

Alexandra's Palace

Vonny Thenasten

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This work was begun jointly by Vonny Thenasten and Carrienne Moore and completed by Vonny.

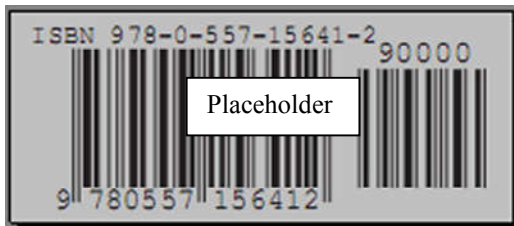
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This novel is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental

Acknowledgements

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A yogi or yogini of the Tibetan tradition visualizes his or her subtle body as a chörten. This visualisation is actually a co-creation, since the universe is ultimately a mental creation [...]

*Similarly, practitioners of Alchemy build their Tower of the
Art*

~The Tower of Alchemy

Prologue

You might not know it yet, but you have a decision to make, a big decision: how will you see the world?

You didn't choose the way things are, but you can. It's a hell of a responsibility, and if you're like most people, you'll try every way you can to avoid it.

Some people won't, though, they'll be looking for the control they think goes with the choice, and good luck to them. A very few will realise that nobody has control, and that the way things are is the only way they can be.

But the choices aren't real, they're all imaginary. You live in an imaginary world with imaginary objects and meanings and thoughts... it's all imaginary. Even imagination is imaginary. The world is a dream, an illusion, a story. What else could it be?

Let's say that the different possibilities for the illusion are sustained by some sort of power. In this book we give that power a name, 'the Jewel'. But it isn't a jewel, it's just what there is. *Tat tvam asi*. The power, the Jewel, can't be part of the illusory world, so it is hidden from us in yet another metaphorical world that we might call the 'phantom' world. The illusory world is created by reflections in the facets of the Jewel in the phantom world.

There are other jewels, real jewels (so to speak). These jewels reflect the ways in which the facets of the Jewel can be combined. Alchemy, tarot, magic, physics and so on arise from different ways of combining the facets.

The alchemical jewel can become the Jewel, as can the tarot jewel and, indeed, any other. But if one jewel becomes the Jewel, the other, lesser jewels will... disappear from the illusion. If the alchemical jewel prevails then tarot, magic, physics will disappear, and so on.

The Alchemical Tower is an illusion (which isn't to say it isn't as real as you are...). Its entrances are also towers. In its centre is the Nuptial Chamber, where the alchemical jewel may be transmuted into the Jewel.

The alchemical jewel itself is faceted in myriads. If you combine the facets of the alchemical jewel in particular ways, a man may become a bird, or a shadow a dragon or a deer, or a history a fantasy; or lightning might strike a tower. It just depends.

Why do we have to be told this? Why don't we know? Because our knowledge of things and forms are only reflections in the facets of the Jewel, the invisible, unknowable Jewel.

*

The world is a glittering jewel, iridescent, scintillating, its centre everywhere and nowhere. In this facet is a face; in that, a forest; in another, a bird; and in another, a storm. In this facet a temple, in that, a tower. The facets are infinite and beautiful, the jewel itself invisible.

This aspect of the jewel sits in the Tower, in the Red Room, whose entrances are many. With knowledge and persistence and skill, this jewel may appear to become the world, and the world will appear to be contained in the Tower.

This aspect of the jewel sits in the Temple, whose entrances are few. With love and distraction and longing, this jewel may appear to become the world, and the world will appear to be contained in the Temple.

If these jewels are united, either strength or love will prevail, only one. The Tower or the Temple will become the Jewel, and the world will become immutable.

*

The bird rose from the jewel and, churring, hovered in farewell before circling the surrounding cold stone walls, and darting into a sombre tunnel. As it traversed its new world, it felt the first stirrings of air and height and beauty, the first whispers of breath and heartbeat, the first pangs of hunger and thirst and fear. And later, emerging from the tunnel past a heavy door and perching high in a tree, it watched the slow passage of its new world, felt the play of its breezes, the curiosity of its creatures.

Later still, settled in the *now!*, it turned its eyes to a tower, to a window. It watched the men and the women and the child.

And now, gliding silently through a great forest, it sees the girl appear, the dog run, the men stare. It sees this man leave his cabin, invisible behind his glaring beams of light. It sees the tower nearby, the jewel, a woman burying the jewel, a man waiting. Then, rising and rising, the bird's shadow grows to encompass the forest and the cabin, the tower and the trees, and at last, at the end of exhaustion, the small grey village. With a final effort it flies into the warm updraft from a chimney, settles, and draws in its wings, invisible beneath the darkening sky.

Conspiracy

‘Henri’s getting to be rather a pain, isn’t he? He’s been trying to pump me about our plans all this week. I had to run away, eventually.’

‘He’s certainly persistent, yes.’

‘So what do we do about him?’

‘Do? We can’t do anything. Alchemists don’t have magical battles, Darley.’

‘I know, but we’re people as well as alchemists, and people can be deceived, even Henri.’

Llew turned, amused. ‘Ah, my darling, you’re thinking that he’s a *man*. But I know him, and he can’t be so easily distracted. You’re on the right track but I’m afraid the solution will require considerable guile.’ He was suddenly serious. ‘And sacrifices.’ He sat up and, reaching over her for his glass, kissed her breast.

She stiffened. ‘You want me to seduce him?’

‘I doubt that would work.’

‘Then what *do* you mean?’

‘Only that mere seduction wouldn’t be enough...’ Llew’s eyes closed for a moment before he continued in a low voice, ‘...however artful. Even if Henri allowed himself to be seduced, you couldn’t influence him directly.’ He kissed her breast again and sighing, lay back on his pillow. ‘It’s a very serious situation we find ourselves in, my love. Henri isn’t an ordinary man, as we know. He has money, power, influence and he wants to change the world—literally. And he will do it, if we let him.’

She rolled her head towards him, her gaze resting as ever on his prominent hawk nose and piercing blue eyes, and reached behind her for the pack of cigarettes.

‘Why is it up to us to stop him? And aren’t we trying to change the world ourselves?’

‘We are learning how to change it only for ourselves,’ replied Llew, ‘and for those who choose to freely accompany us. Henri is more ambitious—he will change it for everyone, regardless of whether they wish it to change.’ Taking the lit cigarette from her, he inhaled slowly, letting the blue cloud of smoke drift from his lips, his eyes fixed and bright. ‘Frankly, we’re lazier and more selfish, and don’t want the responsibility.’

‘I don’t see the point,’ shrugged Darley. ‘If we change it for ourselves, then it will *appear* to have changed for everyone—why isn’t that enough? I don’t understand why he would even think that way.’

‘There you have me, neither do I.’

‘I mean, will the temples suddenly go poof! and turn into towers, or what?’

Llew laughed his tinny laugh. ‘Your guess is as good as mine. Believing that you can make the world behave as you wish doesn’t take much imagination, but believing that you can penetrate to the world beyond—if indeed there is a world beyond the imagination—and change that: well, *chutzpah* doesn’t really do it justice. Henri wants to play God, and I don’t know how we can stop him.’

‘Unless we pretend the same ambition, you mean?’

‘Indeed.’

‘So, these sacrifices you want me to make—presumably I will have to demonstrate that ambition?’

Llew turned towards her, and quietly took her hand. ‘I fear so. It will mean being with him, working with him, and more—until he trusts you completely. You must be the only one.’

‘But Llew, even assuming I can do that, you know how long it will take? Why is it our job to stop him? I don’t understand.’

‘Believe me, my darling, it’s not my choice. The only thing I want is to take you home with me, and for us to live and love together. But I can’t. It’s—’

He stopped, his lips compressed into a thin line.

‘It’s what?’

‘Come, Darley, you know why. The world is as it is and will be. We have chosen a path to follow. If we abandon that path we will be faced with choosing another, and another... there’s always a choice, but we can’t avoid choosing.’

She turned to him, her eyes glistening. ‘I know. But my choice is to be with you and I can’t *see* when that will be.’

‘We’ll find a way my darling, never fear. In the meantime...’ He took her softly in his arms, stroking her hair and kissing the tears from her black eyes, ‘you can show me how much you love me.’

*

The snake writhed and twisted in him, the pressure of its desire urgent, its force and strength ascending. He felt his body taut and hard, sweating, shaking as the serpentine power fought its way through his tearing flesh.

He hadn't expected such pain, such screaming, insistent urgency, but he could not surrender to it: there could never be surrender... The thought rose momentarily in him like a burst capsule of light, an oily, seeping puncture.

And then he cried, 'Too soon!' as the pillar of burning fire started to ebb. 'Too soon!'

Screaming himself now, he fought the slow dispersal of the force within him, his agonising failure.

*

'What went wrong, Henri? I thought we were ready?'

Henri, shaking and pale, stood over her, his eyes a mask of harlequin despair.

'Evidently, we were wrong, Darley. We did not reach to the heart of it. Something is missing in us that I cannot detect. The fault lies in us. The ritual was perfect. There is nothing more that we can do. It is over, for now.' His voice was calm, calculating.

'What do you mean? Can't we try again?'

'And fail again? No. We were exact, we were precise, we were thorough—it is our nature. But perhaps that is not what is required. We are of the same spirit, of the same mind. That must be the flaw. How else could we fail?'

'Together we are perfect, but only as a temple urn is perfect—only perfect of its type. We must find the oil to fill it—another kind of faith to complete ours.'

Darley rose and, returning to the table, contemplated the cards. 'I am too tired to *see*, Henri, but perhaps the answer lies here.'

Slowly, she removed the pack from its silk cloth and closed her eyes. 'The cards will show us.'

*

'She's perfect, Henri. She has great gifts.'

'I agree. She makes it difficult for us to *see* her, and that takes a lot of skill. Are you sure she'll work with us?'

'She's a mistress of illusion, and we'll never be sure of her.' She stopped, and then, sighing, continued, 'But she is a woman and she wants a child. You are rich, handsome, powerful, and you have an ambition that she can be persuaded to share.' She looked at him. 'Any woman would want you. But be careful, we must not underestimate her—she won't fear you.'

Henri nodded. 'Very well. Let us begin.' He took her hand. 'You make a great sacrifice, my love, but do not be dismayed.' He fingered the jewel hanging around his neck. 'This is our union—while it remains whole, the powers we have amassed will not desert us, and the soul we share cannot fade. She cannot stop us unless she first destroys this jewel.'

'Let me see it again.' The woman took the glittering crystal and held it, feeling its smooth warmth in her palm. 'It's a precious thing, Henri.'

'It is the *only* thing. The world turns around it, and our paths weave through the turning world.'

'How can she harm us? She is one and we are many.'

'No, Darley, we are not many—we are alone. You know how the others of the Circle regard us. McGonagle mistrusts us, and as for Llywelyn, I mistrust him.'

'As do I. He stares at me sometimes.' She shivered. 'Do we need him, Henri?'

He pursed his lips. 'For now. But if you can persuade Madeleine, perhaps not. We shall see.'

'She can be won over, I'm sure of it.'

'Good.'

'You look tired. Why don't we go to bed?'

He nodded. 'Yes. But we will sleep alone. From now on, we are colleagues only—if, as you say, Madeleine has the sight, then we must respect her and her art.'

'But Henri—'

'I'm sorry, Darley, but we cannot take the risk.'

'Of course, you're right.' Relinquishing the jewel, she bowed her head. 'And as I love you, I will do as you desire.'

'It isn't my desire, Darley, it is what has to be done.'

'Yes.'

*

Madeleine wakes. Already her hand is reaching for the journal that lies waiting beside her. She begins to write, stilling her mind and recalling each dream in turn. She remembers everything. As she recalls them, she makes brief notes. Most are familiar, and she dismisses them in a few lines.

The last is interesting. Henri and the woman are standing over her. They measure her, as if fitting her for a shroud. The woman is sketching her. Finally, they take a pot of some waxy liquid and anoint her body. Henri touches the jewel at his neck with one hand, the other he places on her belly, drawing a sign in the oil. The woman stops drawing and places her hand on his, and both hands move slowly over the sign, obliterating it.

Madeleine puts down the journal and takes up another. She opens it to a list of colours, foods, animals. She closes her eyes, reviewing the words. Some fade: the others assume shapes. She has in her mind's eye the spirit that she will embody that day. Today she is the Deer, cautious and watchful. She nods. Henri will be back in time for dinner.

Rising, she puts on a gown and walks to the small altar. She prays.

*

An hour later, she has completed her rituals. She has chosen her day's wardrobe, and has ordered her meal.

She visualises the vaulted room in the Island Temple. It contains only a large candle on a pedestal and three figures that surround it. One is of stone, a man, robed and poised, hands raised. The second is of obsidian, a tall, sharp-featured woman. And the third is of wood, mysterious, hooded, hawk-like. They stand, their eyes closed in concentration, the candle highlighting their faces. A wide white circle is drawn on the floor around the group.

Madeleine focuses on the man of stone, homing in on the leather band encircling his neck, from which hangs a jewelled pendant. It is hard to see, becoming less defined the more directly she glances at it.

'Clever,' she whispers to herself. 'Hmm, he is very clever, very deceitful...it's almost as if he knew I would be watching. But how? Spies?' She lets her eyes roam the room. 'Not here. Where? Can he *see*, I wonder?'

Frustrated, she turns her attention to the black figure, studying its angles and planes. New facets have appeared, sharpening and straightening the pose. It has become a jagged-edged dagger now, the hair thinned to a point. In contrast, the wooden figure is softening, its edges blurring, the folds of the robe flowing into each other.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Madeleine smiles and lifts her journal, stroking the rough cover. Inhaling the fragrant scent wafting from the two bowls of warm oil placed at each side of the door, she turns to a fresh page and begins to sketch the woman, who has been occupying her thoughts for several weeks.

‘Perhaps it is Isis who *sees*? Yes, perhaps.’

She draws the lines quickly and decisively, feeling the form emerge complete. She knows Isis.

Finally, she writes ‘The Chariot’ at the foot of the page and blows on the fresh ink until it is dry, before leafing through the journal to another part-drawn page. She gazes contemplatively at the hooded figure there and draws in a stick for him to hold, thinking that later, she will ask the Bird Tarot for guidance on the other symbols to include.

When she finishes she adds a few careful flourishes to the title: ‘The Hierophant’.

*

Now it is midday, and Madeleine rises. She makes a sign and exits the room, pausing to wipe her feet as she passes the threshold. She makes a light lunch in a small alcove, first considering the patterns of crystal and silver arrayed for her meal, making small adjustments. She eats slowly and deliberately, arresting and savouring the fragrances and textures of the food on her tongue.

After her lunch she returns to her bower and rests, her journal by her side. From time to time, she takes it up, making careful notes. Her Tarot reading the evening before had revealed a new figure for her collection and she had hoped that her dreams would flesh out the reading, but she had recognised nothing, and the image remained hazy.

She flicks through the journal. Most pages are lightly sketched in—it will be a long time before they are finished, depending, as they do, on dreams and signs and flashes of inspiration—but a few are almost complete, and she mouths their names as she turns to them: The Emperor, The Empress, The Magus... She stops at the page showing The Fool, staring at the vague outlines. An image from her dreams comes into her mind and she begins to draw again, a face on a leaf. She pauses, concentrating, and slowly brushes her fingertips around the outline of the eyes, which are large and grey like her own.

‘Good,’ she says aloud. ‘A thorn in the flesh of Isis.’

She flips through to The Hierophant and studies the face before finding The Emperor and, holding both pages open, compares them.

‘Who will you help to win me, Isis?’ she says. ‘And will you succeed? No, I don’t think so. I will go, but I will return. You yourself will fail, as you failed before. You cannot change what already is.’

She closes her eyes and prays again, each syllable clear and strong, allowing the cool tones to melt softly into the curved and curtained walls of her chamber.

With an effort, she rises and walks slowly to the door, turning and bowing before she exits into the dim whispering world that she is so patiently transmuting into the cards. It is cool in the corridor and she pulls her shawl close around her as she moves towards a door shadowed in red where light leaks through ancient cracks.

Fire

Ifan scanned the treeline with his binoculars. The air was quite still as he stepped carefully through the damp bracken. A dog barked farther down the valley, and a light drizzle began to fall.

He was sure the bird was there, but he couldn't see it. Shouldering his rucksack, he continued towards the forest, stopping several times to examine the densely-foliaged branches where he suspected it might be, but without success.

He hitched up his collar, unperturbed. He was used to the cold, used to the damp, used to the suddenly darkening skies. Looking up, he wondered what it would be like to wake up to sunshine in the morning instead of the grey monotonous wetness of these hills.

'Wouldn't be my cup of tea at all, would it, eh, boy?' he said to the big dog walking obediently beside him. Dai had trained it well. 'I'd miss the clouds and the grey mists and the green, green grass of home, don't you think?'

The dog gazed at him patiently as he lit his pipe.

'Yes, you're right. Just time for a quick look, eh? See what you can dig out. Feindio!'

The brown bulk of the dog shot off into the trees as Ifan cleaned his pipe, knocking the ash out on a boot before settling down to wait.

The dog had been gone a good few minutes before Ifan heard the bird off to his left, and sounding near. Lifting the binoculars, he carefully followed each branch of the firs where the bird must be, but if it was there he couldn't see it. It was almost as if it were invisible.

He shivered as the sky slowly darkened. The dog was usually company enough, but lately he'd had the urge to go into the village more often, and had spent several evenings in the Red Lion listening to the old men's tales. They seemed to enjoy his air of mystified scepticism, and slyly teased him with stranger and more incredible stories until he'd get quite angry.

'That's ridiculous, Llew! Shapeshifters? Bloody hell! I never heard such rot.'

Llew smiled briefly. 'Stupid or not, Ifan, the world is as we believe it is, up here,' he said, pointing a long finger at his temple. 'Change your belief and the world changes. In this world,' he continued with a grimace and an almost contemptuous glance around the pub, 'no-one believes in anything except their grub and their wages. But the old folk,' he continued with

flashing eyes, 'well, Ifan bach, they lived in a world where *everyone* believed, and that world was very different from ours. They never had TV experts telling them things weren't possible, and so those things *were* possible. They saw the things they saw, and that's all there is to it. We see the things we see—and if some white-coated functionary wants to tell *me* that what I see isn't really there, well, I pray for his soul.'

A series of grunts and *ayes* issued from the old men. A coal fell onto the hearth with a dull clonk, sparking weakly and leaving a faint trail of grey ash.

'Tell me that it's different for you, Ifan,' Llew was suddenly serious. 'You stick to what you see, I would say.'

Ifan stared at him. It was a trick, wasn't it?

'Hmmf. You've never imagined anything?' Llew continued. 'You've never seen a deer that turned out to be a shape made of shadows?'

Ifan snorted. 'I've never seen a witch riding a broomstick, and neither have you!'

'You're right there, my lad, more's the pity.' He leaned towards Ifan conspiratorially. 'But I've got a funny feeling that you will. Look out for those that are too familiar too soon, Ifan lad. Aye, a nod's as good as a wink.' He nodded wisely. 'And witches are not all crones on sticks,' he grinned.

'Garn, you do spout rubbish.'

'Don't be too quick to mock, Ifan. You heard the goatsucker.'

Ifan stared at Llew, searching. 'The nightjar? How do you know? Have you seen it? Shy is one thing but I tell you, that bird is either invisible or I'm imagining it, and I was never one for imagining things.'

'You've got a solid head on you, sure enough,' mumbled another of the old men, wheezing happily.

'Now, now, our Ifan won't be taken for a fool by anything, which is more than can be said for you, you old sheepshagger.' Llew shook his head. 'Remember that time in the clearing and I went for a piss in the bushes? I wasn't gone more than a couple of minutes and you were white as a sheet when I came back.'

The old man sucked his teeth. 'I don't know about that,' he sniffed, his eyes shining, 'but I'd swear on my mam's grave there was something dark there, and not just dark, mind you.' He bent and picked up the coal from the hearth, tossing it into the red depths of the fire. 'And the only thing near was you, my friend.'

The room went quiet.

‘Ah, it’s me as the nightjar, is it? Sucking out entrails and suchlike by the light of the moon? Well, I won’t deny it—what would be the point when intellectuals like yourself and old Biddy here are on my trail?’

Ifan shook his head at Llew’s smiling bright-eyed confession. Llew wasn’t stupid, and there was something about the old men’s wizened heads staring into the coals of the fire that for a brief moment made Ifan wonder. He changed the subject.

‘Don’t mind me asking, Llew, but what is it you do? You don’t seem to spend much time in the shop.’

‘Oh, this and that.’ The others chuckled quietly to themselves, but Llew ignored them. ‘A bit of dealing in curiosities,’ he expanded, smiling. ‘I’m a bit of a curious man.’

Ifan was tired of this game, now. ‘Yes, well. I’ll have look at that leaky roof of yours tomorrow,’ he grunted as he put on his heavy greatcoat.

Llew nodded. ‘Thanks, Ifan, you’re a good lad. There’ll be a few quid in it for you. Mind how you go now—it’s a nasty night.’

Ifan left to a muted round of coughing, that might have been laughter. He didn’t really give it any thought though. Something new had risen in him, a restlessness he couldn’t shake off. He was irritated and dissatisfied, mainly with himself. What Llew had said made perfect sense, and he couldn’t stand it.

He loved his job, loved the wildness, loved his freedom, yet lately he’d found himself talking around the pub fire with these dreadful old men, listening as they spoke of the history of the hills and told the old tales. Dragonlight and dragonfire and dragon-this and dragon-that and Pendragon and... it was endless. He didn’t know why he kept coming—he’d never had time for that sort of blather before, but now it held a fascination that he couldn’t explain, and as he crossed the bridge towards the start of the logging trail that led through the forest and over the ridge he walked untypically quickly, keeping the dog close.

Twenty minutes later, as he turned off the logging trail and onto a muddy track, he could see the lights of his cabin a hundred yards away. He’d taken to leaving them on out of a feeling that someone might come looking for him, although he had no reason to think anyone would.

He shook his head. It wasn’t like him to feel unsettled like this. He was a grown man, and firmly grounded in the soil of these hills. Nothing could scare him, ‘Leastways, nothing that I’m likely to meet around here,’ he

considered soberly, assuring the dog. ‘And if Llew ups and turns into a bat one night, well, I’ll be waiting.’

*

The bird flew into the clearing low and fast, and Madeleine almost missed it in her haste to get out of the squalls of rain that batted against her face.

‘He’s here, Darley,’ Madeleine shouted as she gained the porch.

‘Yes, I saw.’

‘It’s always raining in this damned place, and it’s so cold it makes me want to scream. Thank God it’s the last time.’ She shook out her long black hair. ‘Is he still asleep?’

Darley gently lifted the hood of the swaddled child in her arms. ‘Yes.’

‘Good. You might as well put him to bed.’

‘Very well.’

Madeleine turned to stare at the low black cloud hiding the peak of Moel Siabod while the other woman took the great key and manoeuvred it into the lock of the massive oaken door.

The familiar odours of dust and mould enveloped her as she stepped over the threshold and into the echoing, circular, stone-flagged hall. Hugging her shawl tightly around her shoulders, she slowly circled the room, brushing the rough old walls with her fingertips before moving to the centre, where she bowed her head, standing silently, allowing the stone and weight and solidity of the tower to enter her with its dark and time-filled spaces—five hundred years of silence and strength.

The child belongs here

The words entered her head as an echo from faraway, a whispered prayer, and she replied as the sighing of reeds and the whistle of wind.

This is not the child

She waited while the melancholy unbodied voices drifted in slow swirling spirals, filling the air.

The child belongs here

An eddy of air passed over her like the touch of a feather, and suddenly Llew’s voice came from deep in the shadow of the massive fireplace.

‘I’m sorry, Madeleine, I was delayed.’ A figure was crouched by the hearth, match in hand. As the flame caught, slowly licking up the sides of the blackthorn, it turned. ‘We’re no longer alone. They’ve started clearing the way for the cabins I told you about, and I wanted to take a look.’

'I'm glad you're here, Llew. The child has been difficult and I'm hoping being here will calm him.' She stopped and considered what he had said. 'Holiday homes? Tourists won't bother us.'

'No, they're for the Rangers. The new National Park. But we'll be long finished here before the first one arrives.' He nodded and rising, patted the hard stone chimney. 'We've done good work here, Madeleine, the old place has served us well.'

'I won't be sorry to say goodbye to it, Llew, pretty as it is.'

'Pretty?' Llew laughed. 'I despair of you sometimes.'

Madeleine lifted her chin. 'What have you been up to? You look smug.'

'So would you be, my love,' he replied through pursed lips.

'Yes? So, tell me.'

'Henri has had a great loss. Something very rare...' he paused, lifting his chin, 'and very precious. Something that he can't replace.'

'You stole something from Henri?'

'It... came into my possession. I can't be connected with the theft, although Henri will suspect me. Don't worry, it's nowhere that he can find it.' He paused. 'How is he, by the way?'

'Disappointed, angry.' Madeleine shivered, moving closer to the glow of the crackling fire. 'He's been uncharacteristically jittery for a while—I thought it was to do with our failure, but maybe not. What you have stolen must be very important to him.'

Llew took her hand. 'Isn't he happy with Serge?'

'He stares at the child sometimes, but I don't think he feels anything for him. He can't suspect—it's just that he's so cold, Llew!' She shivered. 'I had to get away.'

'Is the child well?'

'You'll have to ask Darley.'

Llew took her hand. 'Madeleine, my darling, you know how dangerous this is? If Henri suspected for a second that he had been so thoroughly betrayed—' He was grinning '—we'd have to elope.' For a moment his air of studied gaiety dulled. 'And Henri would come after us with weapons far more destructive than shotguns. He has influence over the elements, Madeleine, did you know that? It's lucky for us that he isn't interested in earthly power, otherwise fire and brimstone wouldn't be the half of it. He likes to play God.'

‘He scares me, Llew. When I agreed to this... marriage... with him, I had no idea.’ Her cool grey eyes looked deeply into his. ‘I can help with your deceptions, and that gives us time, but it doesn’t bring us any closer to our goal.’

‘We’re all scared, Madeleine, even Henri. We take up the Path with only our poor human conceptions of where it will lead. We worry if we are good or bad people, we struggle with our consciences—and we realise that, whatever we say, it’s pride and ambition that motivate us.’ He paused. ‘There’s no getting away from it. We’re human and we can only draw on human motives, whatever we claim. You and me, we’re no better than Henri. Perhaps not even as good.’

‘How can you say that? Whatever I am, I’m not like Henri, and I hope you’re not, either.’

‘Well, there you go. We’ll have to agree to differ.’ He gazed around the room slowly, sniffing like a dog. ‘Where *is* Serge?’

‘In his room with Darley, I think. Why?’

‘Why? Because he’s your child. Don’t you think you should at least know where he is?’

Madeleine’s expression hardened for a second before she recovered herself.

‘We know he’s safe, Llew, and that’s all that matters. We need time for our work—’

‘Yes, our bloody work. It consumes our lives, and I’m not sure any more that it’s worth it. Look at Henri—Look at *us*. What are we doing here? Here, in the midst of the great world, we have peace, we have love,’ he smiled, ‘and yet we spend our time sitting in dark rooms making grandiose plans and neglecting our children.’

Releasing her hand, he stood and wandered over to the door. ‘I’m going down into the village. Do you want to come?’

‘No, I have work to do here.’ Madeleine stood and kissed him. ‘Don’t be long, Llew, will you? We get so little time together. And you might want to put on some clothes.’

‘Ah, yes, it gets harder to remember... I’ll be back in an hour.’

The door closed, and Madeleine leaned back in the old creaking chair. Llew’s concern for the child was unexpected. She opened her journal and flipped through the pages until she found The Hierophant.

‘Oh Llew, how disappointing you’ve turned out to be,’ she said aloud. ‘And what is this “something” you’re hiding from me?’

She took a brush and made delicate adjustments to the face, lightening and blending the features, making the jaw less defined, smoothing and rounding the lips.

‘Eunuch Hierophant, my love, how could I have been so deceived in you?’ She slowly scanned the corners of the room. ‘And where have you hidden it?’

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply and placed her hands flat on the page, carefully avoiding the fresh paint. She felt the colours and forms seep into her mind, the colours harmonious, the forms clear and defined.

‘What are you hiding?’

A shock ran through her.

*

As he crossed the bridge into the village, Llew came to a sudden halt. Closing his eyes, he said aloud, ‘So, Madeleine, you reveal yourself at last.’

Taking a small object from the pocket of his greatcoat, he concentrated, and the great fire rose in his mind. Opening his eyes, he put his hands on the warm stone balustrade and stared into the water where the swirls and eddies, catching the late sun, were turning crimson and yellow. Finally, the flash of a burning fire seemed to rise from the water into the air and streak across the dark and lowering sky over the forest, where a lightning bolt crashed down.

‘Goodbye, Madeleine.’

There was a faint flutter of wings, and then silence. A shadow wafted into the trees and then over the broken branches and debris of a clearing towards a thin column of smoke. But as the bird broke out of the trees, the air became a thick haze, almost solid, and struggling, exhausted, it fell.

In the car, Darley watched as the fast dark shape crashed sideways into a fencepost. She stroked the baby’s head thoughtfully. Llew would be all right, she knew, but he was impatient—Madeleine could not be caught out by such a crude attack.

No, she must be allowed to pursue her plan until Darley could devise something necessarily more intricate. Above all, Madeleine must be allowed to complete her journal, risky as that would be.

Madeleine was still staring at the red flames engulfing the house. Darley sighed and pulled the child closer. This was women’s work.

*

Ifan ran through the teeming rain, the dog yelping ahead of him. The column of dust and flames had thinned, and now he could just see glimpses of a dull red glow as cleared the ridge and twisted and turned down the narrow path to Llew's house. Emerging into the clearing he heard the screams of a child, and increasing his pace, he almost fell over a shadowy figure lying on the ground in front of him.

He recognised Llew at once, and putting his arms under his shoulders, dragged the light unmoving form back to the trees, just in time to avoid the car that came careering out of the smoke. He caught a glimpse of a woman's face at the wheel as she screeched past onto the logging track. She was smiling. Another figure was hunched in the back, cradling the child whose screams he had heard.

*

'What happened, Llew?'

It was three days later, and Llew and Ifan were sitting by the fire in the Red Lion.

'Search me, lad. I was on my way down to the village when I saw lightning over the woods and then there was an almighty crash. It had to be the house—I got back up there as fast as I could, but when I arrived, the clearing was full of smoke. I tried to get closer to see, but then something hit me, and that was the last thing I remember.'

'You were lucky. The woman in the car wasn't in the mood to let anything get in her way. She would've run straight over you.'

'Yes, it was Madeleine, and she had her son with her. She was probably panicking trying to get the child away.' He paused. 'At least nobody was badly hurt.'

Ifan glanced at the swathe of bandages around Llew's head. 'Is Madeleine the woman who's staying with you?' he asked. 'Who is she? An artist or something?'

'She paints, yes, among other things.'

'I've seen her out in the woods once or twice, picking foxgloves. I told her they were poisonous, and she just laughed. Odd sort of woman, I thought.'

Llew nodded. 'She's the wife of an old friend, and a bit of an eccentric. Foxgloves you say? Oh well, she won't be back. The house is in ruins.'

'Will you rebuild it? It's the best spot on the hill.'

‘No, I don’t think so. It was a bit of a burden, to be honest. I’m rarely here these days—I really only held on to it for Madeleine, who has a peculiar affection for it. I’ve already had offers from the Commission. They said they want to build more cabins for you Rangers, and they’re looking for somewhere to put a water-tower to supply them. You never know,’ he grinned, ‘if they stop umming and ahing you might be able to put in a shower at last. The ladies go for that sort of thing, you know.’

Ifan nodded seriously. ‘I’d heard that too.’

Llew smiled to himself at Ifan’s deliberate refusal to be amused. ‘I’ll be off, then.’ He stood up. ‘You’ve got a friend in me, Ifan. Anytime.’ He held out his hand, and Ifan stood up.

‘Look after yourself, Llew.’

‘Oh, I can do that, all right. Don’t you worry about me. Old Llew knows how to keep himself safe.’ He hesitated. ‘It’s you I’m worried about, my lad. I don’t like to think of you up there in the woods, all alone. It’s not natural for someone your age. And what if there was a fire?’

‘I’m used to it. And I’ve got the walkie-talkie to contact Dai. I’ll be all right.’

‘Well, the shop’s warm and the door’s always open, you know that. There’s a bed in the back.’

As he left the pub, Ifan looked back at the short, thin man standing so confidently by the fire. The thought passed through his head that he should look far more shook up than he did.

Water

Madeleine followed the trickles of water as they made their way through the little mountain scene. She could watch the miniature waterfall dropping into the polished rose quartz pool for hours, the tiny glistening turbulence that signifies renewal—the water now full of air and minerals from its path through the soft stones—flashing fire as it hit the illuminated pool.

Three o'clock. Henri would be back at four. She put down her pen. It had been a productive few days. She turned the pages of her journal carefully. Henri would be happy with these, she smiled to herself—but not with the other cards, the ones that told the real story.

She thought again about Serge. The poor boy! Such a burden he would bear.

Madeleine flipped back to the beginning of the journal. The Fool stared out at her. Madeleine traced the outline of the sack that the figure carried, hoping that she would know enough to be able to make use of what it contained.

Closing the journal, she sighed and got up to stand in front of a painting of the old tower house, framed on the wall. Serge must be protected, and so must the Fool, when she appeared... It would take all Madeleine's remaining strength. The weight of deceptions exhausted her.

Three-thirty.

She picked up the journal again and contemplated the cards, wondering how the Fool could succeed. She herself would be gone, able only to hint and suggest, and Llew...he too would need guidance. Circumstance, coincidence, accident: all would have to be invoked if Henri was to be defeated.

She glanced out of the window of the ballroom. Yes, there he was, poor Serge, standing disconsolately by the lake, his pony's head down, drinking the water, waiting for Henri's return, to be humiliated once more.

How things go! Madeleine wondered at it all, the roles we are given, the rewards and punishments. Why were things this way? What a terrible game it all was, Henri's game.

*

'Good journey?'

'No worse than usual.' Henri laid his briefcase on the table. 'Serge seems to be taking to his pony at last.'

'Oh?'

'You should take more interest in him, Madeleine. You neglect him.'

'Mmm.'

'You might at least speak to the boy. He says he's not seen you since I left.'

'You know I've been busy with the cards. He's all right, isn't he?'

'So Darley says. But he was rather sullen today. Perhaps he needs more distraction.'

Madeleine put down her cup.

'I was thinking of spending a few days at Mirepoix. He could come with me.'

'Do you think that's wise, Madeleine? You're safer here.'

'I've made arrangements, Henri. We'll be fine.'

'I wish you weren't so fond of that place.'

'I feel safer there than here. I know you try, but this great pile—well, it's *you*, it's masculine, stiff, empty... Why do you look so disgruntled all of a sudden?'

'Be careful, Madeleine, that's all I ask.'

'Of course I'll be careful. Do you think I don't understand how important all this is? You must trust me. You can't do everything—you *have* to trust me.' She looked at him. 'Has something happened? Tell me.'

'Llywelyn has disappeared. It's a cause for concern.'

'Well, you've been expecting it, haven't you? It can't be a surprise. But you make too much of him—Llew isn't a threat. He wants the same thing as us, after all.'

'You don't understand, Madeleine. He has his own plans. If it wasn't for him and his friends it would be done by now. They *are* a danger to us.'

'I don't disbelieve you, but I think you take him too seriously. However, you know best. What will you do?' She paused and pursed her lips.

'Look for him, of course. He seems to have taken measures not to be found.'

'In that case it might take some time. Meanwhile, there are things I must do in Mirepoix.' She sighed. 'I'm leaving tomorrow. I'll take Serge if you

think he needs to be distracted, although I'm not sure it'll do him any good.'

'Henri's face went still for a moment, and just for an instant there was a glint of suspicion in his eyes. 'It's almost time. Soon you will have to make the choice.'

'Yes, well. Mirepoix is almost ready. I think it might have to be there.'

'Then what are we doing here?'

'A deception and an alternative, Henri. This house is strong—in fact it is perfect—and too obvious. Mirepoix too is strong, but it is strong in illusion, deception, misdirection—the most powerful female magic.' She laughed. 'If we need to use La Baume it will mean that Llywelyn is cleverer than I think he is, or perhaps that he has found an ally who can see through my deceptions. It shouldn't happen, Henri—but it's possible.'

'I failed before because I didn't have you, Madeleine. Earth magic is necessary, belief, persistence, blood—all is necessary,' he grimaced. 'But I have to say that I am concerned. With Serge, everything was properly prepared, everything was ready. It was clear from the failure of the ritual that he could not be the prodigy we had hoped for, but he shows no sign at all. It's inexplicable. Even if he isn't exactly what we envisaged, he ought to be more...'

'More like you, Henri? But why should he be? If we knew what he *should* be like, I could create the illusion. Illusions are as powerful as the real thing. But we *don't* know, and Serge is what he is. Perhaps he'll surprise us one day. He surely has a role to play.'

'Maybe so.' Henri lit his cigarette, studying the flame of his lighter. 'But we can't afford to wait any longer. Fire, metal, earth, water, wood, growth, life. Without even one of them, everything is lost, and we will dwell eternally in illusion.'

'Illusion is all we can know, Henri. That is why I must go to Mirepoix, and why you must make this place yours, entirely, completely. As long as we are true to ourselves, we will succeed.'

'Indeed, the tower and the temple—together we will penetrate the veil.'

Madeleine laughed. 'If that's how you must think of it.'

'It's foolish to think it can be any other way.'

'There are many ways and many kinds of fool, my love.'

Stone

‘It will do this time I think, Madeleine,’ Henri said, unsmiling.

‘Yes. I’ll need to make some small changes, but it feels right, the energy is good.’

‘You are certain?’

‘I can’t be certain, Henri.’

‘I am not comfortable with uncertainty, Madeleine, it isn’t my nature.’

‘No. So you’ll need to trust me. Isn’t that why I’m here?’

‘Henri nodded. ‘That is so.’ He stood back, taking in the bulk and presence of the house, its solidity. ‘I must say I am surprised, Madeleine. La Baume is certainly to my taste, but I didn’t expect it to be to yours.’

‘Taste has nothing to do with it. It’s right, that’s all.’

Henri nodded. ‘Mirepoix would not do?’

‘No,’ she sighed. ‘A dead end.’

Madeleine replayed in her head an earlier conversation with Llew. He had been enthusiastic.

‘The tower’s perfect. Henri’s very close to success, and if you fail, we risk everything—and that’s not a figure of speech. The world’s darkening, Madeleine. Every day the omens become harder to read. We’re losing, our power is waning, and we must succeed—or hide, and turn to lies and deceit. I want that least of all.’

‘Llew, son of Llywelyn, son of Llywelyn,’ she smiled lazily, ‘I shouldn’t believe you, but I have no choice.’ She looked at him, her eyes sparkling in the rushlight.

Around them the calm and solid walls of the temple gave their weighty assent. She bent towards her lover, enfolding herself in his certainty, softening herself until she was a wisp of nothing, a hazy mist of unknowing. She felt his spirit enter her, the violet translucence enveloping and subduing her, and she slowly gave herself to him, dissolving, molecule by molecule, atom by atom, wave after wave. There was no end to her giving.

‘Madeleine?’

She lifted her head. ‘I’m sorry. What did you say?’

Henri looked into her clear grey eyes. ‘I said Darley will help us.’

‘Oh. Do you think it’s wise to trust her so far? Will she not be jealous?’

‘We have known each other a long time. We tried and failed together, and I know she no longer harbours her own ambitions. She is adept and she is loyal—I have every confidence in her.’

‘Why her? Why not Llew? I don’t like his manner, but—’

‘Ah, Llywelyn. Yes, he is more powerful, but I *don’t* trust him.’

She looked at him sharply. ‘Then why did you keep him so close? His energies are very dark, as I’ve told you before.’

‘We are brothers, he and I, and you are our sister, our lover...’ He smiled a rare smile, thin and knowing. ‘Be careful, Madeleine, he will try to suborn you. I understand your distaste of him, and that will give you a measure of defence, but that alone is no protection.’ He paused, watching her closely. ‘Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it is time to cleanse the Circle.’ He nodded to himself. ‘But first we have to find Llywelyn.’

*

‘We’ll call it Roland, or Rosalynd.’

Henri settled himself in the car seat and switched on the ignition. ‘They’re rather medieval names, Madeleine. Why not Guy or Gervaise for a boy, or Eleanor?’

‘Roland is so romantic! And soon we’ll have our own Dark Tower. No, Roland is perfect. Or Harold.’

Henri smiled. ‘Very well. Are you going to put on your seatbelt?’

‘It’s too uncomfortable. I know it upsets you, but I really can’t bear it.’

‘It doesn’t upset me, Madeleine.’ He paused for a second, and seemed to move his lips. ‘I wonder where Serge is?’ He glanced across the lawn to where the boy had been sitting. ‘He seems to have taken to that pony. Darley says he spends hours in the stable reading it the more gruesome fairy stories.’

Madeleine smiled, closing her eyes, preparing herself.

‘As long as it keeps him occupied. I feel like going fast, Henri—can we? And put the roof down, I want to feel the wind.’ She reached across him to press the button, lying back as the roof slowly opened and tucked itself away. Henri turned to rest his eyes on her for a moment, listening to the controlled whisper of the engine.

He put the car into gear, feeling the heavy surge of power as he would feel the weight of his desire, the inevitable energy of momentum, of how things were and had to be.

Accelerating as Madeleine had directed, the car slewed suddenly as it crossed a patch of loose gravel where a tractor rut had been levelled. Henri heard Madeleine's tiny gasp of pleasure as the car left the road, but there was no danger, the smooth lawns on either side stretching away to the boundary of the estate.

He turned his head to watch Madeleine's face just as a figure appeared at a canter beside him, the piebald pony's tail up. The car's rear end swung back and into the pony's fat stomach, breaking its legs. Serge was thrown through the open roof of the car, Henri feeling nothing as he lost his grip on the steering wheel. The blow on his head was just a sudden sensation as he blacked out.

Wood

‘Can you smell that, Llew? What is it?’

They both stopped and sniffed. ‘I can’t say I recognise anything out of the ordinary, lad. What am I looking for?’

‘There’s something strange here,’ said Ifan, making a face. ‘I’ve noticed it before a couple of times.’ He sniffed again. ‘Ashes, dung, rot—that’s the closest I can come.’

Llew shook his head. ‘I can’t smell anything. I’ve been back here several times myself you know, just in case something survived, buried under the debris, but there’s nothing left. The fire was too hot.’

They’d come to check out the new water-tower. Ifan didn’t use words like ‘spooky’ himself, but if he did, spooky was what he’d call it even though the clearing itself was unremarkable: a wide flat area of cleared timber, with the water-tower squatting in the centre, among the ruins of a large house, and ringed by piles of jumbled stone.

‘Hmm.’

‘What?’

‘I had a funny dream last night—well, actually I’ve had the same dream several times in the last couple of months. The old house was in it,’ Ifan nodded towards the ruin, ‘and somebody...’

‘Yes?’

Ifan coloured slightly. ‘I think it was a girl, but odd, more like a...’

‘Don’t tell me the fair maid Elan has been wooing you, Ifan,’ Llew grinned. ‘She must be making the rounds.’

‘I’m not a bloody idiot. No, It felt like someone I should know but didn’t recognise. Like with that bloody nightjar, familiar but invisible, if you see what I mean. She had something to do with the fire though.’

Llew nodded, staring at the remaining walls of the building, blackened with soot and dotted with burnt stubs of timber. In one of the ruined rooms, an enormous fireplace still stood, its massive gothic chimney intact.

‘It looks different out in the open,’ he mused, ‘I used to think there were all sorts of secrets hidden in that room.’

‘It’s not so secret now, is it?’ said Ifan curtly. He felt unsettled, as if everything had suddenly changed. ‘And not much chance of it getting burned again now, with the water-tower slap bang in the middle of it. Odd sort of setup, really.’

‘They didn’t want to waste money clearing it if they didn’t need to, I expect,’ Llew smiled, ‘and the stone will be useful to them later.’ They gazed together at the new tower. ‘Anyway, there are no more secrets hidden here, my lad, and I should know. The magic’s gone.’

Ifan felt goosebumps on the back of his neck. ‘I don’t know, Llew. The plainer things are, the more they can hide, it seems to me.’ He shivered. ‘Let’s get back, I’ve things to do.’

Paper

Serge studied the card, and looked again at the commentary to the painting.

“The Queen sits above the others. She knows their faults and their lies. She is benevolent, though her gifts may not appear so to her supplicants, for they are liberating. Her most exquisite gift of all is of self-knowledge, and the recipients of her gifts fear this above all else.”

The girl seemed to him very young for a queen, but her posture was confident, if disdainful. He wondered for a moment who the sitter had been. His mother had had many models, men, women, boys, girls, and some that Serge had been unable to sex from his vantage point in the chestnut tree outside her studio window. He’d sat there many hours unseen, for although Madeleine had insisted that huge windows be cut into the walls of the former ballroom, the largest room in the house, she never looked out. She didn’t seem interested in the light itself, or where it came from, only in what it illuminated, herself and her work.

He turned a page of the journal. Next was *The Empress*, evidently a parodic self-portrait. Framed by an extravagant assemblage of exotic beasts, a pregnant woman sat, wide-eyed and full-lipped. She had a knowing look and a cynical eye, carefully weighing up the supplicant before her, measuring their weakness, taking notes.

“Like the Queen of Pentacles, the Empress knows all their faults and lies. But she is secretive, hard to know, hard to understand. She wields her power whimsically, bestowing favours on the ill-favoured, denying the rewards of virtue to the virtuous. She is not to be trusted.”

The portrait’s eyes were cold, her dispassionate glance unbeguiled by appearances. She knew that the bowing knight before her, apparently waiting humbly for her decision, nevertheless was wearing his best and

strongest chain-mail and his sharpest and most nimble sword. Should her verdict not be to his liking he would resist, but she was not afraid.

Serge had no feeling for this woman, neither love nor hatred, but only a vague discontent at her being his mother. Her death had not distressed him as much as the sight of his father grieving, but he dared say nothing to Henri, who continued to air his public face of easy calm, of controlled regret. Yes, regret more than grief, Serge considered.

After Madeleine's accident, Henri had had his estate manager organise the disposal of the piebald pony, and had given Serge another, bigger, more spirited replacement.

'Take her,' he'd commanded. 'She is well-trained, but it is for you to make her yours.' He stopped, waiting, but Serge did not respond. 'These things happen,' he had continued slowly, looking directly at Serge, who would have preferred punishment. 'There is nothing to be done.'

The second half of the journal contained reflections of Madeleine's life with Henri. Much was unflattering, much was critical and cruel, and at first Serge had left it unread, succumbing to an internal prohibition, but eventually he read it all. He himself was never mentioned.

*

'Serge! Come down! I want you to meet someone.'

Serge stared at the picture of his mother on the wall, and put down his pencil. He'd been trying to draw her, but he couldn't get the expression right, the faraway eyes.

Shaking his head, he rose from his desk and walked to the door. What did the old bastard want now?

His mother was standing in the hall. Serge stopped abruptly on the stairs, staring at her hat, the one she always wore when she went to meet friends. But she'd dyed her hair red, a deep smoky red, and it cascaded over her shoulders, over the old black fur coat. Henri was kissing her, his hand in the small of her back, leaning into her.

'Father?'

The woman pushed Henri's hand away as they turned to greet him.

'Ah, Serge. I'd like you to meet Melissa.'

It wasn't his mother, but another woman, a woman wearing his mother's clothes. She held out her hand.

'I'm so happy to meet you at last, Serge. My name's Melissa. I'm coming to live here.'

‘Are you the new housekeeper?’

Serge blushed as he blurted out the stupid question. Of course she hadn’t come to work here, she was just his father’s latest fancy. But dressing her up in his mother’s clothes? What was Henri doing?

Melissa smiled warmly. ‘No—but if Henri spends his time kissing the help, maybe I’ll apply.’

Henri was looking at Serge curiously.

‘Melissa will be staying with us, Serge. She will have Madeleine’s old room.’

Serge looked from one to the other.

‘I’m sorry, you took me by surprise. Father hadn’t mentioned you—’ And then he remembered. The week before, he’d been woken by screams in the early morning, just before dawn. He’d thrown back the bedclothes and scrambled down the stairs and out onto the lawn.

The curtains of the room at the centre of the house above the portico were open. It seemed that there were several people in the room, and he stood for several minutes outside the open window watching the shadows and listening. All he could hear were voices, not speaking, but hissing, cackling, gasping, while the shadows crouched and leapt around the room, bathed in red light.

Just as he turned to enter the house, one of the shadows appeared at the window. It was his mother, her head being roughly pushed over the cill, her black hair falling down the wall.

When he’d woken later in the morning, he’d dismissed it all as a dream. He’d gone outside to look for signs of his earlier presence but found none. The window was shut and everything looked normal. But when he’d looked closer at the wall below, he’d seen a black thread hanging next to a red one, both glistening like strands of a spider’s web in the dewy light.

‘You look very much like my mother.’

Henri smiled as Melissa bowed her head. Serge wondered again where Henri found these women.

‘I hope you two will get on.’

‘Of course we will, Henri,’ said Melissa, raising her head. ‘Won’t we, Serge?’

‘I’m sure we will.’

Serge returned to his study, and spent the next hour searching through his photographs. He found one at last, a photo of his mother dressed as Melissa had been that day, standing next to another woman who looked uncannily similar, a woman with red hair. His mother had had no sisters, no relatives at all as far as Serge could remember.

He closed the album and picked up the photo he'd been drawing from. It seemed somehow different, clearer, sharper, as though he was looking at it through different eyes. Now, instead of being distracted by the smile and the hand she was holding out in front of her, he could see her eyes clearly, the unlined pale skin around them, almost colourless, incapable of anchoring them to the face. He pictured Melissa's eyes staring up the stairs at him, and quickly finished the sketch.

*

'What are you reading, Serge?'

The voice behind him made him jump, and he dropped the book, which fell open at a full-page colour plate. Melissa put down the basket she was carrying on the bench beside him, and bent to see.

'What a strange-looking place. Where is it, do you know? I can't read what it says here,' she said, pointing to the top corner.

Serge didn't answer.

'Is it a secret? Whose book is it?'

He bit his lip. 'It's my mother's.'

'It's a sort of Tarot, isn't it? But I've never seen one like it before.' She started flipping through the journal, Serge looking anxiously over her shoulder as she examined some of the pages. 'I can recognise some of the obvious ones—this is The Tower, isn't it?'

'It's our old house in Wales,' said Serge, reluctantly. 'It's in Snowdonia. I've only been there a couple of times but I think my parents used to go there a lot. I didn't like it much, it's dark there in the woods, and it didn't feel good.'

Melissa looked at him. 'What do you mean, not good?'

Serge was staring at the page, his face dark. 'I can't tell you. Just not good. It burned down.'

'Henri doesn't talk about your mother much. I suppose it isn't surprising, even though he got me to dress in her clothes.' Melissa's grey eyes opened wider. 'Did it upset you to see me like that, Serge? I'm sorry, it wasn't my idea. You looked a bit spooked.'

Serge lowered his eyes. 'It's OK. I don't remember much about her,' he mumbled uncomfortably.

'Henri said that she died in a riding accident a few years ago, but he's hiding something, isn't he? Tell me—I won't tell anyone else.'

'I killed her.'

'What?'

'I killed her. It *was* an accident. They were going away, and I wanted to race them down to the road. I was on my pony and the car skidded into me and I fell on her. I broke her neck.'

'Oh, Serge, how dreadful!'

'Henri says he doesn't blame me, but he does.'

'I don't think so, Serge, really. He told me it was an accident. He can't think it's your fault, he didn't say you killed her. He loves you.'

'Then why does he leave me alone so much? Why does he hide so much from me? He's not like other people's fathers.' He glanced at her. 'What's he doing with you, anyway? Why are you with him? Is it because he's rich?'

'Oh, Serge, no, it's not like that.' Melissa's face was grave. 'I know that's what it looks like, but really—' She paused. 'We just ended up together, just as you ended up his son, just like everything ends up like it is.'

'I don't believe you. He's so old. How can you love him? I don't. I hate him.'

'What was your mother like?' asked Melissa, softly.

'She... She looked a lot like you. She was a painter. She painted the pictures in the ballroom. It was her studio.'

'The Tarot pictures? Like the ones in your book?'

'It's her journal. It tells you about the pictures, and... other things.' Serge looked scared. 'Don't tell father, will you?' he said, anxiously. 'He doesn't know about it. He doesn't know I've got it.'

'Why don't you want him to know? Are there things about him in there?'

'I shouldn't have said anything. You shouldn't have seen it.'

'Can I borrow it sometime? I'm a painter, too. I'd be very interested in seeing it.'

'No.' Serge snatched up the journal, closing it and putting it in the big poacher's pocket of the heavy black coat he always wore. 'It's mine. It's all

I have of hers. I don't want anyone else to see it.' He started towards the stairs and Melissa went still, following him with her eyes.

*

Serge stepped sideways into a dark alcove and tensed, listening, but there was nothing but the sound of his own breathing. He waited a moment longer, feeling the prickling of hairs on the back of his neck.

Madeleine had made him feel like that too, as if she was watching him, waiting for him to do something. He'd always felt that he disappointed her, that whatever it was that she was waiting for, that only he could bring her, was beyond him.

Back in his room, Serge put the journal on his desk and opened it at a page near the back. There was a sketch of another tarot card, and a photo of the finished work, and a commentary. This one was of hills, with mountains in the background and a ruin, all dark and mysterious under the faint light of a moon. The commentary was written in some kind of illegible old French as far as Serge could guess.

The next page showed another landscape and ruin, this time bleached by a powerful sun, and again in another language that Serge didn't recognise but thought must be Spanish or Portuguese.

He could think of only one reason for making the commentary so obscure—the other descriptions were hardly clear, but at least they were in a familiar language—and that was because they were important. He carefully removed the last six pages with a scalpel stolen from his mother's studio, and then walked over to the window. You had to look really hard to see that they were missing.

*

The air was thick around her as Melissa emptied her mind and waited. Normally it took just a few seconds for the air to clear, but here in Henri's house it took much longer and never smelled fresh. Eventually, the cold stone passages and echoing halls of a great tower began to appear. She felt herself as a light, wispy presence, no more, as she followed the dark walls to Serge's room.

He was sat at a massive oak table, long, dirty, straggly hair falling on to a book he was peering at. A woman sat in the corner opposite him, asleep, her crumpled dress catching glints of light from the two large candles that were the only illumination.

Melissa watched as Serge grunted and closed the book with a scowl, standing abruptly and moving over to the large stone fireplace. Bending,

with an effort he lifted the edge of a flat hearthstone and fumbled beneath it, dragging out an iron box. He quickly placed the book inside, and replaced the box, dropping the heavy hearthstone into place and smoothing a pile of ash and burnt wood dust over the cracks.

*

The next day, Melissa was in the ballroom after breakfast. She hadn't bothered to dress: there was no point—Henri was in London for a few days on business, and he didn't allow her to go out by herself, not that she wanted to.

The windows gave onto the lawn that stretched to the walls at either side of the entrance gates a quarter of a mile away along the meandering drive. Her gaze took in the wide green vista and the lake in its centre that glistened in the sun, the small white temple on its wooded island in shadow.

Melissa knew Serge took his pony to the lake to drink every morning after his ride. While she was waiting for him to appear, she pored over each of the pictures that lined the walls. She took photos of the ones she thought must be Madeleine's and compared them with her own Bird Tarot, but it threw no light on the puzzle.

*

Henri's Bentley appeared on schedule, and as she had hoped, so did Serge. As the sleek green car passed through the gates into the drive, Serge's pony raced out from beneath the cover of some trees and came alongside.

The ritual continued after Henri glided to a stop by the house. Getting out of the car, he grabbed the pony's reins and waited as Serge dismounted, handing the pony to the waiting stable boy, and then led Serge back across the lawn to the lake, and beyond to the small stream that fed the lake and formed the eastern boundary of the estate. Henri required Serge to explain how he had spent his time while his father had been away.

Melissa grunted. They would be at least an hour. She left the ballroom and made her way to Serge's room, and stood behind the desk chair. She stared over the desk, making small sounds under her breath and finally bowing her head slightly. Only then did she glance at the small fireplace. Moving quickly, she found the loose floorboard at the edge of the hearth and, prising it up, removed the small wooden box and took it to the desk. Lifting the lid she removing the journal from its hiding place.

Serge's scanner was old and slow, and Melissa had plenty of time to study the prints as she waited for the next one to finish. A few buildings had

their own cards and also figured in the backgrounds to others: a massive black tower, a white temple, a smaller tower, a rustic house. Human figures too: a red-haired woman, a black-haired man, a black woman, a jester or vagabond.

It seemed to Melissa that there was a story to be extracted somehow, but there was so much that was arguably symbolic she was at a loss. Reading had never been her strong point, and mostly she relied on staring at a page until something lit up her imagination.

She held the page she had just printed up to the light. There was a lake, out of proportion and the wrong colour, but a lake just the same, and on an island in its centre stood a white building, peeking out from behind some familiar-looking trees.

*

Melissa's feet sank into warm mud as she skirted the margin towards the small beach where the rowing-boat lay, its blue hull curlicued with patches of green and purple algae that quivered and blurred into the shape of a cross, a forest, a maze, into a bearded face... And there was a dog, yelping and snapping at something hidden.

She closed her eyes and refocused. She could lose hours following the slow transformations of her personal world, *the phantom world* as she called it, where she mostly spent her life—and which sometimes brought practical benefits: getting from the house to the lake had been via a billowing cornfield in the sun...

She had barely seen Henri since she had arrived weeks before, and it seemed that was what she could expect in the future. The household seemed to run with only a housekeeper and a couple of others who Melissa came across from time to time cleaning some small ornament or going on an unknown errand.

She didn't mind, although she was rather lost in the great house when she returned from—where? Where exactly did the landscape she moved through exist? She was aware only of dark dank corridors smelling of earth, even though when she looked through one of the cobwebbed windows she had seen the big green Bentley negotiate the narrow carriageway up to the lane with its iron gates, and disappear.

Darley, the woman who had brought her here, had left with Henri, which Melissa thought was also odd. Why bring her only to abandon her?

But these questions didn't really concern her. She had lived most of her life in that way—barely involved—and it didn't take much effort for her to ignore the faintly unsettling place she found herself in now.

She flicked off her sandals and stood for a moment quite still, her thin print dress gently ruffling in the slight breeze, before stepping lightly into the rowing-boat.

*

Pulling her shawl over her cooling shoulders, Melissa stepped into the colonnade surrounding the marble temple and made a slow circuit, singing softly under her breath. There was a large unglazed window facing away from the house through which she could see Madeleine's sepulchre, and leaning on the cill she let her eyes wander over its shiny surface, patterned like Damascene steel, and the reflections from the beams of sunlight artfully directed onto it.

The interior of the temple was surprisingly small, and its walls tinted green from the damp air, although it smelled fresh and sweet. She felt as if she had discovered the entrance to an underground bower, and that if she could only find the key, the walls would fade and she would be in Madeleine's world.

Everyone had their own world, she knew, even if they didn't realise or acknowledge it, and she was certain that she would feel at home in the worlds of those women who had preceded her here.

But there was something missing: *No doors, only a window*, she whispered to herself. *Where are the doors?*

She climbed through the window.

*

Melissa breathed out slowly and picked up the baseball bat leaning against the wall. It was light and hard—perfect, she hoped, for beating off attackers. Whether it would work against the phantoms she didn't know yet, but she'd soon find out. Meanwhile, it was something to hold, something reassuring.

She had heard the voice as soon as she had set foot on the floor of the temple. It came from above, somewhere in the dusty, dirty, disused upper floors that faded into sight as she lifted her head.

The phantoms had been with her a long time, from childhood, and every so often, new ones appeared, as some had recently. She thought she'd seen them all now, the dragons, the birds, the weird animals, the... other ones, the ones that really scared her. They appeared even when others—Henri, anyone—were present, but their appearance was only for her.

The ones she had had from childhood were straightforwardly nasty, with teeth and hissing and clawed wings, and other crude and nightmarishly commonplace features, but the newer ones were hard to see, hard to interpret, hidden and sly. They were the only ones who came now. They had scared her at first, enough to make her scream and run, but they followed her wherever she ran. She could fight, but it exhausted her, and they almost always hurt her. Some of the fear she felt was because they always changed—changed shape, size, everything, until they were unrecognisable even as beings.

Often, after they'd gone, she'd find bitemarks and stinging furrows where claws had rasped her skin, and bruises, large and ugly bruises. She never remembered getting them, but accepted them as the price of living in that world, their world, her world. She wondered which phantom was above her, if it was a phantom and not an animal or a noise in her head. There was this world, there was her dream world, there was her fantasy world and then there was her phantom world. Two real worlds. It was so complicated! She put a hand on an open step and hefted the bat.

And then there was the pain. As Melissa started up the creaking stair, she felt the first blows on her feet. There was no point in looking yet, it would be the hidden ones, too quick to follow. The pain was in both worlds. In this world she would just suffer, but in the other... Sometime the pain needed to be kickstarted by her, or by someone else, but most of it came afterwards, when she abandoned herself, when whoever had begun it gave up.

Another blow came, much harder, knocking the bat out of her hand, hurting her arm. She screamed and sat heavily on a step, holding her pulsing hand.

The top of the stair was dark and hot. Melissa took off her T-shirt, and then, thinking about what had happened before with the more physical phantoms, the rest of her clothes. They tended to get ripped or filthy beyond the powers of anything to clean, and she had few clothes with her.

She'd begun to think that she could control the phantoms, that it was all about acceptance. As a child it had been beyond her power to oppose them, and it hadn't occurred to her that it was possible, they were too terrifying. But Henri's phantoms were subtler, not merely brute monsters, and they hindered her more through diversion and distraction than force. Focusing was therefore the key, and keeping busy with mundane tasks.

The air was becoming clearer, and ahead of her the passage seemed to open out into a wide round space something like the inside of a tower, damp and musty. There was the faint chirrup of a bird, and a small body swished past her and through a small unglazed window out into a forest.

Air

Ifan, Dai and Geraint had been up since dawn, shovelling piles of debris off the track that led up to the castle. The storm had brought heavy rain down very quickly: some earth banks had been washed away and many trees had been broken and uprooted.

Gaps in the cloud were now appearing, and Dai and Geraint were leaning on the drystone wall at the edge of Llew's field to roll a much-needed cigarette. Ifan was crouching behind the truck, lighting his pipe out of the wind.

Standing, he glanced over the wall at a walker just rounding the bend on the track below. Geraint had seen her too. 'No map, no weatherproofs, not a clue,' he chuckled to Dai.

'Never properly kitted out, these tourists.' Dai shook his head. 'They wouldn't go for a swim in a pair o' wellies, would they? but they come up 'ere in a pair o' pumps an' a vest—I ask you. Shame this un's not just wearin' a vest, mind!'

The walker clambered up a steep rise in the path, disappearing momentarily then resurfacing, her sleeves rolled up to the elbows, a scruffy white terrier at her heels.

'Hi,' she smiled, shaking her hair free as she approached. 'I was hoping I'd bump into someone. I'm a bit lost—Is this the way to Moel Siabod?'

'You're on the first ridge,' Ifan told her.

She turned to him, her long hair brushing her shoulders.

'Mmm, what a lovely earthy smell,' the girl said, lifting her nose towards his pipe. 'Smells like the tobacco my granddad used to smoke.' She smiled at him with her wide eyes.

'I'd not advise a climb today,' Dai said, interrupting, 'with all these storms. Paths are a mess. A lot of branches down, and some trees.'

'I'm on a walking holiday,' the girl said, 'and I want to walk.'

'So does laddie here, by the looks of it,' Ifan said, bending to stroke the excited dog. 'What's his name?'

'Not a clue. He isn't mine,' said the girl, inspecting his collar. 'He came out of the woods and started following me.' She turned the dog's tag over in her hand. 'Ah, he's called Merlin, bless him.' She smiled up at Ifan. 'I'm Melissa.' She extended her hand.

'Ifan.'

He said no more while Melissa fussed the dog, who rolled belly up for her. She stroked the soft skin lightly, looking up at last, smiling.

'You're a Ranger, right?'

'Yep. We're clearing up the storm damage. The lads are right, you should wait for clearer weather. There's not much chance you'll get a good view of Snowdon today.'

'Oh?' Melissa stared at him.

'It's pretty spectacular on a clear day.'

'Have you climbed it?'

'Many times.'

'Tell you what, I'll probably be at the Three Horseshoes in Dolwydellan tonight,' she went on. 'Why don't you meet me there? You can tell me about the local attractions, wildlife and so on.'

'I might be able to.' Ifan put his pipe back in his mouth and took a tentative sip before leaning down to stroke the dog. 'I'll keep a hold of Merlin. We're bound to bump into his owners.'

'Thanks.' The girl reached into her bag and drew out a card. 'Here's where I'm staying—just in case we miss each other tonight.'

The girl turned and walked back the way she had come. The dog strained to follow her, but Ifan hooked his thumb into its collar and held it fast.

'Bye darling,' Dai called once she was out of earshot, laughing back to Ifan, 'Think you've pulled, mate!'

*

Ifan had decided to take Llew's advice and try to be a bit more social, and here was an opportunity. It was only a drink with a tourist, after all.

Melissa called to him as he entered the bar, beckoning him to the armchair beside her at the unlit fireside.

'I've got you a pint, Ifan. I hope that's OK?'

Ifan ignored the two grinning heads at the bar as he headed towards her.

'Hello Melissa. Thanks, that's fine.'

He sat down and began to relax as the girl talked in a low voice, soft but clear, about her walks and the birds she'd seen, and how she felt about the many incidental pleasures she found in her wandering.

Ifan let her talk on, soothed and suddenly comforted by her closeness. She asked him about his cabin, and as he was describing it, she put her small hand on his arm and smiled into his eyes: 'let me see it, Ifan, please, it just sounds so idyllic.'

They left the Horseshoes and walked back the long way, over the bridge, up through the forest and over the pass to his cabin in the lee of the hills. She held his hand and stayed close to him, following the beam of the torch until they reached the leaf-covered path that climbed up to the small verandah, reached by two steps.

'Here we are,' he said as she turned and leaned out over the rail.

'Wow—it's so quiet, so perfect, so beautiful,' she murmured, entranced. 'It must be so peaceful living here.' She took his hand. 'Can we go inside?'

She sat crossed-legged in front of the fire while Ifan busied himself in the kitchen, and then lounged on the sofa, drinking tea, talking and gazing into the fading fire until the sky outside turned a turquoise blue, and then they went to bed.

*

Melissa had vanished when Ifan woke the next day, but she was at the Three Horseshoes the following evening: and the evening after. It seemed to be understood that they would go back to his cabin together. They didn't even talk about it.

She began turning up unannounced at the cabin, usually moments after he got home, swishing her way up the path, her hair messed up from the wind. She would run up to him and give him a hug, as if he was expecting her, sometimes even apologising for being late, and one day, she just stayed. Suddenly Melissa lived there with Ifan, as if she had always been there but had never been noticed before, slipping seamlessly into his life.

She was undemanding and relaxed, and brought warmth and comfort into Ifan's austere world, keeping the cabin tidy and looking after the little vegetable patch. When autumn arrived she swept up the leaves that fell in great drifts and shovelled them into the compost. She had made his cabin into a home—the very smell of her warmed him when he returned from work in the shortening evenings.

On the other hand, Ifan was unsettled by her oft-repeated determination to be independent. She made food but often didn't eat with him, instead preferring to tramp through the evening mists. She also avoided the village, rarely venturing beyond the immediate surroundings of the cabin in the daytime.

She liked to stand on the verandah in the evenings, staring up into the trees, so Ifan bought her a rocking chair from Llew to sit comfortably, and she piled it with big cushions to warm her back as the evenings drew in, and not before time—Melissa was pregnant.

*

Ifan usually met Dai and Geraint at the Horseshoes on Fridays and Saturdays, but since Melissa's arrival he had seen less of them—not that she had asked him to, far from it. She always left him for an hour or two while she went for her evening stroll in the woods and it was he who found himself waiting for her to return.

It had been two weeks since she'd told him about the baby: she hadn't sounded particularly happy when she had called out in her sing-song voice one night from the kitchen, 'I just thought I'd let you know, Ifan—I'm pregnant.'

Taken unawares, Ifan had sat for a second, his eyes fixed on the fire, before getting out of his chair, and when he took her in his arms, she wriggled free and stood looking into his eyes.

'If that's what you want?'

Ifan had no ready response, and lost, he took her in an unyielding embrace while he tried to create some order in his thoughts. At last he said in a cool tone, 'Getting rid of it isn't an option, Melissa, you know me well enough to know that. I can't say I was prepared, but it's happened and that's all there is to say.'

Melissa looked him steadily in the eye. 'You don't have to say that, Ifan.'

'I'm a simple man, Melissa. I say what I think.'

Melissa let out a great sigh. 'Yes, you do.' She put her head on his chest, and her tensed body softened. 'I wonder what she'll turn out like? Something out of the ordinary, Ifan, like you and me, I imagine.'

*

One night, restless and unable to sleep, Ifan lay staring at the back of Melissa's head when he felt her hot hand reach back to cup his arm.

'Hmmm? You still awake?' she murmured. 'I've been thinking of names for her.'

In answer, Ifan rested his hand lightly on her belly 'How do you know it's a girl?'

'I just do.'

‘What about Elan, after the maid of Dolwyddelan?’

‘I like Alexandra.’

‘Why?’

‘Because she’ll be queen of all the earth, and we’ll all live in her palace.’

Melissa’s breathing slowed to a barely-discernable sigh, and Ifan’s head filled with hazy images of a figure stumbling through cold stone corridors towards a red glow, eyes searching the ground.

*

September came and went.

Every night, as Ifan made his way up the path, he saw Melissa in the rocking chair on the verandah, lit by the light from a window, intent on the slim book she had been reading since she arrived. She nearly always seemed to have it in her hand or tucked into the cushions in her rocking chair, ready to pick up. He wondered how anyone could read so slowly.

Tonight, as he approached she looked up and said, ‘Let’s go for a walk.’ He dropped his rucksack by the rocking chair and bent over to kiss her. ‘You really want me to come?’

Smiling broadly, Melissa slid on her cardigan and hovered over the step down. ‘You don’t have to come if you’re tired.’ She pulled on her wellies. ‘I’m ready.’

Ifan checked his torch and nodded.

The logging track was drier than Ifan’s sodden and leaf-mulched path, and protected by tall trees, their grey trunks silhouetted against the moon. Negotiating the ruts and encroaching nettles and brambles, they walked almost silently, the air still, muffling their voices and their steps. Ifan could hear the chafe of their clothing and the squeak of their soles on the needles and cones.

‘Sssshhh!’ he whispered.

‘What is it?’

Ifan pulled her to the ground, where they crouched, motionless.

Off the track to their left a single cone of moonlight shone down into a wide clearing. Ifan could make out the vague grey shape of the water-tower in the mist, dots of moonlight suddenly illuminating its curving column. But near its base Ifan thought he could make out a different light, warmer, dimmer, like a red glow.

‘There’s someone there!’ Melissa whispered. ‘I can see them.’ She tried to stand, but Ifan pulled her back down and she huddled reluctantly beside him before he felt her mouth on his ear. ‘Ifan, there’s a man by the tower. Look.’

The reddish glow swayed, then shifted position, higher now, as if it was being held. Whatever Melissa could see seemed to be on the move but Ifan heard no sound.

‘How can you see anything?’ Ifan muttered, ‘It’s pitch dark.’

‘Can’t you see him?’

‘No. I saw a light, but it was probably the moon.’

‘It’s not, it’s a lamp.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I can see it.’

Ifan saw the dark red dot of light again, swaying, a little higher now. A beam of moonlight came and went—he saw the tower clearly, but no figure holding a lamp. The dot flickered then vanished.

A scrabbling noise behind them took their attention away from the clearing. Melissa ran back and dropped to her knees, lifting something to her chest. ‘Oh, Ifan—I think it’s dead.’

Ifan crouched down and felt the damp feathers and warm back of a small bird. He turned on his torch. It was one of the invisible nighthawks he had only heard. Puzzled, he shook his head.

‘It couldn’t have been that. Nightjars don’t scuffle about—it was definitely something bigger.’

‘I’m taking her back to the house,’ Melissa said, standing up. She scooped up the bird and held it under her chin.

‘Good idea,’ Ifan agreed, looking around warily. ‘Sod this for a lark.’

‘So sad,’ Melissa said as they trudged back to the cabin. As they approached, Ifan could see a light, but they hadn’t left any lights on.

When they reached the verandah, Ifan put his hand on her arm. ‘Stay here.’

Melissa sat gently in the rocking chair, cradling the nightjar. She felt something oozing out from under its wing.

Pushing the front door open, Ifan slowly circled the living room, half expecting to see someone. Melissa’s sandals were the right side up. Had he

done that when he had shifted them away from the fire? He couldn't remember, he'd rescued things so often.

Glancing up, he saw where Melissa's book lay open, face down on the mantelpiece. That was unusual, she rarely put it anywhere but under the cushions on the rocking chair.

He had never thought about what she had been reading for the past five months, but for some reason he felt an urge to know now. He flipped it over. It wasn't a novel, as he had supposed, but a hand-written notebook or journal of some sort. For an instant he thought it might be her diary, but no. The name 'Madeleine Faurot' was written in florid script on the inside cover. Curious, he flicked through a few pages—they were paintings, all rather weird.

He returned to the first page, which showed a figure coming over a hill, clothes in tatters, carrying a small patterned sack over its shoulder. The hill was emerald green and very steep—so steep that the figure should have been falling backwards, yet it seemed almost to float. A hot blue summer sky burned above, but a black cloud hung at the top right corner. Hundreds of flowers dotted the hill. A small animal was chained or leashed to the figure's ankle, either a dog or a cat, it was hard to tell—and its jaws were wide, snarling in something like fury, or pain.

The unpleasantness of the image and the sound of Melissa crying brought Ifan back to earth, and replacing the journal he returned to the verandah and crouched down beside her.

'I'm sorry about the nightjar.'

Melissa looked at him. 'We were in the other world.'

Ifan laughed gently. 'Where's the other world, my lovely?'

'You were there with me, Ifan.'

'Don't talk rot.'

'No, really. You're the only person I've known who's seen what I see.' She looked directly at him, serious and sombre. 'I know you saw it too, and you didn't just see it, Ifan, you were part of it.'

'The red light? That sounds a bit mad, Melissa.'

She lifted the nightjar to show him it was still alive. 'Look—she's breathing.' The bird's eye opened and glared at him. 'She doesn't belong in this world.'

'It's just a bloody bird, for God's sake, it's not from another world, you idiot.' He lifted its wing. 'Look, blood—it's just a bird.' He shook his head. 'I'm going to make us a hot drink and a sandwich,' he said tersely.

‘Oh, and by the way, that book of yours, you left it on the mantelpiece. I already moved your bloody sandals today.’

Melissa stared at him.

‘It’s got some nice paintings in it,’ he added, seeing her expression, ‘and it would be a shame if they got burnt.’

‘My book’s here, Ifan.’

He took the book from her hand. ‘But it was on the—’ He turned to the first page: it was exactly the same picture, but in black and white. He quickly flicked through to the end, then handed it back to Melissa without a word.

As she lifted her hand, the nightjar flexed its wings and took off into the trees.

‘Good bloody riddance,’ he muttered, really spooked now.

‘Oh, Ifan.’

Going inside, he picked up the slim journal from the mantelpiece and slid it into the lining of his rucksack. All these odd happenings were starting to get to him—it would be nice to get some answers, and clearly Melissa wasn’t inclined to give him any. Maybe he would take it down to the antiques shop in Betws y Coed and show it to Llew.

*

Ifan hesitated for a second outside the shop’s dark brown door, decorated with a hand-painted Open sign that was faded and difficult to read.

‘Ah, Ifan,’ Llew slid his glasses off his nose and greeted him warmly as he entered. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I’ve got something I’d like you to take a look at.’

While Ifan stamped his muddy boots on the mat, Llew made for the table in the corner of the cluttered room, beckoning him over. They sat opposite each other, both staring down at the intricately decorated cover. Llew paused, then brushed his fingers over the rough fabric.

‘See?’ said Ifan earnestly, ‘it’s a journal.’

He watched as the old man turned the pages slowly and painstakingly, peering intently through his spectacles.

‘Well?’ said Ifan after a couple of minutes, ‘what d’you make of it?’

Llew was only halfway through and didn’t respond immediately, making a soft, guttural “humph” as he bent closer to scrutinise a particularly garish painting. Ifan watched his face—it was expressionless. A further minute

passed. A grandfather clock, whose tick had been irritating enough, began to chime.

‘So what d’you think?’

Llew looked up. ‘Well, for a start some of the pages are missing. Do you know anything about that?’

‘Oh?’

‘Here.’ Llew turned to the last page and ran his thumb softly down the spine. ‘It’s hard to see unless you’re looking—they’ve been very carefully cut out. I wonder why?’

The old man folded his hands over the open journal and looked at Ifan.

‘I didn’t tear them out,’ Ifan muttered, folding his arms across his chest.

‘I’m not suggesting you did.’ Llew stood up. ‘But tell me again how you came across it.’

‘It just appeared in the cabin one evening. I thought at first it was my girlfriend’s, but—and I can’t believe it myself, to be honest—it turned out that it’s not hers, but the original of a copy that she’s been reading for the last few months.’

Llew’s eyebrows lowered. ‘She’s reading a copy of this? Hmm, that’s a very unlikely coincidence, I’d say. Would it be possible for you to let me see her copy, just to compare it with the original?’

‘Why?’

Llew shook his head.

‘My lad, I’m interested in the unusual, historical and arty. I make my living by buying and selling for profit, but my life is all about the joy of the quest! I’m an interpreter of stories as well as facts, a solver of mysteries and a seeker of truth. That’s my real life!’ he smiled, amused at his own extravagant claims. His face turned serious and he grunted. ‘Although some people would call me a seeker of trouble.’ He nodded to himself and continued, ‘Could you bring the copy to the shop after lunch?’

‘I don’t know about that, Llew. It’s not mine.’

Llew nodded gravely. ‘Of course. I tell you what: how about I come by your place later? We wouldn’t need to take anything anywhere, then.’

‘OK, thanks Llew. I’m much obliged to you.’ Ifan held out his hand.

‘Leave it with me, I’ll bring it back, don’t worry,’ said the old man insistently. ‘I’d like to do some research—no harm will come to it.’ He could see Ifan hesitate. ‘I could get over by seven. Will you be there then?’

‘Yes.’ Ifan nodded.

‘Good. I’ll see you at seven.’

Llew brushed imaginary dust off the cover as Ifan got up to leave, thinking how incredible it was that Madeleine’s journal—Madeleine’s journal! The very thing he had spent years searching for—should fall into his lap like this. He had Henri’s jewel, and now he had the journal!

It was too easy. It had to be a trick, didn’t it? But he knew Ifan, and if there was any trickery it wouldn’t be the down-to-earth ranger to blame. So somebody else was sniffing around, and it could only be one person.

The *hidden* spell for the cabin and water tower he had enacted so many years ago had worked resoundingly well. Henri had been able to find neither the journal nor his jewel, nor now, Melissa. It *was* too neat.

*

As Ifan wandered back to the road he felt unexpectedly light. He had been reluctant to let Llew keep the journal even for a few hours, but now it was out of his hands he felt only relief. He walked briskly across the village green to the car park, jangling his keys. The post office was just closing—too late to collect his mail.

He wondered how to persuade Melissa to postpone her evening walk. He didn’t want her to know that he was interested in her book, because he had come to realise how little he trusted her. She was so secretive, and her fanciful imagination coloured everything she saw, even in broad daylight. She saw birds as totems, phases of the moon as significant, and stars as magical spirit-guides. From time to time it occurred to him that he must have role in her imagined world, and he began to wonder what it might be.

He would be stupid to rely on her, but sometimes he came close to glimpsing things her way, and started to understand that fantasy was as real for her as the forest and his work were to him. It was pointless wondering why she read the black and white copy when the other was so much more colourful. But what if there really had been someone in the clearing? Had that someone visited the cabin and left the other copy while they were out?

Ifan wasn’t a suspicious man and he found these thoughts ridiculous. How had he got involved in this nonsense? Unconsciously fingering the thin leather band at his neck, he re-ran the last few months in his head.

Llew had called him over to the little group of old men one night in the Horseshoes as he was sitting alone at the bar. They immediately began to

rib him about his apparent lack of interest in the local women, implying that he was hiding some secret dealings with wizards.

He was about to move away from this silliness when Llew took his arm.

‘Only in fun, Ifan lad. You may not know it, but you’re well-liked in the village. We appreciate your work, and how tough it is. Seriously, lad, you need a bit of fun and comfort or you’ll become too hard. A woman would be good for you. See, Ifan, I’ve something for you, to bring you luck.’

Llew brought out the leather band.

‘I know you don’t go in for this sort of thing, but although it’s just a bit of string, it worked for me, God knows how, but it did; and you, why you’re a handsome man and should have no trouble. Here.’

In spite of his resistance to nonsense, Ifan found himself taking the thin leather and putting it around his neck. He couldn’t feel it, and very soon forgot it was there.

Feeling more welcome, he stayed, and they talked about the dreadful fate of lovers in the Welsh tales, Rhys and Meinir and the others, and told Ifan how to lay charms in the forest to catch himself a nymph, and he smiled a cautious smile.

‘She’d have to be a mermaid to live on that mountain.’

This got a laugh, and silly as it all was, Ifan felt drawn to these old men. While what they said seemed to be both ridiculous and impossible, somewhere underneath he felt there to be a dark current of ancient lore, not to be acknowledged.

*

‘He’s an obstinate man,’ Melissa whispered into the air, ‘very obstinate. So, lucky for me he doesn’t know, I suppose.’ Melissa’s grey eyes widened in expectation of some new phantasm, but the window scene in front of her stayed resolutely normal. ‘He wants to be ordinary,’ she mused, idly wiping away a cobweb. ‘It makes him feel safe.’

She frowned, reliving the day she had first met him, and how she had watched as the coloured lights had played about him on the hill. ‘How could he possibly not notice,’ she asked herself, ‘when the lights are even in his eyes? It must be different for him. And yet...’

Melissa’s phantom world echoed her normal world but in a different way, and both had their magic—if either were magical. She wasn’t sure that *magical* was an appropriate description of the phantom world—there was much there that was unpleasant and frightening—and both were as real as the other to her, although often, Melissa was only dimly aware of the

other, normal world—the world that other people seemed to live in. She suspected that while Ifan was able to see into her phantom world, he couldn't or didn't allow himself to.

'The only difference between us,' whispered Melissa, 'is that he refuses to accept what he sees, but I accept what I see. So which of us is normal?'

*

When Ifan got home, the radio was on. A distorted lecture about the health benefits of breast-feeding echoed round the cabin while Melissa fussed over the oven, evidently in a good mood.

'Hi, Ifan,' she said. 'I've made some flapjacks. Oats and honey—good for the skin.'

He kissed her pale, smooth shoulder. There were new bruises on her arm.

'Have you been into town?' she asked, moving to the fire. 'We needed milk.'

'Isn't it about time you went into town yourself? To see the doctor?'

She prodded at the logs with the poker.

'It's a good idea, you know.'

'Ifan, if it's OK with you, I'd rather not,' she answered with her back still to him. 'Please don't ask me again.'

He let out an irritated sigh. 'Have it your own way,' and went to take a shower, unsure how to get her out of the house before Llew's arrival.

When he came out, the warm aromas of caramelised syrup and butter and vanilla had infused the whole cabin.

'The flapjacks smell good.'

'Have one. I'm not hungry—I had some leftover soup earlier.'

'I thought I'd make tea tonight,' Ifan offered. Relieved to have found an excuse to delay her, he set about chopping onions. 'We'll eat at six-fifteen.'

*

At tea, Melissa was garrulous and upbeat.

'I felt the baby kick today,' she told him. 'It feels like butterflies.'

'That's good, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know when it's due?'

'End of January, I think.'

'God, that's soon!'

Melissa beamed and then yawned, pushing her barely-touched plate to the centre of the table. 'I need the night air,' she breathed, rising and stretching her arms above her head.

'It's a bit wet,' Ifan heard himself say, as the rain dripped loudly off the guttering outside.

Ignoring him, Melissa took her coat. A moment later the front door slammed shut and Ifan heard her feet slapping across the verandah and down the steps. Then the sound changed to the steady tread of wet boots through leaves. Both relieved and hesitant, he followed her out and stood for a second by the rocking chair, feeling like a thief; then lifting the cushion and taking the journal, he sat and studied the pages.

He was no wiser ten minutes later when he looked down the path and saw the lights of Llew's old van rocking and swaying up the uneven track to his gate.

'Hope this is the last of the rain.' Llew commented by way of greeting as he came up the steps.

'Come on in, we don't have long till she's back.' Ifan ushered the bedraggled old man into the cabin.

'Your book and I have spent a very interesting afternoon together,' said Llew as he placed the journal on the kitchen table. Ifan put Melissa's copy beside it.

'Did you find out anything about this woman Faurot?'

Llew looked deadpan as he said, 'Nobody I've spoken to has heard of her. *Madeleine Faurot*. Hmm. It could be a nom de guerre of course, but I get the feeling that it isn't.' He scratched his chin. 'I suppose Melissa hasn't mentioned her at all?'

Ifan shook his head.

'Hmm. I found some links to the name, mainly in France and Switzerland, and there's a partial address for her at a house in Shropshire, but it's fairly old—she seems to have left there ten years ago. And I found someone of that name who died the same year. It's not a common name, but I don't think we should leap to conclusions.'

'Uh huh. Anything else?'

'Yes.' Llew scratched his ear. 'Mme Faurot's husband is still alive, and he *is* interesting. Monsieur Henri de Genêt is very well-known in some circles.' He stopped and glanced at Ifan's face, but there was no reaction. 'Whether you'd call it fame or infamy is open to opinion. He's pretty powerful, influential in...' He stopped again, screwing up his face. 'I don't know quite how to put this without sounding, er—'

'What?' Ifan watched Llew's expression curiously.

'I've a bit more digging to do before I can say for certain. Give me a few more days. Now—' He sat down and opened both books, turning the pages in synchrony until he reached the end.

Ifan glanced at him. 'You were hoping the copy had been made before the pages were ripped out, weren't you?'

Llew nodded. 'I had rather hoped so, yes.'

Ifan looked at the clock. 'So, is that it then?'

'I'd like to take both copies away with me for a few days, if that's OK?'

'Why? You've seen they're identical—'

'I'd like to make a proper comparison.'

Ifan shifted in his seat and took Melissa's copy of the journal from him. 'I can't lend it you, Llew. Mel'll miss it.'

'Where are you hiding her, my boy?' Llew's tone was light, but his eyes shifted from the bedroom door to the window and back again before they settled again on Ifan's face.

'She's out—gone for her evening walk. She likes the cold and wind.' Ifan was uneasy at this questioning, feeling as though he was being held to account for her.

'We were beginning to wonder if she was still here—'

'We?'

Llew's face relaxed and he smiled conspiratorially. 'The tea shop gossips in the village, the net curtain twitchers. You know how it is.'

'They don't bother us up here.' Ifan checked the clock again and stood up unceremoniously. 'But yes, she's still here, and she's expecting,' he added, instantly regretting his rashness.

Llew raised a finger to his lips. 'Mum's the word.'

'I'd appreciate that, Llew.'

'Evidently. When's it due?'

'She's not sure. January, I think she said.'

'Ah. Early, even for a lamb. She'll be hardy, no doubt.'

Ifan stopped, puzzled. 'Melissa says it'll be a girl, too.'

Llew opened his fat briefcase and slipped the journal inside. 'Give her my love, Ifan,' he said, shutting the case with a leathery snap. 'I'll just take the original, then. I'll see if I can shed some light on the nature of this Tarot.'

'Tarot?'

'Cards for divination.'

'Oh yes, I've heard of it. Are these ones unusual, then?'

'Well, the designs are original, but not so different that you can't recognise the cards. If there are secrets they're not *in* the cards—at least, I can't see any—but I'm damn sure there are secrets *of* the cards somewhere here.'

Ifan watched his face as it hardened and became serious. 'The Tarot's an odd thing, Ifan. I don't suppose you have any time for that sort of thing, but personally I'm open-minded. Melissa's in good company.'

'I think she might be some sort of witch, Llew. You know, pagan? She only talks about trees and birds and clouds... and she talks to herself. I get the feeling she's not really there.'

'A witch?' Llew pouted. 'I don't see why not. But I wouldn't worry, Ifan, witches are just ordinary people with a penchant for the divine—and divination.' He smiled a thin smile. 'I'll lend you a couple of books if you like—it might help if you talked to her about it, and if you know something yourself, what she says might make more sense. Actually—' He opened his briefcase again and rummaged around inside, 'you can borrow these to play with. I think they're rather nice.'

He handed Ifan a large pack of cards and a small blue book. 'Look after them, my boy, they *are* valuable. Anyway,' Llew picked up the briefcase, 'I can see you're in a hurry, but perhaps you could do me a favour? I'd be very grateful if you could ask Melissa if there are any more copies of this journal. You could ask her to explain the cards to you, too—you never know, you might find them interesting.'

Ifan was torn between a sudden desire to pursue their conversation and the pressing need to usher Llew out of the house before Melissa came home.

'I will,' he confirmed distractedly, straining to catch another glimpse of the kitchen clock.

Llew turned and left, and Ifan sank into his chair by the fire. He had Melissa's copy of the journal still in his hand, and began to leaf through

the pages, quickly at first, then more slowly, until his eyes homed in on a melancholy woman. She held a skull on her lap, gazing into it as if it was a crystal ball.

'If I look and look and never stop looking, one day I might see,' read the inscription.

He knew there was a Hanged Man, a Tower and a Death card, but that was it. Melissa would know, as Llew pointed out, but he didn't want to ask her. He opened the little fat book, and slipping the cards that Llew had given him out of the pack, flipped through them. They were all bird scenes.

He was just about to put them back when he heard footsteps on the verandah and he turned, fumbling a card onto the floor. He picked it up quickly and stared at it in his hand. It was a nightjar.

*

'A circular tower in a circular glade,' Melissa mused, touching the trees' silver trunks and feeling the spikes of tiny snapped-off twigs scratch across her palm. 'How perfect!'

The rain had stopped, but a fine mist hung in the air, dimming the beam of Melissa's torch as she stopped to sit down at the edge of the stream. She wished she'd brought Madeleine's journal with her—she wanted to look at the painting of the odd building with the tower rising out of the roof into the trees.

'Madeleine could never have seen the water tower,' she mused, 'and yet here it is.'

She was interrupted by the distant sound of an engine. Staring down the logging track she saw lights; then the engine noise died and the lights went out. She strained to hear a car door open, or voices, but there was nothing.

The mist had grown denser. Untying the hoodie from her waist she pulled it on, the torch falling out of her hand and down the shallow bank into the stream. She found her other torch and pressed the soft rubber button, but there was no beam.

'Damn.' Rubbing her tired eyes, she opened them to see her shadow in front of her, and scrambling to her feet, she turned her face to the light and stumbled into a tree, cutting her finger on one of the sharp spikes.

'Melissa?' It was a man's voice, quiet but tense. 'Over here, by the tower.'

'Who's that?' she said, shielding her eyes. 'What d'you want?'

The dim red glow grew sharper. She saw the outline of a hand above a lantern; an arm; a thin face; and as she came nearer she recognised the familiar posture.

‘Serge?’

‘Melissa? Over here! There’s shelter under the tower.’

She could see him clearly now, his nose and chin lit up by the lamplight. He placed the lantern on the ground as she approached, and they stood staring at each other.

Melissa grabbed the cuff of his coat and pulled him closer. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I’m doing some research,’ he told her, obscurely, ‘and it’s all rather confusing.’ He raised his face to the dark underside of the building they were sheltering under and was about to continue when Melissa interrupted.

‘Was that you in the car a few minutes ago?’

‘No, but I saw it drive up to your cabin.’

‘You know where I live? Are you following me? Is that why you’re here? Did Henri send you?’ Melissa asked sharply.

‘No, absolutely not! But he’s looking for you, Melissa.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘As I said, I’m finding all this quite confusing. I think Henri made me come somehow, although I can’t think—I just don’t know. And I don’t know how I ended up here. I’d taken the boat to the temple, just wandering about, and I went inside... and then I was here.’

Again, he raised his head and stared upwards. ‘It’s where Madeleine brought me once when I was young. I remember it well because it was the summer before boarding school—the only time she and I spent any time together. There was a house with a tower... These are the ruins.’

He looked at Melissa curiously.

‘So how is it that *you’re* here?’ he asked. Then, his face darkening, ‘and why didn’t you say goodbye?’

‘I knew we’d meet again.’ She put her hand on his arm anxiously. ‘Henri doesn’t know where I am, does he?’

‘No, he can’t do, otherwise he would have come himself, wouldn’t he? There must be some other reason—maybe the ruins. ‘Have you—’ He stopped. ‘Never mind.’ He looked at her, his head to one side. ‘Do you only come out at night?’

‘What? What d’you mean?’

‘I’ve been watching you for the last couple of days. I thought you must be in hiding or something.’ They stood face to face, looking into each other’s eyes. ‘I didn’t want to call at the cabin in case...?’

‘Ifan. His name’s Ifan.’

‘In case you hadn’t told Ifan. I left you the journal to let you know I was here.’

Melissa nodded, sighing.

‘Didn’t you find it?’

‘No, he did. I didn’t think anything of it at the time but I remember now—he accused me of leaving a book on the mantelpiece and I said I hadn’t, then he grabbed what I was reading and—’

‘You copied my mother’s journal, didn’t you? That’s what you were reading—I knew it,’ Serge said abruptly.

‘Yes, I copied it. I’m sorry, Serge, but I had to see. You don’t know how important it is.’ She bit her lip. ‘Damn. Ifan must still have the other copy.’

‘Did you recognise the house shown on the Tower card? It’s this house, before it burned down.’

‘Of course I did.’

‘I didn’t like it much. It was Llew’s—do you know him?’

‘I don’t know anyone here except Ifan.’

‘Oh. Well you might have seen him around: thin, lank hair, shiny forehead, always wearing brownish-green tweeds. He looks a bit birdlike from a distance.’

‘I don’t go out much, as you discovered.’

‘Ah, well,’ Serge frowned. ‘Remember his name. He’s on our side, I think.’

‘Aren’t you sure?’

‘It’s difficult, Melissa.’ He paused, and looked into her eyes. ‘It’s lovely to see you again.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘At the pub in Dolwyddelan, but I’m leaving tomorrow morning. Will you come down and say goodbye? I’m getting the ten o’clock bus to the station. Meet me by the bridge?’

'I can't. I can't be seen.'

Serge's face fell. 'Well, get the journal back from Ifan, will you? You can keep it until I see you again. I'll write and let you know.'

She told him Ifan's address. 'It's the village post office. He has to collect his mail. It'll be OK if you put my name on it.'

'You can't get much mail—won't he be curious? What if he opens it?'

'I don't know, Serge. Maybe he's meant to find out.' She sighed. 'I'm as lost as you, you know. I don't know how I ended up here, either. It feels right, but... Someone is doing this to us, Serge, but I don't know who and I don't know why.'

A fog was beginning to settle over them, moving down from the treetops. 'You better get back before you can't see,' Serge said softly. 'Come tomorrow if you can?'

Ifan pushed Melissa's book back under the cushions of her rocking chair well before eight. It was now eight-thirty, and she still hadn't returned. He thought she was probably at the water tower, talking to the trees and looking for the lantern-carrying ghost she thought she'd seen.

He heard her wellies drop onto the doormat and her hoodie being unzipped.

'It's pretty foggy out there now,' she called out as she came through from the kitchen and sat down in front of the fire.

'Nice walk?'

'Really nice. There was a big moon earlier.' She paused, watching the flames of the fire lick and spit. 'I saw a car coming up the track,' she said distractedly, rolling down her socks and giving him a sidelong glance. 'Who was it?'

'Probably just tourists.'

'In the dark?'

'You know what they're like. They're probably drunk or lost.'

'D'you remember the night we found the nightjar?' she asked him, suddenly.

'You wouldn't let me forget.'

'And you said I'd left my book on the mantelpiece?'

He nodded. 'Vaguely. Why?'

‘What did you do with it?’

He shook his head. ‘Bugged if I know. Isn’t it still there?’

‘No. You must know where you put it.’ Her eyes were cool.

‘Melissa, I can’t remember—I must’ve put it somewhere where it wouldn’t get damaged. I’ll try and remember. Why all these questions? Is it important?’

Melissa’s eyes softened, but Ifan knew she thought he was lying. ‘Not really, it just popped into my head. You know what I’m like. It doesn’t mean anything. D’you want to play draughts or have a game of cards?’

‘If you like.’

Melissa took a pack of playing cards from the bookshelf and Ifan studied her as she shuffled and dealt them out.

The picture of the world he had inside contained a blank shape, a blank space, that he had never expected to be filled. Not exactly a shape, but an absence—of music, of light, of air—a dull grey hole into which the colours of his life drained. Behind him his ordered life, his cabin, his work: and before him a tiny unoccupied sky. Melissa filled that blank, that space, and lit the air.

He smiled faintly, intensely wary of these feelings he had for her.

‘We’ll see who wins,’ said Melissa, tossing her head. They started to play. The fire burned hot and then settled into a steady glow as they sat and dealt and played the cards. Melissa made a drink while Ifan stared into the flames, sipping at his pipe, and then they continued in the easy quietness, surrounded by the peaty and resinous smell of pine and tobacco, and another smell that Ifan couldn’t quite place.

*

Melissa lay awake all night and rose at dawn, sweeping up her clothes from the floor before tiptoe-ing out of the bedroom to dress silently in the kitchen.

It was all but dark as she made her way down the track on the outskirts of the forest until she reached the brow of the hill and saw the first glimmers of sunrise hitting the mountain on the other side of the valley. She followed the path that snaked alongside the river down to the bridge. She was much too early, but she would wait just to see his face again. Serge was still a boy in many ways, but then Melissa acknowledged to herself that she was only a girl: and they were both unaccountably involved in others’ incomprehensible plans.

‘You said you couldn’t come!’ Serge said on seeing her. He dropped his rucksack on the pavement, a wide grin on his face. ‘Did you bring it?’

‘No. I can’t find it. I think Ifan’s got it.’

His face puckered up. ‘Oh? I know you have a copy, but I can’t help thinking that there’s something important hidden in the original.’

‘Not many places to hide something in a book, and you’ve had plenty of time to study it, haven’t you? Are you looking for invisible writing or...’

‘Yes, I am looking for things like that, among others, but I’ve only just started to understand what I might find.’ He paused. ‘I only want to know when it’ll be over, Melissa. I’m only going along with things so they can be resolved, ended.’

‘Serge, there’s something I have to tell you.’

‘What?’

‘I’m seven months pregnant.’

He stared at her for a long moment, and she nodded, reading his mind.

‘Oh. I see. Does he know?’ His voice was cool.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Is that why you left?’ Serge said, now sullen, unresisting.

Melissa didn’t reply, and they sat silently together until the bus came. She breathed out, ‘Serge, I left your father because—’

‘Time to go,’ he said, rising and hefting his rucksack.

‘Please, Serge, don’t tell him where I am.’

The automatic door opened and he climbed onto the bus.

Melissa watched him seat himself at the window, but he didn’t look back. She stared at his head, watching the hazy halo of tiny lights flicker red, and suddenly had an impulse to go and talk to Llew in his shop.

Such urges came to her often, and she never knew what caused them, or why. It seemed that it was just how her time was to be spent, following an unknown plan.

She had no idea what she would say to Llew. All she knew about him was that he had owned the ruins where the water-tower stood—where Madeleine used to stay—and that he was one of Ifan’s pub cronies. And that Serge trusted him.

She had just decided to follow her impulse when she saw a young boy enter the shop, and struck by an inexplicable panic, she turned rapidly back to cross the bridge to the cabin.

The boy's face stayed in her mind all the way back along the dark track—the grey skin, vacant eyes and fixed gaze. She knew she must be *seeing*—no-one in the normal world could look as bad as that.

In many ways, the normal world with its Henris and Serges and Alexandras was not as real or significant as her life as a phantom being, but at least she was free there.

'Free!' She snorted as she began the long incline to the waiting cabin. Yes, Ifan let her do what she wanted, and Serge would look after her if she wanted—but she felt oppressed by them both.

'So here I am', Melissa said aloud, as she reached the cabin and flopped into the rocking chair. 'But where am I?'

For almost the first time, she tried to think about what the plan for her might be, but there was too much that she didn't and couldn't know. She couldn't separate the events of the phantom world from those in the normal world until her arrival at Moel Siabod. Only the last few months with Ifan were perfectly clear, and she wondered at that.

And now there was Serge. She loved Serge, probably, and he obviously loved her.

She sat and rocked, looking out over the trees and valleys to the mountains in the distance.

'I'm happy,' she told herself. 'I'm in love and I'm safe and I'm happy. Happy.'

Serge paid off the taxi and hoisted the rucksack on to his shoulder. The great gates of La Baume, his father's fortress, stared down at him. He shook his head. Was this what you were supposed to feel like when you came home?

But it wasn't his home, it was just where he lived. All that was waiting for him there was the usual grilling from Henri, and then the monotony of work and study. Thank God, in a few months he'd be free.

He could delay Henri's interrogation for a while. Turning away from the gates, he started along the lane to the place where the old wall that circled the estate was crumbling and easily climbed, and was hidden from the house and its cameras.

He was still shocked at meeting Melissa again. It would be hard hiding it from Henri, if he suspected—Serge tried to remember the conversation when the trip had come up.

Henri had been agitated, a rare event in Serge's experience. He'd called Serge into the ballroom, and when he had arrived, Henri had been standing in front of one of Madeleine's paintings, staring fixedly as though trying to divine something deliberately hidden. Serge recognised the painting as one of the towers in the journal. There were three in all, one that looked like Llew's old tower house at Moel Siabod, another drawn in a gothic style that nevertheless reminded him of La Baume, and a third—the object of Henri's attention—that he didn't recognise.

'It might be good for you to visit the place again, to remind you of your mother.'

It was an odd thing to say—Henri rarely spoke of Madeleine. Nevertheless, Serge took it as a hint, but didn't want to appear too compliant.

'You mean the tower house? But it's gone. Where would I stay?'

'I'll book a room for you in Dolwydellan. It'll be a change of scene, at least. It's time to get out into the world a little, Serge. You hardly leave the house.'

And whose fault is that?

He reached the gap in the wall and climbed through onto the perimeter track, churned up by his daily rides. It was strange: the small wood around him seemed much more sinister than the vast blackness of Moel Siabod. All the time he'd spent wandering around outside Ifan's cottage, following Melissa, exploring the water-tower, not once had he felt scared: rather, it had seemed familiar and welcoming—completely different from the memory of his visit with Madeleine.

He realised that it was just that Melissa was there. He stopped, overwhelmed by the memory of her. She had been his father's mistress—he closed his eyes, but it was impossible to clear his head of her image on that first day, dressed in Madeleine's clothes.

And now she was pregnant by Henri, and living with Ifan. It was impossible to understand. The only thing to do was to forget her—preferably before he reached the house. He snorted, then taking a slow breath, cleared his mind.

‘So, Serge, how was Moel Siabod?’

Serge closed the heavy front door and crossing the hall to the foot of the grand staircase, put down his rucksack and looked up.

Henri was waiting as usual, silhouetted against the big window on the half-landing above him.

‘Hello, father. Unexpectedly pleasant, actually.’

Henri slowly descended the stairs while Serge continued, his eyes fixed on his son’s face.

‘Dolwydellan is more interesting than I remembered, and walking in the forest was more than refreshing, as you said it would be. Thank you for suggesting it. It’s a shame the tower house is gone—I should have enjoyed staying in the woods now, I think.’

Henri reached the floor and stood close, turning his head to one side, gazing at Serge, questing.

‘You look a little pale. Did you meet a ghost?’

Serge sniffed dramatically. ‘I think I caught something. It was pretty cold and damp there.’

There was a small pause while they looked into each other’s eyes, and then Henri seemed to relax as if he was satisfied, his voice losing its harsh edge.

‘Yes, the weather’s always appalling there, and yet it was your mother’s favourite. Did you take a look at the remains of the house? It must be covered in weeds and brambles by now.’

‘I wandered around the ruins for half an hour. There’s nothing much to see, just heaps of stone and burnt wood. You wouldn’t think anyone had ever lived there, it feels so empty. It’s as if the life force has deliberately deserted the place,’ he said, unhappily. ‘And the chimney reminds me of a crematorium. There’s an odd smell.’ He paused, shivering with imaginary cold. ‘They’ve built a water-tower in the ruins.’

He picked up his rucksack and swung it onto one shoulder. ‘Of course, I don’t remember it as it was—mother took me twice, didn’t she? So really there was nothing there for me.’

‘No...’ Henri spoke slowly. ‘I was quite surprised when you said you wanted to visit.’ He was still gazing into Serge’s eyes, probing.

‘You suggested it, father.’

‘Did I? That seems unlikely. No matter.’ Henri’s clear, unblinking eyes were still on him, and Serge looked down, suddenly feeling tired.

‘I don’t know why I agreed to go. I suppose I thought that I might discover some feeling there, something of mother, something warm—it was the only time she paid any attention to me.’

‘Now, Serge, you mustn’t remember your mother like that. She did her best, she just wasn’t very... communicative. Do you remember if she told you anything unusual about the place?’

‘How could I? I was so young. No, all I can remember is having a bonfire. She sang some songs to me, and we danced around the fire.’ He frowned. ‘I’ve almost forgotten what she looked like.’

Henri was standing with his hand on the baluster. ‘Hmm.’ He seemed to be satisfied for the moment, and his voice lost its insistent tone. ‘I don’t suppose you met any of the locals? I seem to remember Madeleine saying that they were very curious, always asking her what she did at the house, and offering to come up and “help”.’

Serge shrugged. ‘They left me alone. They must be used to tourists, and it’s a pretty dead place.’

‘I’m surprised. They would have recognised your name—these villagers have long memories. Are you sure you didn’t talk to anyone? Not even in the pub?’

‘Why would they be interested in a teenage boy? No, I’m sure. I was tired in the evenings when I got back. Walking in the forest is tiring, and climbing Moel Siabod itself is more than just a stroll. I just ate and went to my room. I expect they found me very boring.’

‘Well, I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. I had thought that I might have the house rebuilt for Melissa...’ He looked sharply at Serge, who coloured. ‘You were fond of her, weren’t you? It must have been upsetting when she left so suddenly.’

Serge shifted uncomfortably. ‘I liked her, yes, father, of course.’

‘She was fond of you, too, Serge. I think she felt quite sisterly towards you—she wanted to protect you.’

‘Protect me? From what?’

Henri stared into his eyes until he looked away.

‘Oh, you know. She was sad for you that you’d lost your mother. She was a remarkable woman. I’m not surprised you miss her.’

‘Miss her?’ Serge blushed again. ‘She used to talk to me. We were friends, nothing more.’ Before he could stop himself, he added, ‘Why did she leave so suddenly, father?’

Henri cocked his head. ‘We had a difference of opinion. It was... irreparable, a matter of principle. But I’ve told you that before. Did she tell you differently?’

‘You know that she left without saying goodbye, father. She didn’t tell me anything. All I know is what you told me.’

‘But you don’t believe me?’

‘I didn’t say that. I don’t know what I believe.’

‘Hmm.’ Henri started walking towards the ballroom, and Serge relaxed. Then Henri suddenly turned back. ‘Serge, you’ll tell me if Melissa contacts you, won’t you? I should very much like to talk to her.’

Serge was expecting this. ‘Of course, father.’ Then he turned, angrily, ‘But she won’t, why should she? I’m just a stupid boy she took pity on.’ Grabbing the strap of the rucksack, he ran up the stairs. Henri’s eyes stayed on him until he disappeared from view.

Llew found the roar of the train comforting as it hissed and rattled its way through the rain-covered hills into Shropshire. Madeleine’s journal pressed against his ribs, safe in his inside breast-pocket.

Llew had read her obituary in the Times, but the story had looked like a complete fabrication. Madeleine did not ride, yet the article stated that she had been killed in a riding accident.

He glanced out of the window, obscured by streams of diagonal rain. How had Madeleine’s journal—and a copy—made their way from La Baume to a ranger’s cabin in Snowdonia? The apparent purposefulness of it all was worrying.

Llew paid off the taxi and stood at the gates of La Baume, waiting, his eyes drawn to the familiar sight of the Lake Temple. A dull glow was just discernible through the mist, swaying as if being carried, the light gradually brightening.

Then Serge emerged, boots crunching on the gravelled drive as he drew nearer. He raised his lantern.

‘Father, is that you? What happened? Why haven’t you come in? Where’s your car?’

Llew raised both his hands and took a step closer to the light.

‘Don’t be alarmed, Serge. It’s not Henri, it’s Llew.’

‘Thank God for that,’ said Serge, letting out a loud breath. ‘I wasn’t expecting him back till the day after tomorrow...but what are you doing here? I thought you and he had fallen out?’

‘No, we didn’t fall out, nothing like that. I don’t want to go into it now.’ Llew stopped and composed himself. ‘But it made me miss Madeleine’s funeral. I’m sorry, Serge. It’s hard to lose a mother.’ He put his hand on Serge’s arm.

‘It was my fault,’ Serge said in a flat tone. ‘My pony broke her neck.’ Llew fought the urge to comfort him. ‘But I don’t get it. Father mentioned your name only the other day.’

‘Did he? Why?’

‘I can’t remember: but he’s gone to Wales. He was asking me about an antiques shop—he wanted to know if I’d seen it when I visited a couple of weeks ago.’

‘You were in Betws?’

‘No, Dolwyddelan. I stayed in the pub.’

‘A bit different from the tower house!’ said Llew, adding quickly, ‘It’s a pity the house burned down.’ He seemed to pause to recollect something, his eyes lowered. Then, with a sigh, ‘What were you doing there?’

Serge suddenly felt the need to unburden himself. Madeleine had trusted Llew, hadn’t she?

‘It’s OK, Serge, your father and I aren’t friends. He’ll not hear anything from me.’

Serge looked at him for a moment, then nodded. ‘When mother died, Henri asked me to catalogue her paintings and drawings.’

‘She was a fine artist, was Madeleine,’ Llew encouraged him.

‘I found a journal that she’d made. It was hidden in my room—I was only eight and I suppose she thought Henri wouldn’t look there. It had pictures of a Tarot deck—I recognised some of them from pictures in the ballroom. One card showed the house in Wales.’

‘A journal, you say?’ said Llew, gravely. ‘When was this?’

‘A few months after she died—nine years ago. Father started getting all weird about things, and asked me to sort out Madeleine’s things, especially her studio—probably because of Melissa. She was into all that Tarot and magic stuff and told me a bit about the cards.’

‘Melissa?’

‘One of Father’s girlfriends. She didn’t stay—they were only together a few months. She was different from the others, though, and one day she left, just like that. Henri was beside himself. He still doesn’t know where she is.’

‘Oh?’

‘And he mustn’t find her.’

‘Why not?’

Serge pressed his lips together. ‘Can I trust you?’

‘Your mother did.’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’ Serge smiled wanly and continued, ‘I saw her, Melissa. I couldn’t believe it. She was living in the woods with a man called Ifan, only a stone’s throw from the house.’ He reddened. ‘I didn’t want to meet Ifan, so I left mother’s journal at the cabin to let Melissa know I was there.’

‘Go on.’

‘She didn’t find it—apparently Ifan took it. But I did manage to talk to her alone a couple of days later. She was upset about the journal going missing, even though she said she had a copy of it anyway.’

‘Ah, I see.’ Llew smiled and relaxed. ‘Your mother’s journal is safe, Serge. I know Ifan, and he let me have a look at it—sorry lad, but I really had no choice. I’ll get it back to you soon, don’t worry. In the meantime, I want to ask you something—’

‘Yes?’

‘Did you cut the final pages out of it?’

‘How do you know that?’ said Serge, frowning.

‘Where are they?’

‘I don’t know. Do you have the journal with you?’

‘Serge, listen to me, this is important. Madeleine made that journal for Melissa—and it’s vital that you find those missing pages. The cards tell a story, and you’ve thrown away the ending.’

‘That’s ridiculous! Mother couldn’t have known Melissa, could she? She died years before she arrived.’

‘I’m sorry, Serge, but there are important things you don’t know. I’ll tell you about them sometime, but just at the moment we need to find those bloody pages.’

How do you know all this? How do you know she wrote it for Melissa?' he persisted.

'Your mother and I were quite close at one time, Serge. The house on Moel Siabod was mine, not hers.' He paused to let this sink in. 'Look, can you try to remember where the missing pages are? Are they in the house?'

'I don't know. I hid them in a safe place, but they disappeared. I thought Henri must have found them, or that Melissa had come back for them, but I don't think she did.'

Llew grimaced. 'Come back? Are you saying Melissa knew about the missing pages too?'

'I don't think so, but I don't know for sure.'

'Well, they can't be in the cabin, and anyway, Melissa...No, she can't have them. Which leaves Henri and Darley, and if Henri...' Llew's face hardened. 'Serge, listen: don't say a word to anyone about what we've just been talking about. Not to Darley, and especially not to Henri.'

'Of course not.'

'I'm going back to Wales in the morning to talk to Ifan. If he still has the journal, I'll make sure he returns it to you—your job is to find those lost pages. They must be somewhere here. And believe me, they're worth more than your life, more than my life. I know that sounds idiotic, but if Henri finds them first, you'll soon know how seriously I mean it. Your friend Melissa is in very great danger.'

'So he didn't go to Wales to seek you out, but to find Melissa?' said Serge. 'But how could he know she was there? I didn't say a word. I've got to warn her.'

'No, leave it to me. You stay here. I don't think he can be sure, he's only guessing.' He shook his head. 'Is there anything else I should know?' Llew looked into Serge's eyes.

'I don't think so, except—'

'What?'

'She told me she was pregnant.'

Llew nodded. 'I see.' He tried to sound interested and surprised. There was a long silence. Serge was still staring at him intently. 'Yes?'

'Well, it's obviously my father's.'

'Are you sure it isn't Ifan's?'

'She left here in April. She said the baby was due at New Year. Do the maths.' Serge's manner was agitated and gruff.

'I see. Does Henri know?'

'How could he?'

'My dear boy...' Llew said in a schoolmasterish voice, 'don't you think he might have an inkling?'

'Why would Henri want another child at his age? He didn't want me. He wouldn't care whether Melissa was pregnant or not. He's mad at her because she left him—people don't do that to him.' Serge smiled. 'But she did.'

'Yes, she did.'

'She just went, no warning, nothing. I suppose she couldn't, or father wouldn't have let her go.' I don't know what he was doing with her—the first time I saw her she was dressed in one of mother's outfits. She told me later that he'd insisted, and that he often made her wear Madeleine's clothes. That's weird, isn't it?'

Llew was interested in any news about Henri, but the night had turned cold, and he had only a thin coat. He grunted noncommittally.

'Isn't it weird?' Serge repeated. 'And isn't it weird that a girl her age—my age—would be interested in a man old enough to be her father.'

'She left him, Serge,' said Llew, encouragingly. 'That should tell you everything you need to know.'

'I suppose so. Can you warn her, Llew? You'll do that? You promise?'

'I promise..'

There was a short silence, both waiting to see if there was more to be said, before Llew, sighing, said in a weary voice, 'Well, I think we've said enough. Find those pages.'

He pulled his collar up. 'I'll be off now. Can you call me a cab? I'll be in touch.'

'Listen Serge,' Llew called, seeing him turn away, his head down. 'People do all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons, and because of all sorts of obsessions and pressing circumstances. Don't try to make sense of it, just stick to what you believe. And Serge, don't blame Melissa for how she behaves—and don't blame yourself.'

Serge made no response except to walk away down the mist-filled driveway towards the invisible house, gesturing vaguely with his arm.

*

When Ifan returned to the antiques shop the following Saturday, he was surprised to find a young boy behind the counter.

‘Morning,’ said the boy. He sounded English, and definitely wasn’t a local.

‘Is Llew here?’

‘No, sorry. He had to go off for a few days. He’ll be back on Monday. I’m Edward, his assistant. Can I help?’

‘I came to pick up a book I left with him. I don’t suppose he said anything? Ifan’s the name.’

The boy shook his head. ‘No, sorry. I can give him a message when he gets back?’

Ifan turned away. The shop was much tidier than his last visit—no heaps of books and papers, no desk diary. Even the desk lamp had gone, leaving just the spider plant slowly dying in the corner.

‘No, thanks. I’ll come back in a couple of days, you said?’

Ifan left the shop and crossed the road to lean over the wooden rail above the river. The sound of the fast-flowing waters gradually calmed him as he lit his pipe and tasted the reassuring peaty smoke on his tongue.

He wondered how he had got mixed up in such idiocy as this—faerie women, mysterious journals, dead prophets—and yet he was reluctant to let it go. He’d lost the simple life he had known up to now and couldn’t work out what to expect in his new one with Melissa, but in the midst of all this strangeness, his child was the one thing he could be sure of.

*

Henri could see the antiques shop quite clearly from the café across the road. He stirred his black coffee and watched.

It was a good hour and three coffees later before Llew’s first customer materialised, a bearded man with a pipe and a resolute, obstinate look on his face. He was either very effective at getting what he wanted, or he was too impatient to wait, for he left two minutes afterwards, crossing the road to light his pipe just a few feet from Henri’s table. He was frustrated, judged Henri, a connoisseur of expressions. Frustrated but determined—Henri felt a momentary sympathy.

But now the shop was empty. Henri rose and crossed the road.

The spring-bell clattered dully as he entered. The shop smelled as if it had just been doused in air-freshener, but the musty odour of dead men's clutter still lingered, ground into the dust that was evident everywhere.

He was annoyed to see a young boy behind the counter.

'Good day. Is Mr Llywelyn available?'

Edward lost his habitual slouch, straightening as if he'd been called to attention. 'Sorry, sir, but he's away on business.'

'No, he's not,' Henri said, laying his palms flat on the counter. 'Where is he?'

The boy looked puzzled.

'Sorry, but he's not here.'

'Where did he go?'

'I don't know. He said he was taking a train.'

Edward felt as if the man was choking him, staring into his eyes as he took a card from his top pocket and laid it quietly on the counter. 'Give him this. He'll know who called.'

The pressure suddenly ceased and Edward slumped, his head cloudy, unconscious of Henri's exit. When he could breathe normally again, more curious than frightened, he picked up the card—*M Henri Le Genêt* was all it said. There was no address or contact details. He flipped the card over. An odd-looking symbol was embossed on the reverse, a triangle above a rectangle, resting on two wavy lines.

He must be some kind of nutter, Edward thought to himself, rubbing his forehead. He felt tired suddenly, a dull heaviness making him feel faint.

Llew returned the next day, finding a note in the letter box saying Edward was too sick to come in. He nodded, lifting his chin and sniffing deeply, and then turning, saw Henri's card on the desk.

So Henri was in the village. 'Not to worry,' Llew chuckled to himself, 'there's nothing can be found here, even by our esteemed seeker. Best go home, eh, boyo? What's happening at home?'

Laying his briefcase on the desk, he pulled out the journal and opened it out on his little photocopier—a couple more copies would do.

Metal

November came and went. Melissa had been listless and agitated for weeks, taking walks at all hours and staying out for much longer than normal. But as December deepened, she returned to her usual flighty contentment while Ifan became more and more weary, his face and hands frozen when he returned from work in the black evenings, his head foggy and dull.

Two weeks before Christmas the first few flakes of snow spotted the branches of the pines. Winter had taken hold.

Ifan had taken to reading the journal in his truck, away from the cabin. He hadn't seen Melissa read her copy for a while—not since they'd spoken about it—and she no longer left it under the cushions. She was clearly suspicious of him, which made him think that the journal was important to her, but he couldn't understand why. The paintings and the commentaries scrawled next to them made little sense to him.

It was a sort of story, a journey, and there were many hints that the paintings were significant, but in what way he couldn't imagine. It described a Tarot pack—and he now knew more about what a Tarot pack was—but many of the figures and scenes in it looked like real places. Two of the cards seemed to show someone very like Melissa, and one of them, when he looked closer, might be Llew. It was all very strange.

Then, on the fourth of January, Melissa went into labour. It was just as they were getting ready for bed, when to Ifan's irritation, she ran down the stairs and sat down on the front doormat.

'What are you doing?' he shouted, following her.

'I have to go to the tower house, Ifan,' she stated calmly, trying to pull on her boots as she swore.

'You mean the water tower? Are you mad? It's snowing! Why do you do this—all this crap about seeing things? Get a bloody grip, Melissa, you're not going anywhere except the bloody hospital.'

He picked up his keys, but then a puddle suddenly appeared across the mat. She saw him look and nodded.

'It's too late, Ifan, see? My waters have broken. Please, help me get to the tower. I need to be there, please. I have to.'

'Absolutely not, no way. I'm taking you to the doctor.'

‘No!’ She screamed so loud he had to cover his ears. When she stopped he stared at her and sat down, defeated.

‘OK, have it your own bloody way. But if anything goes wrong... Do you know anything about it? Is this really your first time? How can you be sure it’s OK? Just get this clear: if things look bad, I’m taking you to the hospital.’

She nodded.

‘And you’re staying right here in the warm.’

‘But Ifan, it’s not safe for her here!’

‘Don’t be bloody stupid. You’re staying here. You should be at the hospital with a midwife.’

‘No, it’s not that. You don’t understand.’

‘You’re bloody right I don’t understand.’ His face dark, he brought a big blanket and towel and laid them in front of the fire, then pulled off Melissa’s boots and walked her over. Trying to remember what happened on TV, he collected warm water, sponges, flannels and put them beside her, then stood and waited.

She had crouched on all fours like an animal, a cat or wild pig, making grunting and howling noises, and squirming.

‘Don’t worry, it won’t take long,’ she said as a screech escaped her. It seemed to him that she had barely air to breathe.

‘Breathe, don’t talk.’ Ifan squatted by her, stroking her back.

She let out a convulsive yell, and Ifan barely had time to jump before he saw the top of a head appear between her legs, waxy and white, then streaks of blood. Another huge scream, and the head and shoulders appeared. He put out his hand to support it. Her final push was soundless as she collapsed forward and the baby flopped into his hands.

*

Melissa was what Ifan had heard described as an Earth Mother—doting, possessive and jealous, carrying Alex in a baby-sling made out of a cotton scarf, feeding and talking to her constantly. She named the trees, pointed out the birds that settled on them, told her stories, sang songs and read rhymes: as did Ifan, who felt himself warming towards Melissa as he held Alex in his arms, feeling her downy head against his neck. The way Melissa looked at him then was different from her usual way: there was a tenderness she hadn’t shown him before, but underneath that, a wistful sadness.

She was no longer careless about the dangers of the fire, her evening walks became sporadic instead of being a matter of life or death, and her furtive other-worldliness had become a mellow complaisance.

‘I love it when we’re all together like this,’ she mused one morning. ‘We’re like a real, proper family, you me and Alex. We don’t need anyone else, do we?’

Her words should have been comforting, but Ifan felt as if she was talking from a vacuum within a world invisible to him, where everything was perfectly fine on the surface, everything was how Ifan had hoped things would go; but instead of feeling closer, he felt hollow, as if she were invisible, intangible.

*

Ifan had taken to telling Alex the ancient Welsh tales, fresh in his mind from listening to the old men. He was glad he’d thought of joining them in front of the fire at nights—he hadn’t known most of the stories, which they happily repeated in great detail for him.

Melissa usually sat cross-legged on the sofa next to him cradling his daughter, listening, thinking the stories were really for her. She grew fond of the story of Elan, the maid of Dolwydellan, who was so beautiful that the village was named after her.

‘If Elan was her name, Ifan, then what does Dolwydd mean?’ she asked one night.

Ifan laughed at his own ignorance and shook his head. ‘I haven’t the foggiest idea. I’ll ask Llew next time I see him.’

‘Llew from the pub?’

‘Yes, he knows everything to do with the old tales, folklore and the like.’

‘You’ve lived here all your life, haven’t you?’ Melissa said, lifting Alex off of Ifan and placing her gently in the Moses basket.

‘Well, round abouts, yes—but I’m not from the village.’ They smiled at each other. ‘Don’t you ever get lonely, Melissa? You’re stuck here day in day out.’

She shrugged. ‘Not lonely, no. Curious sometimes, but I love it here. It’s as good as a palace for Alex, and I’m safe here with you. We’re both safe.’

‘Safe from what?’

‘I don’t know, just safe. It’s a big bad world out there.’ She took a deep breath and sighed dramatically.

Even though Ifan was next to Melissa, her voice sounded disembodied, unfocused. He didn't think she was answering his question, more making an interior observation.

'Seriously, Melissa, what am I keeping safe? Alex is mine, but are you? To be honest, sometimes I think you're not here at all. You do things that make no sense.'

'To think that I'm not all yours is the wrong way of looking at it, Ifan,' Melissa said in a low voice. 'We're all on a journey, and mine brought me here. You happened to be here. And now Alex is here too. We none of us belong.'

Melissa's hand felt warm but her voice became thin and distant as she turned and stared out of the window, her eyes filling with tears.

Ifan hugged her, being able to make nothing of her answer. It sounded like meaningless nonsense, but she was here with him, and he would make sure his and Alex's lives wouldn't become victims of her nonsense. He would try to learn more about her from Llew, who was certainly hiding more than he was telling.

*

Llew had made it his business to become friendly with Dai and Geraint, his only sources of information about Melissa and Ifan, and it wasn't long before he learned that the baby had been born.

'She seemed a right lass when we first saw her—it was on the path up to Moel Siabod, and—I don't know how else to put it,' Dai was saying one evening. '—she just threw herself at him.'

'So she did,' Geraint confirmed with a nod, 'and now we know why.'

'Broody, you mean?' Llew prompted. The two men exchanged a knowing look.

'Don't say anything,' Dai said quietly, 'but our Ifan must have been firing on all cylinders to have got her up the duff that quick, eh?'

Geraint was nodding, his lips pursed. 'As I recall it, and correct me if I'm wrong, it's almost to the day Ifan met her right here—and by my reckoning even if she spent the night with him, I'd be mighty suspicious.'

'Me too, but not our Ifan. He thinks she's the best thing since sliced bread—he doesn't say anything, but you can tell when a bloke's wearing the rose-tinted, and he's got them right at the end of his nose.'

Llew nodded. 'Maybe. I wouldn't be so sure.'

'I wouldn't trust that one,' Dai said coldly. 'Unfriendly. Have you ever seen her in town? No, me neither. That's suspicious.'

'Maybe she's agoraphobic,' Llew suggested, watching the pair's small black eyes.

It was Geraint who answered this time. 'Is she hell. Back last year I saw her out in the woods, and she wasn't alone.'

Llew raised his eyebrows in interrogation.

'She was with another man. I didn't say anything to Ifan, but...'

*

Melissa heard the front door close and Ifan's rucksack being dropped onto the doormat. She shifted position and moved Alex to the other breast.

'Hello!' she called, 'It's windy out there. Good day?'

Ifan emerged from the kitchen red-faced, his hood still up, only his beard and cheeks visible.

'A couple of trees down. Storms predicted tonight.' Ifan pulled off his gloves and laid them on the hearth, holding his hands out to the flames. 'That fire's a welcome sight,' Ifan said, shivering. 'There's a damp in the air that goes right through you. Oh, there's a letter for you.'

Melissa looked up abruptly.

'Really?'

'Yes. I picked up the post today. I'll get it out—'

'Oh, don't worry now, Ifan, you look knackered. I'll make us some tea. You relax, you've had a hard day.'

She made them each a mug of tea, hoping that Ifan would forget about the letter, but when she sat down next to him, she saw that he'd put it on the table. Ignoring it, she gave him a kiss.

'Aren't you going to open it?'

'I don't want to, yet—I can't think who it's from. Nobody knows I'm here.'

The atmosphere was strained for the rest of the evening, and every so often Ifan would glance from Melissa to the letter. It was still on the table when they went to bed.

She waited until she was sure he was asleep, then tiptoed out and took the letter into the bathroom, locking the door, and sat on the edge of the bath.

The writing on the envelope was in black biro, even, tidy and angular. Sliding her finger under the join, she took out the flimsy notepaper.

Leave at once. I think he knows where you are. If you need help, there's a man who owns an antiques shop in Betws called Llew Llywelyn. Contact him.

I hope the baby was born safely and all is well. It's best that you don't try to contact me after this. I'll be going up to university in the Autumn.

Best wishes,

Serge

Best wishes, she thought, sadly, and then turned her attention to the rest. *Leave at once*: it sounded urgent. How did Serge know Llew?

*

As soon as Ifan left for work the next day, Melissa packed two carrier bags before sitting by the fire to re-read Serge's letter. It was so short, so final. *Don't try to contact me*—it stopped her every time. She screwed it into a ball and tossed it in the fire, then tying Alex into her big cotton scarf, hauled the carrier bags to the front door, and started down the path to the logging track.

*

When Ifan got home it was dark and the fire had gone out. The lamp in the living room was lit, but the house was silent and cold. He lit the fire and took a mug of tea out onto the verandah and stared into the forest for a long time.

At last he went in to stand at the fireplace, distracting himself by kicking a scattering of cinders back under the grate. Noticing a ball of singed paper next to a blackened log, he picked it out and unrolled it.

So she really had gone.

He made himself another mug of tea. Who was Serge? He knew Llew, or knew of him, so he must be a local, and he was off to university, so he must be eighteen or nineteen... It must be the lad in Llew's shop.

Melissa was weird, he knew, but was she also deceitful? Had she been meeting Edward on her moonlight walks? Was he the one they'd seen by the tower?

Ifan felt used and betrayed and was angry at himself for being so stupid. He didn't care about Melissa, but Alex—he had to find his daughter. Melissa had no right to take her away. His heart sank as he realised that no-one apart from himself and Melissa had ever seen her. Officially, she didn't exist. He didn't even know Melissa's surname—the letter had been addressed simply to “Melissa”.

He collected his torches and went out again, taking the long way, down the wet path to the logging track and then skirting the edge of the wood. At the top of the hill he began to half-jog, half-run down the steep slope towards the village, the freezing wind whistling into his face.

*

The smell of beer hit him as he pushed open the door of the Three Horseshoes. He went straight to the bar.

Euan looked bored. ‘Not seen you in here for a while.’

‘Been busy. Give us a double vodka and a pint of cider.’

Ifan glanced round the room. A group of walkers surrounded an upturned beer barrel, looking at maps. Then the door opened and Llew entered, windblown and ruddy-cheeked, stopping to loosen his scarf at the door. He nodded when he saw Ifan.

‘My dear boy, how are you?’

Ifan knocked back his double vodka, the liquid rough on his throat. Llew beckoned him over, indicating the space beside him.

‘Terrible weather, eh?’ Llew said as Ifan carried his pint of cider over to the table. ‘But forgive me, I hear congratulations are in order. How is the lovely Melissa? It's a baby girl, so I'm told.’

Ifan's mouth twisted into a thin line. ‘Llew, can I ask you something?’

‘Fire away.’

‘That boy who was looking after your shop the time I came for my book—’

‘You mean Edward?’

‘I just wondered—’

‘Dreadful about the poor boy, isn’t it? I suppose you heard?’

Ifan raised his eyebrows.

‘The lad’s in hospital—something to do with his lungs—he can’t breathe.’

‘Oh.’ Ifan didn’t know what to think. Melissa’s disappearance could hardly be a coincidence, could it?

‘That’s not why I asked.’ He slowly reached into his pocket and passed the crumpled letter to Llew. ‘I found this when I got back from work tonight. The lovely Melissa has vanished with my child.’

Ifan watched Llew’s face carefully as he took his spectacles out and held the letter at arm’s length, turning it over as if expecting more.

‘D’you think she wrote it herself?’ he asked after a moment. ‘Was she planning to leave all along?’

Llew looked genuinely shocked. ‘Don’t start thinking like that, Ifan. There’s no reason, is there?’

Ifan sighed. ‘I suppose not. It’s been really nice lately, the three of us... But who’s this Serge character then? I thought it must be Edward, he’s the right age for going to university—’

‘No, Ifan. “Serge” must be Madeleine Faurot’s son.’

‘You know him?’ Suddenly, Ifan’s suspicions flew back into his mind, but now they included Llew.

‘It’s a long story, Ifan.’ Llew stroked his chin guiltily. ‘You remember the foxglove woman? The woman who was staying at the tower house that time? Well, that was my friend Madeleine Faurot. I’m afraid I’ve been a little bit disingenuous—’

‘So what’s all this about?’ Ifan’s voice was rising, and Llew leaned over and put his hand on his arm.

‘I’m sorry, Ifan, try not to get upset, lad. It’s... complicated. I don’t know the ins and outs, but I do know that Melissa couldn’t tell you about her involvement with Madeleine’s family. You wouldn’t have believed her, anyway. Henri, Madeleine’s husband, Serge’s father, is a very powerful man, a very dangerous man. Melissa was protecting you—’

‘But she’s taken our child, Llew! If she’s in danger, then surely Alex is in danger too?’

‘If Serge thinks Henri knows she’s here, and if that’s true, he’s probably here already.’ Llew cast his eye across the bar. ‘He’s a hard man to spot when he doesn’t want to be spotted.’

‘Is he a criminal?’

Llew exhaled with a wry smile. ‘He’s a businessman, but he has other interests—his real power is rather specialised and intangible, but if you met him, you’d certainly know about it.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Ifan roughly, irritated again at Llew’s vague explanations.

‘Henri was in the village the day Edward was minding the shop. He was looking for me, Ifan, and for Madeleine’s journal. Edward couldn’t help him, and... Henri occasionally likes to experiment with people.’

Llew pulled his scarf off the bench and began to wrap it around his neck.

‘I’m sorry that Melissa’s gone, Ifan. I know it must be hard for you,’ he said in a father’s grave voice. ‘But it might be for the best. We poor ignorant humans—sorry Ifan,’ he broke off, aware of his tendency to preach.

He leaned forward, ‘Don’t give up on her yet.’ He shook his head. ‘I only have a feeling, but—’ He stood abruptly and pressed his hat hard down onto his head, ‘—for the moment, it might be an idea to keep your head down. And don’t go home yet. Leave it half an hour—’

‘What is this, Llew? Is it more of your nonsense? Because it’s serious for me. What the hell is all this about? Why the big hurry to leave?’

The old man looked stern. ‘Weren’t you listening, Ifan? Yes, it is serious, and not only for you. Henri was here before, looking for me, and now he’s probably returned. I need to keep my head down too, and this place isn’t exactly a hideaway, now is it? You’ll be all right up in the woods—he can’t search every inch of the countryside—but I have to keep out of the way for a while.’

‘What’s it all about, Llew?’ Ifan was getting louder. ‘Why won’t you tell me anything? You’re as bad as Melissa!’

‘I’ve told you enough for you to know Henri’s a dangerous man,’ Llew stated, calmly. ‘I’m sure he’s got no beef with you, but when he finds Melissa isn’t here, he’ll come for me. I have to make arrangements.’

Ifan grabbed Llew’s arm as he got up. ‘You have to give me more than that, Llew.’

But it was like grabbing air, and slipping out of his grip, the little man hurried towards the bar door. Opening it, the force of the wind blew the heavy door against the wall with a sharp crack.

Rain lashed Ifan's cheeks through the open doorway as he watched Llew run across the car park. Then there came a rumble of thunder and the silhouette of Moel Siabod lit up, lightning crackling along its ridge.

Llew's tail lights flickered on as his van pulled away over the gravel into the road, then a ragged whiplash of lightning hit a tree and an invisible column toppled slowly but inevitably out of the dark, crashing down into the path of the accelerating car.

As Ifan ran out into the stinging rain, there was a screech of tyres and an ear-splitting bang, and as he reached the tree another burst of lightning flashed along the ridge, illuminating a sixty foot larch crushing the roof of the van, which was buried in an impenetrable tangle of branches.

He shouted Llew's name again and again but there was no answer, and he turned to run back for help.

Halfway across the car park he heard the dull thud of a car door behind him. A figure was striding towards the van, the flaps of a cloak slapping against its legs as it pushed a path straight through the branches of the tree. Reaching the van it smashed the window with what looked like a walking stick.

Ifan thought he must be imagining it, but as another sheet of lightning illuminated the sky he saw the figure quite clearly inspecting the inside of the van then turning and walking away, the branches that had been so impenetrable to Ifan seeming to brush aside easily at his approach. With a final swish the figure disappeared into the darkness.

A second massive bolt of lightning smashed into the remains of the van, sending huge flames roaring out into the night, hundreds of tiny fires lighting up the larch like a christmas tree.

Earth

Melissa put down her book as the elegant figure emerged from the college archway and turned towards the high street, looking around her. Darley had obviously not found Serge, which reassured Melissa that he was likely to be alert to her potential appearance.

She decided Darley was not worth following, and settled more comfortably into the window seat.

*

Half an hour later, Serge appeared, walking across the green. He was greeted by the porter.

‘Nothing for me?’

‘Sorry, sir.’

So, no post again. Serge paused for a second, but the porter had turned away to read his newspaper. He was both relieved and disappointed, and as he continued across the lawn to the far side of the quad, he stared at the window of his rooms, hoping and fearing that Melissa would be waiting for him. He knew it was stupid—the last he’d seen of her was at Moel Siabod eight months before. She was gone.

Entering the cold stone staircase, he climbed the worn steps to his room. Once inside, he threw down his rucksack, filled the old electric kettle and settled himself in the sagging armchair, his magnificently battered resting place; and breathing out, he felt the deep satisfaction of knowing that he could sit here for an hour or a lifetime, undisturbed.

And then his attention was captured by a note pinned to the back of the door. He stared at it for a moment before slowly rising from the chair. With relief he recognised Darley’s handwriting.

Thank God it wasn’t Miranda, who had been pursuing him for days, leaving notes with the porters and even once ‘accidentally’ bumping into him in the quad. He supposed she knew of his father: perhaps it had been a mistake for him to join the Circle. Even now, he didn’t know why he had—just because Henri had suggested it, he supposed.

What did Darley want? Serge read the flimsy piece of paper as he wandered back to his armchair, vaguely wondering why she hadn’t waited for him to return.

Dear Serge, he read. I wondered what you had made of the Circle? Does it interest you at all? Perhaps, if you find it amusing, you should try to meet some of the more reclusive members. Professor McGonagle is a particularly interesting man.

So they—his father and Darley—were still keen on interfering. He wondered if Darley had recruited Miranda.

There was knock at the door, a hard double-rap. The indefatigable Miranda didn't knock like that. It must be Darley, returning. He heaved himself up reluctantly and opened the door, only to see the gruff figure of a man, heavily-clothed in thick country wear.

'Are you Serge, Melissa's friend?' the man asked immediately, without preamble.

The voice startled him, then he suddenly had a vision of woods and a clearing, and someone with a torch... Recomposing himself, he said, 'Hello. You're Ifan, aren't you?'

Ifan stood foursquare in the doorway, almost belligerently. Serge could see that some sort of accusation was coming.

'If you're looking for Melissa, I'm afraid I can't help you. I haven't seen her.'

Ifan eyed him coldly. 'So it was you. Aye, I'm looking for her, but I didn't really expect you to tell me where she is. Are you going to let me in?'

'Of course,' Serge said, relieved. 'You've come a long way. Come in, come in, though I don't know how I can help you.'

Ifan entered and made straight for the small fire burning faintly in the grate. 'It's bloody cold in here, worse than the cabin,' he muttered, rubbing his hands.'

'Yes, they're pretty old-school here in regard to comfort. They don't believe in cossetting us, not good for the soul.'

'Soul? Sod the soul, it's the bloody body that you need to look after in this weather. You sound like Melissa with her airy-fairy ideas.' He looked at Serge. 'There's no need to frown like that. I like Melissa—I can see you do, too. But she's not why I'm here, except incidentally.' He paused, searching Serge's face. 'You know Melissa left me when she got your note? She took Alex, our daughter.'

He looked angry now, 'I was stupid, I let Melissa have it all her own way, but I'm not letting her get away with running off with my daughter, no way. Whatever daft ideas she has, she's not going to do that to me.'

'Melissa left Moel Siabod?' Serge went to stand by the window, unwilling to let Ifan see how relieved he was, and then continued quickly. 'You're obviously very upset, but I can tell you that it's not straightforward, Ifan. I wish it was. She had to leave—Do you know where she went?' He collected himself. 'Of course not, otherwise you wouldn't be here, would you? Stupid of me.'

'It's complicated, eh? Yes, that's what Llew said. Look, will you tell me what this is all about? None of it makes sense to me. Why did she just turn up out of nowhere? She seemed to be happy—' he hesitated, 'as far as I could tell. And then she just left. What's she afraid of?'

'What has she told you?'

'Never mind what she's told me. You tell me.'

'I don't know for sure, but it involves my father, and Madeleine—'

Ifan nodded. 'Llew said Madeleine's your mother. It's her journal that Melissa's been reading for the last year, isn't it? The one I found—that you left—in the cabin?'

'Yes. I'm sorry about that, Ifan. I didn't know who you were, and I had to find some way of contacting her without arousing your suspicions.'

'Well, that worked out well, didn't it?' Ifan's face relaxed. 'But I can sort of see that, now.'

'My father's not someone you want to get on the wrong side of. And he's rich. It's not hard for him to find people to do his dirty work.'

'Look, Serge—can I call you Serge, lad? You don't know anything, I can see that. OK. So your da's a nasty bloke, I can accept that, but I don't care about him. All I'm interested in is finding Alex and taking her home where she'll be safe.' He shook his head. 'Melissa's not fit to be a mother, I tell you. She's a bloody crazy woman. I'm surprised she could get it together enough to leave the cabin. She's no idea how to look after herself, let alone a child.'

Ifan was circling the room, examining the prints on the wall, reproductions of Madeleine's Tarot paintings. He'd stopped at one of them.

'These are the pictures in Melissa's journal.' He pointed, 'and that's the water-tower near my cabin. At least,' he said, stepping closer, 'it's the clearing. And the lightning.'

‘Yes. You know she used to visit the ruins of Llew’s house?’

‘I know very well. I was there when the lightning hit it.’

‘Were you? Well, then you’ve had a lesson in what happens when my father takes offence.’

‘Are you telling me your *father* burned it down?’ Ifan grunted. ‘Bloody hell, what kind of man is he, to cast lightning? And don’t start telling me he has the secret of dragonfire. I’ve had enough of that kind of rubbish to last me a lifetime.’

Serge didn’t smile. ‘I told you, he’s just someone you don’t want to offend, Ifan. Look, take a seat and I’ll tell you what I know about Madeleine and Melissa—and Henri. It might help you understand.’

*

Melissa stared into Alex’s eyes. She felt no connection: rather, she felt as though she was being assessed somehow. But for what? She had no idea. What did they all want with her?

She thought back to how she’d met Henri. She remembered seeing Darley at the party, feeling her eyes on her, much like Alex had her eyes on her now. Without really knowing how, she’d found herself being steered by them to a private room, where three others were waiting, and then there was a blank until she’d woken in the Red Room...

She shivered. Melissa had her phantom world, but it wasn’t like this, it wasn’t creepy like their world.

Her thoughts turned to the forest, and Ifan. It must have been a relief to him when she left. She’d wanted to explain things to him, as much as she could, but he wouldn’t understand. Melissa sighed. Maybe she should write to him. But after all this time she still didn’t have anything concrete to say, and she wasn’t going to tell him that Alex wasn’t his.

*

‘So that’s it, Ifan. Henri is planning something, and there’s something about the water-tower that he—and maybe others—are interested in. Melissa was drawn into it, but I don’t think she knows anything either. In fact I would say that she knows less than I do. You say Llew was killed in an accident? Well, now you see the danger that Melissa is in.’

‘That’s ridiculous. A tree fell on him, I saw it. It was nothing to do with Henri.’

‘You really don’t want to accept the truth, do you, Ifan?’

‘Oh, come on. You’re not telling me...’

‘I’ve already told you, haven’t I? And you’ll find out for yourself if you get in Henri’s way. He’s not an ordinary man.’

Ifan shook his head. He wasn’t going to mention the cloaked figure inspecting Llew’s crushed car. ‘I don’t know who’s sillier, you or Melissa.’

‘Doesn’t it strike you as odd that Llew and Edward died just after Henri’s visit? That lightning burned the house, and lightning brought the tree down?’

‘Coincidence. Don’t go reading things into it, Serge. This Alchemy business—’

‘Have it your own way, Ifan. I’m only telling you what I think. It’s guesswork, but I’ve known these people all my life. They’re not ordinary. Strange things happen around them.’ He looked at Ifan curiously. ‘You say Melissa’s weird. You must have seen things...and how do you think Melissa arrived outside your door with no warning, with no car, with nothing? Do you think she walked from Henri’s?’

Ifan scratched his beard. ‘I’m not saying that a lot of it didn’t make me wonder—’ He nodded his head at one of the walls. ‘These pictures,’ he said quietly, ‘Are you saying that they might give us a clue to what Melissa’s doing?’

‘I think so. Madeleine was a clever woman—and Melissa has gifts, you know.’ Seeing Ifan’s look of concern, he continued, ‘Nothing like Henri’s or my mother’s, but she can see things, do things...’

‘You mean her phantom world? She mentioned it once or twice.’

‘That’s part of it. It’s why she was useful to Henri, I think. But he didn’t understand her—it’s odd, he’s extremely good at that kind of thing. It’s pretty unbelievable that she was able to escape.’

‘Where would she go? I could have kept her safe in the cabin. No-one goes there.’

‘Except me, eh, Ifan? And Llew.’

They stared at each other.

‘Yes, I see. But even if everything you say is true, it doesn’t really affect me, does it? I’m sorry about Melissa, but she used me. She has to fight her own battles now. I just want Alex.’

‘I said it wasn’t simple, Ifan. I think Henri wants Alex too, not Melissa.’

Ifan looked Serge full in the face. ‘But you want Melissa, don’t you?’

‘I—’

‘Well, good luck with that. She’s trouble, Serge lad, even allowing for all this stuff with your father and everything. Believe me.’ He put his hand on Serge’s shoulder. ‘I’m not one to interfere in other people’s business, but...’

‘I know, I know. But it *is* my business.’ Serge hesitated. ‘And I think I’ve found a way. I can’t tell you how in case Henri makes you *his* business.’

‘You think he’s after me too?’

‘Not yet, or you wouldn’t have made it here. But if he gets frustrated... He’ll probably be told about your visit. I’m sure he’s having me watched.’

‘Ah.’

‘I might be able to do something, but it depends on someone I’m not sure I can trust. Can I trust you?’

‘Me?’ Ifan looked offended and angry for a moment. Then it passed, and he continued, ‘Yes, you can trust me, Serge, and I think I can trust you. We’re different, you and me, and you’re only young but you seem like a man who keeps his word, and that’s all that matters. Shake—’ He held out his hand. Serge took it in a light, firm grip.

‘Well, that’s it, I suppose. I’m no nearer finding Alex, and I don’t know what to do next. It’s down to you, boyo.’

‘I’ll do what I can, Ifan. We need to keep in touch. It’s quite likely that Henri will intercept your mail, so we’d better find another way. Do you have an email address?’

‘No. I’ll give you Dai’s address. He’s a good lad, and I’ll tip him the wink. Write to me there. Every week, even if you’ve got nothing to say. Just so I know your letters aren’t getting ‘lost’ eh?’

‘Good idea. Be careful Ifan.’

‘Don’t worry, I’m no hero. Dai’s selling one of his dogs.’ He went to stand in front of the picture of the water-tower. ‘Odd, the dog looks like this one in the picture, and that colouring’s not common either.’ He turned to Serge. ‘I can’t say I’m very happy about all this. There’s too much strange for my liking. Still, if strange is what’s needed, then strange it is. I’m not one for giving up.’

Serge watched the burly figure of Ifan as he crossed the quad. What help could Ifan be to him? Not much, yet. But Melissa had said he could enter her world, hadn’t she? even if he pooh-poohed it. They must be able to use that to help them find her, surely?

Serge picked up Darley's note. *McGonagle*. The name meant nothing to him. He suddenly noticed a book among the papers on his desk, and picking it up he opened it. There was an inscription on the flyleaf:

"To my dear friend Sarah. None of this will be new to you, but one day you may find a use for it. David McG."

Sarah? Wasn't that Darley's name? He couldn't be sure. She had always been plain 'Darley'. *David McGonagle*. Curiously, he flipped through the pages. It seemed to be a text book of Alchemical practices, heavily annotated. Darley was obviously keen to keep him interested in the Circle. But why leave him the book? If she had something to tell him why didn't she just say it?

He shook his head, wishing he wasn't his father's son. Nothing was straightforward.

*

The term passed quickly. Serge heard nothing more from Darley or from Ifan, and had nothing to tell the latter.

Miranda had somehow become attached to him, and they spent a lot of time together reading up on and discussing the odd texts that were introduced to them by various members of the Circle. Serge wasn't impressed: most of the writings seemed either confused or deliberately confusing: they would have been more confusing if he hadn't had Darley's little book to consult. He didn't show it to Miranda—maybe he was being paranoid, but it didn't seem like a good idea.

He wondered at her interest in him. She was several years older, pleasant and funny, and very intelligent. Serge knew he was bright, but he couldn't imagine that his sole virtue could explain why she wanted to spend so much time with him unless she was working for Henri. It wasn't as if he led an exciting life: he spent most of his time studying, and going to the odd little pubs scattered round the town, enjoying the noise—and often, very bad music—he found there. He didn't join in, preferring to relax and enjoy the anonymity.

For the first time in his life he felt whole and unencumbered, and Miranda was an easy companion, always ready to talk or not. She often stayed over, and their lovemaking was gentle and reassuring. She had been surprised at his inexperience, and seemed to enjoy introducing him to what was, for her, familiar pleasures. But he always wished it was Melissa in his arms.

*

By Spring, Melissa had settled into a routine. After leaving Alex with a friend, she went to work in the mornings and then spent the afternoons in the library opposite the entrance to Serge's college. She'd bribed the porter to make a list of visitors, and to keep his mouth shut.

Only Darley and Miranda visited him. In a way it comforted her to see Serge and Miranda together. Melissa watched them closely from her perch in the library, and was reassured that they weren't really close. There were none of the little signs that reveal intimacy. Obviously, they were sleeping together, but she didn't mind, particularly—she'd slept with Henri and Ifan and one or two others, hadn't she? For all he knew, she was gone from his life.

But seeing Darley reassured her even more. Henri was using her to keep tabs on Serge, and she seemed to choose times when Serge wasn't there. Was Darley herself being followed? It didn't matter: it all pointed to Darley deceiving Henri. She was on their side.

*

Ifan had spent the week since his visit to Serge thinking—not an occupation he was used to. He liked, he loved, he wanted his hard but rewarding, straightforward life, and rarely speculated about more abstract things than how to spot possible hidden signs of a Muntjac's bed.

He had no experience of these kinds of people: rich people, manipulative people, *different* people. Melissa had been bad enough, but Serge and his family... What could you think of them? Serge himself seemed straight enough, but he was just a boy. Not like any boy that Ifan knew, though: older in many ways, and serious with it. But a boy, nonetheless, and a boy in love, with all that meant. He obviously believed in this phantom world of Melissa's, and that worried Ifan.

He tried to remember the night they'd found the nightjar. It had certainly felt odd. Ifan had been on edge—not scared, he told himself, nothing scared him—but he'd definitely felt strange in the water-tower clearing, and how could that be? He was as familiar with the place as with his own cabin. Serge wasn't stupid, either, young as he was. If he took Melissa's world seriously, then perhaps there was something in it?

Ifan was now very familiar with the folk-tales of his own world, courtesy of Llew. Devils, spirits, magicians—it still seemed so much nonsense, but Melissa's and Serge's lives were being influenced by the nonsense, and if he depended on them to find Alex he would have to learn more about the nonsense so he could try to turn it into sense.

He shook his head. No, Serge wasn't stupid, and if he believed that his mother and father had... powers, then Ifan would have to at least pretend to take him seriously if he was to find Melissa and Alex.

He would have to learn more about these people. *A good reason for getting to know Serge better*, he told himself. And then he muttered 'Belief,' remembering Llew's words: 'Only believe.' He shook his head at how ridiculous it all seemed.

Clicking off his torch, he stood for a moment to let his eyes accustom themselves to the gloom. The dog beside him was standing stock-still, his fur raised.

The water-tower stood as it always had, a round tank in a small clearing, mounted on a high steel skeleton sunk into the ground, and surrounded by the heaps of stone and rubble that were the ruins of Llew's old house.

Melissa had warned him not to go back to the clearing, but he had helped clear the land and had been in and around it countless times since. What could she know about it that he didn't? He called the dog to him, and started forward, tapping the trees on either side as he circled the tower.

At the top was the big grey cistern that supplied the cabins, Ifan's and the newer ones farther down on the other side of the hill. They were supposed to be for the use of the Rangers, but Dai and Geraint preferred to live in the village, and they were empty most of the time.

He watched as the dog sniffed around in the rubble that littered the ground between the tower and the surrounding walls. He seemed excited. What could Melissa have meant?

The tower looked different in the twilight, lighter and less solid. A faint mist was slowly gathering around it, changing its shape to something that almost seemed familiar, yet unknown.

It was then he noticed a dim light at the top of the tower, more like the diffuse yellow glow of a window than anything else. That was impossible, though, there were no windows: yet the light wasn't from a torch—but it was real enough, and beside him the dog was whining like a banshee.

The dusky light coming through the trees was fading fast and Ifan took out his torch as he walked forward slowly, scanning the path as if expecting tripwires or land mines.

The eeriness made everything seem unreal and slightly threatening, and Ifan realised that something had changed in him. Being around Melissa... Maybe she wasn't an airhead after all. Before he'd met her, he wouldn't even have noticed the mist or odd dim light, and if he had he would have ignored them, but now...

The dog's whining was becoming more insistent, and Ifan made his way across the jumble of stone that surrounded three sides of the tower, picking his way carefully towards the frantically-seeking dog. The steel ladder built into one side of the tower appeared in front of him, seemingly illuminated by the light that haloed the mist above. He stared upwards, listening to the silence of the woods around him.

'Ifan?'

The voice startled him.

'Who's there?'

He suddenly thought of the gun in his cabin, and flung himself to the ground. His thigh hit something hard and he rolled sideways, cursing the pain. And then, with a crack of stone against stone, he heard the jagged chimney of the old tower house topple towards him. There was a sharp sensation of bloody pain and then nothing except a fading voice whispering his name as he passed out.

*

There was the smell of *hospital*, the dead air and harsh brightness of hospital, and the subtle pressure of warmth. *The worst of the pain is over* it said to him, but this pain was bad enough. He opened his eyes.

'Well, Ifan, boyo, you've made a sorry mess of yourself, and no mistake. Lucky I found you, eh? Here, drink this, you'll be thirsty, your pretty nurse said.'

'Dai?'

'Aye. Don't try to move, your leg's in traction.'

Ifan looked around him.

'What happened?'

'Hard to say, really. The top of the old chimney fell on you. We couldn't work out why, though, it looked solid enough, and the rest of the stack's in good shape. The surveyor had a look this morning, and he couldn't understand it. It didn't touch the water-tower.' He passed the glass of water. 'Drink this, it's water,' he said, grinning. 'The nurse said to drink it easy—you won't be used to it.'

Ifan took a sip with difficulty. 'What about the dog?'

'Sorry, Ifan, the dog's dead. His skull was crushed. You can have his sister, she's just as good, if not better. It's getting a bit expensive feeding the lot of them. You'll be doing me a favour.'

‘That’s odd. He was nowhere near me when the chimney came down.’

‘The bang on the head must have confused you, Ifan. The dog was lying next to you. In fact, it had its teeth in your trousers, trying to drag you away, it looked like.’ He looked at the bandaged figure on the bed. ‘What were you doing there? I thought you said you didn’t like the place? “Never hear a bird there”, you said.’

‘Just ended up there, Dai. Went out to check on some of the bloody muntjacs, and, I don’t know. The dog didn’t like the place either, he was whining and running around like a rat-arsed fly.’

Dai looked at his watch. ‘Well, I’d better be going. I’ll call back in tomorrow. Don’t worry, me and Ger can handle things till you’re back on your feet.’

Ifan closed his eyes again. It was too much of a coincidence. He should talk to Serge. Maybe he’d have an explanation, although the only one that made sense at the moment, didn’t make sense. How could anyone make a stone chimney fall down? That was crazy—as crazy as making lightning? As killing an innocent boy? As pursuing a crazy girl?

*

Melissa folded the note and tucked it into her bra, watching Miranda and Serge through the kitchen door. They’d been sitting talking in the big saloon for an hour, and Melissa thought they might leave before she had a chance to grab Serge alone, but at last Miranda had got up to go to the toilet.

Watching Serge day by day, sat at the window of the library, studying the cards, Melissa felt she had come to know him—and Miranda. Miranda was also in the cards, which Melissa found intriguing, since it confirmed that they hadn’t got together by chance. But she was still convinced that they weren’t close. *So...*

Melissa stared at herself among the reflections in the stainless steel door as she passed through with the tray in her hands. Where did these thoughts come from? They didn’t feel like her own—she didn’t concern herself with what other people thought or did.

‘Hello, Serge.’

‘Melissa!’ Serge looked around wildly. ‘For God’s sake don’t let Miranda see you!’

‘She’ll be gone a couple of minutes yet. We have to talk, Serge. When can we meet?’

'We can't. Miranda's working for my father, I'm sure, and she's always around. And so is Darley. And I think there's someone else, too. They're trying very hard to find you, Melissa. You've got to keep away from me.'

'Don't look so worried, Serge. Things have changed. I've changed. Yes, we still have to be careful, but... anyway, you'll see. Look, here's my number. Call me. There's lot's to talk about.' She gave him the note.

Serge looked at it.

'OK. I've got things to tell you, too. I met someone who could help us. You'd better go. I'll call you tonight.'

*

'I'm sorry, Ifan. You can keep the cabin, obviously, but there's nothing we can find for you to do. You know how it is. I'm afraid it's the dole queue.'

Ifan nodded, 'That's better than I expected—thanks for letting me keep the cabin. I don't know if I could live anywhere else. It's my home.'

'Well, you know, if your replacement actually wanted to live up there the new cabins are available. Dai and Geraint don't like to be so cut off. The boys aren't like you, Ifan, they're not stayers—though you didn't hear me say that—and nobody else wants to live on a wet foggy mountain without even a phone. You should get yourself a woman to look after you, boyo, though it'd have to be an odd one who'd put up with that and... well, you know, living alone. What happened to that other one? She stuck it out a while, didn't she? Maybe you could persuade her back. Melissa, was it?'

'That's over, and she wasn't right for me, thanks. It's good of you to think of me, but I'll be all right. I'll be off now.'

'Good luck, Ifan. I'm sorry about all this. I know it'll be hard to find something else. I wish I could help. Maybe you should talk to that woman who's taken over Llew's shop? She might need someone.'

'Mrs Hassen? Maybe.' Ifan sighed. 'Well then, see you in another life.'

He closed the door and stood for a moment in the bright sunshine. There were things to do and to arrange. He felt the stick hard in his hand. He'd already got used to it and it had its place with the others in the corner of the cabin. His leg was pretty useless, and they'd told him it would be best to remove it, but he wouldn't let them. 'It'd be like losing a leg,' he'd told them. He wasn't going to lose a leg. No, he was going to gain a big stick.

*

'You've worked it all out, have you?'

'I think so. Why?'

Melissa looked at Serge's sullen frown, and counted her fingers.

'Well, for a start, why is he still interested in finding Alex? He must know by now that I'm not what he thought I was. I'm not, you know, so Alex can't be, either, can she?'

'Yes, I know. I've learned a lot in the last year, Melissa.'

'Me too. It's in the cards, Serge. They don't make sense unless... Do you know where the missing pages are?'

Serge's head jerked up. 'I'd forgotten about them, to tell you the truth. I hid them in mother's studio at La Baume, but when I went to find them, they'd gone. My father can't have them, and I don't think it could have been Darley, otherwise... It's a mystery. It wasn't you, was it?'

'Me? How could I have known where they were?'

'Your eyes remind me of my mother's, Melissa, and I know you have your talents.'

'I wish you'd tell me what they are. I live in my own phantom world, but so does everybody. It's hardly a special talent, it's just that I admit it. But the cards, Serge, the missing cards! We need them. Don't you remember anything about them?'

Only that they were different from the others—that's why I cut them out. Remember, I was only ten years old.'

Melissa lifted her chin and began to recite: '*The World, The Emperor, The Empress, Strength, The Tower, The Fool.*'

Serge stared. 'I think you might be right. How did you know?'

'It's obvious, but don't ask me why. I think Darley's got them. She hid them with something else. Did Madeleine have a wooden box she kept personal things in? I think they're in there.'

'Actually, yes, she did.' Serge's eyes were shining. 'Do you know where it is? Somebody stole it from me.'

'It's still around somewhere, that's all I know. The cards are safe.' She paused. 'I wish you'd trusted me.'

'How could I? What did you expect? My father...' he said angrily.

'Yes. And then Ifan.' She took his hand. 'But now it's you, Serge.'

'What do you mean? Are you making fun of me?'

He pulled away but she held tight.

'No. I don't know how it happened, how I got mixed up with them. It was like a dream. I had no choice. Henri, well, that was Darley's doing. She... put a spell on me, I think.

'Oh, don't look like that. Don't you wonder sometimes what you're doing, why you're doing something? Spells are real, Serge, not all your thoughts are yours—do you understand? People call them compulsions, obsessions, brainwashing, control-freakery... but it's spells, trickery, sorcery.'

'That's a bit paranoid, Melissa, don't you think?' said Serge, happy at being told secrets.

'Why do you say that, Serge? I can *see* things, I can see how things happen. And what I see is that it's not fate, or chance, or nature making things happen, screwing things up: it's people, bloody nasty people. You can't trust them.'

'Do you trust me?'

Melissa snorted, 'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because... just because.'

'And Ifan?'

Melissa was silent, eventually saying with a sigh, 'Yes. I trust Ifan too.'

'So do I. What do you know, Melissa? Tell me.'

'I can't. It's not the way it works, and you'd be scared, anyway. No, you have to find out for yourself at the right time, and then you can trust yourself. You have to build your own fortress.'

Serge thumped the table angrily. 'What is this, Melissa, it doesn't sound like you, who are you pretending to be?'

'I'm me, and I say what comes out of my mouth, Serge, like I said. You do things too: why would a ten-year-old child hide particular pictures on a whim? How could he see people in a red room that you won't find on the house plans?'

'How can you possibly know about that?' said Serge, surprised.'

'I'll tell you some time, but not now. Now we have to concentrate on more immediate events.'

Serge was looking scared now. 'Ifan was right. You're coming on like a bad detective, suggesting and hinting but never saying anything concrete! What have you been doing for the last year? Why haven't you contacted me before? Why aren't you really telling me anything now? I'm sorry, I agree with Ifan. You're talking a lot of nonsense. There's obviously

something important happening that concerns us—me—and that scares me.’

‘You don’t believe me?’ Melissa had tears in her eyes now.

‘How can I? Look,’ he said, relenting, ‘you might be right, and I *will* be careful. I’ve met someone...’

‘Not Miranda?’ Melissa said sharply. ‘You told me yourself—’

‘No, not Miranda. An acquaintance of my father’s. Professor McGonagle.’

‘McGonagle?’ Melissa shouted, grabbing his arm. ‘No! Don’t listen to him!’

‘Why not? Do you know him?’

‘He used to come to the Red Room,’ she said in a quiet whisper. ‘He was there with Henri.’

‘What Red Room?’

‘The one you *saw*. You thought it was a dream, but it wasn’t, it was real. They took me to the Red Room to... do things to me. Don’t ask, Serge, please. I’ll tell you sometime, but it’s not important now. Just don’t trust McGonagle.’

‘I’m sorry, Melissa, but I don’t believe you. Professor McGonagle is on our side.’

‘Whose side is that, Serge? What has he said? That he’ll help you understand?’ She got up and opened her bag. ‘Look.’ She took out a purple-wrapped bundle and laid it on the table. ‘I’ll show you. You’ve used your mother’s pack, haven’t you? We’ll ask the cards.’

Melissa smiled. ‘You see, Serge?’

‘I think so. You’re very persuasive.’ He lifted his eyes. ‘So what do we do? We know what Henri is doing—but why did he choose you as his vessel, Melissa? You keep saying that he was deceived into using you. Who by?’

‘By your mother, Serge. It was unfortunate for him that he was induced by Darley to believe that he needed a certain kind of female power. I don’t have that, but your she and your mother persuaded him that she did, and she—it’s called *casting a glamour*—made him believe that I did. And Alex is the result.’

‘Alex isn’t what Henri thinks she is, but she’s close enough that if he finds her, he will be able to see that with a small change of plan he might very well succeed.’

‘Change of plan?’

‘Change of partner, then. You were meant—’

‘Me? But she’s my half-sister...’

‘Oh Serge, things like that, conventions, they just don’t apply. Anyway, Alex was meant to be the perfect jewel, but she’s flawed—which is my doing—I didn’t make it to the tower.’

‘That was Madeleine’s plan. But the flaws will become irrelevant if Henri can find the right partner for her, and he’s already searching.’

‘But she’s a baby!’

‘There are ways and worlds where nothing is fixed, Serge. Where people and things exist and don’t exist at the same time, or exist only for the moment... There’s never a point in questioning the morality from a point of view set in the normal world.’

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to think about that. Anyway who would help Henri?’

‘Tell me, did *you* know you were helping him?’

‘Me?’ There was a long pause. ‘Oh, yes, I see.’

‘I don’t think you do. I’m a poor substitute for Madeleine, but you, you’re Madeleine’s son. You, too, were meant to be a perfect jewel. That you’re evidently not—it must have been a disappointment to him, to say the least.’ She looked at him curiously. ‘You must have some powers. I know you can enter my phantom world—what else can you do?’

‘Do? I can’t do anything.’

‘Have you tried?’

‘Tried what? What am I supposed to be able to do? I can read the Tarot, but apart from that?’

‘You were led to the Circle by Darley. She must know what gifts you might have. What happens at the meetings?’

‘We meditate a lot,’ sighed Serge. ‘I suppose eventually we’ll do experiments—’

‘What sort of meditation?’

‘There’s a mandala of sorts—the plan of an Alchemical tower. We imagine visiting the rooms.’ Serge averted his gaze. He didn’t want to tell her about visiting the water-tower in the other world, the phantom world.

‘You don’t have any idea what you’re really getting into, do you, Serge? Miranda does, though.’

Serge stared at her. 'Miranda? Do you think she—'

'Yes. I'm sure she works for him. She's making herself available to you—and I'm sure she's shown you some of her pleasanter talents.' Serge blushed. 'She's leading you down a particular path. What do you talk about?'

'Alchemy. The Great Work. Revelation.'

'The Great Work? Hmm.'

'Melissa, we can do it instead, can't we, you and I?'

She shook her head. 'I don't think so. And why would we want to?'

'Well, lots of people, clever people—Kepler, Newton, Bacon, Boyle, Tycho Brahe, Strindberg, to name a few—they all thought it was worth it.'

'Yes, and they all went mad, like Henri. Be happy with what is, Serge. Why must we want to act like gods? We're not gods. At least, I'm not.'

'I thought you just said we have to stop Henri? As far as I can see, the only way to stop him is to take away what he is trying to achieve, and the only way to do that is to achieve it ourselves. We must be gods whether we like it or not.'

He stopped, suddenly amused at his own words, and glanced at Melissa's face, but she wasn't smiling.

'Being gods—it's only a matter of changing your perspective, like St Paul. But it's serious stuff. Alchemy isn't play-acting, Serge, it's real.'

Serge gazed at her.

'What's happened to you, Melissa?'

'You mean, where's the dozy airhead you knew and loved?' She laughed.

'I never thought of you like that! It's just so unexpected, the way you're talking.'

'Yes, well. I did a lot of thinking in my little garret.'

'What changed you?'

She looked at him.

'Ifan. Watching Ifan, making him do things, hurting him. I had no choice but to do that, but I realised I was treating him just like I'd been treated. I—can you understand what I'm saying?—When this is over I want to start again, with you, with everybody. We—'

'We?'

'Yes. We. Us. You and me.'

There was a long pause before Serge sniffed cynically, 'I thought I'd never see you again. And what about Ifan? You know he came to see me?'

'Why?'

Serge frowned. 'You lived with him, Melissa, and he thinks Alex is his daughter. Why haven't you told him? I understand that it might have been awkward while you were living with him, but not now. It's cruel, Melissa, and it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth.'

'I don't know. I... Yes, I was using him, but it's not as bad as it sounds. He needed a woman, and I'm a woman... Don't look at me like that, Serge. Where's the harm? I wasn't in love with him, and I didn't try to make him love me. Kindness is enough, sometimes.'

'You sleep with people out of kindness?'

'I wasn't with anyone else. Why not?'

'And after you'd used him, you followed me here, and you've been suggesting that you love me now. No wonder he doesn't trust you. I'm not sure I do, either.'

'Why not? I've changed, Serge.'

'It's not kind to deceive someone, Melissa, and you're still deceiving him. It's business, and for Ifan, it's dirty business. You have to tell him. He'll hate you when you do, but you do.'

'I know. I don't want to think about it.'

There was a long pause. 'You say you want your self-respect back. I think you might have to start with the basics.' Serge turned away.

'I should go.'

'Melissa, I want to help you, but that's all. I'm being kind.'

Melissa looked at him and moved closer. 'OK, Serge, you've made your point. You're being kind to me, so I should be kind to you, is that it? OK.' She began to unbutton her blouse.

*

'Wake up, Melissa, you have to go home.' Serge spoke in a low voice, not wanting her to go. Melissa opened her eyes.

'Oh, God, what time is it?'

'Nine o'clock.'

Melissa threw off the covers and began to dress quickly. 'Where's the nearest phone?'

'In the porter's lodge. Tell them I told you. Melissa—'

'Not now, Serge. I'll be in touch.' She turned to him. 'Don't worry, I'm not running away. I should have picked Alex up two hours ago.' She smiled. 'I'll come back tomorrow. We need to talk about Henri.'

Serge's eyes clouded over. 'Yes, I suppose we must.' His mouth was a thin line. 'Shouldn't we talk about us too? What happened? What are we now?'

Melissa pulled on her skirt roughly. 'I don't know, Serge, but I haven't got time to talk now.' She picked up her bag and kissed him. 'Tomorrow at seven. Don't look so worried. Don't tell anyone.'

'Of course not.'

He watched as she ran to the door and pulled it open, blowing him another kiss as she slammed it. He heard the click of her heels as she stumbled down the stone stairwell, and went to the window to watch her as she ran across the quad, her hair flying.

*

'He's just a man, Serge, and a nasty one. I'm sure he caused Llew's death, and Madeleine's too, probably.'

It was the next day, and Serge had had little sleep. Melissa had arrived half an hour before, but refused to discuss what had happened the previous evening. Serge was feeling slightly used and not a little frustrated.

'I killed her, Melissa. It's not something I can forget.'

'Your pony fell on her, Serge, just like the tree fell on Llew. I doubt either of them were accidents. Henri sees himself as an instrument of fate, so trying to decide if it was intention or accident is pointless. He just caught them both unawares, I imagine. This time it'll be us doing the seeking out. And there are two of us.'

'We can't compete with him in the—I can't bring myself to say "magical" world, but I suppose that's what it is, your phantom world, and the alchemical tower.' Serge shook his head. 'We can't challenge him there. We're not Fates.'

'I know. I've been scared out of my wits for the last two years, waiting for him to find me.'

'Actually, what scares me is that he *hasn't* found you. You've escaped him twice, and that simply doesn't happen. It's incredibly suspicious, don't you think? If Henri was on the right track, as it were, he would simply get what he wants. That he *hasn't* got what he wants probably means that whoever is opposing him is...is—'

‘Playing him?’

‘I was going to say *just as powerful* but maybe you’re right. Maybe we’re caught in the middle of a fight between two factions, and that’s why things seem so confused. God knows what weapons they have: deception, certainly, and more conventional ones, no doubt.’

‘Who else is there, though? Henri, Darley, Madeleine—they seem to be on the same side.’

‘Llew was no friend of my father’s and I have the feeling that he wasn’t quite as honest as he pretended.’ Serge sighed. ‘Though of course I can’t be sure.’

‘I know what you mean. I’ve been trying to stay out of their sight, anyway. I’ve hardly let myself visit the other place.’

Serge leaned forward. ‘Nonetheless, you shouldn’t have been able to hide from Henri. I didn’t help you, if that’s what you’re thinking. I can’t protect you from him. It makes me wonder if there really is something else going on.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Darley. She’s not just Henri’s secretary and dogsbody, you know. She’s more deeply involved in all this than it might appear. She was a part of the Circle at university, and it’s well-known that she’s been with him from the beginning. They’ve been preparing themselves for the Great Work for forty years. She was the first woman that Henri tried to achieve the Great Work with. I was told she’s psychic.’

‘She’s involved, all right. I saw her in the phantom world, nearly always with Henri. She was in the Red Room too. I think I might be more scared of her than I am of him.’

Serge’s face tightened. ‘But she can’t be—’

‘Shut up, Serge!’

‘I think she’s been helping us—’

‘I’m not listening.’

‘Don’t be childish.’ He took a deep breath, wondering whether to tell her more about Llew. *Not yet*, he decided.

‘We’ve been lazy, Melissa—I’ve been lazy, anyway. We’ve been acting like victims and it’s made us fearful.’ He paused for a long few seconds, resting in the silence before taking a deep breath. ‘So I agree, it’s time to do something positive.’

'I'm going home this weekend to take another look at Madeleine's things. I'm pretty sure they're still around somewhere.' He shook his head. 'I wonder if Henri's found another... partner, yet? It might explain why he hasn't found you if he's busy grooming someone else.'

'Don't make him suspicious, Serge, will you?'

'He's suspicious of everyone anyway—except, perhaps, of Darley. Hmm, I wonder...'

'What?'

'She must suspect that you're here, but she's not telling him. Why would that be, d'you suppose?'

'She's looked after you all your life, Serge. She loves you more than Madeleine ever did—you can see it when she talks to you. Actually, at first, I thought she *was* your mother. Henri hadn't mentioned Madeleine then, but Darley was always around somewhere.' She looked at him. 'Are you absolutely sure you're not her son?'

'What are you talking about? Of course I'm sure.' Serge pushed his chair back agitatedly, and went to the fireplace, staring at himself in the mirror. 'I'm not black, and I look like Madeleine.'

'You've got Darley's hair.'

'My father's, you mean.'

'I suppose.'

There was a silence. Serge was watching Melissa in the mirror. There was something hazy about her, blurry, as though she wasn't quite solid—and her eyes reminded him of Madeleine's: grey and cold. He turned round.

'You never knew Madeleine, did you? You have her eyes.'

'No, of course not. She died years before I met Henri.'

'It's silly, but I don't know anything about you before you arrived at the house, and you have something of my mother in you—'

'Don't be ridiculous. I know who my mother was, and it wasn't Madeleine.'

'Who *was* your mother?'

Melissa's face hardened. 'I'm sorry, I don't want to talk about her. We're not in touch.'

'Was she interested in—I suppose *magic* is as good a word as any.'

'Not as far as I know. She was scared of all that—she was a good Catholic girl, and it was all a dreadful blasphemy.'

‘What about your father?’

‘She never talked about him. Look, Serge, let’s get back to Henri, shall we? What are we going to do about him?’

‘I’ll have a better idea when I’m back from Shropshire. I’m going to look for the cards that I cut out of your—’ He corrected himself, ‘—*my mother’s* journal. I’m sure there are some clues there. Llew thought so too.’

‘Llew?’ She snorted. ‘Ifan trusted him, but I don’t. Apart from you and Dai and Geraint, he was the only one who knew I was staying at Moel Siabod.’

‘You don’t think he told Henri?’

‘I don’t know, but it would explain a lot. He was very interested in the journal, according to Ifan, and he was our only visitor while I was there. He could very well have been checking me out.’

‘He didn’t see you, though, did he? And if he was working for Henri, why would Henri kill him? You’ve already said you don’t think it was an accident.’

‘No,’ Melissa sighed. ‘It doesn’t make sense, does it? But hardly anything does. Why did Henri choose me in the first place? I don’t have what he’s looking for. Why did he dress me in Madeleine’s clothes? Some sympathetic magic thing? Was he hoping I’d absorb some of her talents? I don’t know. It didn’t work, anyway.’

‘How do you know? If it didn’t work, he wouldn’t be so keen on finding Alex, would he? And he *is* keen, there’s no doubt.’

‘I *don’t* know, Serge, that’s what I’m saying. I don’t know anything except I don’t want to be scared any more that Henri will be waiting for me when I get home one day—or that Alex will just disappear. We have to get rid of him.’

Serge slumped. ‘I know. I can’t even think about it, yet. I’ve no idea how you go about killing someone, especially someone like Henri. And you—you can’t bear to see things die. I remember you telling me about the nightjar.’

‘Birds are different.’

‘Hmm. It won’t be easy. Maybe I can make it look like a burglary.’

‘You’ll think of something, Serge—’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you think you can actually do it by yourself? I could ask Ifan...?’

'No.' Serge was emphatic. 'I know Llew was Ifan's friend, but we can't risk it. It's not that I don't trust him, but... No, it's up to me. He's my father.'

'Do you think Darley—?'

'She threatened me. We'll have to get them both.'

He was breathing heavily now, prickles of sweat standing out on his forehead. Melissa put her arms around him.

'Oh, Serge, how can this be happening to us? I'm scared,' she said, squeezing him hard.

'It's no good asking why, Melissa, Henri knows that. In fact, that's exactly why Henri is so dangerous. If he succeeds, there'll be no more *why*?'

'What d'you mean?'

'Henri's an alchemist, a real old-fashioned seeker, and what he's seeking is the—' he stopped and looked at Melissa, whose eyes were shut. 'He's seeking the thing that will change everyone's beliefs. Alchemy is like a religion, it's all about unity. Alchemists believe that all this,' he spread his arms wide and tilted his head back, '*everything*, everything we see, feel, hear—it's all illusory. With dedication and training we can see through the illusion, and we can—' He stopped. 'It sounds so stupid when you say it.'

Melissa opened her eyes. 'We can what? It doesn't sound stupid to me, Serge. I lived with Henri and Darley too, and I've met them—and you—in the phantom world. I *know* that things aren't necessarily as they appear to us.'

'Yes, you're right, he was trying to unite the female and male principles, since they symbolise the integration of opposites. He wants to be the veil-wearer.' He giggled, and Melissa said sharply, 'Serge! Pull yourself together!'

He looked at her for a moment, then put his head in his hands.

'I don't really understand any of this, Melissa.'

Melissa's face was clear and untroubled, the face she always wore.

'I can't explain any more.'

Serge's voice changed and held a weariness that Melissa hadn't heard before. 'I know,' he sighed, 'but it's not enough. Some things are too important to mess around with—and killing Henri probably comes into that category. On the other hand... why did you wait so long? Why did you make me waste so much time when you could have just told me years ago?'

Melissa lifted her eyes to the ceiling and seemed to count silently. 'I have...' she paused and wrinkled her brow, '*three* answers to that, Serge, none of which you'll like. First, you were too young. Second, you had to find out for yourself. You are the one who chooses what to see, what to believe. I know you find that hard because of the way you've been brought up, and you think that it's other people's duty to do that for you—Madeleine's, Ifan's, Darley's, mine—but that's not how it works. You have to make your own choices.'

'Yes, I see. And the third?'

'Third, what else would you be doing if I had told you, Serge? What could you have done? Nothing would have made sense. You needed to come here and get involved with McGonagle and Miranda—'

'I'm sorry about Miranda.'

'Don't be. You've been happy, haven't you? And now we're together. Tell me how it could have worked out better? Of course we each have our own demons, and they're as real as the earth and sky—we can't ignore them.' She sighed theatrically. 'We've discussed all this, Serge, it's just that, when it matters, you choose to forget. Ask yourself, are you being inflexible as you're always accusing your father of being?'

'Don't bring Henri into this, but yes, naturally, he's one of my demons—and yours too.'

Serge had been gazing fixedly at her while she was speaking, and he was calmer now, stroking her hand where it rested in his. He bent his head.

'OK, Melissa. But why do you say I give you hope? If what you say is true then I'm just holding you back, aren't I?'

'From what? Madeleine's paintings tell you all you need to know about that world.'

'My mother's paintings?'

'Yes.'

'But they're *really* fantasies! Tarot characters, myths, dreams. She just used real places and people out of mischief.'

'No, Serge. Your mother was a lot like me—that's why Henri had to have her. And, like me, she neglected her child.' She turned to him, her eyes luminous. 'Did you never wonder why Henri gave you the task of cataloguing her paintings? He was testing you, Serge, he was giving you an opportunity to recognise yourself, and you failed the test. I'm not judging you: I'm just showing you how things are.'

‘I’m sorry, Melissa, but it still sounds ridiculous. Dreams and phantoms can’t change anything, they’re not real.’

Melissa sighed. ‘How do I know about the Red Room, Serge? Have you ever spoken to anyone about it? I know you were watching because I saw you. The Red Room is,’ she grimaced at the word, ‘*magical*, and it’s real. The fact that you watched and did nothing doesn’t mean anything—except that you didn’t do anything. And I’m telling you that you could have done something, you *can* do something.’ She stopped. ‘I’m just repeating myself now, so I’ll stop. What’s the time?’

‘OK, Melissa.’ Serge scraped his chair back from the table and stood up. ‘I give in. I’ll take your word for it. Here, now, in all the worlds,’ he snorted, ‘we’ll be together. Let’s be together.’

‘Bravo, Serge,’ said Melissa, a big smile softening her face at his uncharacteristic expansiveness. She pulled him to her and hugged him tightly. ‘Let’s go and do what we have to do.’

*

A few days later, Melissa found herself in the library again. Serge had gone to Shropshire as planned and she didn’t need to watch for him any longer, but she liked being there. It made her feel safe.

Nobody knew more about the world than was contained in the books surrounding her: the fruits of hundreds of years of dedication and knowledge, of ambition and wisdom, even that. She liked to touch the books, the different textures of calf, leather, cheap cardboard... she loved them all.

She would sit at the reading desk by the window overlooking the entrance to Serge’s college, watching the sky and the way the roofs of the building opposite broke it up, a monstrous blot of regularity and order obscuring the wild and free clouds.

From time to time, she flattened Madeleine’s journal on the desk and studied the cards, trying to understand the accompanying notes, but although she thought she got the gist, she understood very little of the text. Many of the words were unfamiliar, but even though she was surrounded by weighty tomes that would have soon enlightened her had she been minded to consult them, she ignored them, hoping that one day everything would simply become clear.

She’d learned something of the symbols and marks from Serge, who was becoming extremely knowledgeable, but she closed her ears when he tried to explain them to her in any depth. She had her own way of

understanding, and erratic and unpredictable as it was, it was the only way she would allow herself.

She was restless today, and she didn't know why. The sky was a uniform dull grey under a blanket of grey cloud that the gusty cold wind couldn't shift, and she didn't want to look at it. When she opened the journal, its obscure pictures and incomprehensible text irritated her when usually they held her mesmerised.

She didn't know why she had come, and she sat chewing the quicks of her nails, only vaguely aware of where she was.

Was she waiting for Darley? Melissa didn't know, and she didn't have a plan, but... What would she do if she saw her? Interrogate her? She laughed at herself.

*

Serge wrote "Phone Melissa" on the bottom of the board and underlined it, wondering why she would ask that he call her and, when he did, not answer. It had happened several times now, but he told himself that she was just like that.

He left the kitchen and walked across the stable yard to the woodshed. It wasn't too cold yet but he could feel autumn coming. The winds were chillier, and the nights began too soon. Firing up the chainsaw, he began on the heap of raw branches.

Serge had come to think that Melissa's actions in his world were just fillers, meditations and reflections on the terrors and blisses that were hers in her own 'phantom' world: distractions, things to pass the time—unimportant. Someone else's life.

The chainsaw hiccupped and suddenly leapt up, cutting in the safety switch. Serge pursed his lips, bringing himself back to the present. He was only halfway through the woodpile, but he was getting tired. With Darley in France with Henri and most of the house staff, if he had an accident now he couldn't think of anyone who might come to his aid.

He chopped enough to fill the wood-basket and stacked the rest of the cut wood neatly by the door, looking forward to setting the fire in his new woodburner. At least now, he reflected with pleasure, he'd be able to relax without feeling Henri's cold stare in his back. Thank God he'd gone to Mirepoix. His absence made the house comfortable at last.

He turned back to the woodpile. If he would have cut the whole lot in half the time it had taken him, he reflected.

Ifan stood behind the counter, thinking this was now his life. The woman needed an assistant.

‘You’re a godsend, Ifan,’ she said, shuffling out from behind the counter, zipping her bag. ‘Oh, there’s been a customer keeps coming in, he was here yesterday afternoon, always asking for Mr Llywelyn, though I told him he died. He’s left me several of his business cards now. Let me see...’ She dug around under the till. ‘Yes, here. Maybe he’ll listen to *you* if he comes back.’

The bell jangled and the woman disappeared. Ifan spread the calling cards in a fan-shape on the counter. The name was clear enough: *M Henri le Genêt*.

Ifan’s eyes went back to the door, scanning the cobwebby window-pane through which he could see the café across the street.

A man was standing by the railings, his grey coat buttoned to the neck, his unkempt white hair pulled back in a band at the base of his neck. Everything about him was suave, expensive, except the hair.

Ifan watched as he crossed the road and entered the shop. Ifan had the urge to stand straight.

‘Good day, sir.’ Ifan’s voice was unnecessarily loud.

‘I’d hoped to catch Mr Llywelyn in at last, but you’ll do nicely.’ The man glanced at Ifan’s stick. ‘For intruders? Very wise,’ he chuckled. ‘You can’t be too careful, can you?’

Ifan raised his stick. ‘Genuine,’ he said. ‘Hunting accident.’ The man tilted his head and seemed to be listening for something, then his eyes closed. Ifan felt a sudden sharp pain under his knee, and blinked, grimacing.

‘I see Mrs Hassen’s passed on my card,’ said the man, opening his eyes and gesturing towards the cards.

‘You’re Mr Genêt?’

‘I am. I’m happy to meet you at last, Ifan—but perhaps I should reserve judgement until you show me how helpful you can be. Tell me,’ he said, flicking yet another card onto the counter, ‘when did you last see Llew Llywelyn?’

‘The night he was killed. Why? Are you the police?’

Henri smiled icily. ‘No, I’m not the police. You think he’s dead?’

Pieces of that night swam through Ifan's head, his memory straining to fit them together. The figure in the rain, the grey coat, the—He sniffed: 'Well, they buried someone in his grave. If it's not him, then who is it?'

'Mr Llywelyn isn't dead, Ifan.' The words, murmured quietly, hovered between them. 'Are you sure you haven't seen him?'

'Of course I'm bloody sure.'

Henri wrinkled his nose and ran a finger along the curve of his moustache, his eyes fixed on Ifan's.

'Where's Mr Llywelyn, Ifan?'

'In his grave, man. Are you listening? You're the only one who thinks he isn't dead.'

'Hmm.'

As Henri turned toward the door, he said over his shoulder, 'When you see Llew, tell him I am most anxious to speak to him. No—I am *impatient* to speak to him.'

'I don't know why you keep saying that. I watched a sixty-foot tree smash his car to pieces and then go up in flames.'

He blinked, and suddenly Henri le Genêt was no longer in the shop. Had Ifan blacked out? The hospital had warned him to be vigilant, but he felt fine. In fact, he felt very well. The dull, tiring ache in his leg had disappeared somehow, and he didn't need to lean so heavily on the stick when he stood to stretch.

Sitting again, he idly opened the top drawer of the desk, which was empty. Closing it, he pulled out the second drawer, sweeping his hand to the back, where it knocked against something in the wood. Curious, he pulled the drawer out and turned it over, examining the joins. Then he stooped a little and saw it, taped beneath the desk recess: the journal.

'I knew you'd be of help eventually,' came a smooth voice from behind him. Henri was standing silhouetted against the glass pane of the door.

'Whatever it is, it's not for sale,' Ifan said, not bothering to stand.

Henri smiled. 'I think you'll find that it is. It's a pity, though, I was really hoping you would come up with the original.'

Ifan kept his expression blank as he shrugged his shoulders.

'But the original...' Henri inclined his head to one side and seemed to sniff the air, '... isn't here, although it's not far away.' He fixed Ifan with his eyes again. 'For now, I will have to make do with the copy.' He held out his hand.

'I told you—'

Henri produced a wallet from his breast pocket and counted out a pile of fifty-pound notes. 'Thank you.'

And then he was gone.

A waft of air cooled Ifan's cheek, and he looked down to see not the journal, but five hundred pounds lying in his lap. He had no memory of Henri taking it.

*

'What do you make of it all boy?'

The dog raised its head and watched him expressionlessly.

Ifan nodded. 'Me too.'

Ifan rubbed his knee with a renewed sense of wonder. He shook his head and stared at his hand resting on the leg that the doctors had said would never mend. He had limped into the antiques shop that morning, and now, by sundown, he was sitting cross-legged in front of the fire without a twinge.

'We'll never know, will we boy? It's all magic, really.' Ifan nodded to himself. 'And all that really matters is that bad magic doesn't happen.'

He winked at the dog and took its soft mouth in his palm. 'So is Henri a bad magician for giving me five hundred pounds? And is Serge a good magician for offering to help me find Alex?'

The dog continued to stare into his eyes.

'That's right, there's no help to be had in deciding who's good or bad, is there? And did the bad magician fix my leg? What can you say about that?'

Ifan sat back and relit his pipe, letting the hot aromas leak slowly out of his mouth like a spiritous ghost.

'And maybe dead men do rise again. What do you think?'

But the dog was asleep.

*

Serge was sitting comfortably in his old armchair when the knock came. He looked at his watch automatically.

'Yes?'

'Hello, Serge. I thought it was about time we met. Can I come in?'

The familiar voice soothed him, and Serge rose eagerly to open the heavy old door.

‘Darley! This is a surprise.’

‘Yes, I can see.’

Entering as though entirely familiar with the layout of his rooms, Darley turned, her customarily impassive face relieved by a sudden soft concern.

‘I can’t imagine why you’re surprised, though—surely you thought I might visit you?’

Going directly to the window, she stood to one side as she drew the thin and dusty curtains.

‘I apologise for the melodrama, but it’s necessary. Henri mustn’t know I’m here.’ She smiled secretly. ‘I’m not really here, you know.’

‘You know I won’t give you away to my father Darley. There’s no need to talk like a bad detective.’

Darley smiled a thin smile.

‘Don’t be alarmed, Serge, but I know you’ve been seeing Melissa.’

‘And you haven’t told Henri...I see. I suppose we should talk. How long have you been here?’

‘I’ve been here the whole time,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Not *me* of course, but my... alchemical body, the woman you’re seeing... I can’t be bothered to explain at the moment. Perhaps later.’

She sat down in his armchair. ‘You know why I’ve come *now*, don’t you?’

‘I have no idea, Darley.’

‘Oh, come, Serge. You are completely transparent, I’m afraid—to me, at any rate. I’ve known you all your life, after all.’

Serge had his back to her.

‘Oh?’

‘Let’s not pretend. You are planning to... *remove* Henri, and I’m here to dissuade you.’

‘What makes you think that? It’s absurd, he’s my father. I don’t pretend he’s my favourite person, but—’

‘Serge! You can’t lie to me, I have talents, as you know.’

He stopped, suddenly eager. ‘You can really read minds?’

Darley laughed, a light and musical laugh. ‘I know that’s my reputation, and I enjoy and encourage it, naturally—but of course I can’t read minds.’

On the other hand I'm good at reading people—and you, for example, are very bad at concealing yourself. I would strongly advise against returning to the house this weekend.' She held up her hand. 'No, don't deny it, Serge.' She paused. 'You must not interfere. Things are in hand.'

'Yes, in my father's hand.' Serge paused. 'You've not told him about Melissa, I accept that, but I don't understand why you have helped us. Or why you're trying to stop us.'

'Yes, of course. I simply do the thing that protects you best.'

'Not Melissa?'

'You are in love with Melissa, but she isn't so important to me, I'm afraid. It's you I have given my word to protect.'

'To whom have you given your word? Father?'

'Enough, Serge. You must listen to me,' she said with quiet persistence.

'Listen to my father's spy? I don't mean to be rude, Darley, but you've already admitted as much.'

Darley looked at him steadily, black eyes soft with care.

'Serge, this is important. It is the best advice anyone will ever give you. Do not continue with your plan. I assure you that you will die if you do.'

'You're threatening me?'

'If that will stop you, then yes, I'm threatening you.'

Serge shook his head. 'I don't care.' There was a pause. 'Will you tell father? About Melissa, I mean.'

'No, Serge, I won't tell your father.' She pushed herself up from the chair, sadness weighing down her already-heavy features.

'I can see you've made up your mind. You are loyal to Melissa, and I admire you for that, even though it clouds your reason. Killing Henri will not save her, or you—or me, for that matter. Things are more complicated than that. You are making a fatal mistake, Serge.'

Her eyes were shining as she gazed at him, her guard down momentarily. 'Goodbye, Serge. You won't see me again. I'm sorry. I won't tell Henri about Melissa, nor about the subject of our conversation, but if you go ahead I can't help you any more. Do you understand? I can't help you.'

Dust

Serge opened the car door and dragged his rucksack from the back seat.

‘I wonder what people normally say in this situation?’

Melissa looked at him from the passenger seat, her face strained and streaked with dry tears. ‘I’m sorry I got you into this.’

‘It’s just the way it is, Melissa. We all live in a phantom world of one sort or another, and bad things happen there to all of us.’ He leaned back in. ‘You could wish me luck.’

‘Good luck. I’ll know when it’s done, Serge. I’ll be waiting for you.’

Serge began to walk along the lane to the gap in the wall, a pale moon illuminating the black trees around him. When he reached the damaged stone he climbed over and dropped onto the rutted track below, familiar from his daily walks and rides.

Everything seemed thin, distant and muted somehow as he quietly picked his way along, and as he passed the lake in the distance his mind drifted to his mother’s death. He’d killed her, and now he was about to kill his father. He began to tremble, and stopped to compose himself, breathing deeply. The night was cool and damp, the air cold in his throat.

Keeping inside the trees that screened the ragged path from the front of the house, Serge came to the stable-yard and settled himself between two bales of hay lying in an empty stall, and waited. It was only eleven o’clock.

*

‘Hello, Melissa.’

The voice was low and slightly hoarse. Melissa jerked awake, hitting her head on the window.

‘Who’s that?’ She was awake enough to panic now. ‘Darley?’

‘No, not Darley.’ The voice was level and calm, reassuring. ‘I know what you’re here for, you and Serge... He won’t succeed alone, you know. He’s just a boy, and needs help, and we must give it to him. It’s time.’

‘Who are you? Where are you?’ Melissa sat stiffly in the seat, her throat tight.

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘But you’re—’

‘Dead? Yes, my body is gone from this world but not from the other world, the one you call the phantom world...’

‘I’ve never seen you there! I don’t believe you! It’s a trick!’

‘Come Melissa,’ said the smooth, motherly voice. ‘Come. They’re waiting for us in the Red Room.’

*

Serge stood in the shadows for a moment, listening. He rested the rucksack against the wall, first taking out the two small phials.

He had never felt welcome in this house, it had never been a retreat, but now it felt different, heavier, malevolent. He bent and took off his shoes, squatting to calm his breath and heart, and then closing his eyes, he emptied his mind.

He climbed the stairs silently, feeling the phials hard in his pocket, and listening with all his attention.

The passage through the middle of the house was dimly-lit and felt cold and alien as he moved slowly between the dark walls, bedroom doors ranged on either side. Henri’s was the last, and Darley’s next to that.

He gradually became aware of a change in the light as he approached a door halfway down the passage, a warm undertone of red. *The Red Room*—the phrase appeared in his head. The room he’d watched from the lawn that night, the room where Henri took his women, where he did his work—the room Melissa had warned him about.

The door matched the others, it was an ordinary door, but it seemed hazy in the same way that Melissa seemed hazy and out of focus sometimes. It was the phantom world—how he hated the phrase!—the world *inside* but somehow shareable: the real world.

So, Henri was working. Serge glanced at his watch: two o’clock. He hadn’t planned for this. He’d expected him to be asleep.

‘Come in, Serge. Henri won’t see you. He’s preoccupied.’

Serge had half-expected something like this—a voice, a guide. He replied in a low voice.

‘Darley? You’ve changed your mind?’

‘It’s Melissa, Serge. I couldn’t let you go alone. I was being cowardly. The Red Room is my world, Serge, I know what to do.’

The voice faded.

‘Where are you?’ He looked up and down the passage.

'I'm inside, Serge. I'll open the door for you.'

'How—?'

The door opened slowly. Melissa stood there.

'How did you get here?'

'Welcome to my world, Serge. Remember the clearing in the woods? That's my world too. You've moved in and out of my world—which is Henri's world, Darley's world, Madeleine's world—all your life, but you wouldn't see it.' She glanced over her shoulder. 'But now you must. Come, we have to move quickly. We don't know how long they'll be too busy to notice us.'

Serge entered. The room was bare and windowless. A hooded figure in one corner slowly raised its head.

'Llew!'

The figure spoke quietly. 'Not now, Serge, there's no time. Follow Melissa.'

Melissa pulled aside a thick curtain in one corner, and beckoned him through.

Henri was standing in the centre of a much larger, high-ceiling'd room, dressed in a red robe. Opposite him, Darley was veiled in black, holding tall candles in both hands. They were both intent on a small figure that seemed to be floating in the air between them.

'Alex!' screamed Melissa. She ran at Henri, but half way across the room she stumbled and fell onto the cold marble floor with a dull thud that took her breath away. As she watched, the pale floating figure of her daughter shimmered and disappeared, leaving a peculiar and unpleasant smell similar to wet ashes. Henri turned.

'Ah, Melissa! At last!' He smiled. 'I am so glad to see you. As you saw, we have had to... work with... our daughter, but now you're here—'

Serge was still standing transfixed by the door. He'd seen Melissa falling, Henri turning, Darley moving to Melissa and bending over her, holding the goblet to her lips, her black hands stark against Melissa's pale skin.

Melissa couldn't move. Her urge to scream was locked in her throat, taking her breath away.

'What are you giving her?' Serge felt an unfamiliar energy enter him, a burst of light and heat. He felt as though he was growing taller, stronger, as the force flowing through him fused into his bones. He ran towards

Darley through air thick as foam, fighting it, tearing it apart in his effort to reach her. He brought his heavy torch down and—it stopped, an inch from her head, solid in the air. His hand went numb. Darley looked up.

‘Oh, Serge, you wouldn’t listen, would you?’

With a languid gesture, she reached into her robe and produced a thin, curved knife.

‘I’m sorry, Serge. This has to be done properly. I want to be kind—I loved you as a son, my first-born, the most loved, the most valued.’ She kissed him, opening his shirt, her robe falling open. She moved her hand over his chest, hairless as a side of pork, feeling the hammering of his heart.

‘Ah!’ Darley’s eyes turned up in her head and a pale luminance appeared above her. She slipped the point of the knife between the fingers of her hand, and placing the pommel against her own breast she leaned into him, the shining knifeblade pulling the skin as it entered and sank into him. The small trickle of blood became a pool as the point entered his heart, and the radiance around her became a dense pillar of light. When the blade-guard was firm against his chest she spoke a few low words and twisted the handle sharply, breaking it off. She threw it down, grasping Serge’s body to her, the welling blood soaking her and her unravelled robe as she held him. ‘*You and you!* worldly and alchemical both, let you both find peace.’ The fire around them burst into an orange-white cloud and then abruptly died.

Suddenly, Melissa found she could move again, but all she could do was say, ‘Serge?’

And then Henri and Darley were hanging in the air, just as Alex had been, but held in a cool blue glow. As she watched, Henri became transparent, a network of tiny points of light growing stronger, then fading until, with a faint sigh, they dispersed, leaving nothing but a pile of ash.

Madeleine walked out of the shadows.

‘Thank you, Melissa, and,’ she looked sadly at the heap on the floor, ‘Serge. Your life was not wasted.’ She bent and stroked his lank hair. ‘This poor life.’ She lifted his head and kissed him, sighing, ‘You *were* perfect. You played your part, and now,’ she stood up, ‘it can begin.’ She reached into his pocket and took out the phials, holding them up to the light. ‘Poor Serge.’ She sighed. ‘Come, Melissa.’

The shaking girl rose clumsily to her feet.

‘It was you, wasn’t it? Llew’s accident. It was you.’

‘Of course. Henri guessed that Llew was protecting you. He would have killed him, eventually. It was the only way.’

‘Protecting me? But it was Llew who told Henri that I was staying at Moel Siabod!’

‘No. Henri didn’t know you were there. He thought that Serge and Llew were planning something. He wasn’t as adept as he thought. He has some powers, but why do you think he never succeeded in his wish, despite trying so many times? She turned to where Darley was still suspended. ‘Many times, wasn’t it, Darley? Me, you, Melissa, the others. He would never give up, and perhaps one day he would have found what he needed. Alex—’

Melissa grabbed her arm.

‘What happened to Alex? Where did she go?’

Madeleine smiled. ‘She’s safe asleep in her bed. What you saw was her alchemical body. Normal bodies don’t float.’

‘So that was Henri’s alchemical body too?’ Melissa looked towards Darley.

‘Yes. He’s asleep too, but not safe. His alchemical body—his ‘real’ body—has been dissolved. Now he’s just another old man, a rich and clever one still, but just a man. Kill him if you want revenge, but he’s no danger.’

‘And Darley?’

‘Yes, Darley.’ Madeleine paused. ‘What shall we do with her?’ She turned. ‘And you, Melissa, what shall we do with you? You have only survived this long with my help, and Llew’s.’

‘You and Llew...?’

‘Serge was our son. Poor Llew, he loved Serge dearly.’

‘But I don’t understand,’ said Melissa. ‘What are you all *doing*? Why so many lies? Why do you have to kill everyone?’

‘Oh, Melissa, for you the world is simple, and your phantom world a never-ending diversion. You accept everything—you have come here, trusting that you don’t have to understand, trusting that someone else has made the effort to understand, trusting that you are not expendable... Well, *I* understand, and believe me, you *are* expendable, just as Serge was expendable. You are an animal, Melissa, a creature of habits. You are easy to control—you make no effort.’

Melissa looked at her with frightened eyes.

I'm listening now, Madeleine. I know I've been lazy, I know I've taken advantage of people, I know I can't survive by myself. Please, I can change. Tell me, I'm listening. *Tell me.*'

'We'll see. Now's not the time.' Madeleine turned and looked quizzically at Darley. 'On the other hand, she is *not* expendable—but is she to be trusted? Do I dare take on Isis?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Henri chose his consort well, Melissa. Darley is a Guardian of the Alchemical Tower, and Guardians partake of the nature of a god. Darley chose Isis, the Black Madonna, the daughter of Jesus, the soul of night. We can't ignore her.' She bowed her head. 'But perhaps, if you're sincere, you can help with this. She loved Serge, and Serge loved you... Perhaps she will be useful to us.'

'Useful? For what?'

Madeleine looked at her. 'You've understood nothing, have you?'

'Why do you always speak in riddles? What don't I understand?'

Madeleine smiled and raised her hand, then suddenly her eyes widened and with a wailing scream she ran out of the room.

*

'Ah, Llew has succeeded.' Darley's voice came from behind Melissa. It sounded light, amused.

Melissa spun round. Darley was no longer glowing. She floated to the floor and stood tall, relaxed and smiling.

'He was here, wasn't he, in the corner? I wondered what had happened to him. But what has he done? Where did Madeleine go?'

As she spoke, the room began to fade and the light changed. Suddenly, Melissa was standing in front of an ordinary window. It was still dark outside, but when she went closer she could see the lake in the distance shining in the moonlight. A hooded figure was rowing a small boat away from the island. Behind her, Darley's voice said, 'See? The real world.'

'What's happening?'

'Llew... desecrated... the temple and in so doing, dissolved Madeleine's alchemical body. She is gone.' She turned. 'And Henri is gone, and Serge. And Llew and I will...also fade.'

'Melissa look of anguish lasted only a brief second. 'Oh, I should have guessed. And Serge...' Tears welled up in her eyes. 'So I'm alone again.'

'You have a choice, Melissa,' Darley spoke softly. 'In all the worlds you are the only one who has a choice. We believe...well, never mind. But you can join us in *Shunyata*, or you can live this life.' She spread her arms. 'You must choose now.'

'What's *Shunyata*?'

'Death of the body, death of the mind, death of the soul. Eternal, unmoving—'

'No, no. Not that. Never that. What about my own—'

Darley smiled. 'Your phantom world? That was never a *place*, Melissa, never a choice. It was just something that represented not choosing. No, the choice is this,' she indicated the walls and the sun shining through the window, 'and this.' She clicked her fingers.

Melissa chose.

*

Melissa rocked in the chair gently, murmuring under her breath.

'And the bird with its bright feathers and sweet voice flew over the dark castle and called to the lonely princess, 'Look up, O Princess, see how light I am and how sweetly I sing.

*Rockaby baby in the tree top
When the wind blows the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall
Down will come baby, cradle and all*

There was a noise from inside the cabin.

'Ifan? Are you there?'

'Here,' came an answering voice from the back of the cabin.

'At last. I need to get up.'

'Shall I bring the sling?'

'No, just put her in the cot. I need to get out.'

'OK.'

Ifan emerged from the dark interior and took the bundle from her arms.

'She's wet.'

'Yes. I'll see you in an hour.'

Ifan grunted. 'Mind how you go.'

'Hmm. I'll walk the long way into the village and get something for dinner, shall I?'

'Good idea. Can you drop a note through Dai's door? I need to talk to him about that dog.'

'OK. See you later.'

Ifan watched as she pulled on her hoodie, slung her bag over her shoulder, and set off down the path. She'd be gone a couple of hours at least. He looked down at the sleeping baby thoughtfully.

'Mrs Hassen says you have Llew's eyes.' He held her up to the light. 'I can't see it myself. They do have a kind of bird-like blackness though, don't they my lovely?' He sighed. 'Lucky all that's done with and we can get on with our life, eh?'

He shook his head, and stared through the trees where he could just make out Melissa's back disappearing towards the water tower in the misty distance.

'Aye.'

The End.

A novel by Vonny Thenasten

Vonny Thenasten is a poet and part-time odd-job man

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His other books are available on Lulu.

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