"

"Curious, aint we?"

I shrug. "Why are you taking a sword? Why not take guns or something? I've seen this thing and it's pretty damn big. Is a sword actually going to hurt it?"

"I got guns, runt." He pulls his arms up into an exaggerated body builder pose, somewhat spoiled by the fact that his arms are hidden under his armour. "These guns!"

Demetrius snorts derisively, but says nothing.

George kicks him half-heartedly. "Shaddup you. It's a similar reason actually. I can do a lot more damage with a sword than I could with a gun, because of my first – I'm strong."

"How strong?"

"Dunno, never managed to measure it. But I think the right word is 'inhumanly'. If you don't count the bindings on the hilt, the sword is one item, one piece of metal, so I only have to work on one thing to make it unbreakable. If I use it to hit something as hard as I can, it bloody needs to be unbreakable. Anyway, that's why we have plate rather than chain. Chain's lighter and easier to move about in, but can you imagine how much of a pain in the ass it is to sit and bless individual chain links? Ammunition is even worse, and it only really works on the bits that hit you. So I could make a rifle round massively armour piercing, but it wouldn't do much more damage than normal to a living target. If I make a shotgun cartridge unbreakable, it wouldn't be useable because you wouldn't be able to depress the primer. If I just did the casing, the shot could only get out backwards, which wouldn't be much fun since a twelve bore cartridge has something like three tonnes of pressure per square inch. I could do it to just the shot, but do you know how many pellets there are in an average cartridge? It's a lot, I can tell you, and... I'm losing you, aren't I?"

"Little bit, yeah."

"Then let me put it like this. In a normal fight, the kind of thing where guns would actually be useful, none of us need 'em. We're dangerous and well trained enough that they're a pointless piece of equipment for us. For this fight, we need something even more effective – we gotta be smart about it. So guns have never been something we've used much.

Make sense?"

I nod. "Yeah, it's all about the miracles. You make things unbreakable, and you've got super-strength. What's your third?"

The smile slides off his face so fast I almost expect to hear it land on the floor. "Better hope you never find out, runt. Better hope I never need it."

For a sneaking moment, I wonder if I could find out by trying to copy it, but I don't do it. If he won't share this last miracle, it's probably something awful. I don't really have time to think about it before his mood has bounced back again.

"I don't have armour for you or your friend, so you've got two options: do without, which I don't recommend, or use the home made version."

"Home made?"

He holds out a hand to pull me to my feet. "Come on, I'll show you what I mean."

I follow George through to the kitchen, where one of the sideboards is now littered with the cut up remains of card boxes. He fishes through the debris, and finally emerges, looking victorious, with a single larger piece about twenty centimetres long, curved into an open sided tube. Rough holes like shoelace eyelets have been punched down both sides.

"Put this on." He says, holding it out to me.

I look at it distrustfully. "Uh, what is it?"

George rolls his eyes. "Don't look at what it is, look at what it could be."

I take it from him uncertainly, and try to work out what it is and how to put it on. After a moment of confusion, I find a scrawled instruction on the inside that reads 'left forearm', and slip it on there. It neatly covers most of the distance between my elbow and wrist.

"Here, let me fasten it up." George says, barely able to contain his obvious excitement. I let him take my arm, which he turns over so that the open side of the tube faces upwards, and laces a leather cord through the eyelets, tightening it enough that the card stays in place as he moves my arm around.

"George, are you...."

"Just a second." He holds up one finger to silence me, then reaches over for a set of scissors, neatly trimming and rounding the edges of the tube. "Much better. Now, what were you saying?"

"Are you suggesting I wear cardboard armour?"

He nods happily. "Yeah, isn't it a great idea? I made it myself. There's a full set here for you, and some for Jo but not everything – we can put the rest of hers together pretty quickly."

"George. It's cardboard. It's cereal packaging."

"I told you: think about what it *could* be. Here, put these on too."

He retrieves a few more shaped pieces: another arm piece and larger similar tubes for my thighs and calves, parts labelled 'shoulder', a large plate that bends slightly awkwardly around my chest while another covers my back. While I try to lace myself into the last of the flimsy things, George wanders over to the kitchen doorway and calls the others in to join us. By the time I'm done putting on the rest of the pieces, I'm standing in front of an audience. George runs an appraising eye over my lacings, leaning in to tighten one, loosen another, twist one of the pieces or trim an edge to fit better.

"I feel ridiculous."

"You look pretty ridiculous too, but don't worry about it," he murmurs, head next to mine as he adjusts one of the shoulder plates. His voice is lowered so that only the two of us can hear him. "I know I said some shitty things yesterday about trust, and I'm sorry. I was being a total asshole. I'm telling you this because I'm about to ask you to trust me with your safety, so before I do, there's something you have to know."

"Uh, okay."

Still fastening the last lace, he looks me right in the face with an intensity that's hard to keep eye contact with. "I will never hurt you. You're on my team, and as long as that's the case I will *never* hurt you. I will also slowly and painfully kill anyone that tries to do so, the same as I would for any of the others. Do you understand?"

I just nod, not quite sure what to say.

"Good. Remember that, okay?" He turns away and starts talking to the others at a normal volume. "Okay, I'm only going to demonstrate one of the pieces because if that works, then they all will. Mallory's just seen me trim the edges of the chest piece with a pair of scissors, so she thinks I've dressed her up like a cartoon character just for the hell of it."

I look down at myself. I do look like a cartoon character; adorned with surreal images of breakfast cereal heroes on my arms and chest and brightly coloured packaging from packs of beer on my legs.

George turns to me again. "Ready for the magic?"

I shrug. "Sure, why not."

He reaches out and takes hold of the chest piece gently between his thumb and first finger. The tiny red flames I saw in the bar erupt around his hand and spread, dancing, across the card. They quickly fade away, and I have to squint to see even the faintest trace of them.

"That's really pretty. Does it always look like that?"

"Huh?" Interrupted part way though his impresario routine, George just looks confused.

"The flames. Do you always get those?"

"What are you babbling about, runt?"

Nicholas clears his throat. "He can't see them, Mallory."

"What can't I see?" George asks plaintively, his face slightly petulant.

Nicholas waves his fingers at me, as if to say 'go on, explain'.

"Well, when you bless things, they light up with little red flames. I saw the same thing before, with the pool cue."

"That's interesting," Thomas muses. "I wonder if it's a side effect of what you can do."

Nicholas nods. "Without any doubt. There are possibly other effects which she hasn't noticed yet, or just hasn't shared with us."

"I wonder why colours though." Thomas folds his arms across his chest. "Why not sounds or scents? Why would she get a visual link?"

I clear my throat. "Uh, guys? I'm standing right here."

The faintest edge of a smile tugs at the corner of Nicholas's mouth. "It is, in all likelihood, simply an aspect of your nexus miracle. Either one which has not previously been documented, or one which is unique to you."

I frown. "Oh. How do you know so much about this kind of thing? I thought you hadn't worked with a nexus before. And how do you even know what I can do in the first place? Is that just part of being a psychic?"

"Do you ever ask just one question at once?" He sighs. "When I first read you, I identified the parts of your memories where your superconscious mind was most active. I was able to see what you were doing when you entered Christopher's haven, which indicated a likely seeking miracle, and I confirmed that with other key memories, such as your

highly inappropriately named 'freak train senses'. While it posed no significant barrier to me at the time, you were harder to read than you should have been, requiring me to utilise other techniques which meant you were actively aware of what I had done when I was finished. That indicated shielding of some kind. Since at that point in your life, you had had no opportunity to utilise it, I was unable to identify your third miracle until much later on."

"This is all very interesting," George says, tapping his foot. "But I'm in the middle of a demonstration here."

Again, Nicholas's fingers extend. "The floor is yours."

"Thank you." He pulls a wickedly sharp looking kitchen knife from a magnetic display rack and turns to me. "Mallory, if you'd be so kind as to not move, sweetheart. Not a muscle."

He's fast. He's nowhere near as fast as Demetrius was, but when he lashes out at me with the knife there's barely time to think. Instinctively, my hands start to come up to defend my body, and it takes more self-control than I thought I had just to leave them where they are. On the other side of the room, Jo's alarmed squeal gives voice to my own horror as the knife blade sweeps across my body in a long and deadly diagonal from my right shoulder down to the left hand side of my stomach, dragging a firework display of red sparks behind it with a screech like metal on stone. The force of the blow drives the armour into my chest hard enough to push me backwards. I stagger and steady myself, staring open mouthed at George, who is beaming happily at me.

He points at my chest, saying nothing.

I glance down. My makeshift armour is completely undamaged. I look back up at him, then down again, my outrage at the faked attack totally overcome by amazement. "That's... that's..."

"Told you. Now, let me sort out the rest of your kit, then we'll get Jo set up as well, and we can finish this whole thing off and I can go back to getting happily drunk."

I stand patiently while George works on each of the remaining pieces of my armour. Nicholas, seemingly satisfied with the demonstration, asks George a few perfunctory questions: is he happy with the durability, will the effect be as stable as it would on normal armour, how long will it take to put together a second set. I don't really pay much attention to the answers, just stand, playing with pieces of the blessed armour between my fingers. It's as rigid as steel and my fingers redden with effort as I try to flex it.

"You could have taken my bloody arm off if I'd moved at the wrong time, you know." I grumble.

"You're nowhere near fast enough for that." He says, seriously. "Plus, the old man was watching. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think you were absolutely safe."

"So why don't you all use something like this?" I ask. "It's got to be lighter than all that metalwork. Cheaper too."

George laughs. "Because, as you rightly pointed out, it looks bloody ridiculous. Seriously though, it doesn't cover the joints well enough to be anything other than an emergency measure, and it'll probably fall to pieces in a couple of hours. Plus we train in our armour - if I'd come at you with that knife and you were wearing an unblest breastplate, it would only have left a nasty scratch in the metalwork - I wasn't trying particularly hard. Even so, if all you were wearing was card, then Thomas would have been hard pressed to stitch you back together, and Nick would probably have... well let's say he'd have had words. I think he's actually quite fond of you, runt."

I glance round, but I've missed the others leaving the room; only myself, George, and the rather nervous looking Jo are left.

George beckons her over. "C'mon over sweetheart, let's get you kitted up."

She hesitates, looking at him uncertainly.

"It's okay Jo," I reassure her. "He only attacks you with knives once he gets to know you a bit better."

"And even then only if you're really lucky." George says, laughing. "Don't worry; we don't need to do any more testing. Just need to get you some pieces cut to fit. A lot of them are sort of universal fittings that I put together when I made Mal's stuff, but I just need to... just a second..."

He trails off, rooting around in cupboards, pulling packages apart and snipping away at cardboard like an overly enthusiastic children's television presenter. Every now and then he pauses, holding a piece up and turning it, cutting off an edge or trimming a corner.

Jo raises an eyebrow at me and I shrug.

"Can I change 'a bit eccentric' to 'wacko'?" I mutter. She giggles, one hand coming up to cover her mouth.

I find a handful of completed armour pieces and help Jo into them as George finishes off, blessing each piece once it's comfortably settled.

"What do *you* see when he does that?" I ask Jo.

She shrugs. "Nothing, sorry. One minute it's cardboard, then it might as well be real armour."

"Ladies, please!" George looks hurt. "It *is* real armour!"

Jo and I look each other up and down.

"You look stupid." I tell her, grinning.

"Not as bad as you." She's already laughing again and I find myself joining in.

George folds his arms across his chest, looking sternly at the two of us. "Philistines, the pair of you. I'm surrounded by philistines. It's worse than the old days."

Somehow that makes it worse. All the tension gives out and I laugh so hard my stomach starts to hurt, clinging on to the table edge.

George straightens up suddenly, then without any sort of explanation he puts down his scissors and leaves the room. For a moment I just watch him, confused, then I scoop up my half empty soda can and beckon to Jo. We follow him as far as the kitchen doorway before I get told to stop.

I'm going to instruct the others on what they need to do. Please wait there for now.

"Hang about here a moment." I tell Jo, pausing and leaning against the doorframe.

She frowns. "Shouldn't we join them?"

"Nicholas says he wants us to wait while he tells them what they need to do. He's probably got a good reason, and even if he doesn't I'm not going to argue with him."

Jo looks over at Nicholas, then back at me. "Oh, um, okay."

The chalk marks on the floor are pretty much unintelligible, but there are six circles marked out in a loop around the central point where Nicholas is stood. Demetrius, Thomas and Chris are each stood in one, and George moves quickly to take up a station at another, leaving two neighbouring empty spaces. It's strange watching them, seeing them looking at Nicholas in silence, nodding occasionally, and reacting to a conversation I just can't hear.

"I'm not sure if I'd have believed all this was possible this morning, you know." Jo whispers. "It's a little bit frightening to realise how much there is in the world that I knew nothing about, to suddenly think I could have passed people like this on the street and had no idea."

"They're a good bunch, I think. It's weird that I've only known them for a couple of days. It feels like years."

"I know what you mean. Sometimes you just get good feelings about people, hun. I'd like to have met them without all this danger hanging over us. Nicholas and Thomas especially. They seem like such a lovely couple."

"Couple of what?"

"No, I mean, a couple. Like, they're together. Aren't they?"

I half spit my drink back into the can. "Together? No way. Just... just no."

She raises an eyebrow, mouth turned up in the beginning of a smile. "Come on, don't tell me you didn't notice the way they are around each other?"

"You're guessing!" I snort, voice still lowered.

Jo shrugs. "Well of course I am, you can't tell if two people are in love just by looking at them, but it seems pretty obvious to me."

I stare across the room, open mouthed.

Jo leans over and lifts my bottom jaw gently with two fingers. "It's not nice to stare."

"Sorry."

"Does... does it bother you?"

"Huh?"

"That they might be together. Some people can't handle that kind of thing between two guys... or between two girls. I didn't think you minded though."

"Jo, honestly, I couldn't care less who falls in love with who. What bothers me is the idea of Nicholas attempting romance at all."

"Aw, he seems like such a nice man."

"Yeah, well you haven't been inside his head."

"You probably shouldn't say things like that; he's a telepath isn't he?"

"Psychic." I correct her without even really thinking about it. "He knows what I'm thinking as well as what I'm saying. I'm not going to try and hide anything from him, it would be pointless."

She frowns. "I suppose so, but even if *he* knows what you're thinking, it doesn't mean anyone else does. It just means he'll know when you chose not to say anything."

I turn to look at her and grin. "I would never have thought of it like that. I think I see why he liked you more than me."

"What do you mean?"

"He was a right prat when I met him."

"Really?"

"Yeah, although I think I know why." I'm about to explain about Nicholas being able to see all of my wasted potential, all of the times I let myself down, then I wonder if Jo really wants to be aware of just how much Nicholas truly knows about her now. Instead, I just smile. "It's a long story."

On the other side of the room, Nicholas looks up at me, and I wonder if that's just timing, or if he's listening to us. "Mallory, Jo, join us please."

We take our places in the circle. Chris looks at me as I move into place next to him, but says nothing. His face is slightly dream-like, as though he's deep in concentration. Jo slips her hand into mine and I squeeze her fingers reassuringly.

Nicholas turns to look at Jo. *I'm going to speak to you both psychically. Can you deal with that?*

Jo jumps when he starts talking, but settles quickly. She nods. "Yes."

There is no need for you to speak aloud, I will understand you without it. I am going to attempt to focus psychic

potential to create an incision, pulling us through the boundary and drawing the beast to us. The others have already begun their own preparations, but neither of you have the required training to assist me. Instead, I will ask you to focus on attempting to relax your minds, as though you were preparing to go to sleep. You will find this harder than you might imagine. It is acceptable to start again if you lose focus. Mallory, you may be harder to affect because of your shielding, so attempt to control that.

I nod, not quite sure how to respond without speaking out loud. Somewhere, I can hear someone else speaking; a repetitive monotone that reverberates in my head, seeming to draw my attention. I blink hard, pushing it away and trying to concentrate on Nicholas.

Mallory. That is my voice. Try not to fight it.

"Oh, sorry."

And silence please.

I nod, closing my eyes to listen to him, allowing his voice to pull me along with it. It's sombre and weighty, but somehow musical, building until it rings in my ears like church bells. Through my closed eyelids, I see the ambient light dim until finally it fades altogether, dropping us into darkness and a heat that pulses against my skin like the thunderous heartbeat of summer. My senses dissipate, seeming to become thin and worthless until only two things remain real to me: a distorted sense of connection to Jo through her hand holding tightly onto my own, and the reverberation of one solitary voice, still strong in the dark.

I don't feel it when it starts to go wrong, and it's over so fast that afterwards I can't remember if there's something different I should have done, some way I could have stopped it. Perhaps I'm too close to Chris, kept too safe to feel the approaching danger. Perhaps I've relaxed my guard too much to notice, or maybe it's some part of how having miracles works, but it's not me or any of the saints that notice it first. Even Nicholas, voice firm and resolute, continues to talk for long seconds after Jo begins to panic.

"Mal?" Her voice sounds strange, like she's speaking from far away. Her tone is strained, but I accept it as normal, given what we're doing, given that her introduction to this has been as fast and brutal as my own. "Mal, something's not right, I don't... I think... God, can't you *feel* it?"

I open my mouth to tell her that it'll be alright, that everything will be fine.

She screams.

With no thought at all, I pull away from the others, scrambling for her in the blackness. I have a split second where I hear Nicholas shout in alarm then I lose all sense of his presence as quickly as flipping a switch. Only myself and Jo seem real in the dark. As I catch hold of Jo's wrist with my other hand, she's yanked backwards, almost out of my grip. I'm pulled off balance and down to the floor, where the pieces of my makeshift armour dig in unpleasantly as I land on my stomach with a sudden and painful reminder of the reality of gravity.

"Oh God, something's pulling me... help me! Mallory!"

For a moment, my fingertips stay curled over hers, and I think it might be alright; if I can just keep hold of her, I can maybe protect her.

"Hold on, Jo, just hold on!" My voice trembles.

"Mal, I can't!"

"Yes, you can! Hold on!"

But with a doomed inexorability, Jo is pulled out of my fragile grip and swallowed up by darkness, calling my name.

SAINT MALLORY

Without Jo, without the presence of the others, I find myself alone again, in a cloying and oppressive darkness. The fading sound of her voice hangs in the air as I sit motionless, feeling out for my friends. I search for Jo, for Chris, then Jo again, Nicholas and Thomas; Demetrius and George. Somehow they seem to be all around me, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. I look for a way out, for the way home, for anything familiar or reassuring. Nothing works. It's like being stuck inside a giant bell, with bouncing echoes jarring against all of my senses, making it impossible to locate anything, or anyone. The presence of the others is like complex ripples; overlapping and interlaced. I wonder if that's because of how close I must be to the barrier that we were meant to be pushing through. Maybe miracles just don't work here.

Time becomes meaningless. I could have been here minutes or years, a few seconds or a thousand lifetimes. Is it my fault? Have I sentenced all of us to this isolated limbo by pulling away from the others to try and save Jo? They could all be stuck like me. They could be dead. Maybe I'll be here forever. Maybe I already have been.

The ground is dry and dusty, and there's a faint tang of burning rubber in the thin air. I'm slumped on the border between real and unreal, between here and there, this and that. I can't even think straight in this place.

I didn't save her. I brought her in to help us and then when she needed me I failed her. I sit for a while, then stand. I walk in what I think must be a circle, but with no definable landscape, it's impossible to tell. Eventually, I curl up with my arms around my knees and wait for something, for anything.

The scraping sound is so quiet that at first I think I'm imagining it, and I dismiss it as one more unexplainable thing in this horrible place. As it gets louder, I realise what makes it different – unlike everything else here, the sound has *direction*. Over to my right, still a long way off but getting closer. I scramble to my feet as my memory places a desperate similarity between this and the noise George's knife made scraping along my armour.

"George? George!"

A pause, then the noise again. I hurry towards it, feeling out for the others and fighting the increasing sense of nausea as the echoes of my companions come back harder and stronger. The air takes on a disgusting taste and I struggle to breathe normally, covering my mouth and nose with one hand. The scraping noise comes closer, and now I can hear, faintly, an angry buzzing underneath it. This can't be George. It can't be anything good. I slow to a cautious creeping pace, determined to see what it is that's in here with me, but not really wanting to get close enough that it might see me as well.

"No FRee fOOD, MallREE..."

My spine turns to ice. The voice is like six people speaking at once; shrieking, shouting and whispering altogether. It's male, female and inhuman all forced out of the same mouth, and the resulting cacophony feels like having razor wire dragged across my nerves.

Sloping out of the darkness towards me comes the source of the voice, the scraping, and the smell. Patches of red scales are carelessly scattered over a torso that looks to have been wrung out by giant fingers and left precariously balanced on a too-thin waist. The tattered and bloody remains of primary wing bones jut up over its shoulders, waving hopelessly, forlornly trying to push back air with the last shreds of skin and cartilage which have long since rotted away.

Twisted arms that must be twice as long as the thing is tall trail along the ground behind it. Clutched in one massive twitching hand and scraping along the floor carelessly is a dull metal cleaver, stained across the blade with dark rust and spattered viscera. Fat wasps crawl along the handle and up the lower half of the arm, buzzing furiously and laying sting after sting into the deformed fingers. Its legs are thick, heavy lumps of flesh that weep with sores, and its face... I can't stop staring at its face. I've seen it too many times in my life not to know every flaw, every mark. Swaying at the end of a snakelike neck is *my* face. I step backwards almost involuntarily, considering running, but where to? I cough as the stench of it hits the back of my throat. It pauses, looking at me, its head tilted to one side. *My* head.

"What the hell *are* you?" My voice shakes even as I try to cling desperately to the wisp like remains of my calm.

"sO vERy huNgRY..."

And then it doesn't need to tell me what it is, because I know. This is the thing we came here to kill.

"Oh, fuck." It comes out as an involuntary whisper.

It smiles at me, revealing a mouth full of squirming maggots. I can almost feel them writhing between my teeth and I fight the urge to spit. "Do yOU LIKe THis bODy? It IS tAKEn fRom yoU; FRom yOUr MInd, YOuR mEMOry. FRom tHINgS oF iMPortANce."

"It's revolting." My jaw is clamped against the smell and the horrible feeling that things are moving about in my mouth.

"AnD YEt faMILiaR."

My stomach lurches wildly between fear and revulsion, while my mind revolves around the desperate knowledge that although I can't hope to fight this thing on my own, I may yet have to try.

"I'm not here for conversation. Where are my friends?"

The parody of my mouth splits open far, far too wide. "trAPped aWay. AWay SAfe aND sOUNd whERE yOU wILL nEVER fInD tHeM. oNLY yOU nOW. OnLy yOU IEft."

"Why?" I hiss at it. "What do you *want*?"

"I KNOW wHat YOu cAN dO, SAinT. YOu ARE a SeEKer. A PRoTector." There's a pause as it swallows; a wet, eager, hungry noise. "yOU ArE A nExUS."

I say nothing, fists clenched.

"wE WiLL BArgain, YOu aNd I."

"No."

Its throat works like it's trying to laugh, but only gurgling noises come out as its head bobs gently up and down. "SO eagER tO DEny mE. BuT I hAVE soMEthinG YOu waNT. I hAVE YOuR friENdS. THey ARE MINe nOW, tO tAKE aPART aNd dEVOuR, buT I COULd rEtURN tHEm tO YOu."

"And in return?"

"OnE oF THem, tHE oLDEsT oNE, cAn maKE mE sTRONgeR. He rEFUsEs. I hAVE tRIED tO pErSuaDE hiM. He iS... diFFicuLT. YOu cAn maKE hiM hElp mE. He COULd nOT sTOP yoU."

"What good would that do you?"

"I caNnot bREach tHE bARRieR aS fLesH. I haVe deLAYed tOO LOng. I muST LaY."

"You must... what?"

"My spAWn ARE reStLESS, eAGER tO bE sePERaTe FRom mE."

"Your spawn? You're *pregnant*?"

The head continues to bob gently, silently, and I understand at last why this dragon isn't distracted the way the

others have been. They do have gender, and this one is female. Maybe James was wrong, and there's no such thing as greater and lesser dragons, just terrifying differences between sexes.

I shake my head to clear it, as much as I can. "So, you want me to help you destroy the world by turning it into your nursery. Why would I agree to that?"

It considers me from the left, then the right, face twisted in confusion. "YouR wORLD wILL NOt bE deSTROYED, OnLY chANgeD. I WiLL oFFeR yOU SoME forGOTTEN LAnD wHErE yoU ANd yoUR aLLieS mAy cOMpLeTE yOUR mOrtAL spAn wLThOUt iNTErrUptiOn. YoU wILL noT bE FEd uPOn."

"While the rest of my species burns themselves out because you and your kids got hungry?"

"YoU aRE bEINg DiFFicUlT, aS tHe oTher oNE wAs."

"You tried to eat me last time we met, and now you're asking me to help you wipe out everything I've ever known! You're damn right I'm being difficult!"

"I wAS hAsTy, beFOre. I dId NoT undeRstaNd whAT YOu wERe. NoW, iT Is diFFeRenT. I caN sEE YOuR mEmoRY. YoU hAVe nO loVE foR tHe wOrLD; yoU hAVe hiDDeN frOM iT FoR sO LoNg. I WiLL maKe iT So thAT YoU aRE uNTrOUBleD bY thOsE thiNGs yoU WiSH to IEAvE beHInD. YoU wILL bE sAFe."

"I don't believe you. You'd just wait until I've done what you want and kill all of us anyway."

"YoU tEst MY pAtiEnCE. iF yoU coNtinUe to rEFuse mE, I wILL Kill oNe oF tHe oTherS. PerHaPS tHe pOWerleSS ONe, whO scREAmS sO eAsily."

Again, the thoughtful, wet noise, bubbling in the back of its throat. I shudder.

"FoR nOw I wILL giVE yoU a giFT. To shOw yoU mY gOOd fAlTh."

I narrow my eyes suspiciously. "What gift?"

"ChOOse onE oF tHe oTherS. I wILL giVE theM TO yoU NoW. YOu mAy hAVe OnLY onE. CHooSe wEIL, neXUs."

"Jo. Give me Jo." I barely have to think about it. I probably can't protect her any better here than wherever she is, but I feel responsible for her; she's here because of me.

It laughs, head jerking backwards with each racking jolt of monstrous humour. "Is thIS tRuLy yoUR chOicE?"

"Yes." My voice is somehow steady despite my doubt. Would one of the others have been better? An armoured warrior to slay the beast on his own and save me, save all of us? Maybe George; the dragon slayer himself? It makes no difference. I can't leave Jo on her own in this place.

"It iS A pOoR chOicE, liTTle SAInT. I feAReD yoU miGHt bE AN oPPonENT; yoU aRE noTHinG bUt a fOoL."

One elongated arm snakes out into the gap between us with an alarming dexterity and the hand, which must be as wide as my torso, twists in front of me. Long fingers seem to tear at the darkness, tracing a line from the ground upwards, and Jo falls into view from nowhere, body limp. As the dragon continues to laugh, I dive forwards to catch her with my own arms outstretched. She's much heavier than I expected and the weight of her forces me down onto my knees. Her cardboard armour has been torn away in places; straps and laces pulled loose or sheared through, and her face and chest are bloody with shallow wounds that look like slow and deliberate claw marks. My panicked fingers search desperately for a pulse, pressing into her jugular, but all I can feel is hot, wet blood.

"Jo? Jo! Answer me! Jo, are you alright?!" I lean into her, cradling her close to me, trying to hear or see her breathing.

"Mal?" Her eyes flicker open and she looks up at me, fighting to focus.

"I'm here Jo, I'm here. It's gonna be okay."

"It wouldn't stop, Mal. It wouldn't stop hurting me. I'm sorry. I wasn't strong enough to... I'm so sorry..." Her eyes

drop shut again.

Something inside me snaps. This is what it's going to do to us, to all of us. This is what the world will do to *itself* if I help. My family will end up like this – they might even do it to each other, driven mad enough to turn violently on the people they love. There's no bargaining with this monster. Nicholas wouldn't do it, and neither will I. I lower Jo to the ground as gently as I can, and stand. With her blood still on my hands, I take a step towards the wretched thing, bringing my face as close to it as I can bear. The air around it tastes like bile, and it's still smiling.

"Listen to me you bitch, and do your very best to understand. Fool or not, I will never help you. If you kill me, if you kill all of us, I will *never* help you. I hope your children are born in darkness and eat you alive while you beat yourself senseless on the walls of my reality, failing to get in and cursing me for refusing you!"

The face contorts with sudden fury, and the tattered wing bones spread wide. "YOu WiLL bE LAst To Die, NExuS! YoU wiLL watCH yOUr aLLies sCReam aS I CONsuME tHEM, aND yOUr oWN DeATH wiLL lASt aN ETERnity!"

The twisted arms lash out with the speed of a tornado. The first blow knocks me backwards and the second takes me off my feet altogether. I land hard on the ground, sliding away under the momentum of the fall. Palms pressed against the dusty floor, I try to push myself upwards, but it's on me fast, lashing out again and again. Sharp fingernails rip my skin with each raking strike and I try desperately to crawl away from it, to cover my face. A backhand to my ribs drives the breath out of me and I feel my thin bones crack under the breastplate. The pain is immense, and my mouth opens in a breathless, soundless shriek as my vision blurs with tears. Distracted, I see the cleaver swing towards me, and bring up both hands. There's a burst of pale green light as the edge of the blade starts to bite into my palms, and the cleaver bounces backwards, leaving a stinging, razor sharp incision behind it.

"YouR sHIEld wiLL nOt HELp YoU hErE, SAinT!"

Blade hovering, it rains down open handed strikes with blistering speed. One or two meet a shield that I can barely control; I'm surprised that it works at all here, and with so little understanding of how to use it, it's next to useless. Each shocking blow is more disorientating than the last. Even the ones that land on my armour rattle my body, crushing the plates into me. The few poorly aimed strikes I manage to throw at it are batted aside with a devastating ease. It's not putting any effort into this at all - it's playing with me. I give up trying to defend myself and lash out feebly from the ground with my lacerated hands, struggling to breathe as my broken ribs stretch under torn skin. The flat blade of the cleaver slaps against the front of my face, smashing my nose and opening up a burning wound where the edge of the blade catches my forehead and eyebrow. The force of it drives my head back into the floor, and as my body bounces, the empty oversized hand slams down onto my chest, pinning me to the floor. I struggle as much as I can, pushing upwards with my legs and trying to prize its fingers free with one hand, unable to raise the other. It squeezes down slowly, painfully crushing my ribs, and I feel my face turn red as I struggle to breathe and my body starts to panic over the lack of air.

"PiTiFuL." It chuckles, grinding its palm into my stomach as it adjusts its grip to bring its index finger up off the floor.

The long, sharp nail hovers over my face for a moment as though deciding which eye to pluck out first, and I thrash from side to side as much as I can, trying to keep my head out of the way. It pulls back and I squeeze my eyes shut as though that will help. There's a moment of nothing, then it drives its finger down hard through my shoulder, pinning me to the floor like a butterfly in a case. I scream as my collarbone breaks under the pressure.

"GIvE ME whAt I wANt, aND thIS WiLL aLL bE oVEr QUickLY."

"No, no no *no!*" My nose is broken, blood is pouring down my face from my scalp. There are wasps crawling on

my cheeks; my eyes are streaming with angry tears and my words come out like defiant, choked sobs. I beat against it uselessly with one good arm while the other lies pinned to my side.

It looks at me like I'm no more than one of the black and yellow bugs that swarm around us. "HoW cOuld YoU eVer hoPE tO deFeAt Me? mY POWeRs vAstLY oUtnUMbeR yOUr Own."

With my fingers still twisted around its wrist, heart beating a tattoo against my chest, a memory floods into my brain like bright sunlight: Nicholas stood in the kitchen saying '*greater dragons possess miracles*'. It's like having him whisper it in my ear, reminding me, berating me for forgetting. Fierce hope lights a bright fire in my guts. Even now, maybe there's a chance. If he's right... if he truly is always right...

I quit struggling, body still tense. "I don't care how powerful you are, you bastard." I spit at it, words still weak. "If I'm going down I'm going to *hurt* you on the way out."

I reach out for it, flailing in the dark with my untrained mind, and there it is, glittering and radiant, every colour I saw in those monstrous eyes on top of the tower in the broken city. My face breaks into a violent snarl as I reach for the thick, rope-like threads of its powers. There are no delicate strands here, no subtlety. It's much, much easier this time, and as I search for ways to hurt it, I understand what each thread actually does. Even in the forest of different miracles that the dragon has at its disposal, there are some that are lit up like beacons; the deep red of physical aspects like speed and strength, white psychic effects, and there, hidden in the middle, is the green glow of a shield. I know without really looking at it that it's more powerful than mine, and in the heartbeat it takes me to reach out for it, I understand that this thread is the key to everything now. The dragon has used this to hide us from each other by dropping shields around our senses. All the echoes of the others that I've felt have been just that, ripples bouncing off the shield around me. I've been walking around them in the dark, shouting their names while they've been doing the same, and not one of us has seen the others.

I wrap everything I have around that single thread, every last desperate ounce of strength, and pull. It tears out like a hair yanked free from the root, and the shields evaporate. The dragon screams and its body contorts backwards as though it's been shot. The heavy finger rips out of my shoulder and I sag onto the floor, too exhausted to do more than whimper at the fresh burst of pain.

The dragon gathers itself to its full height, hissing angrily as its shredded wings tremble with rage. Behind it, there's an animalistic roar as George, lit up in red flames and wasting no time now that he can see a clear enemy, charges towards us. My brain spins in calculation without being prompted, and I know he's not going to reach me in time; he's just not fast enough to cover the ground. There's a bitter taste in my mouth as I realise that even now, even with what I've done, this thing is going to kill me.

The dragon reaches out for me with both hands, and my body betrays me as I try to pull myself backwards away from it. One razor nail slides down my cheek with a frightening tenderness, leaving hot, wet pain in its wake.

"sLOWLY..."

Then there's thunder; a noise almost too fast in tempo to be recognisable as the pounding of feet, and a mountain passes over me, its shadow blocking out everything except the vision of rocky flesh, and the pained fire in my skin. The world around me seems to slow as Demetrius slams one oversized shoulder into the dragon's stomach, lifting it off its feet and carrying it backwards into the darkness towards George. With a burst of blue light and a snatch of song, Chris appears in the air above them, sword extended in front of him as he falls. The point of his blade rips through the dragon's back and out through its chest as though it were no more solid than smoke, as he lands with both feet on its shoulders, driving it down onto its knees. A second flash, and he's gone, along with the viscera coated sword. A red black

mist sprays into the air as the blade vanishes, and for an ecstatic moment, I'm sure that we must have won, that it can't possibly survive that. Then the dragon twists, torso seeming to pivot on its narrow waist as it thrashes behind it in the space that Chris occupied only a moment ago, and I see the gaping hole between its ribs start to close.

As George and Demetrius press the slim advantage of the dragon's confusion, I turn away and drag myself towards Jo, desperate to see if she's still alive. The short distance between us seems like unending miles, and I lean heavily against her when I close the gap, one wet cheek pressed against her face. Her breath is cold on my skin – it's shallow, but still there. With my arm draped over her chest, I let myself collapse, dropping my forehead onto the floor. This fight's not mine anymore; I've done everything I can.

"Mallory?" Thomas has dropped to a crouch next to me.

"We're okay," I lie. "We'll be okay, just *kill* it."

He nods and stands, taking a step towards the fight and raising both hands. One wrist turns in the air, and a golden thread fires towards the dragon as it hammers furious fists down onto George's upturned shield. The thread wraps around its target, then seems to unravel and snap backwards like taut elastic. It strikes Thomas squarely in the centre of his chest, and he staggers.

"It... it can *reflect*." He whispers. Dark droplets form in his tear ducts as his eyes begin to bleed. "Nicholas, it can reflect; warn Christopher!"

Nicholas seems to pull himself through the darkness to come into view. He barely looks at us, too distracted by his own incomprehensible fight with the thing that just nearly killed me. Around him, wraithlike images ripple in and out of view; ghosts of other times and places, memories and whispers of power. He flinches like he's been struck every time one of the spectral things passes through him, body rocked with a shock of assaulting psychic energy. "I can't help you, Thomas." He says, voice strained against his teeth. "Move fast before it kills all of us."

Thomas turns back to look at the fight, face set hard. "Let's see which of us goes down first."

He lashes out again and again, using his own abilities to try and shut the dragon down, swaying as his body rebuilds itself under the rebounding attacks. Screaming with an inhuman rage, the dragon begins to beat at the air with its wing bones. Impossibly, horribly, the things pulls itself upwards into the air, with Chris still translocating all around it, clinging to its scales to deliver a blow, then vanishing again. Its hands search for him furiously, as though it's trying to dislodge a bug, but he's too fast. As the two rise upwards, it stops fighting and just watches him, almost allowing him to hurt it. My stomach lurches as I realise what it's doing, and as I open my mouth to scream a warning, the dragon lashes out, predicting its opponent's next appearance and greeting him with a heavy punching blow to the chest that folds his armour in on itself. Chris snatches at air as his sword tumbles from his grip. The dragon catches him in both hands as he starts to fall, and slams its forehead into his face in three fast strikes that seem to echo into the abyssal blackness.

Thomas is already running forwards as the dragon throws Chris's limp body aside, and I'm pulling myself to my feet, heart pounding with panic. The dragon looks down at Thomas, and dives for him, barrel-rolling as it picks up speed. Sprinting for Chris as he falls, Thomas realises too late that the thing is coming for him. He raises his sword with a fencer's elegance, but the blade misses its target and the dragon lands on him, driving him into the ground with a wet, tearing noise, and a rising spray of blood as its flaying claws tear at his flesh.

George screams something at Demetrius, and the bigger man blurs into motion, eating up half the distance between them and dragon before sliding to a halt. George is already sprinting towards him; leaping into the air. As he does, Demetrius turns his back on the dragon and drops, hands reaching up for the top of the other man's breastplate, both feet planted squarely on his metal covered stomach. The momentum of the throw launches George forward with

incredible speed, but robs him of any kind of finesse. He crashes into the dragon back first and upside down, knocking the thing back into the dark and tumbling away with it as Demetrius streams after them.

I reach out for Thomas: the gentlest of brushes with his abilities tells me that most of his bones are shattered almost to powder, and his ribs are open to the air, although he's healing at an alarming rate. Chris's face is a bloody ruin, his armour crushing his chest and stopping him from breathing properly, while Nicholas is kneeling on the ground, shaking violently. We're losing. I realise that I never really considered the dangers I warned Jo about. None of us might walk out of here. We might all die in this godforsaken place.

"Mallory." Nicholas looks up at me, face drawn. He's so pale I barely recognise him, somehow made thinner and less real, as though the dragon's attack has aged him by decades.

"What do I do, Nicholas?" Even talking to him is an assault on every sense I have: I don't need to touch what he's doing to understand it. As much as Jo and I held the dragon's attention before, Nicholas has drawn in every one of the dragon's miracles that he can, turning himself into a magnet for them, to keep the rest of us safe. I can barely look at him without feeling as though I'm falling into a well of death and pain with no way back out. I don't understand how he can stand it without screaming.

His voice crackles with effort. "What we both know you can: you save them. There is no one else left to do it."

Then it *is* just me: Nicholas sags and says nothing more. Chris, Thomas, and Jo lie broken on the floor, while the dragon trades blows with the others so fast that I can barely follow them. I draw a breath, desperately trying to focus. Hands curled into fists, I reach back out for Thomas with as much delicacy as I can manage, trying to copy what he can do, to duplicate it rather than just control it. I wrap disembodied green and gold fingers around the destruction of his bones, and start to piece them back together, watching his miracle work and repeating it, funnelling it into Chris and Jo but focussing on Thomas himself. Together, we repair his broken frame far faster than he can do in isolation. I push as much as I dare, and his body shifts and bucks as we force bone and flesh to knit together, bringing him back from damage that I know would have killed any of the rest of us. I wonder what it would take to actually finish him. The thought is barely formed when his eyes snap open, and he drags air into his lungs to scream. Desperately, I search for some way to shut off the pain, cursing myself for not thinking to do that sooner.

There's a heavy crack and a loud, unpleasant strangled noise from behind me. I look up in time to see the dragon fling Demetrius to one side like a discarded toy, his legs limp as though they're broken. George is pinned face first onto the ground with a foot in the small of his back and his neck held down in the dust by the dragon's oversized hand; he struggles heroically, but every time he gets close to free the disgusting thing shoves him back down again. He manages to grab the edge of his shield and flail backwards with it like a weapon. The dragon knocks it carelessly out of the way, and it skids across the ground towards me, bumping into my knees and rocking gently on its front.

Still holding George down, it looks at me, the awful parody of my own face distorted with rage. "OH, liTtle saiNT, LIttLE NexuS. YoU HaVe hURt mE, aNd YOu wiLL paY FOR tHAt DEarLy. YOu ArE tOO tROuBLESomE tO bE peRMitTEd TO coNTINuE."

The head pulls back, throat working hard like it's going to be sick. As it opens its mouth, extending its bottom jaw as far down as its stick thin waist, I see light building up in its gullet and with horror I realise what it's planning on doing. I reach out for the shield, gasping as I pull its weight towards me. My fingers twist around the thick leather straps, one hand on each, and I come up to one knee with the shield held out in front of me as a gout of flame strikes it, pushing the heavy kite back towards me and licking around the sides. I lean in close to Jo, trying to cover as much of the two of us as I can manage, desperately wrapping my second miracle with the physical shape of George's shield. The heat is incredible

and my arms start to shake under the punishing force. Lines of red lightning flicker across the metalwork as George's miracle stops the shield from melting. I wonder if Demetrius is dead. How long it will be before it crushes George like a bug and his miracles give out. Even with the metal being so hard to heat, the temperature becomes unbearable with horrific speed. My fingers start to blister, but if I drop this shield, if I even weaken my grip, Jo and I will both be incinerated. I hold my breath, trying to work out when the damned thing will have to close its mouth again. Tiny orange and blue flames start to dance on the inside of the shield, and I can feel skin peeling off my knuckles. Still it gets hotter. I can hardly breathe, and I feel like I'm already on fire. Desperately, I wonder how long this can go on. Whether it might be easier to just drop the shield and die quickly. Tears evaporate from my cheeks. Jo, broken and bleeding, looks up at me and smiles weakly. She tries to speak but can't manage it.

This must be it.

We're going to die.

There's a flash of blue light, and suddenly there are strong arms around me, hands larger than my own gripping the shield.

"You can let go now." Chris's voice is grim and terribly gentle.

My fingers uncurl painfully, releasing the shield and letting him take the force of the attack. He's mountainous, unmovable, breastplate pulled away to let him breathe, dragged back to consciousness by Thomas. The muscles on his bare arms bulge but don't tremble as mine were doing. I cradle my damaged hands in my lap and lean back into him, certain that I've never been so relieved to see another human being in my life.

I squeeze my eyes shut. "We're going to die, aren't we?"

"Not while I'm here. I'll keep you safe. Just don't let go of me."

I almost believe him. I want to believe him, desperately. I just don't. The shield starts to warp and melt. I cling to him like he's driftwood and I'm drowning. I reach out to help him, and as I touch it, I realise the truth of his first miracle; he really can keep me safe, from just about anything. The fires wouldn't even touch me, but he can't protect himself the same way. The failing metal in front of him really is his only protection.

Still pinned to the floor, George shouts something in a language I don't understand. It's barely audible over the roaring inferno, but Chris hears it. He tenses up, looking down at me. "Mallory, get a shield up!"

And I try, I try so hard. I push my hands out in front of me, hoping the physical motion will focus my efforts. This time I can actually see it, flickering all around us like a gigantic green bubble, but I can't seem to hold it steady. It cuts through the flames, pushing them back, and for a moment I'm holding all of that fire, that force.

I feel Chris reach out for Nicholas, Thomas and Demetrius, pulling them into the tiny shelter. Then my bubble flickers and dies, and Chris flinches as he takes the weight of the assault on the failing shield again.

"Chris, I don't... I can't..."

"Yes, you *can*." A firm cool hand grips my shoulder; Nicholas, crouched beside me, face strained with effort and Thomas cradled in his arms.

As I open my mouth to argue, Thomas reaches out and grabs hold of my ankle. His grip is like a vice, desperate and hot even so close to the flames. There's no gentleness to it this time, and I feel the connection as he tears energy out of himself, and out of the others, channelling it into me like jolting electricity. Faster than I can really follow, all of my wounds heal and close, ribs snapping back into place and skin knitting together neatly. The pain of it is masked by a dizzying rush unlike anything I've ever felt before. I feel so alive, more ready and able than I've ever been in my life, like I could tear down mountains with my bare hands.

"Now, Mallory, do it now!" Chris growls, words strained through gritted teeth.

George is still shouting as my shield goes up, only now he's laughing as well. I can see all the latticework of his miracles light up, glowing through his skin like he's made of lava. He becomes too bright to see clearly, and the punishing fiery assault falters as the dragon turns to look at him.

"yOU CAnnoT!" For the first time, it looks afraid.

The world turns red.

I have a fraction of a second to see what George's third miracle actually does, and then it hits my shield with the force of a nuclear shockwave. It's unbridled, uncontrolled force, roaring through the air like a hot wind and tearing at the surface of my shield like a churning storm of broken glass. It burns through the energy I've been given like acid, searing it away faster than the others can replace it, and I have to reach into what Thomas can do and push it further, stripping life from the others just to keep us alive. Outside of the shield, the blast rips chunks out of the floor and spins them through the air, crashing into the translucent dome around us with bursts of green light. The dragon screams, but only for a second. I clamp my teeth together, hands stretched out defiantly as I try to survive this last and most terrible assault, which comes not from a monster but from one of my friends. The spinning vortex of debris only lasts a few seconds before it comes crashing down, but by the time it's over I'm lying on the ground again, panting for breath and shaking.

For a moment, there's nothing but the sounds of our breathing, and I lie still with my eyes closed, blood in my mouth and dust in my nose.

"Mallory?" Chris touches my shoulder, as gently as if I were made of porcelain.

"I'm okay."

I pull myself into a crouch and he abandons the wreckage of George's shield to put one weary arm around me. His skin is slick with sweat and I can feel the tension in the corded muscles on his back. I lean into him gratefully; he's trembling with exhaustion, and I know that's because I took so much from him.

"I'm okay, Chris. Really."

Around me, the others are picking themselves up. Thomas is kneeling over Jo, holding himself steady on the ground with both hands.

"Is she alright?" I ask nervously.

"She will be." He says, voice weak. "Her nervous system was pushed to the point where even breathing would have been agony. I don't know what it did to her, but I think she had the brunt of its attention. She's going to have to deal with the emotional aspects of that over time; I simply can't fix those. Most of her physical injuries are comparatively superficial; there's a lot of blood, but nothing too serious. I can fix her, and I can get Demetrius walking again, but anything else is going to have to wait until after I've rested. I'm sorry." Nicholas gives him a sharp look and he shrugs. "Well I am."

I stand up, legs almost buckling under me. "I'll check on George."

I don't know what makes me pick up his shield on the way, but it's cradled in my arms when I get to him. Despite the intense heat of the dragon's breath, the metal is somehow only warm, perhaps because of the blessing. Certainly it's in no worse shape than the ground between us, which is torn and scarred, forcing me to pick my way across it carefully. Blasted chunks of the dragon's cooling flesh lie scattered in sheltered pockets of blackened ground, and strings of muscle and tissue cling desolately to the rough surfaces that have caught them on their chaotic flight past, preventing their escape. George is just lying on the floor in the centre of a wide crater, and if it wasn't for the ragged rise and fall of his torso, I'd be convinced he was dead. The two last bloodied fragments of the dragon's body rest next to him; the long

fingers of one dismembered arm gently touching his shoulder like the caress of some sleeping lover, and the ragged stump of its upper body, from shoulder to crushed skull, lying close by, eyes rolled back in a borrowed face, long neck thrown back and mouth open in shock. I wonder with a slightly sick sensation what happened to its brood.

A single fat wasp buzzes in disorientated, dying circles over George like a falling leaf at the end of the autumn. I bat it out of the air carelessly and drop to one knee next to him. "You alive?"

His hand rises a couple of centimetres off the ground, thumb jutting upwards.

"That was your third, wasn't it?"

He catches his breath. "Do you understand why I didn't want to tell you about it?"

"Yes, I think so. It's death, isn't it? It destroys everything it touches."

He says nothing, one cheek resting on the floor, staring at the fallen body of the monster he just killed.

"Is that how you beat the other one? On your own I mean."

"Yes." He doesn't ask how I know.

"Why wait to use it this time?"

"Because I thought it would kill all of us." He pushes himself up and sits on the floor next to me, looking drained. "All of you anyway. I can't control it. I didn't think you would be able to shield against it, and it's not the kind of thing you can really practise with. Nicholas thinks there's a pretty much fifty-fifty chance it'll take me with it any time I use it. I didn't care about that, but I thought it would... y'know. I just couldn't do that while there was any chance left."

I slip one arm around his shoulder and squeeze against him gently.

George looks at the twisted remains of the shield, noticing it for the first time. "Sadra gave me that."

"I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. "Don't be. She'd have been happy that it helped. I think she'd have liked you, runt."

I smile.

He winks. "I'm glad I didn't kill you."

"Yeah, me too."

Jo doesn't let go of my hand on the way back. Although it's a journey that only takes a few seconds, I'm sure she bruises my knuckles. There's some conversation between her and Nicholas – I hear none of it of course, but Jo keeps looking at him and reacting as though she's talking to him, which gives it away. George hangs the deformed shield back over the fireplace. The paintwork is blasted away entirely. He offers Jo a place to stay but she refuses, wanting to get back to Sarah.

"She might not be any different, you know." He says, face still melancholy. "It takes time for the effects of these things to go away."

Jo nods. "I have to get her to a hospital and at least try to help her get better."

Chris pulls on a shirt and offers Jo his hand. "Do you want to go now, or get cleaned up?"

"Now please."

"Alright."

She hugs me tightly. "Call me, okay?"

"Sure you don't just want me to leave you alone?"

"I don't want to have to convince myself this was real and that I'm not having a breakdown, so don't leave me out there on my own. Plus, I think you're going to need someone normal in your life from now on."

I leave my arms wrapped around her for a moment. "Thank you Jo. For everything."

In the ten minutes it takes Chris to come back, I wash my head and hands, towelling my hair as I watch the blood drain away down the sink, thinking how much I need a holiday. None of us have the energy to drag furniture back into the living room, and no one seems to want to be alone. We sit in the kitchen instead, silently, as though we're waiting for something. Chris and Demetrius make it as far as the table, sinking gratefully into chairs. I follow suit, resting heavily on the table top. Thomas, looking ragged, slides down onto the floor next to the door. Nicholas stops in the doorway and reaches one hand down to rest on Thomas's head. Without looking up, Thomas nods – another shared private conversation. Nicholas smiles and takes enough of a step forwards that the two of them are better connected. Thomas sighs and leans against him. It's subtle enough that I'm probably the only other person in the room who notices it. George holds it together long enough to grab beer out of the fridge, then joins us at the table.

I watch time tick past on the clock over the door. "What's the time difference between Chicago and London?"

George looks up from his beer. "Six hours behind right now."

"Shit."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm supposed to be at my mother's house in eight minutes."

"No worries runt." He jerks a thumb across at Chris. "He can take you there."

"Would you mind?"

Although he must be exhausted, Chris's face splits into an earth shattering smile. "Course not. I can take you anywhere."

"Can you get me to my mum's house before twelve o'clock?"

His smile falters. He looks a little incredulous. "Seriously?"

"Well, yeah."

"Mallory, I think you're missing my point here. I can take you anywhere. Not an issue. *Anywhere.*"

"That's great, really, but I have to get to my mum's place in time for Christmas dinner or she'll pitch a fit."

He rolls his eyes and holds out his hand. "Fine, if that's all you want."

We stand. I slip my hand into his, feeling tiny but safe, encircled, protected. My ears pop gently, and I'm stood in the bus shelter across the road from my mother's house. Richard's car is parked on the kerb and through the window I can see my Dad dancing round the living room with a pair of reindeer antlers on his head and my niece on his shoulders. It's a moment before I realise Chris still has hold of me. His skin is warm and textured. I can feel a raised scar that runs down the outside of his index finger. I'm not entirely sure I want to let go.

"You can come in if you want."

He shifts uncomfortably. "I wouldn't want to intrude, it's a day for family."

"My mum always cooks enough for a billion people. Besides, she'll like you."

"I'm not really... I don't..."

"Chris, we just took on a dragon. Don't tell me you're scared of meeting my mother?"

He surrenders, laughing, and lets me lead him across the road and up to the door. As I ring the doorbell, he leans down and kisses the top of my head. It's unexpected, but pleasant.

"Thank you, Mallory."

I don't have time to say anything as my five year old nephew yanks the door open.

"Aunty Mal!" He catches site of Chris and his jaw drops open.

"Uh, hi." Chris shuffles from foot to foot on the doorstep.

"Wow you're huge!" The boy grabs Chris by his free hand and pulls him into the house. Chris ducks neatly under the doorframe and manages a weak smile and a distinctly feeble 'hello' as my mother comes out of the kitchen.

From the living room, I hear my father's slurred voice. "Who's this titan in my house?"

Then the delighted, childish reply, certain in the absence of any proof; "It's Aunty Mal's *boyfriend!*"

My mother wraps an arm round my shoulders and kisses me on the cheek. She smells like roast dinner, and my stomach growls. She doesn't say anything about the unexpected guest, but I don't need a miracle to know what she's thinking.

I slip one arm around her waist and smile as I close the door behind us. "Don't worry mum, you're going to love him. He's a saint."

EPILOGUE: ORDINARY

By the time the snow has stopped, a thick white curtain has nestled against the lower half of the windows in the penthouse. The twinkling lights of Chicago's night time form little halos in their upper reaches; pinpoint stars turned to wide, wet coronas that track refracted pathways across the ceiling. Despite the late hour, the mouth-watering smell of roasting meat filters out of the kitchen, curling invitingly into each of the rooms, softly nestling around the replaced furniture and drifting with sweet subtlety into the senses of the five men, each about their separate business.

Chris's stomach rumbles as he hangs up the phone. He stares at the blank screen of the handset with a bemused smile, and he's still lost in thought when George comes back in to the living room, heading to the kitchen to check on the food.

"What you smiling at, mate?" George asks.

"Oh, nothing."

"Been on the phone to Mallory again?"

"Uh... yes." Chris colours a little.

"Oh my God, are you blushing?"

"No!"

"You are!" George grins, leaning over the back of the sofa to get a better look. "You're actually blushing. You're like a bloody teenager. How many times have you spoken to her since we all got back?"

"Not much, just a couple of times."

"I thought she broke her phone trying to kill you last week?"

"Apparently Vicky had a spare."

"Vicky?"

"Her mother."

George laughs. "You're on first name terms with her mother? Already? You dog, Chris. You dog."

"It's not like that."

"It'd *better* be like that, you ass. She's a sweet girl, and you could use some damn company."

Chris reddens further, looking down at the mobile phone in his hands. "Well, yes she is, but she's what, twenty two? I'm... well there's a hell of an age gap."

"You do her a disservice." Nicholas says, stepping into the room behind them both. "Mallory is set to become one of the most talented and dangerous people currently alive in the world. She is quite capable of encompassing something so petty as an age gap."

"Still..."

"May I offer some advice?" Nicholas asks, stooping gracefully to settle on the stairs.

George snorts. "You're gonna offer him advice on getting a date? When was the last time you even *thought* about sex, let alone got busy with someone?"

"That's none of your concern. Christopher, Mallory has far exceeded what I believed her to be capable of, something which happens only very rarely. You could sit and debate this with us or with yourself, but in the end you will come to the same impasse: this isn't something you can address without her input, and without spending considerably more time in her company. My advice to you would be to put *less* thought into this, rather than more. If something

develops between the two of you, allow it to do so naturally. She deserves that from you."

"That's..." George raises an eyebrow. "That's actually pretty sound. Although I still think you should go to Bora Bora and break out the guns, or take her to a monster truck show or something. I can get you tickets."

Nicholas dismisses the suggestion with a roll of his eyes. "Yes, if your intention was to put her off altogether."

"Bah, whadda you know?"

A slowly spreading smile turns Nicholas's aging features into something wickedly humorous. "Things that would make even *your* toes curl."

"I'm not arguing with that." George capitulates, both hands raised in surrender. "You might offer to show me, and I don't know if I could handle it. Dinner will be on the table in about twenty minutes. Is Thomas joining us?"

"He's still asleep." Nicholas says.

"I'll plate something up for him later."

"Thank you, George."

"You're welcome, old man. Just... just keep off my toes."

The crack and whine of pistol fire ricochets across the kitchen as black and white gunslingers stir the dust of Wild West towns on a plasma screen. Demetrius isn't looking at the television, but his lips move in perfect, silent synchronisation with each scripted line as he leans over the unladen table. He frowns as he works, using the contents of a tiny tub of coleslaw to sculpt lumpy figures with a delicacy and skill belied by the obvious strength in his hands. He grunts an acknowledgement as George walks past the table to stir the gravy.

"You alright, Dem?"

"Mm."

"Good lad. Jesus, are you watching this again?"

"M'favourite."

"Guess so. Watch it much more and I'll know all the lines though."

"Mmm-hm."

George pauses, looking at his closest friend. "What in the name of Satan's sweaty bollocks are you doing?"

"Making cowboys."

"Making... what?"

"Cowboys. Look." Demetrius prods the first little tower of poorly balanced vegetables forwards with the tip of a finger, prompting its tenuously formed head to collapse backwards in a gooey decapitation. He sighs and adopts a false Wild West drawl. "His name was Slaw. Cole Slaw. Fastest carrot slinger in the west."

George blinks slowly. "You feeling alright, mate?"

Demetrius starts repairing his creation. "Yeah. Why?"

"You're making little people out of garnish, and then naming them. That's one step off making mountains out of mash. Worse yet, you're eating *coleslaw*."

"I'm not eating it."

"Then what..." George asks, clearly confused.

"I'm playing with it."

"You bought coleslaw just to play with it?"

"Yeah."

"You bought coleslaw."

"Yeah."

"And brought it into *my* kitchen."

"Yeah."

"To play with it."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Demetrius looks up at him, eyes wide with mock heartbreak. "It's three days after Christmas, and I haven't got any presents."

George ignores his beseeching look, shaking the wooden spoon he's been stirring with. "Presents *after* dinner. You know that. Now get rid of that filth, then get back in your highchair before I make you wear a bib."

The smell of dinner draws Nicholas and Christopher into the kitchen before George calls them, and the four men work around each other with quiet familiarity, their long brotherhood allowing them to know each other's habits as well as their own. They sit, and share a moment of contemplation. They don't say grace: not all of them are men of faith, although they share a common respect for such things.

Before the others can begin eating, George raises a hand. "Wait, wait, one last thing before we start. I've got something for the old man."

Nicholas raises an eyebrow. "Before dinner?"

"It's worth it. Just... just don't turn me into a bug or something."

A stern look settles onto Nicholas's face as Demetrius tries to stifle a laugh. "What have you done, George?"

"Well, I just thought, seeing as you can get close to people again, you might want to start up the old job."

"What 'old job'?"

"You know, checking that list twice and stuff."

There's a frosty silence from the end of the table.

"Anyway," George continues, cheeks creased with an uncontrollable grin. "Since you're out of practise, we thought you might need some help getting back into it."

"Whatever this is, I had nothing to do with it." Chris says, laughing.

George reaches down under his chair and pulls out a small parcel, wrapped carefully but with a complete lack of skill. Gold and silver string criss-crosses cheerfully coloured paper held down with an incredible amount of badly placed sticky tape. He nudges it across the table to Nicholas.

"Go on. Open it."

"I could just find out what's in there the easy way." Nicholas murmurs, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes, but you won't. That's breaking your own rules. *Open* it, you grumpy git."

With incredible care, Nicholas takes the packet, then opens one end and peers inside. He rolls his eyes and snorts. "You are masters of comedy, both of you."

George and Demetrius turn to each other, howling with the hilarity of their own joke.

Chris looks lost. "What is it?"

With a sour look on his face that doesn't completely mask his smile, Nicholas peels back the rest of the paper, and pulls out a soft, oversized red fleece hat, complete with fluffy white trim and a silver threaded white pom pom hanging

from its tapered tip. He sighs, and nestles it gently on his head while the others laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho." Nicholas says, grimly. "Pass the potatoes."

Thomas is not a prophet, and he possesses no miraculous foresight. He himself has no ability to share such visions with others, but there are those who do.

He dreams of a darkness that rushes towards him like a storm. Driven by madness and blinded by hate, it howls as it comes, tearing down the mighty and the brave in order to find and kill what it seeks. Thomas twists in his sleep, fighting the terrible sensation of loss that clings to it like a bow wake.

Between him and the storm stands a woman; black hair fans around her, whipped by the winds, and her simple clothes are stuck to her slender frame by wild rain. She has a message for him; words he needs to hear, and he knows that there is only this one chance to hear them.

"*Shōnen...*" she whispers.

Then the storm is upon them both, and although he tries to reach her, to protect her, to hear what she has to say, they're forced apart.

Outside of the dream, his body thrashes soundlessly as he fights against what is upon him.

He doesn't see Nicholas excuse himself from the table to slip silently down the corridor to his room, and he's ignorant of the care the older man takes as he crosses the thick carpet to stand by his side. Although he never sees the fatherly tenderness with which Nicholas lays one hand on his forehead, he stills almost immediately, as if the other man's presence has put flight to all the sorrows he can see, turning the storm to gentle starlight.

Thomas rests, made calm by a presence he's not even aware of. He'll never know, just as Nicholas will never know, the truth of what he's just seen. When he wakes, he won't remember the woman or her message, only the cool touch of the calming hand that silenced her. He will not know that the storm is coming, and by the time it hits, it will be too late to remember that someone tried to warn him.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Derbyshire, 2015

Mallory started out as yet one more thing I knew I'd never finish, and ended up giving me the shock of my life tonight when I realised I was looking at the finished version of a 100,000 word novel.

The original idea was to write it as a 'Christmas Special' for my role play group (lovingly called 'the Goblin Gang' by the indulgent wife of one of its members). The game would incorporate Santa, who would turn out not to be a jolly fat man from the back of a drinks wagon, but an ancient and powerful psychic driven to hating the human race because of the evils he'd seen them commit. A lot of that idea formed the personality of Nicholas, and in the end I decided that I wanted to write the whole thing as a story, rather than let the players destroy it (as players are wont to do).

It's been so long since I started writing this book that I think I've actually forgotten when I began. I know the whole thing has been shelved several times, and without the active encouragement of family, friends, colleagues, and relative strangers, it would have stayed there. Key among all of these people was Adrian Tyson of Great British Entertainment (GBE), who inspired me to actually start writing in earnest, and gave up his very limited and precious time to help me out a lot in the early stages.

One of the challenges of writing the book was languages. Personally, I remember enough GCSE French to get myself into trouble but not back out of it (a testament to my school teachers rather than my own memory), and my most impressive linguistic skill is the ability to declare 'I am a small mushroom' in four languages. This should give you an indication of my lack of talent in that area. With that in mind, I'm not sure what possessed me to include Cantonese, Japanese and Dutch in this book, especially since I'm reliably informed by native speakers of at least two of these that they're both complex and context sensitive.

Although Mallory herself would not understand the additional languages used in the story, I thought it might be interesting to provide a translation for your reference. I hope that you will forgive any minor misunderstandings that I might have made.

Chapter 1: Mallory

"Lo sigh, mo mun tigh, ngor bay jor chin, ho may dough. Ho sound yee." / "Hi boss, it's okay, I've paid for the tasty food. Hope business is doing well."

"Suey yan, ngor tung nay gong yeah! Nay yat dee dough uum tank ngor gong, gig say ngor!" / "Son of a bitch, I'm speaking to you! You never listen when I talk to you, it drives me crazy!"

Albert Tang not only provided the translation for this text, he did so twice; I lost the original English after the Cantonese had been put into the draft, so he kindly and patiently translated it back to English so that I could include it here!

Chapter 8: The Last Door

“Shōnen o mitsukete.” / “Find the youth.”

“Shōnen o mitsukenasai!” / “Find the youth!”

Omoikane’s final words to Nicholas can be read as an instruction to go and find and protect Thomas. Although the English translation is the same in both versions, the first is an instruction and the second is a command. Kitty Fury, a skater with the amazing Hellfire Harlots, helped to source the translation, which provides a small insight into the relationship between Nicholas and Omoikane.

Chapter 15: Nexus

“Nog een.” / “Another.”

Nicholas is accurate in his assertion that the context of this simple sounding statement is in fact quite complex. Vanderpool is identifying someone like himself, a potential rival, rather than just another person. Despite having help from both Guido Smits and Pete Sanderse, there were three versions of this before we finally settled on ‘nog een’ as the most appropriate.

I feel that the translations added something that I just couldn’t have done on my own, and I can’t thank Albert, Kitty, Guido, and Pete enough. I am both jealous and a little in awe of people who can speak more than one language fluently (although of course I’ll never admit it). Personally speaking, I think that linguistic talent is far, far too rare, and this deficit is something which is not taken seriously enough. More people should learn to talk about mushrooms on an international level.

If you have seen either the printed copy of the book or the advertising artwork, you’ll be aware of the beautiful cover artwork. When that was delivered, I squealed like a little kid opening presents at Christmas. Dan Hartley is a very talented artist whose work goes from strength to strength, and I highly encourage anyone reading this to look him up on social media. If you want someone to draw on you professionally, then you want someone who will make your skin look even more beautiful, and Dan does that very thing every day.

I’m still trying to decide how to properly thank my proof readers, whose encouragement kept the book from being trashed early on: Ed Gray, Sue Hare, Garry Feeley, & Chris Hill. Guys, you’re amazing, and I love you. One day, I’ll work out how to say thank you properly.

At the end of this section there’s a list of the Kickstarter supporters who helped to fund publication. I started planning the Kickstarter when the book was only on the first draft (mainly as a pipe dream), but when it came time to actually press that button and commit, I was overcome with a bad case of nerves. Knowing I needed someone who wouldn’t pull any punches with their support, I turned to Adrian Waite. I can’t repeat what he told me, but suffice to say the project went live about ten seconds after he said it.

Lastly, my heartfelt thanks belong to Brian Smith, who acted not only as a constant source of encouragement, but also as my editor. Brian deserves recognition as the fussiest, pickiest bastard I’ve ever had the pleasure to work with. Seriously, he made my life hell, making me justify every ridiculous decision and challenging every continuity flaw, even when I’d skipped over them myself, or had assumed telepathy on the part of the reader. I did consider putting deliberate

errors in this last part of the book, since it's the only thing he hasn't seen before printing, but in the end I found that I jsut couldn't.

Ruth

THE KICKSTARTER SAINTS

Actually taking the final step between finished story and printed novel is a mildly terrifying thing. In the case of Saint Mallory, that step would not have been possible without the kindness and charity of the individuals listed below, who supported the Kickstarter project which put this book in your hands.

Mark 'Pigeon' Allport	Paula Martin
annieBeth Barrett	Tracy Mayfield
Chloe Barrett	Meri
Harriet Barrett	Chris Metcalfe
Jen Bateman	John Milligan
Alex Beaumont	Tim Mundon
Alex Burton-Keeble	Peter Smith Nielsen
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Eddy Valentine Hughes	Kelly Thompson
Izlinda H. Jamaluddin	Adrian Tyson
Admiral Adam Ahmed ibn Al'Rostamani Johnson	Dave Williams
Michael Madden	Alan Williamson
Milo Underfoot	and Saint John the Defenestrator
James Markun	

Also to those supporters who chose to remain anonymous, and to the many people who helped to advertise and promote the Kickstarter project.

~ THANK YOU ~

PREVIEW: APOSTATE

Sunrise isn't for another hour, and I'm already running. This isn't the steady pace of someone who trains to keep fit, or the gentle jog of a woman who wants to revel in the peace of the world before the rest of the human race wake up and spoil it with their noise. This is a flat out, desperate sprint. The only noise along the bank of the river is the pounding of my feet as I maintain a speed that would have been impossible for me eighteen months ago.

I glance over my shoulder, but the man following me is nowhere in sight. Just as well. Ahead of me, stone steps cut into the grassy bank of the river next to a shabby boathouse. I skid to a halt next to the doors, thinking fast. If I can wait here, maybe he'll run right past me and I can turn this around, stop having to be so defensive. The boathouse is clearly still used; the large padlock on the door is coldly clean in the predawn gloom. I'm not strong enough to break it on my own, but I know a man who is.

I reach out for him, covering the distance between us almost instantaneously. Tiny red flames, visible only to me, lick at my hand as I channel his inhuman strength for just a few seconds to crush the curved arm of the lock between my fingers. As muffled as it is, the noise of distorting metal is far too loud for my liking, and I'm glad I didn't just rip it off. With another glance back up the track, I slip inside, and pull the doors closed as quietly as I can.

Gently, carefully, I slip around the darkened shapes of rowing boats and up to a barred window looking back out onto the path, crouching so that I'll be almost invisible from outside.

Twenty seconds later, he comes around the corner, body eating up the distance between us with an enviable ease. He sees the boathouse and slows to a walk. I curse silently as his olive face breaks into a victorious grin. He must have seen the lock. Why wasn't I more careful? A few more steps, and he's standing no more than two metres away from me. I control my breathing and stay still, certain that he won't see or hear me.

"I know you're in there." He laughs, then raises his voice to a controlled shout. "She's all yours, mate."

There's a heavy tap on my shoulder and I realise to my horror that I'm not on my own in here. I spin on my heel but it's far, far too late. The man in front of me is so fast I barely see him move. One hand lashes out, pinning me to the wall by the throat.

He looks at me like he's almost disappointed. "Sorry Mallory. You're dead."