

The Wormhammer

Or something

Synopsis/blurb:

Over the millennia, Mystics have been slowly uncovering, piece by piece, the magical language of the angels - one that can make changes to the material nature of the world. The words in this language can take lifetimes to discover, as is to be expected when trying to pry the universe's most precious secrets from its tightly clenched fists.

That is, of course, until one afternoon, when a mystic named 'Good Morning' manages to get his hands on an otherworldly book containing the language in its entirety. Seven years have passed since then, and everything is different now.

'I wish to see with new eyes.

I wish to draw breath into new lungs.

I wish things were different.'

PART ONE

The first word the mystics discovered was 'Move'. It was found early in the morning by the mystic named 'Cash Money', as he stood in the stream outside his house in the valley between the mountains named Wonder and Great Blue. As was usual for Cash Money, he had been up all night. He had little trust for those who wake early; he believed the morning should be entered from the front end, wide eyed and full of awe like a baby bird falling from the nest. Night-time is a time for vulnerability, a time to remove your assertion of power over your life and the events that take place therein. He had been in his studio, but the first few calls of the dawn chorus had caught his attention, and drawing him out from the back of his head for a moment, made him aware of the sound of the stream babbling outside his window. Something whispered down his spine - and a vital urge to feel fresh cold water rush around his calves and feet took hold of him. The stream flowed down through the valley from the mountains, formed of melting snowdrifts, and was always numbingly cold, even on the hottest days of the year.

When he spoke it, the world shivered in recognition, but its effect was non apparent, and this was the same for all the words found in the following millennia - beautiful and oblique but with effects that came to no major use. When he spoke it, he realised it had been the very first word ever spoken, tumbling long ago from unknowable lips, and he felt very strongly that he was the only person who had spoken it since. He passed on the knowledge of this word to his disciple, Grace, who passed it on to herself, and so on down through the generations.

Since then, only a handful of words have been found. A great deal of excitement was ignited in the mystic community at the discovery of the word 'spark', as the first word that had been learnt with observable effects. Of course, with its effects being so easily replicable through non-magical means, the excitement quickly dissipated.

A great deal of time has passed since Cash Money's discovery, the mountains still stand, gathering icy waters from the sky and guiding them through brooks and gulleys down into the valley below, but beyond this, not much from that time remains. The charred bones of the little house nestled in the crook of the mountain valley have been long secreted away under the earth by generations of worms and decaying leaves, and far away, in his bed, a mystic named 'Good Morning' is stirring from fitful slumber. He wakes slowly, and lies there a while, feeling no particular impetus to begin the day's work, adjusting to the glaring fullness of his consciousness and the heavy body swaddling it. Sunlight pours into his room, illuminating a golden column of floating dust, which dances around above the floorspace between his bed and wardrobe, but he's surprised not to be enthralled by this moment of beauty acting itself out in his very room. He rolls over to face the wall.

Eventually he convinces himself that the nothing he feels lying there is the same as the nothing he'd feel if he got up, and so he makes himself a coffee and goes to sit on his balcony. On this particular morning his thoughts are moving faster than he can

keep track of, but they all feel of little consequence anyway - he is blighted by constant nagging half memories of important things he's supposed to do soon, or supposed to have done already, but they slip back into the tumult as quickly as they arise. He is soon unable to remember if they're really that important, or whether he just believes they're important because he's forgotten what they are, leaving him with the sense of mundane dread not attending to your responsibilities always leaves. As the coffee hits his bloodstream, it starts to numb the aching from his limbs and behind his eyes, and soon his body feels habitable enough to begin work for the day.

In a cavern beneath his house is the hall of the moongate, a towering, shimmering mirror encased in granite, flanked by thick, ornate basalt pillars, and this is where he likes to work. It was through gazing into this moongate that he had received a vision of a different sort of place, replete with glowing palaces, strung out across mists, inhabited by different sorts of people to the ones he was used to. At the time this vision had seemed so important, the next bounding leap forward in the unending toil of the mystics, but today it seems just as every other grim facet of the world appears to him – hollow with inevitability.

He begins his work, task after task failing to captivate him as he flits between them, each newly abandoned attempt deepening the cavernous feeling inside him and the disappointment in himself at his inability to commit to any one of them. It's at some point in the mid afternoon that he notices the moongate stirring once more - mists are pouring out of it again, and a general tickling feeling of anticipation emanates from it. Good morning feels this anticipation as though he were looking at it through a screen door, and not as though it were inside him. He brings his feeling of empty compulsion with him as he drifts cloud-like across the moongate's threshold, on the other side of which he finds himself inside a huge, grand hallway, filled so completely with light that he can barely see, and as he walks, he feels less like he is moving through the space than that the space is moving around him. At the end of the hall there is something seemingly covered top to bottom in downy white feathers, without any other distinguishing features. At first it seems to be a trick of the light, hard to focus his eyes upon, but he comes squintingly to understand that it is indeed a person, and that it sees him, and once again it surprises him that he feels nothing. The person had been writing in a book, but it had looked up when he arrived and laughed. 'I am not fierce, and I am not special', Good morning repeats to himself as he moves towards the person and takes the book from its willing hands, and he keeps repeating this as he returns backwards to the moongate, holding steady his eye contact with the laughing thing. When he emerges on the other side his face is streaming with tears.

On a small hill at the boundary between the woods and a stretch of grassy clearing within view of Good mornings balcony, there stands a troll. The troll is sometimes hard to discern from the world around it, so it is no wonder Good Morning didn't spot it, even as he was looking right at it while drinking his coffee.

The troll is going about it's own business. It can feel the seasons changing around it. When the world says something, the troll says it with her. To a troll a lot of things are awfully big. The world hears this. 'Yes, those are some awfully big things', she says to it.

-o0o-

Good morning spends the rest of the day in his room poring over the pages of the book he took from the person in the palaces. The book is a book of words, more words than the dozen or so the mystics have ever learnt by an unimaginable amount. Adrenaline courses through his body, making him woozy, but he powers through, engorging himself word after word. He reads some out-loud to his empty bedroom, the first being 'listen'. Immediately he is aware of a host of sounds he didn't realise he was hearing and finds that he can make out each one with perfect clarity - every rustling movement beaming a minuscule tableau into his mind's eye. He can hear the swoosh of every speck of dust swirling round his bedroom, the little tiny footsteps of spiders and woodlice pottering about among the rafters, and the sizzle of the stars strung out across the firmament, far, far above him. It's an amazing sensation, but one that makes him feel quite sick. Another word makes him liquid, and suddenly he knows what it is to be water, spilling out of his robes and seeping into the floorboards, trickling down through the house and into the ground, down, down, through the earth until he runs in a hundred little rivulets down the stalactites and drips into the hall of the moongate, where he speaks another word to become whole again.

Whether its an accident or a decision he makes is unclear to him, but kneeling there gathering himself together from the cold granite floor of the hall he finds a new mantra emerge from his perpetual lonesome mutterings - 'I am going to grant so many wishes'. As he says it, the feelings he'd been missing all day rush back to his body, slamming into his chest like a cannon ball. He is no longer the mystic named Good Morning. He has become something new, and he needs a new name for himself. The new name cuts itself beyond his skin, etching deep into his bones.

"Wishmaker".

There have been mystics who learnt words and never told a soul. Most famously, the mystic named Max the Evil Dog had learnt three over the course of his life (entirely unheard of, for even one word to be discovered in a mystic's lifetime was a rarity),

and only revealed so on his death bed. They had asked him why he never told anyone, but he claimed not to know. 'I never got round to it' he said. This had been the focus of much scorn from mystics ever since, fast becoming a favoured topic for self righteous gossip in parlours and at breakfasts across the mystic inhabited world, and remaining that way to this day. Imagine discovering a word and not sharing it with the world! What was the point in all that mysticism if not to share it? There was, naturally, conjecture about Max the Evil Dog's motives for the withholding of his words from the mystic community. Good Morning thought that maybe Max the Evil Dog saw himself as the owner of the words. Maybe he saw them as his and didn't want to share the product of his work with anyone else. How cruel of the angels, he had often thought, to give the gift of those words to such a selfish mystic! Maybe he hadn't discovered them himself, and had stolen the work of another, or a series of others. None in the mystic community could understand what would compel someone to keep such important information to themselves.

Sitting on the floor in the moongate hall, waiting for his head to stop spinning, Wishmaker resolves to go see a beloved friend of his, named Hellrosa, to discuss his findings alongside questions like 'what's the best way to go about doing what needs to be done now?'. Hellrosa lives in a great big house on the moor to the east, and they have known each other for many years. He decides that he must go today, while the adrenaline is still lighting his toes and fingers like matches, because anything could stop him going if he puts it off, and he knows this well, because he is always putting things off. He gets a bag of his things together and looks through the book to find some words to do the job of transporting himself to her door.

At once, the walls of Hellrosa's house stretch upwards into the gathering moorland mists above him, and stood on her doorstep the wishmaker pauses just as he's about to knock. The magnolia tree that floats in the centre of the courtyard has relieved her weary boughs of their pink and white regalia, and an odour of sickly putrescence skulks underneath the regal perfumed miasma that rises from the shifting carpet of browning petals blowing lazily around the wishmakers feet.

Hellrosa is somewhere inside, perhaps making a cup of tea or busily writing notes in the margins of some obscure manuscript, her face expressionless as she employs her eternally reserved but dogged fervour. To hellrosa, the term 'labour of love' is a nonsensical tautology, the spirits of love and labour being bound forever in a inextricable marriage of meaning, a pair wedded so completely that the spaces between their skins have closed up and they have started to see with the same pair of eyes. She occupies this floating world that the wishmaker has only ever been able to momentarily peer over the edge of, like a child just tall enough to glimpse on tip toes across the tops of the kitchen counters, she is not afraid of work, or of time spent, she draws from some unseen pool of will the wishmaker has never seemed to find for himself. For blessed moments, on occasion, he has been able to lift his head from piloting his tired little rowing boat across the grey waves of his self-inflicted dramas and miseries, and witness her emerging halo'd with pink-gold light from

between the clouds, like the figurehead of some shrouded longboat, her wooden visage etched with a blank alien determinism, and he is struck with the notion of a powerful and complex hinterland to his friend, though his desire to explore these hidden sides to her (if he only knew what questions to ask) inevitably recedes quickly back into the smog of his own self interest. He understands that she knows him far better than he knows her, and though at times this dynamic makes him feel frustratingly infantile, the times when he attempts to redress the latent power imbalance in the discrepancy in their well-adjustment have only ended in his embarrassment or worse, unintended cruelty towards her, and he has long since given up on puzzling over what value his friendship could possibly provide her, if only so as not to throw their friendship back in her face.

He wishes he were just here to see her, and not to bring the book and all the things the book will bring with it. He wishes it were not him who had found it, that it were some other mystic, some other time, and he would just be good morning again. He wishes to be small as a mouse, and curl up somewhere and hide. He stands there, wishing these things, and the reality that he could make these thoughts real - that he is the only one in the whole world who could - is not lost on him. He stands still. He feels that if he so much as allowed himself to move he would not be able to resist the urge to say the words that would make him into that little mouse. He is choked by it, swaddled in his desire like the layer of sweat coating his skin. The pause he takes turns into minutes and then hours of inaction. It's all too much for him.

At dusk, his stupor is broken by the clicking of the latch, and he manages in a fluster to re-anchor his awareness into his little body, as a warm flood of light sends his silhouette fleeing out across the cobbles behind him, trapped by the rectangular projection of the doorway.

'Good Morning!' Hellrosa exclaims, as her friends eyes blinkingly struggle to discern her face from the rest of the dark person shaped form haloed by the hall-light behind her. She stands for an affronted moment at the revelation of her motionless friend on her doorstep, the slightest tugging of perplexity playing at the corner of her lips before she has time to mask it. 'How lovely to see you. I was just going for a walk. Would you like to join me?'

The Wishmaker agrees to go for a walk with her. For some reason, he had expected her to know that he was the Wishmaker now, and hearing his old name had thrown him off too much to correct her, and she's already talking about something else now, and it feels all too late to tell her about his new name. She's asking him how he's been, and he says that he's been fine thanks, and asks the same back, and now she's talking about something or other and he feels so terribly rude for not paying attention.

'Are you okay? You seem a bit distracted.'

'Yeah... I'm fine. It's just been a while since I've seen anyone. It's a bit of a shock.'

That wasn't a lie. It had been weeks since he'd even left the house. He just hadn't wanted to, and the more the days and nights had blended together in his house, the less he had felt like there was anything worth leaving it for.

'Well, I'm very glad you came to see me! You're always welcome here.'

They trace a path through the fading light and sharp early-spring air, around a lake embedded in the moorland that surrounds Hellrosa's castle. The wishmaker looks at all the twisting gorse with its golden flowers and the scattered forget-me-nots, invisible from a distance but emerging from the grass as he passes over them, but he forgets to enjoy them. He sees them and thinks the word 'gorse' and the words 'forget me not', and moves on. He has begun to see most things this way. The more words he learns, the more he sees the things around him as being simply incarnations of those words.

Hellrosa confesses to the Wishmaker the reason for her walk - she is hosting a dinner party for some old mystic colleagues of theirs from the academy, and despite having managed to evade most of the first half of the evening in the kitchen, quickly found herself in need of more respite from their company, and slipped out after dessert for some fresh air.

The two friends chat about the weather, and the various goings on in the mystic community, and then the things there are to talk about seem to dry up. All the Wishmaker can think about is the book, but he finds himself not talking about it. It isn't the right time, he decides. It has to be the right time before he tells her. He's aware that with his mind so preoccupied, he is bringing absolutely nothing to the conversation. He doesn't know what he could talk about that would be interesting, and he can only spend so long thinking about what he could say and coming up with nothing, before his mind comes racing back to the book, and to why he hasn't told her about it yet. He isn't being a good friend. He wishes he hadn't come to see her.

'I should probably get back to my guests. There aren't any leftovers I'm afraid, but I have soup on the stove, would you like to come in for some soup?'

The wishmaker had been planning on telling her about the book and then leaving to do whatever had to be done next, but he hasn't eaten today, and he hasn't told her yet anyway.

When they get back to her house, her guests have retired from the dining hall to a large sitting room in the south wing. The mystic called Pale House is splayed across one of the red sofas, talking at length about his recent work trip to Circissa, the southern 'City of Rain' - a favoured destination of romance writers and military historians - from where he joined a small group of mystics bravely undertaking the perilous week long hike through the tropical forest to soak himself in the mysteries of the ancient pre-septrional temple sites there (though Pale House makes no mention of the score of guides and assistants carrying their bags, navigating, setting up camp and cooking for them in his recounting of their adventures). The other mystics

dutifully wait their turn to divulge the events of their lives, one by one tussling to clutch the conversational rudder and steer the group into the stultifying mud of whichever riverbank they wish to languish in, the wishmaker fumbling to intuit from the others which proclamations are supposed to elicit laughter and which ones earn you sneering glances or flashes of piercing glares for greeting them as such. Eventually, each of the guests make their good-nights, and disappear off into the gathering mist, and Hellrosa goes to fetch the promised soup from the stove.

The two remaining mystics sit on the hearth rug and sip their soup and watch the fire. It's begun to rain outside, and it gently pitter patters on the huge windowpanes that line the living room. The soup is leek and potato, with cream. As is not uncommon with those who have been friends for a long time, the pair are very happy to coexist in mutual silence - sometimes there is just nothing that needs to be said. Now, however, is certainly not one of those times, there is something that very much needs to be said, and in this moment, everything has made itself just right for it's doing so. Knowing this feels like a lump in the throat of the wishmaker, and his hot soup makes him sweat around the face. His head feels warm and close, and the air feels stagnant. Still, he finds himself saying nothing, just watching the tongues of flames lick around the logs in the fireplace. Hellrosa is happy to let him stare vacantly into the fire so she can read her book, and it's not long before the words and the warmth start to send her drifting, forgetting to read the words on the page and continuing the story in her head as she falls asleep. She catches herself, and at the realisation of what she'd been doing, chuckles to herself softly.

'I'm going to go to bed. You can stay in the guest bedroom if you like.'

-o0o-

Anyway, back to the troll.

The troll has a lot of things to think about. When a troll starts to do something, it's always a mistake, and it always finds itself much happier doing something else instead. It's important not to shut yourself off to those other somethings you could be doing.

It's a lot of work being a troll.

The troll has very short green legs, and it loves them very much. They root it unmovable to the ground, and when the time comes, they will carry it off somewhere entirely different. In fact, the troll has never been anywhere it didn't get to using it's legs. 'I'm not the sort of troll people look at.' It says to itself. 'I'm the sort of troll that is there, at places, looking at things.'

When the wind blows it goes right through the troll, rolling around inside it like it would through the bones of some old house. As far as the wind, much like most things, is concerned, the troll may as well not be there. It's the sort of thing that you

get used to. Trolls try very hard not to think about the world outside what they can currently see, as they find it to be a distraction - it's for this reason that they never use maps, as it is very easy to find yourself feeling as though you are living on the map and not in the real world at all. By most people's standards, trolls never know where they are, but by troll standards, the opposite is true.

-o0o-

The two friends have breakfast together the next morning.

'What are you going to do today?' asks Hellrosa.

'I imagine I'll go for a walk.'

'Lovely. There's a path I've been really enjoying lately, along a ridge to the north side, and down into a little gully with a brook. I think you'll really like it.'

'I'll do that then.' He says. 'Would it be okay if I stay another night.'

He says it without really thinking about why.

'Of course.'

After breakfast Hellrosa goes to her studio to work, and the wishmaker goes back to his temporary bedroom to get his walking boots on. When he gets in there, though, he thinks about Hellrosa in her studio. She's a very good mystic. Rarely has he known a mystic as disciplined, erudite and dedicated as her. To think - all that work for nothing, now that he has finished the great work, and found all the words at once. She's in there now, pouring all her love and discipline into find the words he already found. The urge to turn himself into a mouse stirs and flares up within him once again. He sits there on the bed, laces half tied, and without really choosing to, empties himself of his feelings about the matter. After a few minutes he takes the boots back off and gets into bed. Softly he says the word 'fire' and a little flame jumps into life in the palm of his hand. He says more words to make the fire take the form of a tiny person and then he makes them green. He spends the day like this, performing little spells to himself in his bed.

At about three o'clock, he gets up to use the bathroom down the hall. Halfway, he hears one of the doors opening, and on impulse darts into the nearest door and shuts himself in the room beyond - a great dusty drawing room, it's huge windows regally adorned by swathes of plush green velour curtain. On the other side of the door he hears the familiar patter of Hellrosa's footsteps passing by and walking up to the door of his guest bedroom, where she knocks three times. After about a minute she knocks again, waits, and sighs. He waits for her to go before leaving the room to creep back up the hallway.

At dinner he lies to her about his walk. He tells her that he loved the ridge and the little gully.

Once more they spend the evening in the living room by the fire. She gives him a book to read, a drama about a king whose court slowly turn against him, which she thoroughly enjoyed when she read it. He looks at the words one by one but finds himself unable to picture any of the events. He doesn't see the king, or the judge or the host of scheming advisors. He just hears the sound of each word, like droplets falling into a pool, one after the other in his head, and longs to be back in his bed, performing spells to himself again. As they say their goodnights, Hellrosa notices his boots, sat by the front door, dry as a bone and un-sullied by the moor mud that would have been churned up by the previous night's rain.

The next day he sleeps in until midday and doesn't even ask if he can stay the night, he just does. Again, he spends the day in his bed, growing plants around himself. He draws them with his fingers up from the ground like you would draw with a pencil. He spreads his fingers, and they bloom into beautiful blossoms. By the evening his room is a veritable jungle, hung with greenery.

Dinner is predominantly silent again, but the wishmaker finds it in himself to strike up as much conversation as he can. They decide to go for an evening walk together, to watch the sunset from one of the hills nearby. It only takes half an hour to walk to the top of the hill, but every minute seems to deliberate unhurriedly over whether to pass or not, hanging around as long as it possibly can before making way for the next. Hellrosa makes small talk as much as she can, asking him about his day, what his plans are for the next, telling him about her work. She's been studying a school of mysticism from the north where mystics attempt to overload their senses as a way of creating a white noise from which to view creation - sitting by roaring waterfalls, inhaling rich perfumes and drinking pure vinegar. She is considering trying the method and has been doing research into the strongest smelling substances. Everything she says makes the Wishmaker twitchier. Everything she says fails to make an impact on him, and the time he spends listening to each word feels wasted.

'Oh right. That sounds good.' He says, and she gives up on talking to him.

The sunset is deeply beautiful, casting lances of golden light out from under its purple canopy, and the wishmaker knows this, but he can't shake the boredom from his body. They stand silently.

He turns to look at Hellrosa, and she has tears in her eyes. He thinks about asking her what the problem is, but he doesn't. When he gets back to his room all the plants are dead.

The wishmaker finds himself avoiding his friend more and more over the coming days, and soon weeks on wasted weeks are piling up behind them.

It is natural for us to want the world to be simple. We try to connect small events in our personal lives to greater events in the universe. If it is like this on this level, it must be like this on greater and greater levels too, we say. The universe has messages for me, that are true and resounding and I just need to listen out for them, we say.

Whatever you believe the universe will immediately prove to be wrong. This is the great movement. It keeps on going and going, spinning and branching out. You can only pay attention to one thing at a time. The infiniteness of the universe is infinitely more than you will ever be able to see.

For millennia the mystics operated on the logic that what occurs on a small scale is replicated on larger and larger scales throughout the whole universe. Each action was important because it was tied to a more vague and important action of the universe, and so on and so on and larger and larger until things got so large they started to make sense. When good morning clutched the book in his hands that horrible afternoon in that place that was so very different to anything he'd seen or any place he'd been, he realised how wrong everyone had been. There was no limit on the universes capability to be different. It kept twisting onwards and outwards, and everything you had never thought it would do, it did. Funnily enough, he felt something similar to what Cash Money had felt, all those years ago, that there was a single fundamental principle underlying everything that went on – 'move'. There was no other way to be. You'd keep on moving as long as you were around, even the most final thing you could do, to cease to exist at all was just to move to another way of being and then something else would begin and it wouldn't be all that relevant that you'd even moved at all. Movement preceded you and movement would continue on without you. Even at the end of time when it seemed that the universe itself had forgotten how to move, spun out across whatever there was that wasn't the universe, spread so thin its energy seemed to dissolve, it would still be moving. It couldn't help itself.

'Why are you here, if you don't want to talk to me? Why are you staying in my house?' The question breaks down the little house the wishmaker had been building in his head. He wishes that there would be some reaction in him to make his friend understand what had been going on with him. He wants tears to spring forth from his eyes, so that she'd understand what a victim he's been.

'What's going on? I need to know. You can't just stay here indefinitely, not talking about it and getting in my way.'

PART TWO

-oOo-

The troll had decided to go to sleep, and now it is stirring from its slumber. It feels the warmth of the evening sun gracing its little cheeks, and it feels as though it might once again be ready to look at things and do things again. When it opens its eyes however, everything is different.

The world has gone completely quiet, the wind isn't blowing, the birds aren't singing, even the pulse that you can always hear if you shut your eyes hard enough and try to not to think seems fainter and further away. The trees are gone as well. In their place are pinkish grey towers, that seem to have been made by piling up wet clay, adorned with little clay roots and clay flowers. The flowers are chillingly accurate in certain places, as if real flowers had been dipped in liquid clay and frozen in place, while others look childish and hurried, clumps of clay muddled together, elements of different plants bunched into one. They all crumble the same way in the troll's gentle paws, and the sun slips back behind the clouds, washing the garden in a shadowless grey.

The troll picks his way through this new and formidable garden, until its foot lands on something surprisingly soft. Dry clay cracks and heaves softly where it broke the ground, shifted by a gentle breathing motion underneath. It takes a moment to understand what it's stood on, as a larger shape ushers itself into clarity as the troll steps back; a woman is slumped at the foot of the mock-tree, eyes shut, and skin caked in clay. Her breathing is slow, and she is garlanded with little clay flowers. Looking around in panic, the troll realises she is not the only body lying in the strange garden, in fact sleeping forms are scattered all around, blended into the terracotta undergrowth. The troll turns and runs.

-o0o-

Nearby, two others are also making their way through the clay gardens. The first is asleep too, shuffling his way a few feet ahead of his companion, who ambles ever watchfully behind. They have travelled a long way in this manner, through forests and mountains and now acres and acres of clay and sleeping people.

The Guardian, the waking member of their party, swings a sword around as he walks, cleaving through the surrounding 'foliage'. He occasionally turns to watch as pale creatures emerge with lumps of clay and buckets of slip to fix the shattered plants in their wake. Much like the flowers and trees, these creatures are no accident of nature, tumbling out of the chaos to tow the easiest possible path. They have been torn into creation. Everything about them, their lumbering gait, the frantic liquidity of their fingers as they rush to fix the damage to their great work, suggests at the intentions of a piloting consciousness fumbling about orchestrating the movement of their elastic grey limbs, but it is an empty suggestion, for no one is home behind their sculpted monochrome faces.

Before them looms a house, or maybe more like a palace, formed of twisting walls and soaring buttresses. It looks somewhat improvised, with whole wings and hallways seeming to have been drawn out from its centre to make space as needed, and towers jutting up into the sky, propped up at odd angles. Some of these towers are so high, the pale ribbons that have recently appeared in the sky wind their way around them, catching the last red splashes of dying sunlight. The guardian knows what this forsaken place is and hopes in vain that it is not their destination.

They are greeted at the door by a colossal creature, seemingly built for the purpose of filling the doorframe exactly, possessing no head, but a huge face embedded where his belly should be.

‘Hello,’ it says in a surprisingly soft voice.

‘Hello,’ replies the guardian. The doorman blinks his eyes slowly, large dark doleful eyes, like a cow’s, blinking as if it can’t understand why the guardian is still looking at it. That seems to have been all the conversation it was expecting.

‘Can we... can we get passed?’

‘Oh. No.’

‘Oh, really, why not?’

‘Well, I haven’t been told to expect you. Is the master expecting you?’

‘No I shouldn’t imagine so.’

‘There we go then.’

The two stand in silence for a moment. The guardian narrows his eyes a little.

‘Why are you guarding his door for him. Why not do something else? You know you can do pretty much anything these days.’

‘I don’t want to do anything else, this is my job. I was created for it’s doing. I am a very lucky doorman.’

‘Lucky?’

‘Yes, very lucky.’

‘How so?’

‘Hmm. Will you go away if I tell you?’

‘Sure.’

‘Okay then. You see at first I did this job because I was told to do it. It didn’t seem particularly difficult, just to stand here all day and not let anyone in. But then I noticed something, and now I don’t feel like stopping. The trees that stand across from me now are the most beautiful trees in the world. And some day something will happen,

an earthquake or a forest fire or perhaps a lumberjack will come and want these beautiful trees to make himself a beautiful house, and the trees that stand in front of me now will go away forever. So, for now, I am looking at these trees.'

The guardian turns round to see the trees the doorman is speaking about. Across from the door are just the same sort of slumping piles of clay that surround them for miles in every direction. The guardian, always one to take people at their word, squints, generously looking to find some inkling of beauty in the dusty pinkish mounds.

'I see', he says, and then after a moment. 'So how could we get passed you.'

The doorman ponders this, and then, after another slow blink, says to the guardian, 'I suppose you could kill me, but I would advise against it.'

'Why's that?'

'Because then I wouldn't be able to see the trees.'

The guardian looks to his sleeping friend, who stands facing the door. As always, it baffles the guardian how he seems to know when to stop and where to walk, despite his slumber. Has he been here before? How could he possibly have been?

He knows there is no turning his friend, no convincing him to take another path. He sighs, before sticking his sword directly between the the eyes of the brute before them. It's odd. Though he knows this creature standing in the threshold before him was, like the grey gardeners, built to fill out a role, born of artifice and not flesh, he can't help but feel as though there is indeed some guiding spark of the divine behind it's huge bovine eyes, some kind of experience unfolding within it's sculpted flesh.

The doorman lets out a small, guttural breath. The noise is so soft it catches the guardian by surprise, and it's no small struggle to stuff down the pang of guilt it elicits within him.

The doorman falls backwards into the doorway, and his eyes don't close as he dies, as though he hadn't been finished using them. Clouds pass overhead, clearing the way for a shaft of moonlight to fall through the opening, illuminating his massive body.

The somnambulist wastes no time in picking his way over the mountainous corpse to head down the pathway ahead of them, and the guardian for the first time feels a small tinge of resentment for his friend, mindlessly walking onwards, leaving him to pull his sword from the giant's brow.

'I'm sure she has many beautiful trees waiting for you, my friend.' He whispers to the doorman.

Beyond the shaft of moonlight, the corridor is almost completely dark, and the guardian must speak a spell of light to illuminate it.

It's filled with detritus of all sizes, some recognisable – weapons, flasks, mirrors, a globe, a stuffed crocodile hung from the ceiling - some rather less so, strange shapes made from unidentifiable material, masses of stone, lumps of metal that look like they have dropped as liquid and hardened on the floor. Sometimes things move in the darkness, strange half formed creatures subsiding on the mould and junk. The guardian is alarmed to be greeted by a human face, peering down at them blankly from atop an armoire. The face, however, connects to the body of a black cat, its tail whipping around in the dust that coats the wardrobe. The guardian grips the hilt of his sword a little tighter, but the cat-thing doesn't seem to want more than a look at the passing pair and the sleepwalker trudges onwards, oblivious as ever to the strangeness around them, each foot he places on the floor managing somehow to miss the strewn ephemera that clutters the hallway.

The sleepwalker grunts a little in his sleep.

'What are you dreaming about, Max?'

Max replies with another little grunt. It may be worth clarifying at this point that this Max is not the same Max as the aforementioned Max The Evil Dog, who as it has already been noted, has long been dead by this point. As is just the case sometimes, these two characters happen to share the same name, bar the 'The Evil Dog' part, which as part of the obscure but by all means deliberate naming convention of the mystics, would never have been omitted from the previous Max's name. It may also be worth noting that Max The Evil Dog was neither a dog, nor evil. He was just a guy, who lived his own life, and died, quite a while ago, and isn't currently sleepwalking though the hallways of this giant junkyard of a house.

'You'd better not be dreaming about being best friends with anyone else.'

The guardian chuckles to himself half heartedly.

'This is a bad place you've brought us to. Do you know where we are? Is there a reason you wanted to come here? I'd really rather you chose somewhere else if there isn't.'

A spiral stairway leads them into another hall, dominated by thick buttresses of unbroken moonlight that reach up to a row of six tall windows on its left hand side from six arch shaped tableaus of illuminated detritus on the hall's right.

By the time the Guardian has climbed the stairs, Max has wandered quite a way down the hall, though he seems to have slowed down a bit, as if he knows the guardian isn't with him. Stood in one of the dark recesses between the columns of moonlight, something falling from his hand catches the light from a sort of lamppost next to him, and as the guardian catches up with him, he can see what it is - tears are rolling down Max's cheeks, down his chin and his arms and dropping off his fingers. He murmurs slightly, his brow furrowed.

'Max? What's going on? Are you having a bad dream?' The guardian wraps his arms round his friend. 'Hey. Hey. It's okay. I'm here. It's okay.'

Max makes no response to his friends touch; he just stands there limply.

As the pair stand, one holding the other, a noise catches the guardian's attention. He turns his head to see, as the nearby lamppost seems to stir, and uproot itself and begin to walk on little ornate legs down the hall.

'Hello?' Says the guardian, releasing his friend from his one sided embrace.

A voice comes from within the lamp. 'Tonight, once more I have freed myself.'

'Oh. Uh. Cool. Congratulations.' The guardian replies.

A second passes and then the voice comes again.

'When the time comes, I know I will not make the decision.'

The guardian starts to feel as if the voice wasn't necessarily addressing him with its first statement.

'I only hope I will wake up there' the voice continues.

Another voice comes, a voice that takes the guardian by surprise, not just for its proximity, but also for its painful dreamlike familiarity.

'It does the thing.'

This voice didn't come from the lamp at all. It came from Max.

'Max?'

The lamppost repeats, 'I know I will not make the decision,' as it continues to wander off down the hallway. The guardian is oblivious to this now. He is catching his breath, his heart racing in his chest and in his head.

'Max?' The surge of excitement in his chest turns sickening and heavy and sour as he realises his friend is still asleep. Max lets out a sigh and begins to walk down the hall again, in the opposite direction to the lamppost. For a minute, the guardian just watches Max walk away. He thinks how strange it is that he isn't having to fight back tears. His fingers feel electric, and the walls feel closer than before. He follows him though, of course. He doesn't decide to, he just does it.

They continue in silence. As they pass through twisting corridors, Max begins to speed up. To entertain himself, the guardian has started taking his sword to anything vaguely smashable in the corridors around them. A path of shattered globes, flasks, and gemstones lies in their wake. He's just finished dispatching of a rather grand looking vase when he notices that Max has stopped walking and is just standing at a door at the end of the corridor, his nose pressed up against the wood.

'You want to go in there, Max?'

Of course, Max doesn't respond, he just keeps standing, as close to the door as humanly possible. The guardian keeps his sword in hand, and tries the doorknob, but it's locked, so he looks around for a key, before sighing once more, pulling Max back by his shoulder, and speaking a word to incinerate the door. The room beyond is dark, and as cluttered with junk as the preceding corridors, but Max makes his way inside confidently, and shuffles over to the far corner, to an unmade bed with an ornate headrest, where he climbs under the covers.

'That's someone's bed. Is this what you wanted? What the hell, Max?'

Max is lying, oblivious, with the duvet tucked up around his ears, curled up facing the wall. The guardian closes his fingers tightly around the hilt of his sword, the heavy sour feeling rising in his chest once more.

Someone clears their throat in the doorway behind him.

'What are you doing?' The person says.

The guardian whips round to see the speaker, and immediately he knows who it is.

The Wishmaker seems compelled to occupy his hands with little spells - he holds a little golden string, which he is untangling knots from, but every time he succeeds in straightening it, it ties itself in yet more complex knots. This isn't what surprises the guardian though - it's a common affliction of the new age, almost every waking person the Guardian has met over the last years has suffered from the compulsion to mindlessly occupy their hands. Instead, it's the appearance of the Wishmaker's face that distracts him immediately from the question had been asked. He had heard that the discoverer of the book of words was a young man, and it was his young man's hubris that led him to unveil its secrets with so little caution, but the face that meets him now impresses upon him a kind of deep ancient-ness, sunken half lidded eyes peer out from between deep dark grooves, the thin line of his mouth drawn wearily between sagging cheeks. Only the wishmaker's face and hands protrude from the pooling slumps of his faded robes.

Behind him Max rolls over in the bed.

'This is my bedroom. What are you doing here?' He talks very slowly, as if each word requires a tremendous effort.

The Wishmaker sees the sword clutched in the guardians hand.

'Ah. I see.' He stops playing with his golden string.

The guardian looks down, as if only now remembering the weapon he is clutching.

'Oh, no man, I'm sorry. It wasn't that, my friend here just wanted to sleep in your bed, I guess. Is that okay?'

The wishmaker looks passed him to the body sleeping in his bed. He looks perplexed, understandably, but there seems to be a hint of recognition in his expression.

‘Uh... yeah, I suppose so. I don’t tend to sleep much these days anyway.’

‘Thanks.’

‘No problem, man. You want anything else?’

The guardian thinks for a second.

‘I guess a stool would be good.’

‘Oh yeah, I’ll go get one.’

The Wishmaker walks off into the corridor. For a while, the guardian can hear him clattering about, and then the sound gets more distant, and the Wishmaker seems to wander off into another part of the house. After about an hour, the guardian assumes the Wishmaker must have forgotten, so he pulls a little coffee table of ornate black marble up to the side of the bed to sit on. As he sits, he looks at the detritus in the room around him. Strange theatre masks adorn the walls above the bed, twisting into pained expressions, and a suit of armour stands near the door, seemingly not forged of metal, but of a green glistening ceramic, wielding in it’s gauntleted hands an imposing war axe of the same material.

The Guardian is correct, the Wishmaker did forget about getting him a stool. He poked about in the clutter in the corridor outside the room, and then, to his surprise he found a mirror. Since the day he had found the Book of Words, all the mirrors in his house had been broken, seemingly having been shattered the instant he stepped through the Moongate, but now, lying on the ground, having been previously buried underneath a big white sheet, there was a small, unbroken, pocket mirror. The Wishmaker holds it gently, as if fearing that his touch alone would break it. He stands looking at it for a second, before a realisation hits him, a face emerging from the frenetic pulsing tides of his mind, resurfaced by its recent echo in the world of real objects. He puts the mirror down on a nearby desk and goes downstairs to check something in the Moongate.

‘Oh! I know where I’ve seen him.’ He announces, out loud into the corridor - you see, over the past few years the wishmaker has come upon quite a strong feeling that he is not alone in the house. At first he reasoned to himself that it was probably something in his crumbling psyche, manifesting in the shape of a person as a last ditch attempt to give him something to hold on to, to stop him dropping off the edge, but he has long since forgotten this line of reasoning, and is quite convinced that there is, in fact, some unseen person watching him at all times. He’s never had more reason to believe in this person than a certain uncanny feeling, but it’s become so firmly cemented in his world view by now that it seems rude not to talk to it, and so he

bumbles about his day, talking out loud to the seemingly empty rooms and corridors of the labyrinthine house.

The guardian, meanwhile, has resumed his recently acquired pastime of smashing the Wishmaker's belongings. Various creeping things slither away into the darkness to escape the carnage he is unleashing onto the piled citadel of detritus that chokes the house's arteries. When he's finished turning the contents of the hallway outside the bedroom to smithereens, he begins using the words to conjure up new things to shatter, just coming up with whatever he thinks will satiate his passion the most, and at last he lands upon an ornate glass chandelier.

The glass pendalogue his blade makes first contact with splinter satisfyingly, but the swing of the chain takes most of the power out of the collision, and the chandelier rocks heavily backwards, and then lurches towards him again. The guardian stares forlornly into the shimmering mass of glass as it retreats mockingly, heaving with more gentleness each time, its motion toward and away softening into a steady circular gyration. His body aches with exhaustion, and so he lies down on the carpet among the splintered glass, and sleeps. When he wakes up, someone has returned him to the bedroom, and tucked him in next to Max. With a sigh, he wraps his arms around his friend once more, and when the Wishmaker returns he finds the pair curled up together, the guardian asleep with his head in the crook of his friend's neck. The Wishmaker gently shakes him awake.

'Hey,' he says, 'I have something I want to show you. I know where I've seen your friend before. He will be safe here, I promise.'

The guardian wipes the sleep from his eyes and follows him down to the Hall of the Moongate. The hall itself is covered in tiny roots that weave a fibrous mesh across all the walls and the stalactites. At its centre, the roots connect to a plant, a stalk enclosed in dry bleached leaves, atop which a strange flower sits, with petals of the same pure bridal white that form a sort of chalice, which holds a colourless odourless liquid. A fly lands at the edge of the pool of nectar, and stooping to drink, drops immediately dead, and begins to disintegrate as it drifts across the surface. By the time it reaches the middle, it's disappeared completely.

Ignoring the plant, the Wishmaker leads the Guardian over to the Moongate. Its face is misty, but as the Guardian looks into it, the mists give way to a candlelit studio, where a woman is curved over a desk, ferociously writing notes in the margins of a book. The wishmaker touches the cold granite frame and quickly the view retreats through the window and rushes across the rugged moorland surrounding her, following the lines of crumbling walls of irregular stones that marble the landscape, past the edge of the moors to fields and woodlands, until the landscape opens up to a wide, flat, wind-blasted peninsula punctuated by brick chimneys, where squat grey houses crouch among little congregations of trees huddling in niches between the gently undulating hills. The view through the mirror centres on a little floating light, flitting among the reeds lining a small creek. The light flutters and twists in the air,

soaring up among the trees before swooping low over streams and winding through the undergrowth. At first it's too bright to look at properly, but as the Guardian looks closer, he can begin to make out a cold, unflinching face at the front, with a trail dragging behind it like a comet.

'Max.'

He watches Max follow the stream out to where it joins a river, and opens out to an estuary, and then to the grey churning sea, where he flies up to join a flock of migrating geese and then drops back down to play among the waves.

'Is he lost?' Asks the Guardian.

'He chose this. He has passed through the gateway of the skin.'

'But he looks bored.'

'He is.'

'Right.' The guardian turns and leaves.

Max again ventures upwards, to join one of the long paths that twist across the sky. Around him, there are other faces, all going the same way, weaving in and out of each other.

The Wishmaker catches up to the Guardian in one of the corridors leading up from the subterranean hall. Being so deep within the catacombs of the wishmakers house, there is nothing to indicate to the pair that the sun is, at this moment, crawling it's way over the distant clay coated hills to brush the tops of the roofs with soft orange. It's only the growing hunger pupating in the Guardians belly that heralds the end of the night and the beginning of the morning.

'Make me some breakfast' He says at last.

'What?'

'I'm hungry. I want you to make me some breakfast.'

'Oh. Okay then.' Replies the Wishmaker, despondently.

PART THREE

The circular kitchen is one of the few rooms in the house whose purpose is ingrained in its construction. Early on after the revelation of the book of knowledge, when he still planned on using it, the wishmaker had extruded rooms below it to raise it above much of the rest of the house, so it would still look over the gardens, and now it stands high in a sort of tower in the western wing, though the wishmaker has rarely

returned to it since. Because of this, the kitchen is also one of the few rooms not clogged with the results of the wishmaker's restless conjurings, and so it stands relatively wide and empty, with the round table at its centre, and the chimneys from the stoves winding up to its domed ceiling and conjoining at its zenith, their upper reaches shedding the last remaining flakes of blue and white paint, that having once attempted to ingratiate them into the cotton-clouded summer sky-scape adorning the ceiling, now struggles to adhere to the unprimed metal. Through its ajar windows, house martins have at some time arrived and nested above the cupboards and in the eaves of the curved rafters, but they have long since left, like all the birds did once construction of the clay gardens began.

The Wishmaker begins to say words to conjure a lovely breakfast, starting with two plates, which the Guardian promptly picks up and smashes on the floor.

'Why did you do that.'

'I want you to make me breakfast. With your hands, I mean, not your words.'

'Oh. Right. Why?'

'Because I want you to. You took my best friend away from me. The least you could do is cook me some eggs.'

The Wishmaker puts two slices of bread in the toaster, and cracks two eggs into a frying pan, while the Guardian sits patiently at the table. After about five minutes, the smell of smoke begins to fill his nostrils.

'It's burning.' He says, unimpressed, to no response. 'Wishmaker?'

The mystic stands motionless at the stove, his hands limp by his sides. When the Guardian moves over to him, he sees that he is just staring at the eggs rapidly blackening in the sizzling oil. The toast, likewise, is burnt beyond recognition. He turns the stove off, and takes the toast out.

'Come on. Stay here. You owe me that at least.'

His words are born more of contempt than care or comfort, but regardless they fail to command a response from the Wishmaker. He just stares glumly at the space where the frying pan was. Taking his hand once more, the Guardian leads him over to the kitchen table and sits him down. As they hold each other's gaze, the glimmer of an expression ripples across the wishmaker's sepulchral face, but it returns to stillness before any meaning can be glimpsed. He had expected this might happen. It's nothing new.

'No,' the Guardian snaps at him, 'no. You're not going to do this. Don't leave me here alone.'

This also gets no response. The wishmaker slowly begins to shut his eyes...

The Guardian pushes him hard, and he falls backwards, chair and all, and his head makes sickening connection with the floorboards behind him. The guardian stands over him, boiling and confused. Still the man on the floor doesn't move, his eyes just slowly move to find the guardians.

'I thought you'd be something else.' Says the guardian, then says the words to make the breakfast appear on the table. He sits down on the floor beside the unmoving wishmaker with a plate, cuts a piece of egg off and puts it into his mouth.

'Chew.' He says.

The wishmaker just continues to stare at him out of the side of his eyes like a dog. A yellow stream of yolk starts to dribble painfully slowly from the corner of his mouth.

'Eat.' The guardian says, disgusted.

Still he doesn't move.

'Eat.' He says. Again.

He puts more egg into his companions motionless mouth, with a bit of toast.

'Look. Isn't that good? Doesn't that make you *feel* good?' He says, coldly. He hates him. He doesn't try to hide it.

He grabs his jaw forcefully and pushes it up to his top teeth to make him chew the egg.

'Please eat. I'm not going to hurt you. Please just don't go.'

Nothing.

He collapses into the wishmakers miserable chest, burying his face defeated into his dusty stained robes, and his body shakes with one big sob. It surprises him, and as he lays on him, he feels something move against the top of his head. It's the wishmakers jaw, slowly chewing what little egg is left in his mouth. And then after a few more seconds, he feels his Adam's apple bob as he swallows.

-o0o-

I think it's time we check in on our troll-friend. After a few minutes of running it stops to catch it's breath, and sits down on the dusty ground. The troll is still resolved to find a way out of the clay garden as quickly as its little paws will take it - provided it ends somewhere. Surely it must. All things end somewhere or somewhen. It climbs one of the imitation-trees to get a better look at its surroundings, and see if it can spot any would-be exit routes, but the garden extends in all directions, seemingly as endless as the grey sky above it, but when the troll has clambered back down the tower of clay, it feels something in the ground again. For all its ugliness, the unified mass of dry clay beneath its feet proves an excellent medium for the translation of

vibrations, and it's not hard for the attentive troll to discern a distant rhythmic tremor, moving through the garden. It sets off, into the garden, seeking the tremor-creator, and feeling slightly less alone in the ridiculous expanse of pinkish grey.

-o0o-

'Are you trying?'

'Yes.' Says the wishmaker.

'Come on then. I thought wherever Max was going was going to be where he needed to be. But it's not, so I don't care anymore. I don't want to be here and you don't either, so we're going somewhere else.' If it were Max, he would try to contain the harshness brimming at the edges of his teeth and knuckles and wrists, but something about the Wishmaker has let it off the leash, and now it bounds out of his mouth before every word like a hunting dog.

This harshness chases the Wishmaker further into himself, and he burrows down further into his misery.

'Don't be so pathetic. You need this more than I do.'

Sword drawn, the Guardian silently marches his companion through the twisting corridors and stairways that lead to the front door where the body of the fallen doorman lies. The wishmaker moves like a human sandbag, his feet shuffling with the resigned indignation of a prisoner led to the gallows. In return, the Guardian quickens his gait to a frustrated stride, the point of his blade poking into the shoulder of his petulant escortee a firm imperative to keep the pace up.

'How long will we be out for?' Asks the Wishmaker, as they walk out from the shadow of the house.

'Why do you even want to come back?' Asks the guardian,

The wishmaker gives no response, instead glancing over his shoulder, to take one last sagging glance at his labyrinthine temple to misery.

'You should be grateful to me for taking you away from here. This is the worst place in the world.'

The garden near the house is littered more densely with sleepers than the surrounding area - they must have been journeying to find the wishmaker, or seeking refuge in his house, before succumbing to the sleep. For miles beyond that, there are not even the sleepers to break up the expanse of clay towers. No birds sing, no wind blows. In an attempt to exploit his new found company for entertainment beyond the confines of his own head, the Guardian interrogates the wishmaker at length, but he struggles to describe his life beyond the barest bones - he was born to mystic parents, so he became one too. He didn't have many friends at the academy, but he

did quite well at his studies. He inherited his parents house when they moved into a retirement home in the nearby town of Esurex, and set up his study in the hall with the Moorgate below the house where he worked until he found the book. When asked about anything after the books finding, he just drifts off into a kind of reverie. He is unable to give an opinion on his parents, or mysticism, or his colleagues at the academy. Still, it's more conversation than the guardian has had for the better part of seven years.

After about about four days walking, as the sun is about to begin its descent once again behind distant clay choked hills, the garden ahead of them begins to take a new shape - strange even to it's usual revolting undulations and perverse towers. Huge clumps are gathered, towering up together much higher than the 'trees' that surround it, unusually symmetrical, with even the impression of turrets and crenelations along it's smothered walls.

'Oh. Oh no.'

It's the wish maker. His half-lidded eyes flutter, and he crashes to the ground, kicking up a dry cloud of clay-dust. The Guardian kneels down next to him, and cradles his heavy head in his lap. He shakes him.

'Hey. Hey. Wake up.'

Of course, no response returns to him. The guardian continues to shake him, he slaps his face, but no sign of life emerges from the wishmaker's slumping visage. Instead, a kind of bored serenity has relaxed the folds of his ever crumpled brow, his mournful eyes closed in a death-like slumber.

With a sigh of frustration, the guardian leaves him, lying in the dust, and makes his way through the front gate of the castle into a courtyard area, similarly covered over with clay like a pink-grey moss growing over every surface. Someone has carved away the clay around a small side door, and it's been left unlocked. It leads into a small room with coat hooks and shoe racks, though they only boast a single coat and pair of shoes between them. A door on the other side of the room opens straight onto a narrow wooden staircase that leads up into the dark.

'Hello?' He shouts up the staircase.

He's about to head in anyway when a woman's voice calls back to him.

"Hello! I'm in the study. Come on up!"

He starts. He really wasn't expecting to find anyone awake.

The top of the staircase opens into a hall with two doors on each side, where he stops.

'Second door on the left! Sorry!'

The study holds a sort of old-world cosiness the guardian thought had gone extinct. It's warm and smells like the inside of a book, and the surface of the stout table in front of him is littered with papers and ring shaped coffee stains. At the far end of the room, a desk is illuminated by light from a window, with the clay scraped away from it's outside, and it's here that the woman sits, hunched over and fiercely scrawling in the pages of a notebook. The guardian immediately recognises her mystic robes from the Moongate, though the studio isn't the same at all.

'Give me two seconds... have a seat if you want'

The Guardian lowers himself into the dusky leather embrace of a sofa that threatens to swallow him whole, and looks into the dying fire in front of him.

'You can stick another log on if you're cold.'

He does.

'O.....kay!' With a final flourish, she sets her pen down, and turns round to face her new guest. 'Hello! What's your name? Want a coffee?'

'Uh... I'm Pete. Yes please.'

'Hi Pete. My name's Hellrosa. This is my house, but I don't use hardly any of it any more. What brings you here?'

'Oh. Uh. I don't know. I was looking after a friend of mine but, uh, I'm not doing that any more...'

'Oh really? Why not.'

'I'm just not.'

She pours him up a coffee into a wonky ceramic cup from a cafetière sitting on a metal plate over the fire.

'Cool cup.'

'Thanks! I made it using some of the clay I scraped from the window. It took ages to pulp it back up into workable clay. I had to smash it into dust and mix it with water. I made four but I already broke all the others. So don't drop it, ha ha.'

The sagging grooves of the cups walls mean the most comfortable position for Pete's fingers is a strange claw-like grip, with his middle and ring fingers gathered together, while his pinky finger is guided down quite abruptly to the bottom of the cup. It feels like holding some kind of ancient scaled insect, it's warmth permeating out from its core through its shining glazed chitin and into Petes fingers. It feels so new to Pete that he forgets to drink the coffee inside, and it won't be long before it goes cold in his hands as they talk.

Maybe its the lethargic heat from the fire or the all-encompassing sofa around him, but he feels very relaxed. Hellrosa tells him that she's a mystic (but you already knew

that of course), and that she's currently writing a book about Giants. Pete doesn't know anything about giants, and he's quite happy to listen to her talk. It turns out they all died out a long time ago, before we came along, and that they're responsible for quite a lot of how the world is. How it used to be, that is. Before the big clay garden. Like us, the giants were children of the moon and the sun, early attempts at creating life to populate the movement. Though they didn't seem very good at maintaining their existence within the movement - they lived short volatile lives, as though their spirits were magnetised to the moon, and this gravity pulled them toward her always.

They were so close to her, in fact, that they seemed to possess her ability to emanate. From them, supposedly, came the spirits of the animal religion, the lives in things. The things they saw, they saw to contain life, and so it was. Hellrosa tells him a story about two giants. They were named Wonder and Great Blue, and they lived in a time when the face of the earth was almost completely flat, because the giants ended up making all the valleys and the hills and stuff, but they hadn't done that yet.

They were born in love, from the moment they set foot on earth they knew they wanted to spend their time together. They were a fearsome pair, and they took what they wanted. They found a giant called Ten Rocks, who had built himself a beautiful house by wading out into the sea to pull up great chunks of the reef, to adorn it with multi coloured corals. When Wonder saw the house she fell in love again, and so Great Blue knew that he had to have it for her. When Ten Rocks was out hunting, Great Blue went to the peninsula where his house was and ripped it up from the ground, and took it home for his wife. This pleased Wonder immensely. When she looked at the house and its myriad colours, and knew that it was hers, she felt beautiful. Over time, however, the harsh sunlight of the desert started to bleach the corals, and their bright colours faded away, until they were bone white.

One night, Ten Rocks was lying, trying to sleep along the shore where his house used to be, but a bright light was stopping him. He followed the source of the light over the horizon, to the plains, where the moonlight was shining off the bleach white corals of his old house. Ten Rocks drew his sword, and crept into the house where the two giants were sleeping. He lifted his sword above Great Blue's chest, and just as he was about to bring it down, he was struck from behind by Wonder. The pair threw his body into the ocean, but they couldn't shake the fear that he had instilled in them that they might somehow lose each other, and so they each started the construction of a giant cairn, for the world to remember their beloved even when they had long since died. They worked on their colossal memorials day and night, and into the hole left in the ground from where they ripped up each boulder they whispered a name, a new name each time for their beloved, so that they might have so many names as to never be forgotten, and these holes filled with rain and became the lakes. In the fervour of their massive construction, they forgot to eat or sleep. After a month of working tirelessly, they both came to be so tired and weak that they could go on no longer. Having not even the energy to catch food, they collapsed together between their twin cairns, to hold each other and wait to give in to their hunger,

content in the knowledge that their respective sweetheart would be remembered forever.

'Is that true?' Pete asks sleepily when she's done. Mystics love to take these kinds of fairy stories literally, and he wants to humour the sincerity of her mystical work.

'On some level, probably. There are two mountains in the north with those names, and the lakes around there all carry old names too.'

'I know those mountains. I grew up there. My mum's house is right between the two.'

'That's funny. It's quite an important place to us mystics - it's where our first big mistake was made. You've come an awfully long way if you came from there. Why did you leave?'

'I left when Max got ill. Or y'know. Fell asleep.'

'Max is the friend you mentioned?'

'Yeah. He's not like the other sleepers. He walks about. I was worried about him getting hurt or something.'

'So you just followed him? You didn't try and stop him from leaving?'

'No, I didn't. Who am I to stop him from going where he wants to go.'

'That's quite something. To give up your life to take care of someone like that, I mean.'

'Yeah. Well. I wasn't needed back home.'

'You weren't needed?'

'Yeah.'

'Why aren't you looking after him anymore?'

'Because he's fine. I saw where he is in a great big mirror.'

This catches Hellrosa's attention.

'You met the Wishmaker then.' She says.

'Yeah I did.'

'I'm surprised he's still knocking about. I thought he'd have gone to sleep by now.'

'Oh. No, yeah. He only went to sleep a couple of hours ago. He's outside.'

'He's outside?!'

'Yeah he's outside. He gave up just before we got here.'

'Okay. Let's bring him in.'

'Oh yeah, right.'

Of course, he's exactly where Pete left him, illuminated occasionally by the shifting moonlight running its pale hands over his sleeping form.

'Hello.' Says Hellrosa, upon arriving at the collapsed body of her friend lying in the clay-dust.

'He's asleep.' Says Pete. 'I did say.'

'I wasn't talking to him.' She says.

This puzzles Pete, naturally.

'Pete, would it surprise you if I told you you weren't alone when you came to my house?'

It would.

'What do you mean, sorry?'

'There's someone else here with us. I'd assume she followed you here.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I can see her fingertips.'

Pete looks around. There don't seem to be any fingertips.

He's about to question what on earth she means by this, when suddenly out of the air near the Wishmaker's sleeping body comes a voice.

'No, you can't.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.' Hellrosa replies.

No reply comes.

'Sorry, what? What the fuck was that?' Pete asks, looking around.

'I think it's a watcher. I'll tell you about it when we're inside. Lets get this idiot out of the cold first.'

Together they carry the sleeping Wishmaker in, and lay him on (or rather, into) the body-swallowing sofa. Pete can't help feeling a bit jealous, usurped from his spot there and relegated now to sitting on the floor by the coffee table. He's become quite immediately attached to the beaten old thing, and it's easily the most comfortable place to sit in the little room. However this feeling is rather overshadowed by the revelation of the existence of his invisible companion. Hellrosa doesn't seem too worried about it, and he's instinctively trusting of her, and a compulsion to impress her implores him to resist betraying any sign of how unsettled it's made him. He can't help but glance around every few minutes to try and catch a sight of her fingertips though - at least knowing exactly where she was would put him at a bit more ease.

'You'll have to take him back tomorrow.' Says Hellrosa, as she sits down on her desk chair, which is turned to face the others.

'What. No, hang on. I'm not going back. I was quite happy to leave him outside with everyone else.'

'I don't really want him here. I didn't really think I'd see him again.'

'Well, lets just leave him outside then!'

'No.' She says, and then; 'You are a watcher, aren't you?'

Pete can't help being caught slightly off guard by the sudden pivot.

The watcher doesn't reply.

'So you don't have a name?'

Still no reply.

'Cool.' Hellrosa decides not to push her anymore.

Nobody knew about the watchers before the Book of Words was published; it seems that the event changed something for them that compelled them to make their presence known to us. They left us with their own books, long catalogues of knowledge, stretching back to before anyone could remember, but the things the watchers chose to write down seemed of little consequence to anyone else. Major political events, if recorded at all, were described by the simple actions of unnamed individuals, often indiscernible from the actions of normal people, signing papers, washing clothes, eating meals, killing each other. The vast majority of the entries listed the effects of weather, and descriptions of places, written from such a specific viewpoint that to try and attach the descriptions to any location, historical or present, felt impossible. They also often recorded what seem to be the actions of animals, though they describe both people and animals as being simply 'someone,' making it hard to discern between the two. Frustratingly, sometimes 'someone' also seems to mean things like the wind, trees, land features and even groups of people. There was also a great deal of diagrams, with annotations claiming to represent fairly normal things, but with the diagrams themselves baring no relation to these things, or anything at all really. Very notable in the books of the watchers were the lack of descriptions of themselves, in fact they seemed resolute in their conviction not to ever affect anything that happened in the world. In the first page of each book, they left a message:

'Hello. We were the watchers, the forsaken first children of the movement. We are the ones for whom the mourning moon weeps. We've been here a long time, but we're going away for a bit now. Please continue our work if you remember how to, because we have forgotten.'

Entries in the books of the watchers typically go something like this:

Today I am in a place where the dirt that makes the floor forms V shapes. The wind is making its way so slowly to the north, and it carries its pollen with it. There are weeds growing along the east and south walls, but not the west or north. Someone is singing and someone else is washing themselves in a stream. Someone is drooping their long, beautiful arms over the south wall, brushing them in the dust there.'

Or this:

'This is the fourth day of rains. Someone is breathing by the shore.'

For about a week, the appearance of the books of the watchers caused quite a fuss, everyone was talking about these strange books of knowledge and what wonderful secrets they might hold the keys to. The more they read, however, the less inclined they felt to keep reading, and eventually the scholars presented a simple question as justification for the discontinuation of this study - if they truly were the first children of the movement, why were they still here? Why would the moon refuse them her embrace?

No one wanted to read the long dull books of the watchers, and so they gladly accepted the story that they represented a small secretive cult of deluded mystics, and that it was probably a good thing they went away. The discredited watchers were fairly promptly ignored after this point.

'Are you aware of the 1707, Pete?' Asks Hellrosa gently, sitting herself down on the floor at the head of the coffee table.

'The what?'

'There's a group of mystics called the 1707, who placed a lot of belief in something they call the Wormhammer, though they sometimes call it 'Bugonia'. Actually there's a few groups. As mystics are wont to do, they split into smaller movements over disagreements about whether the Wormhammer was like a guy or whether it was more like a thing, or a place or a way of being, or a combination of these things. And then the thing-people split again over whether it was the sort of thing that you could wield, or whether it was the sort of thing you were struck with, and so on. But the point was anyway, that whatever the Wormhammer was, it had to be reached through something called the 'Entropy Breakdown'. And the way through this entropy breakdown has been obscured before, and had needed to be reached again, when language was invented. The first language, the one we use to describe stuff with.'

Suddenly the voice comes again, from near the fireplace. It's very softly spoken, but Pete still jumps at the sound coming from so near to him.

'I remember that.'

'I thought you might.'

'He was one of us.'

The voice sounds almost embarrassed at this last part.

'Wait, who was?' Asks Pete.

'Enoch.' Says Hellrosa.

'He had a name?' Asks Pete. One of the few things he's been able to grasp about the watcher so far is that Hellrosa assumed she wouldn't have a name, and he doesn't want her to know exactly how clueless he is about all this stuff, so he's been looking for points to interject with an insightful question and coming up frustratingly short until now.

Hellrosa sits patiently, looking into the space where the watchers voice came from, and after about a minute, the voice comes again.

'Yeah, he had a name.'

The eerie stillness of the garden seems to be invading Hellrosa's little oasis of comfort, seeping in through the clay scraped window panes. Pete fights the urge to be uncomfortable with the silence. 'Just listen' he tells himself, 'That's what Hellrosa's doing.'

'He invented having a name. He gave them about all over the place to all sorts of things.'

The watcher takes long pauses between each thing she says. It seems she's out of practice saying things - it's been a long time since she last did it. Every sentence is something she's thinking as she's saying it, in time with the slow pace of thoughts that need to fill an eternity.

'It was very hard, when he invented having a name. It changed a lot of things. We didn't like it very much. It made it a lot harder for us. Eventually some of us decided it might be okay, because we could use some of the words he came up with to try and write down some of the stuff that happens, like in those books they gave you all. I never did that though. It seemed extremely pointless. I guess it was a challenge for them, one they never really solved. How to describe things using the words without ending up just describing the words themselves, if that makes sense.'

'I see.' Says Pete, not entirely sure if he does.

'But he went away after that, to work on another language. As if the violation that was the first language might be magically solved by a second language. Fighting fire with fire. Before him, life was like an ocean. And then he went and drew lines between all the waves, and once he was done it became very hard to see the waves and not the lines.'

They each take some time to think about this last bit. It's Hellrosa who speaks first;

'Is that why the other watchers went away? Because of the second language?'

'Yeah.'

'Why did you stay then?'

'I couldn't shake this feeling I kept having.'

'What was the feeling?'

'It was a feeling about a place. At the middle of the world there's a mountain made of ruined cities piled atop each other. At the bottom are bricks from before people knew how to make bricks. We knew this because we were there when they laid them. We watched as more and more came to lay their bricks upon the pile. They lift us up now so that it looks like the clouds might be pressing down on us from above. It no longer seems like there is any more room above us and I now have this nagging feeling, a question I keep asking myself. Was I wrong not to be a brick layer?'

Her voice is slow and sad, almost cautious. She's never told anyone about this feeling before. When she speaks again it's so quiet it's hard to hear.

'Because I did, once, and I never forgot it. I still feel the weight of it now, the heaviness in my organ. It's rough imprint on my tainted fingertips. Only once, and never since, because of a another feeling I had once, a different one to the one on top of the mountain tel at the middle of the world. I harboured this other secret feeling in my chest-place, like an infection, sharp and warm. The mark my fingertips left was a blue-green flower from the south, and so that became my name among my brethren and I became a 'name-thing'.'

At this point she stops, trying to regain control of her quavering voice. Hellrosa and Pete wait quietly for her to continue, and after about a minute, she does. The floodgate is open now, and though the flow is slow, nothing need stop it coming out.

'Our order made a vow of egalitarianism, no thing above another, but she was a mammoth-hunter. She was the perfect echo of the icy peaks and the freezing winds that rush up over and against them. She was soft under her fierce and cold, born and bred simply to survive, to birth children and then to die. She would live her whole life, as her people did, fighting cold and hunger, until it ate her, and she would not be anymore. I gave up my wandering to migrate alongside them and to live at the edges of their camps, and to watch her before anything else, though I knew it was wrong. I just tried not to think of my brethren and our covenant and think only of her. After her Second, though, she was weak. The fat in her lamp was growing thin and she was flickering. I knew she would never see the things I had seen, and I wanted to just give her a glimpse, so that she wouldn't leave without seeing just a little of how beautiful the movement can be.

So I brought her the flower from a far-south plain. I chose it because I thought it might seem to her like the resplendent blue-green lights in the sky, a powerful spiritual mystery from another place. It was nothing like the tight thorny knots of yellow blossoms in the foothills or the white florets speckling the grass on the steppe

where her people lived, and I thought she might see it and understand my feeling, so I left it at the threshold of her pit-house.

She didn't understand what it was, I don't think. I don't even know if she found it beautiful, she just looked at it for a moment and then stepped over it. In that moment, my covenant-organ begin to ache like a stone inside me and I felt again the vow I had made, so distant by then in my memory that the person who stood in my shoes that day may well have been someone else entirely. I wished beyond a million wishes for the flower to continue growing in the sun in a valley far to the south, ignorant to the touch of this cold harsh place. I begged the stars over and over, and when I knew that they would not remedy the flower from my touch, I spent a thousand and one years in the place of washing, but there was no removing my finger prints. It just doesn't work like that. I was the first to fail, I was made clean, and I made myself dirty.'

'I don't think that made you dirty.' Says Hellrosa. 'I think it made you beautiful.'

'You don't know anything.' The Watcher speaks with a surprising amount of vitriol given the quiet breathiness of her storytelling. 'Your life is like the beating of a fruit-flies wing. You are free to burn, like the lamp at the bedside of the long disappeared pathogen of my fixation, knowing your tallow will run out before you have to see the ashen marks made by your flame.'

After this she goes silent. Talking to the Watcher feels like walking on eggshells, Hellrosa is starting to understand that her brain works very differently to most peoples. No wonder - she's had a long time for her values to cement themselves. Every word spoken about her shakes the foundations of how she sees herself.

Pete just feels bewildered. He's managed to grasp about twenty percent of the conversation thus far, even at the snails pace of the Watchers speech. All he really understands is that she's very old and very sad, and almost all of her sadness seems to be her own doing.

'I'm glad you came. The Wishmaker is an idiot and I don't love that he's back in my life, but I'm glad to have met you both. It's nice to have company. It's very quiet these days.'

'Oh... Uh, thank you.' Says Pete. The watcher says nothing.

'I'll make up a bed for you on the floor in here, Pete. I only really use this room, the room next door for a bedroom and the kitchen across the hall. I don't even really know what state the rest of the house is in. I'd imagine those grey fellers have done a number on it.'

'What about the watcher?' Asks Pete.

'What about her?'

'Where will she sleep?'

'I don't think she will. Will you?' She directs the last part over to the corner where the watcher's voice came from, but no response comes.

After Hellrosa has taken herself off next door to sleep, Pete finds himself sitting up in his makeshift bed.

'You don't sleep?' He asks.

'No.'

'Oh.' He says. 'I can stay with you for a while, if you like.'

'It's okay.'

He's surprised at how ready he feels to actually go to sleep. He thought he'd feel creeped out, having the watcher in the room, but he's become very quickly used to her presence. Who knows how long she was with him before now? Maybe some part of him knew she was there, and so on some level he's used to having her around. Or maybe it's just the day of walking and the deep cosy darkness of Hellrosa's studio melting together with the warmth from the dying embers in the fireplace.

'How long have you been following me?' He asks.

'I haven't. I was following the wishmaker.'

'Oh. Okay.' He says, almost asleep before his head hits the pillow.

-oOo-

The troll has tracked the tremor-maker through the garden for miles - what might be the only other inhabitant of the garden seems to have much longer legs than our little troll, and doesn't seem to tire or stop at all - but at last, the tremors grow in scale, and the little troll catches its first glimpse of its newfound company. It hides behind a 'tree', and watches as a large pale man-like thing strides through the garden, with long legs and a shining hairless head. It's arms don't hang down by its sides, but are seemingly gathered at its front, and it's tall enough to be able to move without much regard for the towering piles of clay littering the garden. It walks quickly, but everything from it's waste up barely seems to move at all, it's long legs bending in such a way as to absorb all the vertical movement as it clammers across the uneven terrain, so that it's torso doesn't bob up and down even a little. Like a kestrel is able to hold it's head in place while it's body moves, the striding things upper body glides with eerie perfection through the landscape. It's facing (and walking) away from the troll, so the troll can't see it's face, but as it walks, the troll spots something small and white poking out from round it's side. The thing disappears behind the striders front again as it takes another stride, but when it re-emerges, the troll is able to recognise it - not one thing, but two small white feet. The pale strider is carrying someone in it's arms. The troll runs softly, so as not to attract it's attention on the off chance it should

be able to hear things as subtle as the feather fall of troll footsteps, round through the lumps of clay on it's left side to flank the striding creature, so as to get a look at it from the front. The striders face is blank and peaceful, and the feet belong to a young woman, cradled in it's arms, with her hands against it's chest. She is, of course, fast asleep. After a while of trying to keep pace with the strider, the troll grows tired, and watches the pair disappear off into the garden, feeling the striders footstep tremors slowly abate into the silence. Not long after they have gone however, it is joined by yet more strange, blank faced company. Out from between the clay trees, towing the path of the strider, tumble two grey crawling things, with their buckets of slip ready to patch up the cracked footsteps in the garden where the strider placed it's great feet. They reach into their buckets with their long fingers and slop out the watery clay, smearing it into the crevices, working quickly and nimbly despite the seemingly chaotic movements of their gangly limbs. These too disappear into the gardens on the trail of the strider, leaving the Troll alone once more.

-o0o-

PART 4

The next morning Pete wakes up to the sound of Hellrosa making coffee in the little pot over the fire, which she's already started up again. It's still dark outside.

'Hey,' She whispers to him, 'Sorry, I know it's early, but I like to get a start on things.'

'Look I'm sorry. I know you want to take your friend home, but I'm not going back there. No one should go there, least of all him.'

'That's okay. We don't have to do that today. He's not going anywhere.'

The implication that they will still do it on another day disgruntles Pete, but Hellrosa is such a welcome presence he finds himself quickly forgiving her dismissal.

'Right.'

'Watcher?' Asks Hellrosa, into the room, but again no response comes.

'How do we know she's still here?' Asks Pete. 'She might have left in the night.'

He pictures her, gazing out the window all night, before stealing out in the early hours, off into the garden, alone again. The picture he has of her in his head is almost regal - she holds herself high, straight backed, tightly wound. He can't get a clear image of her face except her eyes, wide and intense, like a cornered animal.

'Yeah. She might. I hope not. Last night I spoke without thinking.'

Pete thinks this is a little silly. The Watcher seems very high-strung, but it's not up to everyone else to tiptoe around her, however ancient and sad she is.

'Are you still here? I have a question for you.'

She pours out the coffee into her little wonky handmade cup, and sits down on the floor next to Pete.

'Okay then.' Comes the voice of the watcher.

Pete is surprised at his relief.

'Where did the other Watchers go?'

'Like the past is etched into the present, so is the future, and there is a place under the world where these scars become clearest. It is here, where none else can go, that my brethren went, to drift in the eternal darkness, alone with the sickness in their organs.'

Hellrosa is too awe-struck to heed the pain in the Watcher's voice.

'So it's real.'

Pete has quickly learnt that keeping quiet during these kinds of discussions is often the best course of action.

'We call it the Fray.' Hellrosa explains. 'It was thought up by a pair of mystics called 'Mottled Sky' and 'Gloom', who reasoned that, as you say, the future causes the present as equally as the past does. There is a sort of place within a place the mystics call the 'Hundred Year House', where visions of the deep past are revealed, and Mottled Sky and Gloom argued that the existence of this place necessitated the existence of it's twin, a place where one could witness events from the very end of time.'

This, like many things Hellrosa says, doesn't make a lot of sense to Pete. He has always had little patience for the refracting concerns of the world of mystics and spirits and the like, and their frustratingly opaque ways of conveying them, but something about Hellrosa compels him to listen. Maybe it's just the refreshing presence of some other person and the things they have to say. The despondent wishmaker didn't make for particularly enchanting conversation, and Max has been similarly useless, for obvious reasons. Sitting on this made-up bed on the floor of this strange woman's studio, Pete becomes slowly aware of the pit of loneliness that's made itself at home in his stomach, and suddenly feels awash with gratitude at the presence of two new companions in his life, and their accompanying mysteries. For once there's something new to think about besides the unending expanse of clay and the dull thud of footsteps, and this old room with its preserved old-world comfort, candle-smoke smell and hardwood dignity is a world away from the crumbling junk-world of the wishmakers house. The world begins to feel a little larger, a little more full of surprises again.

A look of introspection washes across Hellrosa's face, and she nods gently. She considers saying something to the Watcher, but chooses not to.

The fire flickers in the grate, and Pete takes a sip of coffee. Hellrosa makes her coffee very bitter, and doesn't add sugar or milk, and Pete's been a little too shy to ask for it. It's so bitter it almost stings, but the warm liquid in his throat feels good.

'My brethren have told me about it before, though I don't wish to go. The end of time is peopled with lone, amnesiac somatics drifting the separating waters. All the sadness of the world swills around their feet. It's not a good place.'

Even this statement, full of tiresome grandiosity and sickeningly oblique terms, fills Pete with a strange philanthropic love for the watcher. It feels ridden with little clues to the mystery of her personhood and the way she thinks and the life she's lived so far. He's glad to have Hellrosa there, because alone there's no chance he would know the right things to ask to begin to pick it apart and start to understand, but she might. She understands this sort of thing, so he waits for her next question, knowing he'll learn as much from it's asking as from it's answer.

Hellrosa thinks for a minute, turning over in her head the words she plans to speak before she lets them out.

'I think this place - the fray - might hold the key to curing the vitality disease and bringing back the sleepers.'

That wasn't a question. The hairs on Pete's arms raise, and his stomach tightens. Suddenly his body is electrified with nervous energy. She can't be serious, surely? His mouth falls open, but he holds himself back from asking.

'Oh. Even so it would be impossible for the pair of you to go there without a covenant organ.'

Though he barely understands the words, the tone alone of the Watcher's response deflates, him, sending his stomach rolling, his wasted excitement searching his fraught body for somewhere else to go.

'No. There's a way, for at least part of ourselves to go there. The mystics who studied the hundred year house discovered it. It won't be difficult, but it will be hard.'

Pete's head is reeling, he feels like an animal, more than one part of him wants to run. He doesn't even register the obnoxiously oxymoronic last sentence, or the phrase 'part of ourselves'. At the words 'there's a way', his mind is gone, racing at a hundred miles an hour.

'Okay. There's a doorway not far from here.'

'Would you like to come with me?'

The Watcher doesn't answer.

'Are you afraid of what you might see?'

Pete's starting to get a little irritated by the Watcher's propensity for silence. He wants to jump up and start doing things. Now.

'It's okay if you don't want to come.' Says Hellrosa.

Pete gets the impression that the Watcher is breathing a deep, silent sigh. Now is not the time for sighing!

'No. I will. Maybe I can re-form my organ while I'm there.'

'Okay. What about you, Pete, do you want to come? It won't be easy.'

'Yeah I'll come.'

Pete feels sick.

PART FIVE

Hellrosa refuses to use the Words to travel, so they have to walk, which is, as all walking through the clay gardens is, sickeningly dull.

'It's amazing how far the gardens have spread in just a few years. I miss being able to drive to places, but it would take a lifetime to clear the clay from the roads by myself.' Hellrosa says, 'That's okay though. It's good to be bored sometimes.'

'Sometimes.' Thinks Pete, but he doesn't say anything. He's too glad to have company to lament the long lonely boredom of his travels to reach this point. He knows the absurd extent of the gardens reach very well, and if it only takes days to reach this place, it's sure to be well within their bounds.

He's still taut with anxious energy, both him and the Watcher wrapping themselves in heavy silence, despite Hellrosa's attempts at starting conversation. He feels a little bad about it, and tries to think of a question to ask her.

'You knew the Wishmaker before he found the book, right?' He asks.

'Yeah. I helped him publish it. And write the introduction about how he came to find it. He was already in quite a state then. I sometimes wonder if he had already somehow contracted the vitality disease before he even found the book. He wasn't called the Wishmaker then, of course, he was called 'Good morning', which I always liked better. Mystic names aren't supposed to have that sort of meaning of course, but you can't escape the positivity in a name like that. I always hoped he might grow into it. But when he found the book he felt he needed a descriptive name I guess. I'd like to say he wasn't always like this, but he sort of was. He always seemed a little lost. He came from a mystic family, and his parents were both very good mystics. They would have supported him whatever he chose to do, I'm sure, but he became a mystic too, though it never really seemed like he knew why. We met in the academy. I liked him a

lot, he was funny, in his own way, and he wasn't as pretentious as a lot of the other students. He was a very good mystic too, though he never really gave himself credit for his achievements.'

'But you aren't friends any more?'

'No... We haven't seen each other since we published the book. I don't know what's wrong with him. Well I do. I just hoped he'd get over it, for my sake. But anyway. When he came to me after finding the book he had a really hard time telling me about it for some reason. I knew something was up, so I just let him stay until he felt ready to open up, but to be honest it got a bit ridiculous. He ended up staying for weeks.

Eventually I just snapped, and told him to get out, and somehow that got him to finally tell me what he'd found. I think he felt sorry for me, the condescending prat, or guilty or something, but he never really had anything to feel guilty for, right? Anyway I

helped him put it together and get in touch with one of the academic publishing houses, and by this point he was really a wreck, you know. He could barely get out of bed, and he used to sleep for like, fifteen hours a night. It was like he'd given up on life completely. After we sent off the final manuscript, he just left, without a goodbye.

I'd made a celebratory tea, and went upstairs to get him, but he was gone. I called him obviously, and went round to his a few times, but it was like he was hiding from me. I used to call him every night, but he didn't answer. I was really worried about him at first. The only sign I had that he was even alive was that every time I went round his house was in an even worse state, even more clogged with all the random shit he was making, I guess just to entertain himself. Then the house started growing,

to make room for all the shit, I assume, because god forbid he make the effort to get rid of some of it. I kept trying for the first full-fucking-year after the book came out. I went round, I rang, maybe only once a week towards the end, but you know I still tried. And then one day I just thought, you know what, fuck you. Why am I making the effort, when you won't.'

'Yeah. That sounds fair enough. It sounds like he was just feeling sorry for himself.'

'Yeah, he was. I mean obviously he had problems, you know, but how can I help him with that if he wouldn't let me anywhere near him. So I stopped checking, I assumed he'd just give up eventually, like everyone else did, I didn't expect him to last this long. Fair play to him I guess. The house must be massive by now.'

'Yeah. It is.'

'Ugh. Anyway that's enough about him. What about your friend?'

'What about him?'

'What was he like?'

'Uh, Max, he was cool, I guess. We knew each other since we were little kids. He used to come round sometimes. I guess Mum wanted us to be friends, cause I didn't really have any, but I didn't really think about it as a kid. And I guess he ended up

being my best friend without me really noticing. It wasn't until he got ill that I realised that I hadn't been that good of a friend to him, and when he got up and started walking about, it was at a time when I, uh, I didn't really wanna be at home, so I decided I'd stay with him and look after him.'

'Why didn't you want to be at home?'

'Uh, I guess 'cause my dad came back, and it made me realise some stuff. Some stuff I'd been wrong about.'

'What stuff?'

'Well, my dad was a businessman, right? So he wasn't really around when I was born, cause he travelled around most of the year. And then after I was born, he made this super weird career pivot and became, like, a preacher. A reverend. But not a normal one, because he still thought like a businessman. He devoted himself to the leopard star, and he wrote books about it, and he travelled around giving sermons to huge crowds of mostly men, and he became kinda a celebrity. And he lived the lifestyle, too, he really went all in, I guess, and he didn't really come home at all, and when he did it sucked, because he sucked. And cause he was never around, I always felt like I had to take care of my mum. She seemed a bit lost without him, she'd go for these long walks in the mountains after dropping me off at school, and when I got old enough to walk myself home, she often didn't even used to come back until it was time to make tea. So I'd take charge of stuff like doing the washing and keeping the house clean, and cooking a lot of the time, while she was out. And she told me not to, and she'd laugh and say that I was a kid and I should be out playing and stuff but I really wanted to look after her. I really loved my mum. She was really cool. And then one day he came back, cause he was ill. A worm in his stomach was making him really sick, and he was so weak all of a sudden, and he really changed. It was like he realised his whole life until then was meaningless, and he just wanted to be small, and to know my mum again. And when he came back, suddenly the house was clean all the time, and all the washing was done, and dinner would be sitting on the stove before I even got home from school. And she used to take him on walks with her, up the mountains, and when he got too weak to walk she'd take him up in his chair. And suddenly she didn't need taking care of anymore, and he was in the house, and he was so small and sad and apologetic and it was all too much. So when Max needed me I guess it kinda lined things up perfectly for me to go. I knew it made Mum sad, but she would never stop me doing what I wanted to do.'

'And now he doesn't need your help either.'

'I guess not.'

'You must be feeling pretty strange without him.'

'Yeah, I don't know. I feel weird. A little bit useless. Like I don't really know what I'll do next.'

'That's cool. I think it's alright to feel like that, do you still want to help him?'

'Of course.'

'Cool. We'll make him the first one we try.'

'Okay.'

They keep walking for days, talking when they have things to talk about and trudging in silence when they don't. They sleep on mats underneath the stars, because there is no rain or wind in the clay garden to bother them, until looming over the horizon comes a towering metal structure - an electricity pylon. The wires connect to others leading to the west and to the north, and when they reach it, they begin to follow the ones leading west. In many places, the wires have broken and fallen down, but no electricity has flown through them for years anyway. Soon, the clay slathered remains of houses begin to rise up out the formless ground around them, gradually gathering closer and closer together as they walk on, littered with more and more sleeping people. The remains of human activity sprinkle the landscape, washing lines pierce the piled clumps, dark caverns open up where the clay has failed to adhere to the windows of cars at the edges of the streets, which are now deep grooves, rolling linear hills for miles.

Something in the endless expanse of clay stifles memories of the old ways of things, it seems almost compassionate in it's willingness to anaesthetise it's wanderers against the pain of clutching their barbed wire ties to times lost. Here, though, where it's struggled to smother the rows of houses and telephone poles and wire fences, the ghost of the old feeling still hangs thick in the air, like it did in the first days. Like miasma it fills their lungs, familiar malaise - it's impossible not to relive those days after the excitement wore off, when people moved as if in a dream, slowly growing still on the inside. For a while, humanity seemed unified in it's collective weariness, its loosening grasp on old passions, the resigned contentment in letting things get slowly worse. For a couple of years, they kept up the hollow performance of domesticity, and acknowledged with complacent empathy the decision of those who gave up, more and more each day, until the sleepers outnumbered the waking, and the grey gardeners came and no one stopped them building their vacuous project, and those still willing to make the effort felt compelled to leave their homes and search for something else, only to have their will ebb away at the hands of the endless garden.

The ache sets in, each malformed, clay-slathered sign of life bringing it twinging back into life, and it mutes our three wanderers. Two children are slumped against the remains of a fence, their pupils flitting behind their eyelids in restless slumber. A tricycle sits in the middle of the road, it's wheels cemented to the ground and it's handle bars adorned with terracotta flowers. The company clamber over a fallen telephone pole. At another house, a pile of small perfect bones accompany claw scratch marks at the faint impression of windows and at the bottom of the back door.

Eventually the watcher stops them at a sort of hillock in a clearing.

‘It’s here. Under the hill.’

Hellrosa produces a trowel from her bag, and begins to smash one of the sides of the hill, and scoop out the clay and fling it behind her. Its not long before she cracks through into a darkness underneath it, a hidden cavern under the clay. After helping her kick through the remaining clay to make a sort of doorway, Pete speaks the Word for ‘light’, and, seeming to come from nowhere in particular, light floods out into the air around him, illuminating the space. It’s a petrol station, with clay piled around the three open sides of the canopy to completely seal it in.

‘A petrol station?’ He asks.

‘Yeah.’

‘Woah.’ Says Hellrosa ‘Obviously it wasn’t here when the gateway was built, they didn’t even notice it, they just needed somewhere to buy and sell petrol.’

‘They must have recognised it was here on some level, because they built the door in the same place.’ Comes the voice of the watcher. ‘How are you planning on getting in? You won’t be able to get in there with your names and your bodies.’

‘I know. We’re going to have to leave them both behind.’

‘What.’ Says Pete. For the first time it’s dawning on him that he might not have any idea what he’s got himself into, and that ‘the fray’ might not be like any place he’s been before.

‘It’s okay.’ Says Hellrosa, ‘It’ll be okay. The way we’re gonna do it is like this. You’re gonna etch your name onto one of these tablets of unfired clay, then place it under your tongue. This will anchor you to your body and your name, which will stay here, while another part of you will be free to enter the fray - the experiencing aspect of your self. When your saliva erodes the name from the tablet, this subtle body will be pulled back to your physical body and your name, and you will be whole again.’

Pete sucks air in through his teeth.

‘It’s important that you know that by your name I don’t just mean the word. You will leave behind the summary of your deeds in the movement, and only your experiencing body will remain. You won’t have any notion of an identity, nor will you feel a need for one.’

‘Wait, so I won’t remember anything?’

‘Not until you get back.’

Pete takes some time to contemplate this.

‘Okay’ he says at last.

At this point, Hellrosa addresses the Watcher.

'You won't forget us though, will you?'

'No, I'll still know who you are.'

'Okay. You mustn't give us any indication of that when you meet us in there. We won't have any idea that we have a name or a body, and if we become aware of this we'll feel like we're doing something wrong by being detached from them, it'll fuck everything up.'

'Okay.'

'And one last thing. We'll be able to see you.'

There's a little pause before the watcher speaks again.

'I know.'

'Okay then. Let's do this.'

The clay tablet feels quite uncomfortable under his tongue, as Pete follows Hellrosa to the door to the petrol station. She turns to give him a comforting nod, and steps through the threshold. Immediately her shoulders drop, and she keeps walking through the door before coming to a stop a couple of metres into the shop. Pete gulps, and follows her through.

-o0o-

After the baffling appearance of the strider and the grey gardeners, the troll finds itself quite grateful for some solitude. Thankfully the sun has come out again, and though even its gentle touch can't warm the slightly damp cold of the clay ground, its fingertips find the trolls skin and brushing over it, fill its heart with the company of a beloved friend in a strange place. With the deep soothing breath that comes with this familiar touch, finally the troll is calm enough to be reminded of something that happened a long time ago, that its grandtrolls would speak about in solemn moments, when things were quiet and serious. There was once a sickness in the earth and the rocks and the water, someone very sad and difficult had seeped poison out into these things, and spread a great stillness. The stillness was so terrifying, many people had convinced themselves it must also be beautiful. Some grew to revere the sickness, and some couldn't remember a time or a place that hadn't been always completely still. Eventually a beautiful friend had come along, and like the touch of the sun now in this strange still place, with the simple grace of it's fingertips had healed the sickness in the groundwater. With this memory, the troll is able to calm itself even further. Even when the ground itself is sick and the whole world grows still, it says to itself, there are beautiful friends out there who can come along and sort it out. As it walks along now, the clay plants seem so strange and ridiculous

that it can't help but laugh, and its laughter slips into the dreams of all those slumberers around as the rustling of leaves in the breeze or a distant tinkling of bells.

-o0o-

Pete is the first to wake up, immediately spitting out the clump of clay sitting frog-like on his tongue, somehow dry and wet at the same time. His mouth feels horrible, and he's starving. The petrol station is still full of food, but it's all at least five years out of date, and the air inside is stale and tastes awful through the layer of clay coating his tongue, so he goes outside to wait for the others. His head is clogged with half remembered images and feelings, like waking from a dream - he has an impression of a darkness, and of two children in white dresses dancing at the edge of a pond, and he remembers something else, a meeting of two buildings that leaned together to kiss before they crumbled away. He remembers a circular theatre of people, with him at it's centre, but none of them are looking at him. And lastly he remembers one of the children ceasing it's dancing to reach down into the green pond water, and pull its soaking heaving reflection out to lie alongside it, the red mud staining their white dresses. His whole body feels hot and heavy, but the extremities of his fingertips feel achingly cold, and the spaces under his armpits and beneath his knees and elbows where his skin touches itself make him want to tear it from his body. It's morning, and the sun is still hanging fairly low in the sky, leaving the last dimming oranges of sunrise cresting the horizon. After a while Hellrosa comes out and sits next to him on the cold ground, and they sit and swill water to wash the clay out of their dry mouths, and watch the shadows slowly shortening. At last, someone else comes out of the hole in the petrol station-hill. She's lithe and pale, and she looks a little bit like Hellrosa.

'Let's go back.' She says, quietly.

At this, Pete feels Hellrosa turn to look at him, and her gaze burning into his cheek. He takes a deep breath, and nods.

It takes most of the day before another word is said, as they retrace the cracked clay impressions of their feet back out under the power lines, through the smothered suggestions of outer suburbia into the emptiness of the open gardens once again. Two trails of footprints become five, repeating back on themselves. They eat in the silence of the criss-crossing shadows under the first pylon they came to.

'You got what you need?' Asks the Watcher.

'I hope so. I guess I won't really know until we try it. At least the worst that can happen is that they just keep sleeping.'

She focuses on her memory of the Fray. She can feel it's there. She tries to hold it in her hand, an impenetrable black stone. Hopefully just carrying it will be enough.

'You chose not to heal your covenant organ?' She asks.

'Yeah. I decided to do this with it instead.'

'It suits you.'

'Thanks.'

The Watcher slips her long white hand into Hellrosa's, who gives it a little squeeze. Her breath catches, and she swallows, her stare fixed directly ahead, but she doesn't let go, keeping it there as they walk.

'You don't remember it, do you?' She asks.

'No, but I'm sure we will, soon.'

Hellrosa pretends not to notice the Watcher studying her with fascination.

At Hellrosa's house, they sit around the coffee table once more, again subdued, but this time it's different. They feel like runners, wrapped in foiled blankets to retain their body heat. The presence of the Wishmaker's oblivious form sunken into the sofa at first seems an affront to Pete, an invasion of the space, but as the evening drifts on, he begins to feel a great sorrow for this wasted heap of a man, unknowingly embedded in the one place in the world free of the repercussions of his monumental failures. He feels that had the Wishmaker joined them on their fray journey, there might have been a third child dancing by the edge of the pond. He wonders if the Wishmaker would have ever known to wish for such a thing. He thinks about the mountainous body of the Doorman, caught in the moonlight on the threshold between the heart of the Wishmaker's world and the rest of it.

'I have a mystery for you.' He says.

PART 6

In the morning they gather the things they need to make the journey back to the Wishmaker's house, and they take turns carrying him by the shoulders, with his arms draped around them in pairs. Though they are quite used to travelling through the clay garden now, the added weight of the Wishmaker means their feet sink fully through the layer of clay, and having to lift their shoes half a foot out of the ground with each step is quickly exhausting. They take longer breaks, and sleep earlier. It takes almost a week before the first of the twisting spires crowning the Wishmaker's house pierces the horizon, but at last they find themselves at the door, where the body of the giant doorman still lies.

Passing the corpse, Pete can see that where his sword has opened up the skin, the flesh beneath has started to sort of squirm and a buzzing noise emanates from within. Frozen in his disgust, he watches the humming wound as it pulsates, and to his surprise, after a few seconds, a single bee emerges from the opening, sitting on

the pierced skin for a moment before flying off out of the doorway. More follow, and within a few minutes, many bees are coming and going around the giant body. He follows one as it ambles through the air, rolling about as though drunkenly along a little path round the wall of the house, to a slight ditch surrounded by clay trees. At the bottom, next to the wall and facing it, are the imprints of two bare feet, filled with little pools of water, and it's here the bees land, sipping from the puddles.

More surprising than the footprints, however, pushing through the cracks and breakages around them, are small stems of grass – fresh and new and full of vital green. His reverie is disturbed however, by a sound to his left. The strange grey figures the Guardian saw tending the clay plants on his first ventures in the garden have emerged from behind the slumped pinkish mounds surrounding the ditch and are descending its slopes. Setting down their slip-buckets, they begin to tear up the grass from between the cracks of clay, as the Guardian watches in horror.

It doesn't take long for him to catch up with the watcher and hellrosa as they hobble up the hallway with the Wishmaker between them, wiping the grey remains of the pale gardeners from his blade as he hurries after them. He sets about clearing the rubble from their path, so that they can bring the wishmaker in. Together they bring him to the bedroom, and slump him into an armchair by the window.

When he tells Hellrosa about the bees and the footprints, her teeth pull at her lower lip and she smiles gently, her brow slightly furrowed.

'Good. This might actually work then.'

Pete and the Watcher sit outside in the sun while Hellrosa prepares the rites. She explains that mystic rites don't tend to be pre-written, they have structures, and part of the intimacy of the rite is the time the mystic spends filling out the structure, slightly changed by their own memory or perception of the rites they've heard. Pete sharpens his sword on the thin whetstone he keeps lashed to his thigh, while the watcher just looks up at the clouds passing over head, waiting.

'What is it about her?' Asks Pete.

'What do you mean?' Replies the Watcher.

'You sense it too. I know, I can see you studying her.'

The Watcher betrays a bashful smile for a moment before her brow crinkles.

'It's strange. She was just herself in there. I don't think she knew it, but she just looked like herself. It was scary.'

'What did I look like?'

'Bright and confused. Radial. Quite hard to understand. I prefer you like this.'

Before Pete can ask another question, Hellrosa reappears.

'You're going to do it now?' Asks Pete.

'That's the plan.'

She leads them up to the bedroom once more, where she goes to kneel at the side of the bed, where Max is lying, facing the ceiling, Pete and the Watcher standing awkwardly behind her. She gently takes his left hand and places it at his chest, then turns his right hand over so it's palm is facing upwards.

The Watcher studies Pete's face, but no muscle moves, he just stares glassily at the face of his friend. He looks almost scared.

Hellrosa begins:

'I will draw for you now the map of the stars which is also your soma, so that you might know it again.

There is the one and that is all, whole and self-contained, but formed of two and from this one are formed four, two for each of it's parents, and together these are the seven cardinal directions.

The one is forwards always, and this is your head, and your spine, the longitudinal meridian of your body.'

With this she places a hand across his forehead.

'Two is your moon side and three is your sun, and these point to the right of you and left of the world, and the left of you and right of the world.'

She touches the fingertips of her other hand first to his right shoulder, and then to his left, and then removes both her hands, and rises to stand over him.

'Four is your left hand which points to your left foot, which is five and points to your right foot, six. Seven is your right hand, which points again to your left hand, four, and these are your four wandering stars.'

Her voice is earnest, her tone is less that of the priest reciting a lofty incantation and more of a friend gently giving hard-to-hear advice or a parent's answering a child's confused questions about life's injustices. It tremors with the uncertainty of a love in turmoil, terrified to say the wrong thing, for their meaning to be ripped from them and scattered by a storm of misunderstanding and clouded emotion.

'With your moon hand you reach out and with your sun hand you receive, with your dog foot you know what is ahead of you and with your worm foot you know the ground.

Your sun eye lives in your moon side, and your moon eye lives in your sun side. The salt water of your skin and eyes is of the womb-pond, and this is two, and the warm water of your gut and your veins is thick with iron from the groundwater, and this is three.'

Max's eyelashes flutter for a moment, but his eyelids remain closed.

'Hey Max. Welcome back.' She's speaking almost in a whisper now. 'Everything's okay, but you might want to keep your eyes closed for a little bit. My name's Hellrosa. Do you feel that? That's my hand. How does it feel?'

He doesn't respond.

'That's okay. Let's take it slowly. Don't worry about doing anything just yet, just lie there, and when you're ready, you can open your eyes, but be prepared that it might be quite overwhelming. I'm going to tell you a mystery.

It's one of my favourites, I spent a year studying it, and then I made the pilgrimage to go and visit the site. I hope you like it, it goes like this:

There's a Great Lake in the hills, near a city in the south named Lovades (she pronounces it the northern way - 'luh-VAY-dees'; in the south they pronounce it 'LOW-vuh-dees'). The water is crystal clear, so you can see right down, only this lake is so deep that you still can't see the bottom. It's clear because it's a salt water lake and the salt stops things like algae from making it murky. Now, there used to be two stones, about, maybe the size of a pillow, and they floated in the lake. They would drift about the lake very slowly, so they seemed to just appear in new places every time you visited, occasionally near each other, sometimes floating together, but most the time in separate parts of the lake. The locals called them the old men of the lake.

Now these floating stones naturally became of interest to the mystics, including a great-uncle of mine, because the salt content of the water doesn't provide nearly enough buoyancy to make stones of this size float. So they measured them up, and got to work creating two replicas out of the same stone, quarried from the side of the lake. In fact, a small handful of mystics enjoyed the stone-working so much they took up the trade of masonry, and lived out the rest of their lives as tradespeople, my great-uncle included - he devoted his life to making beautiful rough hewn stone arches and walls. He created a lot of the stonework around my house, in fact. Anyway, of course, both of these replicas sank immediately. They were perplexed.

They even fished the stones out of the water to make sure they weren't hollow or something, and sure enough, they weighed the same as the replicas. They decided to take one of the stones out of the water and bring it to the centre for mystical research in Lovades, which provided rather fruitless - it was, seemingly, like any other stone - but when they got back to the lake, the local fishermen told them that the other stone had sunk, out in the middle of the lake. The interest in the stones deepened into obsession for lots of mystics, who have since filled books with drawings of the remaining stone, records and diagrams of it's journeys across the lake, even accounts of rowing out priests of the animal religion to try and talk to it, to no avail. According to them the stone is silent. It's protected now, you can't touch it, remove matter from it, let alone remove it from the water, in case it sinks as well, but the fishermen will happily row you out to see it. When I visited I rented a boat so I could go and see it by myself, I don't know why, but I felt like I should be alone the

first time I saw it. Not being allowed to interact with it, there wasn't really anything to do when I got out there, so I just pulled in the oars and let myself drift with it. I was in Lovades for three days, and I ended up spending all three of my afternoons like that, just sitting in the boat, drifting alongside it, taking in the sights of whichever part of the lake it was in that day as they passed slowly by. I still have no idea what causes it to float, and what caused the other to sink.'

Max's eyes are open now, and streaming with tears.

'Would you like to move? Or not yet?' Asks Hellrosa.

Max slowly reaches up a hand to his throat, and feels his Adams apple bob as he swallows his saliva. He lets out a shallow cough, and places his hand back at his side. His shining eyes remain fixated on the ceiling above him.

'Max?' Says Pete, and is about to step forward, when the watcher grabs his hand from behind. They exchange a glance, Pete's eyes are wide and intense, almost fiery.

Max's eyes widen too, and he catches his breath.

'Max, can you hear me?'

No one speaks.

Max shuts his eyes again. It's too much for Pete to bear, and he steps outside into the corridor to clear his head, and the Watcher follows him.

'It will probably take some time for him to adjust. He's been gone a long time.' She says, gently.

'I know.' He takes another deep breath.

The quiet is broken instantly by the door slamming open, and the white shape of Max comes tearing out of it, immediately tripping over his own legs, and crashing down into the debris, before stumbling back to his feet and racing down the corridor.

'Oh, God...'

They hear Hellrosa gasp in the room behind them.

The pair share a quick, confused look, and chase after him. Max runs like a lamb, stumbling on new legs, small and white and uncertain, but dogged and determined in his rush. He practically falls down staircases, battering his knees and elbows as he crashes through the detritus.

They pursue him down through the bowels of the house, a fleeting white shape ahead of them, clambering over the strewn furniture in his wake, until they reach the hall of the moongate, but it's too late. They arrive through the stairway-door, just as the petals hit Max's lips, and he gasps in long gulps of its nectar. He's kneeling at the white flower in the centre of the room, cradling it's goblet-like head as it wilts in his

hand. Pete rushes forwards to catch his collapsing body as it falls, and cradles his crumpled friend. He can't think of anything to say except 'No.'. Over and over.

Hellrosa arrives, out of breath, shortly after them. - 'Oh God.' She says, over and over as well. 'Oh God Pete I'm so sorry.' The Watcher hangs in the doorway like a spectre, she too is frozen, and no words escape her lips.

After a while, Pete has gone quiet. His body is no longer wracked by great sobs - he's completely still.

'Pete?' Hellrosa shakes his shoulder gently. 'Oh, Pete...'

She carries him first up the stairs, and tucks him into the Wishmakers bed. He looks achingly similar to Max, replacing his body almost exactly. She carries Max out next, and the Watcher helps her. They bring him outside, so that his spirit can leave, to where the footsteps are, and lay him on the ground with his head next them them.

'I'm going to build him a pyre. Out here.' She says. 'Would you like to help me?'

'Hmm' Says the Watcher, and turning, walks away into the garden.

Hellrosa feels the sudden chill of newfound alone-ness again for the first time in years, as she watches, blinking, the pale shape of the watcher receding into the pink grey. She lies down on the ground next to Max, and looks at his face, eyes open and unseeing, facing the sky.

No clouds pass over head.

She spends the whole night on the ground with him, stirring in and out of sleep. In her dreams she revisits the Fray, but her memories of it are already eroding and branching in new directions from the ones that came with her when she left it. She dreams that Max was there with them. He occasionally tries to talk, but his voice is nothing, just the sound of the wind. He wanders off into the fog. The two strange figures embracing in the dark have become, in her memories, the giants of the story about the twin cairns. She imagines them standing, waist deep in an ocean, holding each other, fugitives sought by great scouring searchlights from above, in brief moments shining otherworldly bright like angels when caught in the illuminated discs of spotlight sweeping across the waves. She knows it wasn't these giants in her memory when she left the fray, but she can't picture anything else now. She dreams about someone filling in the footprints, resting their head on the wall of the Wishmaker's house. Trying to get in. She dreams she's in bed with someone, tracing her fingers over the marks on their skin, their foreheads pressed together. She's spent her whole life with this person. When she looks into their eyes, she understands that they are dying. They bring their hands up to either side of her head, and pull her in to kiss each of her eyelids, before breathing their last breath.

Whenever she wakes, Max is there to greet her, a pale motionless slither in the moonless night.

She gets up before the sun, and goes into the house. She goes all the way up to the kitchen at the top of the house, and makes herself a coffee, and then she begins her work. Piece by piece, she drags all the furniture out of the house, and begins to pile it in a clearing about a hundred yards from the entrance to the house. Some of the pieces are too big for her to lift or drag, so she takes the glistening green ceramic axe from the suit of armour in the Wishmaker's room, and hacks them apart in the halls where they sit. She wraps the pieces up in rugs, curtains, bedsheets, whatever she can find, and drags them down the stairwells, dumping them onto the pile.

As she works, she turns over in her head the words Max whispered to himself as he tore his eyes open for the last time, whispered in shocked realisation, concerning none but himself, and impenetrable in meaning and expression. 'I only hope I wake up there.'

By the end of the first day the pile is about as tall as her, and fills out most of the clearing. By the end of the second, she can't see over it, even if she jumps. She makes a pathway up onto the top by leaning the doors of an old wardrobe across its side, and carries Max's body up onto a platform on its top. She has just finished carrying Pete and the Wishmaker out, and reclining them in two giant dusty armchairs facing the pyre, when she feels a breeze rustling the hairs on her arms. Something like a wind comes howling over the clay treetops, towards the house. It stops at the edge of the clearing, blasting away the dust from the piled junk. It's the watcher, and she steps down gently from the air, and approaching Hellrosa, produces a flower - a real flower, not a clay one - a little blue lily.

'It was growing in the shade of an old sycamore tree, in a field beyond the edge of the garden.' Her tone is completely flat, factual, but her stare is intense and enquiring, almost frightened.

Hellrosa is dumbstruck.

The Watcher clenches her teeth, and pulls the sides of her lips out into a thin, flat smile, wordlessly turns, and ascends the wardrobe doors to place her flower in Max's hands, at his chest.

The rites Hellrosa holds for Max are the simple rites reserved for tragic losses of youth - none of the flowery language and elaboration that gilds the passings of elder statesmen, and those who have lived full lives of passion and adventure. Every word is like an empty house, full of the pain of waiting, and she uses them sparingly. She can't help but glance occasionally at the sleeping attendees, and at the Watcher, who faces the ground, eyes closed.

The last words are, as always, addressed first to the movement itself, and then to the Goddess.

'Every day I have loved you. May he find solace in your embrace.'

With this, she strikes a match, and something strange happens - a wind rises, and blows it out. She turns to look at the Watcher, but she is still shut-eyed in motionless mourning. Hellrosa laughs a short, sharp, breath, and then lets out a focused, rounded sigh. This time when she strikes the match, she closes her hand round it as a wall, and, holding it in her hands like a dove, lowers it to a strip of kerosene soaked fabric at the base of the pile. She releases it, and quickly the fire snakes its way up the side of the structure. It's not long before the wood catches, and a plume of smoke rises from within, engulfing Max's pale frame completely. She steps back to take the Watcher's hand again, and together they watch.

The Troll had found itself back near the giant sprawling mess of the Wishmakers house, and had quickly moved on, but something is happening that makes it want to turn around. Something passes by, something like a wind, streaming over the clay ground. The wind doesn't notice the troll, but as usual that doesn't bother it - instead the sudden presence of a wind in the still garden makes it suddenly very excited, and it starts to hop about on it's paws. It wants the wind to know how grateful it is, to show it how much every part of it's little body is enraptured. The little thudding of it's paws resounds through the clay ground, and reaches something else lost in the clay garden - another wind, who had been traipsing across the garden for so long it was considering given up on being a wind, but having been drawn now to this distant playful thudding, is very pleased to be greeted by the sight of our little troll, launching itself into the air.

Watching, it's reminded of just how much fun it is being a wind. It approaches much more meekly than the great rushing one that preceded it, and starts to join in, winding its way in circles around the little troll. The Troll giggles, a deep earthy sound, and crashes to it's knees, exhausted. With deep panting breaths, it points this little lost wind in the direction the big rushing wind went, and the little wind rushes off in pursuit. The troll sits on the cold ground, catching it's breath. There's no use in chasing the winds, they'll surely be long gone by now. It lets itself think about the places they'll be visiting, far away from this horrid garden - it imagines them shaking dry distant sunbathed clotheslines and lifting birds into the air to lean against themselves, holding them in a perfect balanced hover. It thinks of all the seeds and spores and specks of dust gathering in their trains, adorning them awhile before drifting off to find new homes. It thinks about the rains coming and churning up the clay earth, and the winds dispersing their treasure trove across it, and imagines it sees plants, bright and green and almost painfully vivacious, tangled among their grey-pink imitators. As the troll thinks these things, a warmth reaches out to it through the clay garden, and a light blooms in the distance in the direction the winds headed. 'This is the way,' it thinks to itself, 'it must be, this is the way to go, and I must know it, so that when the beautiful stranger returns I can show it to him.' It begins to run at full speed, charging in the direction of the light with a collection of wayward winds at its

heels, each having arisen from near expiration in some forgotten corner of the garden, lured into action once more by the sounds of little tapping feet.

It doesn't take long for the troll to get there, and the winds it brings with it sweep up the embers that linger and glow in the gut of the bonfire, and send them flickering into the sky. Neither Hellrosa nor the Watcher see the troll as it arrives on the hillock behind them, but the Wishmaker and Pete, lost in their slumber, find themselves watching, and following, as a knight, his pointed face protruding from under tumbling layers of silver curls, bearing in his right hand a staff that refracts into a tangle of branches at its top, and a perfectly circular shield of interwoven roots in his left, leaps in great bounds towards the house, and comes to a halt at the edge of the circle.

Here, the knight leaves the Troll behind to step with great strides up onto the pyre, and lowers the branching end of his wand to touch Max's left hand, and the flames seem to burst out of the palm to greet it, then he raises it to the air, and the flames rise with it, and then just like that he seems to blow out of existence into the wind he brings with him.

The disturbed embers twirl upwards in the column of smoke, to an open window on the third floor of a nearby wing, where they meet a curtain hanging out of the opening, and catching the dry tattered thing, they quickly creep along its edges and burst into life, reaching inside the dusty room and looking for every dry thing to gather up in their vivacious rapture. They crash out the door and into the corridor, meeting each neglected thing with equal exuberance, holding them in their blazing hands and feeling them change, before leaping on to the next. Soon the choked ventricles of the house are alive with fire, extending itself from the deepest bowels to the loftiest towers. A thousand and one little creeping crawling things slip out of the cracks and windows, and slink and scuttle off into the twilight.

The Watcher turns to Hellrosa, their hands clenched together. A question plays across the furrows of her brow as she looks into her friend's face.

In the shaking, twisting shadows of the house, Pete finds his body looking remarkably small, and warm, and beautifully dark inside in a way that it never gets once you leave it behind. As he gets close, he can smell it through the smoke, familiar and slightly musky, and he creeps in, quietly as he can. The Wishmaker must have felt something similar because as he cracks open his heavy eyelids, Pete can see him turning in his sleep, shivering for a moment as the cold night air sneaks in between the waves of heat from the fire. A thought surfaces through the heavy lethargic darkness before he slips away again - 'I'm back, where I've slept every night of my life.'

EPILOGUE

A storm is rolling over the twin mountains, and it shakes wildly the trees that cling to its slopes and pummels the ground with rain, churning the earth up into a wet pulp. The bells that hang in the branches around the little house sitting nestled between the feet of the two peaks have been ringing for a week now, and as the winds pick up, they reach their crescendo. The rain, dispersed into droplets at the touch of the trees, rises up again to hang over the valley and the forests as a shifting mist, materialising the beams of the car headlights into shining columns that twist through the meandering forest roads.

Pete hangs up his dripping raincoat on one of the pegs by the front door, and goes into the kitchen. The house is in remarkably good condition, besides the dust, which he begins to meticulously sweep into two big piles in the living room. The ancestor is not in the hall, his mother must have moved it before she died. Once he has finished gathering the dust from the whole house, he fetches a bucket and goes to get water from the pump in the garden. The rain has eased up a little, but he can see that it is still coming down in sheets over the sides of the mountains, and the bells clang to him from the trees. At the bottom of the garden stands the ancestor, facing the house. The rain has washed away most of the detail from its face, and the letters around its neck, which were illegible even in Pete's childhood, have been completely erased.

Pete puts the bucket down and goes to put his arms around the ancestor. He thanks it for watching over his parents and the house. As a child, he had found the ancestor unnerving, standing as it did in the hall day in and day out, wordlessly watching. His parents would often go to it for guidance or protection, but he never dared to. He was worried that the ancestor was trapped in there, and that it wanted to get out, but his mum had told him that their consciousness had long disappeared, all the ancestor was was the trace of their existence, like a name carved into a rock. She said that they must have had someone really love them if they were still here.

Once Pete has finished cleaning the house from floor to ceiling with rags and water, he lowers the ancestor onto its back and drags it into the living room between the two piles of dust. He fetches a suit of his father's and a dress of his mother's from the armoire in their bedroom and lays them each out over the piles of dust he has gathered and opens all the windows in the top floor of the house. Underneath the windowsill at the back of the house, two idols stand, one named 'Wonder' and one named 'Great Blue'. He brings these downstairs also, to lie at the sides of the ancestor. He kneels and kisses the ground at the top of each pile, above the heads of the idols, and then above the head of the ancestor, and walks out the back door leaving it wide open.

Setting off with his walking stick, he allows his legs to carry him up the overgrown path leading from the garden up into the alpine forests, rain beating down on him

from above, and after most of the day walking, he finds himself at the edge of a small clear pool under an overhang, the dense canopy above letting in only the slightest drizzle of rain. Water drips down the moss and runs in little grooves over the surface of the rock leading into the pool, and from the pool a stream runs down under the ferns and disappears into the trees. He strips naked, and submerges himself in the freezing pool, and in it's icy full body embrace, he remembers.

There's nothing to me, I am skeletal and membranous, and it takes all my concentration not to shake violently. All around me are currents, tearing me in different directions, howling as they pull themselves through my body. Everything I am is clenched, holding fast, rooting within myself, the pain of trying to hold myself together is overwhelming, each sense overloaded, I can taste salt and a thick and musky scent has crept in and slumped itself inside every cell in my body, and I can feel each one of them trying to work this foreign agent out through my cell walls, back out into the air where it belongs. Occasionally, hulking shapes move passed me in the battering winds and the dark, unseen giants, predators, each time they pass my whole body goes viscerally rigid, and I feel I could snap. Slowly enough, though, I am able to create within myself an anchor, and with this in place, the winds and the smells and the pain of holding myself together ebb away, until they're almost bearable, and gradually I am able to start paying attention to things outside my body.

The world is huge and dark. There are suspended lights hanging around it like a canopy. Wait, no, not lights, people. Motionless, vacant, glassy eyed. A shiver runs through the fibres of my membrane, a little dream-feeling. I picture myself reaching out to touch one, my warm medial digits meeting cold lifeless skin. My membrane feels colder at the thought, and the darkness feels darker. But they don't seem to pay me any attention.

There are two others here with me. One seems as lost as I am, blinking awake into the dark. Newly born here. The other is much more at ease, though something radiates from her, something painful, a sadness that makes it hard to look at her. I can feel a fading discomfort in my... something. Under something. A part of me I guess.

Something in me wants desperately to be close to the one that is more at ease. It feels good that someone can be at ease here, I want to be close to that, but I can't seem to work out how to get there. I feel like I should know how to move around, but my instincts lead to non-existent motions of limbs that aren't there. It takes a while, but eventually I figure it out; it's not such a case of moving myself, but letting everything else move, until, in relation to it, I'm where I want to be. The other one that woke up when I did has also moved closer, and I think I'm okay with that. There isn't much I can do about it if I'm not. They seem to have garnered the attention of the at-ease one, who stares, and floats around them, studying them. If the other one

understands the reason for this scrutinisation, they don't betray it, but they willingly submit themselves to it nonetheless.

The at-ease one is letting themselves slowly float off in one direction, and a reflection appears out of the darkness to greet them. It seems this darkness has a wall, and that wall is reflective. It's water. And it's down, the easiest direction to go in. There are actually things submerged in the wall of water, protruding out of it like growths. Old things. And they're gradually becoming water themselves. The remains of living things, buildings, the detritus left behind when everyone who can leave leaves. It's impossibly quiet. Nothing disturbs the water. We follow the at-ease one across the surface, our reflections following along beneath us, in V formation. There are more others here, still, somehow. They cast long shadows across the surface, illuminated by distant lights that pass in and out of the shroud above us, as they move slowly across the sunken landscape. They pilot long bodies, these strange captains, awkwardly. We approach one - it's a beautiful thing, ornate, with dark curious eyes - I worry we'll distress it, but it doesn't seem to mind, it just traces our movements with its head. The at-ease one seems particularly confronted by the appearance of this creature, and they spend a while frozen in place, staring into each other's unblinking eyes. At last the strange captain turns its lavishly decorated head, and continues to pick its way across the submerged rubble, the articulations of its limbs contorting to find footholds in the disintegrating subsurface. We trail behind it for a long time, and soon it seems to forget we're even there. We come to a place where the ground still rises above the water, a sinking island holding aloft a crumbling building, and the remains of a wall. Here, wading out of the darkness comes another, a very different vessel, striding on four legs, with an extending neck-limb that culminates in a gaping mouth-hole. They meet on the islet, and for a while they just gaze at each other.

Eventually the first, the one we were following, reaches out its long fingers, and begins to trace the contours of the other's neck. From around the mouth-hole, narrow white tendrils begin to extend, like roots, and return the exploration, feeling the other's ornate face. They are almost embracing, so close to each other now that they seem to almost be one thing, but there is no hint of recognition in the first's large dark eyes, just the same intense curiosity. After some time spent in this almost ritual sensory greeting, they pull apart, and begin to wade off in different directions. We stay at the island, and watch them in turn as they return to the inky darkness, occasionally illuminated in the distance by the wandering columns of light cast down from partings in the thick dark atmosphere. We wait and watch, as the waters slowly seep further up the banks of the island, filling in the footprint holes left by the strange captains, reaching around the edges of the house, and slowly pulling it in until there's nothing left, just the same pitch flatness that surrounds us as far as we can see. The at-ease one floats above the edge of the island, looking down into the earth and then into her reflection appearing over the edge of the shore as the waters gather around the island's summit.

For the first time, it strikes me that there is another dimension to her. She isn't like me. This being-at-ease, it gives her space to want things that are more complicated than a central anchor to hold herself together, and sail-cells to move herself along. All this time she's been having different kind of thoughts to me, and a question moves like a current across my membrane - 'What does she want?'. This capacity for wanting feels like darkness, deeper inside my companion than surrounding her, osmosing it into herself, the air around her a field of pathways gravitating into her core. Suddenly, her ease is not my own, but an unseen weapon that only she wields. I am frozen in fear, I cannot bring myself to watch anything else, and so my stare is fixed upon her.

After a while of gazing down into her reflection as it steadily rises to meet her, she seems to reach within herself, finding a sort of stone core, her anchor, which she begins to pull outwards into threads that hang in the air around her.

We linger in this complete darkness for a long, long time, watching the at ease one knit together these strands of stone from inside herself, until something, a tugging, nagging feeling, starts to pull me away. It's terrifying, this lack of control, as if bound by some invisible rope that drags me through the darkness, the hanging lights above us blurring into a tunnel of streaking white. And then all of a sudden, the lights are gone, and I'm back with my name and my skin, in a dim petrol station under the ground, with a horrible claggy lump of clay disintegrating in my mouth.