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Jackie Morris, author and illustrator, *The Unwinding*

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Simon Fisher, Family Bookworms Wales

‘How to classify this great book? Ecofiction, thriller, fantasy, parable? Page turner from the outset: tense, uncompromising and hopeful. Nicola Davies’ knowledge, understanding and passion for the natural world and all that we are in danger of destroying, imbues every page.’

Eva John, literacy consultant



with thanks to
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Cathy Fisher
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the midwives of this book

and to my husband
Daniel Jones
for unfailing love and support

THE SONG THAT SINGS US

NICOLA
DAVIES



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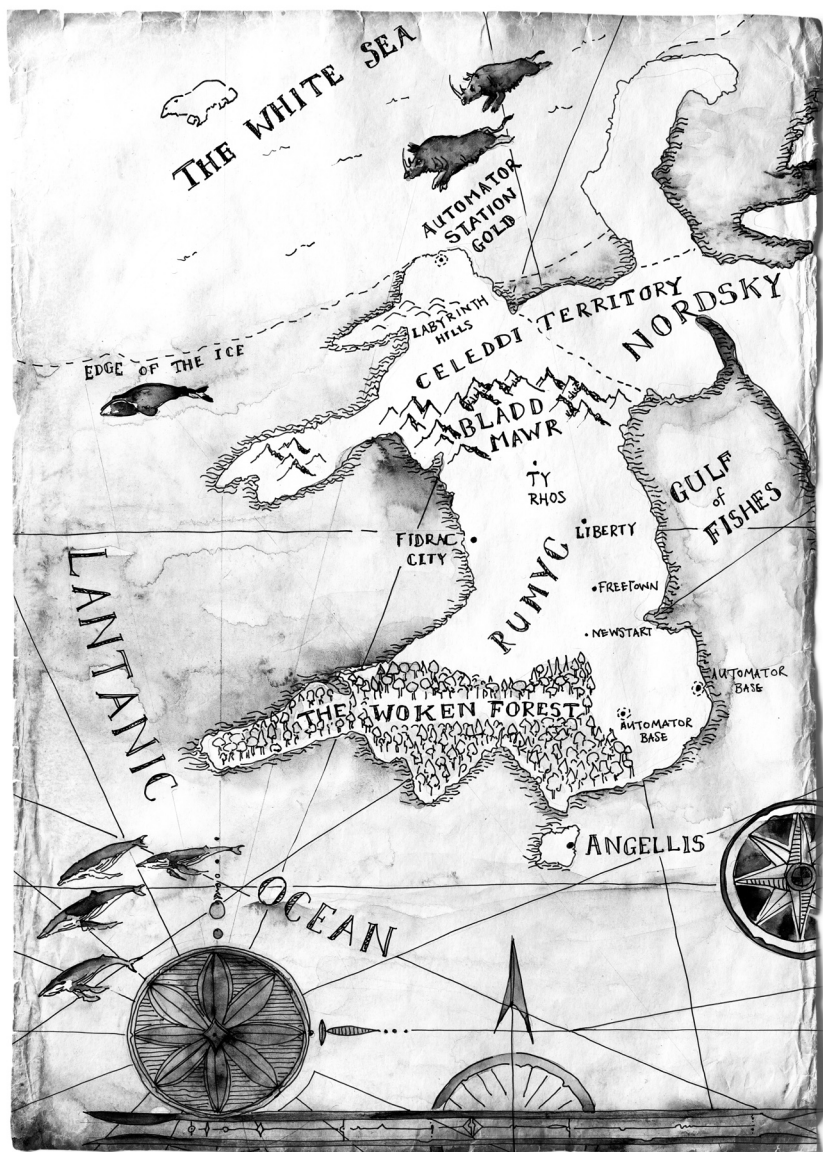
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When animals speak, it's time humans listened.



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1

Skull Gully

Harlon



Harlon sees the lantern beams slicing up the mountainside towards her home. They've come at last, the people called the Automators. The red symbol on their black uniforms is a fist closing round the Earth and now it's closing around her family too: they've come to take her brother and her sister, Ash and Xeno. But she and Ma won't let them.

'Kill the lights,' Ma says. 'Get ready.'

They all know what to do. They've practised this routine so many times, but Harlon never thought it would be for real. Together the three children bar the front door and lock the shutters. They don't speak.

Ma pulls two rifles out from underneath the bed. She loads both then lines up more ammunition on the windowsill and pokes the barrel of the first between the shutters. She's not Ma – Breen Avvon, alpaca farmer – now but someone else, the person she was before; the person no one is allowed to talk about, who knows how to shoot straight, and knock a man to the ground in perfect silence.

'Dammit,' Ma says. 'How did they find us?' Her eyes narrow, focused on the dark silhouettes darting between the rocks and trees, getting closer. She bites her lip and Harlon sees that Ma's afraid. That scares Harlon more than anything, but she mustn't show it. It's Harlon's job now to be strong for her little brother and sister. So she listens, looking calm, while Ma tells them what to do, speaking in snatches over her shoulder as she aims.

'You'll have to snowboard down Skull Gully,' Ma says.

What? Harlon wants to answer. *What?*

Skull Gully is six thousand feet, six thousand ways to die is what Ma's always said before. But, as if she's read her eldest daughter's thoughts, Ma says, 'I've done it myself, Harlon. I know you three can do it too. Nothing will follow you down there.'

Of course nothing will follow them because it's like jumping off a cliff!

Ash and Xeno look at Harlon; she stays steady and she gives their shoulders each a squeeze to tell them that if Ma thinks they can do it, then they can. Really, she's not sure.

A bullet slams into the kitchen wall, striking sparks from the stone. Ash and Xeno cry out and Harlon pulls them further from the window. Ma pumps a volley of returning fire.

'That'll keep them back for a minute,' Ma says and turns from the window to look at her children. A dark stain is spreading through her shirt; she tries to pull her jacket over it but it can't be hidden.

'Ma!' Ash cries out. Xeno whimpers and moves towards her.

‘No! Keep back from the window,’ Ma says. ‘Just listen.’ She grits her teeth.

‘No time to explain. Get to the bottom of the gully. Don’t let them catch you. Head to the coast.’

Ma gasps, takes a few deep breaths against the pain and closes her eyes.

‘You have to get to a place that’s not on a map. An island lost in the deepest part of the ocean. No one will find you there. You’ll be safe. Promise me you’ll stay together; promise me you’ll get there.’

Her eyes open, blazing, her voice with an edge like a sword. *‘Promise.’*

Blood loss, Harlon thinks. It’s made her crazy, but there’s no choice but to make the promise.

‘We promise, Ma,’ they say together, like a small chorus.

Xeno starts to cry.

‘Hey, little bird,’ Ma says, more gently. ‘You have to take our song there, alright?’

Ma takes a breath and hums the first notes of the lullaby she’s sung them all their lives. ‘The song that sings us’ is what Xeno calls it. Xeno answers with the first three notes sung in her bird-like trill.

‘Good. Now hand me that other rifle, Harlon. Quick.’

Harlon does as she is told, creeping low under the window to pass the rifle to her mother’s hands.

‘I’ll be alright, Harlon,’ Ma whispers. ‘I will survive this. I’ll be fine and so will you. You trained for this.’

For a moment Harlon feels about to crumble, then something flips inside her. Ma is right, she did train for this, all her life. Ma trained her.

‘Travel like ghosts,’ Ma says. ‘Don’t trust anyone. Take our song. Remember, lost in the deepest ocean. Now, GO!’

Ma’s voice is laced tight against the pain, her sparse words only just managing to escape her lips, but still she turns to aim into the centre of the flickering torches. She has always seemed to Harlon like a dagger forced to be a spoon, but tonight she’s more like herself than Harlon’s ever seen her, that secret person that Harlon feels she’ll never get to know now. That person whose skill and fierce love will buy her children as much time as she can, whatever it costs.

They have to use it.

Harlon steps back from the window and rubs her tears dry. She barks at Ash and Xeno.

‘Ma’s fine. Let’s go. Right now!’ And they start to run.

The three of them race down the long stone corridor and grab their outdoor gear from the pegs that line it. Their boards lean up against the wall, cleaned and waxed by Ma’s long, beautiful fingers. Harlon pushes down the questions formed by Ma’s words: *an island not on any map? Lost in the deepest ocean?*

She must not think right now. Their survival depends on focus: one step, and then the next. Harlon reaches for her jacket but her hand falls on Ma’s old one instead. It’s a man’s coat, too big for Ma, but she used to wear it all the time when they were small. Harlon pulls it from the peg and puts it on. It’s old, with stitching crisscrossed over its layers of lining, but it smells of Ma; that’s all that matters.

Their backpacks, ready packed with camping gear, dried food and water bottles, are in size order. Ash takes his middle-sized one and catches Harlon’s eye.

‘The three bears,’ he says. That’s what Ma used to call them when they were little: *my three bears*. Harlon, as the biggest, was the daddy bear, Ash never seemed to mind that he was Mamma, and little Xeno, although his twin, could never be anything but the baby.

Ash smiles at her, even though he’s scared, so she smiles quickly back.

‘Get your backpack on, Mamma Bear,’ Harlon says. ‘No time to waste!’ Xeno smiles too and for a moment they’re those three kids again, giggling insanely because Ma called them bears. Then Xeno frowns and lifts her board above her head to show how ready she is.

‘Sky will hatch!’ she says and Harlon nods, even though nothing Xeno says ever makes much sense. Then there’s another shot, from inside the house, and the sound of a ricochet hitting the walls.

‘Go!’ says Harlon, and hustles her siblings out into the pre-dawn dark.

Outside, the cold has fangs and the stars fizz with frost. Ragged clouds are shoaling round the moon like fish. It may snow, Harlon thinks, hopefully. It would be good if their tracks were covered. Their eyes are used to the blue twilight of winter nights, so they don’t need a torch to find the way. Frozen snow is piled head high either side of the path that leads away from the house, hiding them from the Automators whose shouts and lights stab up into the sky. The alpacas call in alarm, like a herd of rusty hinges, as the noise reaches their stall.

Ash stops moving.

‘They’re scared,’ he whispers. ‘So scared!’

It's not just the calls that tell him. Ash can feel their thoughts, Xeno a little too, but the alpacas are Ash's special friends. Alba, the white cria who he reared when her mother died, cries out like a human baby.

There's a burst of gun shots, the alpacas scream and Ash's legs collapse under him. Xeno turns from the path and throws up into the snow. There is a horrible silence. Harlon doesn't need to ask what's happened. Why would anyone do such a thing? Shoot defenceless beings trapped in their stable?

'Alba!' Ash whispers. *Alba!*

Harlon feels she could throw up too. She knows every one of the alpacas by name and character, even if she can't eavesdrop on their thoughts the way Ash can. But there's no time for grief now, no time for anger even. She pulls her brother to his feet.

'We have to go,' she says and pulls at his jacket.

But Ash doesn't move. Xeno lays a hand on her brother's arm. Her mouth is a straight, determined line and her eyes shine hard as ice. She's tougher than Ash. Like a bird, small and tough, armoured with feathers. Xeno makes a sound like the first notes of a robin's song, but lower.

'Ash!' she says. *Fly!*

'Right,' Ash says. 'Alright.'

Harlon calculates as they run up the steep rocky track: a ten-minute climb to the top; thirty for anyone not used to climbing mountain paths at speed. More for someone who doesn't know the path, which is half hidden between the boulders and stumps of trees. Will their headstart be enough to let them get

away? Harlon is not sure. She picks up her pace and pushes Ash and Xeno to do the same. The sounds of hard breathing and the scrunch of footfalls enclose them as they run. There are shouts behind, voices yelling orders, more shots. Harlon gives Xeno and Ash a stream of small orders and encouragements to stop them thinking.

In Harlon's head, her ma's voice speaks.

When you are in danger, the most dangerous thing is to wish you weren't. Accept the reality of danger, then you can survive it.

Climb, she tells herself. Get away.

Xeno is first to the top. She's waiting when Ash and Harlon reach the rocks that stand like sentinels guarding the gully, one almost overlapping the other, so the narrow entrance is hard to see. Beyond them, sheer drops hide under lips of snow. Even the most skillful skier could not go down Skull Gully; skis are just too long to make turns tight enough for the narrowest sections. But snowboards make this dangerous descent a possibility and Breen Avvon and her three bears are expert snowboarders. No one will have the slightest chance of following them.

Behind them there is a sudden boom, and the house that has been the only home they have known, becomes a cloud of red flame and smoke against the snow. The children look at each other without a word, numbed by shock. That's it. There is no going back. From this moment their past life is gone, and any future they imagined utterly changed. Harlon can't lie and tell them Ma is fine and will follow when she can. All she can say is the obvious.

'Time to go!'

Harlon bites down on fear and sorrow and cuts off their past life. A kind of reckless joy rises in her like a shiver as the three of them drop over the lip of the gully.

The light of the setting moon makes the snow glow almost blue. Thin shadows of their three bodies follow them down the slope. This first section is just steep, really steep, and narrow. There's not much room to turn; the only choice is to go straight down, a sort of controlled fall. Which means gathering more and more speed, reacting more and more quickly. But they are very good at this, they have ridden the mountain snow every day of the long winters since Ash and Xeno could walk. That means climbing every slope before boarding down it. So they're fit and strong as well as skilled.

I know you can do this.

Harlon looks round. She needs to know at all times where Ash and Xeno are. They must be close enough to keep in contact but not too close to risk collision, a fall that could be fatal at this speed. Ash is in front. He reads the snow intuitively, and he's at his boldest when he's on the slopes. To the right and a little behind, Xeno is careful and precise, naturally graceful.

A voice of doubt whispers like a mutiny inside Harlon's mind: And you, Harlon? What would you say about your skills and strengths?

It seeds panic in her heart. She doesn't really know what she can do.

Stay calm, Harlon, Ma's voice tells her. Think. Always, think!

Every tiny undulation, every minute change in texture in the snow is vibrating through the soles of Harlon's feet, into the joints of her knees and hips. Her whole body is reading the snow, the way Ash says bats read the night air. New information from nerves and muscles piles into her brain, more and more with every passing second as her speed increases and increases. The slightest error, a misjudgment of balance, a turn when the edge of the board isn't perfectly positioned, will send her into a cartwheeling fall. She feels she's already at the very limit of what she can do.

There's a sudden quiver in the snow. Its surface feels unstable. A glance to the side tells her Ash and Xeno have felt it too. They all know what it means. They must float over the snow without attacking it. Slopes as steep as this one this rarely slip, but now this feels as if it wants to stop being a surface and start being a wave. It is an avalanche wanting to happen.

There's no headspace for thoughts about what lies behind, or what lies ahead. There is just *this* moment of intense effort and concentration. And then the next, the next, the next. Each second so packed with what every muscle must do, every sense attend to, that time slows down and stretches.

The gully widens a little, flattens out before a second plunge into a slope that's spiked with rocks. But the flat brings another kind of risk: slow down here, Harlon knows, and they could all sink into powder over their heads. For several moments this takes every ounce of concentration, and then Harlon realises that she can't see Xeno. She's so small that if she sank here they'd never find her. When did she see her last? A second ago? Ten? Where *is* she?

‘Chirrup.’ Her voice is right at Harlon’s shoulder, answering her thought.

A wind is getting up, siphoning up the gully from the valley floor, slithering over the powder and whipping it into a low icy mist, obscuring boards for moments on end. Easily enough time to hit a rock. But they can’t slow down. They must keep the impact on the snow light and quick or risk starting that avalanche. Then the gully turns to the left, out of the wind but into deep shadow. Harlon’s eyes struggle for a moment in the lower light and she loses sight of Xeno and Ash. When she spots them again they are fifty feet behind her and above them, almost on them, two dark shapes.

Falcons?

The birds of prey are huge and very fast. Harlon’s never seen falcons so big, or willing to fly in moonlight. They are strange and menacing and very clearly chasing Ash and Xeno. But what makes Harlon’s blood suddenly run ice cold is that Xeno clearly doesn’t know they’re there. Xeno’s power of tuning into bird minds is exceptional; she can sense the presence of a bird that she can neither hear nor see, tune into a passing goldfinch a hundred feet up in the air. Yet she hasn’t sensed these creatures and they’re almost on her shoulder.

Just as the wrongness of this hits Harlon in the belly, the birds stoop, full of malevolent intent. Their dark bodies dive like missiles, wings part-folded, like the fletches of giant arrows. The air is fractured by their speed. There’s a flash of yellow eyes and outstretched talons more like steel daggers.

Harlon screams a warning and now, at last, Xeno and Ash

see the birds too. Xeno lets out a high-pitched cry of shock. She ducks and one falcon skims her head and wheels round for another pass. Ash hasn't been so lucky. The other bird has raked him with a claw and there's a dark line of blood across his cheek.

'Trees!' Harlon yells. 'Into the trees!'

Ash and Xeno understand at once. Close-packed trees clothe this section of the slope to the left of the gully. To board between them at this speed, in moonlight, is insane but it's the only way to lose the birds. Falcons are built for high speed in open country, not for fast changes of direction in the enclosed space of dense woodland.

Moonlight, deep shadow, tree trunks, come at the speeding boarders in a high-velocity tangle. Every microsecond could smash any of them into a tree. Harlon hears the gasps of effort, the scrape and swish of boards turning at the last possible moment, as her brother and sister make split-second decisions about which way to turn. She sees them appear and disappear between the trees. In shadow, in light, in shadow again. Close, then far, close again, as if time was being cut into unconnected chunks.

Everything seems to get faster and faster. More disjointed. Senses, muscles, joints are close to overload and still the birds pursue them.

'Look out!' Ash yells a warning. One falcon is coming straight for the side of Harlon's face. But the bird is so focused on its target that it looks only where its feet will strike. Harlon jinks sideways, scrapes the tree trunk with the edge of her board, and the falcon's left wing smashes into the trunk.

There's a snap, loud as a rifle, as the bird shatters into a floundering mess of feathers.

Ash and Xeno crow with delight, then Xeno screams. Harlon sees her shoot past, flashing between the trees with the other falcon's foot tangled in her hood. Xeno swats at it in panic, trying to keep her balance on the slope, trying to avoid the trees. She rips the hood away and swirls it. Too late, the falcon realises its mistake. Xeno smashes it into a passing tree and its head explodes.

By then the children are a hundred feet further on, speeding ever faster through the trees and, like the birds, too focused on what's just in front of them to see the bigger picture. By the time Harlon registers the end of the trees, they are all in the air. They've shot out over the lip where the slope of trees becomes sheer rock face, and are now falling.

Harlon is aware of the quiet as they fall. She has time to see the moon setting behind the mountains, the stars, the shapes of her brother and sister against the indigo sky, against the dull pearl of the snow.

'Oh,' she thinks, 'we're going to die.'

And then they drop into snow on the slope below the rock face. Harlon thinks of Ma dropping berries into whipped cream one summer day, counting as they made a satisfying plop.

One, two, three.

They are blackberries dropped in cream. Side by side, alive, unbroken, up to their waists in the fluffiest powder they've ever seen! It seems impossible, insane, wonderful.

Harlon is the first to free her legs and board from the drift.

She stands in the stillness and silver light, the relief of survival running through her. Then, there's a sound. A low crack. It's a sound they all know well. It means avalanche. There's a dark rupture in the pale face of the slope that runs from Harlon to Xeno, and from Xeno to Ash like a jagged, pointing finger. Their luck has run out.

In the early light Ash's face is too distant for Harlon to see but she can see Xeno, though she is not close enough to grab, to touch, to hold and never, ever let go. Close enough to see Xeno's eyes fill with terror. Close enough to hear her call, for the first time in a long time, 'Harlon! Harlon!'

The snow below gives way, as if it had just evaporated. They fall into a pounding maelstrom of white.

Harlon knows the theory of what to do in an avalanche.

The first thing is: try to get out of the way. But the whole slope has turned fluid; there is no 'out of the way'. The second is: try to hold on to something, but there's nothing to hold on to. The third: try to swim through the snow to keep at the surface, but the force of the snow-wave is so great that she's turned over and over, helpless as a leaf in a storm. 'Up' and 'down', lose all meaning. Her head hits something and she's not tumbling in a white-out any more, but high up in the branches of a tree.

*

It was Harlon's birthday and they'd all come down the mountain into town. Later they would go to the baker and get

cake, but first Ma was delivering wool to a weaver, one of her regular customers. Harlon was to watch over the twins in the yard behind the weaver's house while Ma did business. But the weaver's garden had an irresistible tree that Harlon *had* to climb. She reckoned she could see the twins well enough from up there.

Harlon looked down through the branches and the twins were still sitting together on the back step. She'd left them with her spinning top but they had found another game to play: a row of mice and robins, live creatures, was lined up like toy soldiers at their feet. She knew the twins had done this, and she knew it was bad. Bad people called Listeners talked to animals like this. It was wrong, worse than stealing, her teachers said. *If you know a Listener you must tell me at once, even if it is someone in your family*, Madame Mollit told the class every day. Listeners were taken away to stop them being bad and came back, branded with a letter L upon their foreheads, so you could spot them and keep away.

Harlon began to cry. She didn't want Ash and Xeno to be bad; she didn't want them to be taken away like that and have a letter burned into their skins. Snivelling, she got to the bottom of the tree as Ma came out. Ma shooed the birds and mice away, scooped up the twins, and in two minutes they were all loaded in the cart and heading out of town. There would be no cake and everyone was crying: Xeno, Ash and Harlon. Ma stared ahead and didn't say a word.

Juno, their horse, lost a shoe so the journey home took ages. The twins fell asleep at last.

'Only bad people talk to animals, Ma,' Harlon whispered.

'They don't *talk*, Harlon. They have a power called siardw,

that lets them *listen* inside animals' heads. Sometimes animals like the feeling, like a cat likes being stroked, and they come to take a look.'

'But only bad people talk to animals and tell them what to do, Ma,' Harlon insisted. 'My teachers say.'

Ma shook her head.

'They don't *tell* animals what to do, Harlon; they only listen. And that's a good thing. Siardw lets Listeners hear animal thoughts, sometimes even plant thoughts in their minds. It helps us understand them, so we can treat them properly. Listeners are very special.'

'Then why do people say they're bad?'

'Because the Automators don't want anyone to hear or understand other living things; they just want to use them. They fear Listeners and what they can do.'

'Are you one, Ma?'

Ma shakes her head.

'No, but I think I know about what it's like to be one. Like being able to hear a song that other people can't hear, a song that's everywhere all the time, that holds the whole world together. You should be proud your brother and sister have this special power.' She pulled Harlon close and went on.

'The Automators try to get rid of Listeners, but d'you know what? More are being born all the time. Remember the field behind the house? How it bloomed with yellow flowers when it was ploughed and the ground was broken? Listeners are blooming like flowers because the Automators are trying to break the world apart. Listeners help to protect it, so we need to protect *them*.'

Then Ma began to sing,

Oh, there was a woman, and she was a widow

Listen to the flowers in the valley

With a daughter as fair as a the bright sunny meadow...

Harlon didn't really understand what Ma said about flowers and Listeners protecting the world. But she did understand that Ma's voice was sad when she sang the word 'widow'.

They stopped going to town and Harlon stopped going to school. She didn't mind. They could learn from all Ma's books, and the space and the solitude in the mountains were better than a load of screaming children. There were soaring eagles, deer, and the calls of wolves and ravens instead of teachers. Harlon spent long summer days with Ash and Xeno, wandering the high pastures. Ash calmed the alpacas and laughed at their funny thoughts, while Xeno connected with the passing flocks of finches for news of bears. Winters were encased in a magic, white world of snow and ice, perfecting techniques with the snowboards that Ma had built and taught them all to use. Harlon sometimes thought she could hear the song that Ma had once said 'holds the world together' even though she had none of the siardw power that her siblings had.

But down in the valley things were changing faster and faster. Ma called it the Automators 'spreading their stain'. When Ma and Harlon went down to get supplies or sell their wool, they saw the forces of the 'Diacoch', as the mountain people called the Automators, more and more often. They saw Listeners taken from the streets, or dragged from their carts or houses. Adults sometimes, but more often children, and their families. Ma said they took them to Fidrac city, the capital by the sea, to the Automator headquarters. Most never

came back. Those that did were husks of people, able only to sit and stare, with an 'L' branded on their foreheads.

The radio signal in the mountains was unreliable, but when voices came out of the crackle they belonged more and more to Automators, telling of the bright future that waited for everyone who would leave the land and live in the city. Lots of people had listened already and there were empty houses in the small mountain town. Often Ma would turn the radio off and go outside and walk for hours, even in the dark.

The threat of the Automators was there in the lessons Ma taught them, like a shadow on the wall. As well as reading and sums and history, they learned how to survive in a blizzard on the mountain, how to travel without being noticed, how to hide. Harlon had extra lessons too: while the twins fed the chickens or tended the garden, Ma taught Harlon how to be their protector. Harlon never asked how Ma knew the things she taught: how to fight, how to use anything as a weapon, how think like a spy and a warrior.

*

As Harlon floats back up to consciousness, Ma's secrets are like the foaming backwash of a wave that melts into the sand. She wakes to find she's still tumbling in whiteness, which stops abruptly. Now she remembers the fourth thing to do in an avalanche: as soon as it stops, move, flail, struggle all you can. In seconds, the snow will change from behaving like a liquid, to being solid; it will set around her face like stone and she will suffocate.

Just in time, Harlon wriggles her whole body, if wriggle is

the right word for the huge physical effort it takes to create the smallest amount of movement. She's left gasping, heart leaping, coughing out the snow that's worked into her mouth and nose and lungs. She manages to create a pocket of air, the size of a loaf of bread, next to her face.

This makes only a tiny bubble of hope that soon pops: the snow has set, like concrete. Her left arm is pinned behind her back, her right held just in front of her face, and her legs are folded like a squashed fly. Panic engulfs her, more paralysing than cold. Who is going to dig her out? There's no one. What if Ash and Xeno are both dead?

The fear says *yes, they're dead.*

The fear says *lie still, let the snow hold you tight and take your breath, quickly. Die! Die now.*

Breathe, Ma's voice tells her.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Harlon's heart slows. If Xeno and Ash are still alive, she's not allowed to die.

'Harlon!'

'Harlon?'

Ash's voice! He's alive. Maybe he's even above the snow. The most useful thing about the air pocket is that it gives her space to yell.

'ASH!' Harlon yells with every scrap of volume she can manage, but the cold has stolen her voice and it takes Ash an agonising time to hear her.

Then he does and starts to dig her out. Ash scrabbles with his hands and says her name over and over, but there's no

sound from Xeno, no bird chirp, no second pair of scrabbling hands. She's probably too chilled to help, Harlon tells herself. I'll need to get them both to some shelter soon. This thought warms her, but when she's out into the air at last, Ash is alone.

'Couldn't find her,' Ash is saying. 'No Xeno!'

Harlon stares at Ash; she is stupid with cold. He tries hard to find the words to tell her what has happened, but he too is chilled and the words slip about like bits of broken ice.

'Supside-down,' he sobs. 'Got out. Called. Searched. Poked the snow like Ma taught us. No Xeno. No Xeno.'

Xeno, little Xeno, Baby Bear, Little Bird, is alone and lost on the mountain. Or buried, waiting to be rescued. Or already dead, her mouth stopped with snow. Harlon's legs are like straws that won't hold weight.

Don't think about what you can't change; focus on what you can.

Ma's voice is in her head again, the only still point in this storm of pain and disaster.

Assess. Think. Act. The mantra that her mother taught her.

Assess:

They are dangerously cold. Soon they will lose all ability to think or move. Snowflakes are already flying round them. A blizzard is gathering.

Think:

She can't help Xeno now, but she can help Ash.

Act:

Harlon stands up and takes Ash's shoulders. She shakes him, hard.

'Stop blubbing, right now,' she says. 'We have to get to shelter or we'll die.'

'Where is Xeno?' he wails. He's small for his age and now

he looks tiny, more like eight than twelve. Harlon thinks of stone and ice and metal and puts them all in her heart.

If Xeno is buried, then she's gone. But it won't help Ash to hear it.

'She'll have got out, like you did,' she tells him. 'She'll find shelter. She's smart and she knows what to do. We'll find her, when we've warmed up.'

Her words work. Ash nods. He helps pull her board out of the snow. Its tip was sticking up from the snow close to where she was buried. It helped Ash to find her. The bindings are undamaged and she still has both boots. Ash's board is gone so she stands him on the front of hers where she can hold him, and sets off down the slope.

She's too cold to try to calculate how far the avalanche has taken them from where they should have been. The clear dawn has turned into a sudden blizzard. Snow drives in from all directions, biting and scouring, wiping out all lines and shadows. The world has turned blank. Gravity is the only guide and shelter of any sort, a rock ledge, a fallen tree, anything, is the only destination.

Time too goes blank. Has Ash been leaning on her legs like this for minutes, or for hours? When did she begin to feel this sleepy? Just as she's about to stop and dig a snow hole to keep them both alive until the blizzard's over, something brushes past them, dark and low. Instantly Ash wakes up.

'A Gula!' he says. 'A wolverine. It's come to find us!'

Harlon can tell at once from Ash's voice that he's not just looking at this animal, he can *hear* it. How has Ash 'tuned in' to the Gula, the way he does with the alpacas, when his siardw, never strong, has got weaker as he's got older?

The wolverine lopes easily beside the board. Harlon catches the glitter of a dark eye. She's never felt such concentrated power from any animal before.

'There's shelter,' Ash reports. 'She's going there. She says we can follow.'

She says we can follow? That's not eavesdropping that's a conversation. Harlon's skin prickles. Why would a gula come looking for them like this? Harlon can think of a reason at once: gula aren't big like a bear, just a kind of hound-sized weasel, but they have a reputation: they'll eat anything, alive or dead. Perhaps this gula's just waiting for them to die so it can make a meal of them. Perhaps they smell of death already.

Harlon pushes the board to gather speed and the Gula ups her pace to run in front.

'She says it's not far,' Ash reports.

The creature's shaggy outline swirls like ink into the paper of the blizzard and, just as Harlon is considering jinking away from her, she's gone and the corner of a log cabin looms out of the whiteness. The board hits it hard, tumbling Harlon and Ash into a drift.

Ash sits up. 'She tuned out,' he says sadly.

She tuned out? Harlon looks at Ash. She wants to ask *How did she tune out, if you were in her head? It should be the other way around.* But now's not the time for questions. She's too tired, and too relieved: this cabin means they won't die in the blizzard after all.

Fumbling with frozen fingers. Harlon gets herself out of the board's bindings. Together they feel their way around the cabin searching for a door. They find one shuttered window,

a bank of solars poking up from underneath the snow, then finally the door, unlocked. They fall in through it and kick it shut behind them. The howling blizzard still goes on but now it can't get them. Harlon sinks down onto the floor. The relief of being safe from the cold and snow feels almost unreal. Is this a hallucination? Or worse, some kind of trap? She signals to Ash to be silent and they creep about, exploring.

A solar lantern, almost out of charge, shines just bright enough to show a room with thick beams holding up the roof. There's a stove, still warm, a high bed, table, chairs, jars and tins of food. Not a hut, but a home. Is the owner here somewhere? Or lost on the mountain?

They hold still, listening for signs of life. A sudden soft thudding has them almost jumping into each other's arms. It's coming from a cupboard in a shadowed corner of the room!

Thud, thud, thud.

Then a pause and...

Thud, thud, thud again, in quick succession. It's almost like someone banging out a code.

Again, and then again. They creep closer to the cupboard.

Harlon's thinks that whoever it is must be tied up and gagged, knocking their head against the door to get their attention. Maybe the people who set the falcons on their trail have tied up the owner of the cabin?

Thud thud thud thud...

Pause.

Thud thud thud thud.

The pace is becoming more desperate.

They stand either side of the door. Harlon puts her hand on the latch and looks at Ash.

One, two, three, she mouths, then snatches the door open.

A woman is sitting in the cupboard, squished between sacks of flour and large jars of pickles. She is tall, with a huge complicated mound of gingerish hair, a sort of fortress of plaits and twists and pins. The hair twitches a little, like the surface of a pond rippled by the wind: there are many insects using the hairdo as a home. The woman is comically folded, with skinny arms wrapped around long, thin legs, in striped leggings. Her eyes are open, but blank, like the windows of an empty house. Harlon reaches out and gently touches her arm.

‘Madam? Can we help? What’s wrong?’

The woman turns to look at Ash and Harlon. Her eyes come on like lanterns in the dusk: warm and kind. She puts a hand up to touch the place on her head where it banged the cupboard door.

‘Oh,’ she says, a little dazed. ‘I wonder, could you help me up?’

There are streaks of white in the braid-mountain but there’s something in her eyes that seems too young to call her ‘old’.

Ash takes one long arm and Harlon the other, and they pull her up and help her to a chair. The woman passes her hand over her face as if reminding herself of her own features.

‘I am a little out of sorts,’ she says. ‘The death-watch beetles in my beams, you see, their voices when they hatch are...’ she shakes her head ‘...quite overwhelming. They use their banging to call to each other. Insects do not think many things but what they think, they think very intensely.’ She smiles

apologetically. 'Sometimes their thoughts catch me unawares and I have no choice but to join in!'

Ash and Harlon exchange a glance; it is clear to them that what she's taking about is siardw. Although speaking so openly about this forbidden power makes Harlon nervous, it almost certainly means that there's not a threat from the Automators inside this little cabin.

'We could make you a cup of tea?' Ash offers. It's clear he is fascinated. He's never met another Listener apart from Xeno before.

'Thank you,' the woman says. 'My name is Mayo by the way, Mayo Mayer.'

Before Harlon can tell Ash to be cautious he's introduced them both. Mayo looks at each of them in turn.

'Welcome, Ash and Harlon,' she says. 'I am more glad to see you than I can say; human conversation is the best antidote to the beetles, I find. I am quite recovered! I think *I* should be making tea for *you*.'

Together Harlon, Ash and Mayo relight the fire, assemble cups and teapots. Mayo directs them to a store of honey underneath the bed; the reason for its unusual height, it turns out, is a hoard of jars, crocks and tins, all *full* of honey. Ash chooses a jar with dark honey, like a giant, amber bead. There is comfort and distraction in these homely tasks but the horror of Xeno's absence and Ma's fate howl just outside the door with the blizzard.

While the tea brews Mayo assembles salves and dressings for the cut on Ash's face. But she understands that Harlon wants to dress her brother's wound herself. Harlon cleans the

blood away and underneath it's just a scratch that doesn't need a dressing.

'There,' Harlon whispers, 'good as new.' She wants to kiss the hurt place, but Ash is too big for that stuff now. She turns away to drink the tea laced with honey that Mayo's poured for them.

'Honey is most restoring!' Mayo tells them. 'Honey helps and heals!'

Harlon wraps her fingers round the cup and sips. As the warmth and sweetness flood through her, Harlon's body sighs in gratitude. The honey is like nothing she's ever tasted before. It is the taste of summer and suddenly Harlon finds she is flooded with memories of Xeno running with her trail of finches through the flowery mountain meadows. Tears prick her eyes and Mayo sees them.

'Ah my dear!' she exclaims. 'Honey memories! They can be powerful. You have been reminded of a person you have lost?'

Lost? Harlon struggles to regain composure, to be strong for Ash. But this time, he is strong for her instead.

'My twin sister,' Ash explains, quite calmly. 'When we were caught in the avalanche, we lost touch with her. But she's very clever. She will be fine.'

Harlon stares at her brother. The panicked child wailing on the mountain has gone. He sounds so convinced, so calm. He leans close to her.

'She's alright, Harlon,' Ash tells her. 'I *know* it. She isn't dead, Ma neither, they're alive. I *feel* it in here!' He puts his hand on his chest and looks into her face. Harlon nods. She wants so hard to believe him, to believe Ma.

I will survive this.

Madame Mayo shakes her head at them in dismay.

‘Oh my goodness. You poor children, it seems you’ve had quite a time of it.’

She looks keenly at them both, her eyes saying more than her words.

‘I won’t ask anything about your story that you don’t want to tell. But I can guess why you were caught in an avalanche before dawn. You have nothing to fear here. I am a Listener and the Diacoch are no friends of mine. While the blizzard blows and while you are in my care, you are safe.’

She gets up.

‘Now,’ she says, businesslike and practical, ‘if there’s one thing I know, it’s that young grubs need feeding.’

Mayo fetches jars of pickles from her cupboard and lines them up along the middle of the table. She has preserved every flower, leaf, fruit and seed that the mountain has to offer. The lantern light shines through their colours: greens and yellows, oranges and reds, like the seasons spiced and caught in glass. She cooks up sheets of flatbread on the stove and piles them on a plate. Mayo shows them how to roll the pickles and preserves inside the sheets of warm bread. With each one, they try new combinations from the rows of jars. And then they make dessert with rolled-up bread and honey. There are different kinds of that too; seasons, weathers, pastures all blossom in their mouths and run over their fingers. While they eat, Mayo’s head glitters with the moving carpet of her insect friends. They come to the surface of her hair to take morsels of food from her fingers, then dive back down into her braids, like whales under the surface of the sea. They are nothing like the things that

usually infest human hair, more like living hair jewellery. Their movement clearly fascinates Ash.

At last, they're finished. Mayo sets Ash to do the washing up while she and Harlon make up two extra beds. As Mayo pulls blankets and pillows from cupboards, she speaks about her bees, their cleverness and bravery, how hard they work.

'They dance, you know, and sing, to tell each other where the flowers are. But it's more than that. It's joy. When a worker dances for her sisters there's a harmony through all the hive, it thrums with happiness. It can set my heart singing for days when I listen to their thoughts. The Automators will never, never understand that.'

Harlon finds her heart is racing, her hand frozen on the blanket she's unfolding.

'Is something wrong, Harlon?' Mayo asks.

Harlon shakes her head.

'It's just that I've never heard siardw talked about so easily. Our mother didn't like us to speak about it.'

Mayo looks at her keenly.

'But your brother is a Listener? Yes?'

Even here it seems a risk to say it aloud.

'How d'you know?'

Mayo shrugs.

'We can spot each other.'

'But how?' Harlon asks and as she does other questions push their way onto her tongue. 'I don't understand siardw; how can a brain inside a bony box connect with anything?'

It's a thought she's never said out loud before, not even to Ash or Xeno. But Mayo replies calmly.

‘I wish I could explain to you, Harlon. But I’ve no idea how it works, all I know is that it *does*. I can only tell you that it feels like listening to a sound that’s always there, but not everyone can hear.’

Harlon nods, remembering what Ma used to say.

‘A song that holds all life together?’

‘Yes!’ says Mayo. ‘That’s it! Who told you that?’

‘My ma,’ Harlon begins. ‘She taught me everything. And now...’

Harlon stops herself. She doesn’t want to say the words out loud but Mayo says them for her.

‘You don’t know what’s befallen her and you don’t know what to do.’ She sighs as if she’s come to a decision long in the making. ‘Perhaps I can help you. Sit down by me while I tell you a bit about me, and about you too, perhaps. But first, get that tin from the shelf above the bed. And fetch your brother over here.’

Harlon does as she’s asked. She puts the worn, round cake tin into Mayo’s hands and Ash joins them beside the fire.

‘When I was young,’ Mayo begins, ‘insect Listeners like myself, and my dear father, rest his spirit, were in demand.’

Mayo starts to work at the lid off the tin. It is very stiff and she turns it round and round as she loosens the lid, telling a little more with each turn.

‘Insect Listeners are rare, but very useful. You can go deeper into small minds safely, sometimes a little too deep, as you saw with me and the death-watch beetles today. But if you take great care you can do more than listen, you can *suggest and guide*.

‘We made a living keeping locust swarms from fields of

maize, and making sure the peach trees all got pollinated. I had a small airship-transport, so we could travel far. Then the Automators came with their nonsense about “escaping nature’s tyranny” and their machines and chemicals. We were outlawed. I kept my transport for a while. Made a living flying things to places roads didn’t go. But then they outlawed that too and took all the airship-transports for themselves. When they killed my father I came up here with my bees and left my other family behind.’

Ash is transfixed. What must it be like for him, Harlon wonders, to hear his secret power talked about so openly, to hear about a time when it was valued, not feared?

‘I was close to my brother’s only son, Tui,’ Mayo continues. He was a Listener too; horses were his gift. Another useful talent in the countryside, but both he and his employer had to keep it secret, and that was getting harder. He saw what was coming, the Automators’ big tar-powered cultivators that would put horses out of work. So he enlisted in the navy: no horses on the sea to give him away. We kept in touch by letter, never long – we both had to take great care. When he was seventeen and home on leave, the Diacoch came to get him and his father. They killed my brother and Tui vanished.’

Finally the lid is off. Inside is a small notebook.

‘For four whole years I heard nothing. I didn’t know if Tui was alive or dead. Then this came...’

She hands the children the notebook. It is filled with beautiful little watercolours of all kinds of creatures. The first are familiar ones from the countryside of Rumyc, birds and flowers that Harlon and Ash can name, but the last pages are

full of more exotic animals. Sea birds that Harlon's only seen in books, brightly coloured crabs and fishes in rainbow hues. The last page is a black and white tail, the fluke of a whale.

'He was a wonderful artist, I think,' Mayo says. 'He drew or painted every living thing he saw. Some of those were painted at the place where he grew up but the last ones perhaps in the place where this was taken.'

Mayo draws a photograph from the bottom of the box, pinned to the single sheet of a letter.

'This is the last letter that Tui wrote to me,' she says.

The handwriting is firm and clear, a rounded and generous hand, but hastily done, with a poor pen. Harlon reads it out.

Dearest Aunt,

I'm so sorry for the long silence. Forgive me. It's not safe for you or for me to tell you much, but know that I'm a father, of a little girl, and that I fight to protect my wife and my child, and to preserve the song that sings us all!

Greetings and love to you and your bees

T

The photograph is small, the size of Harlon's palm – it is a wonder in itself because the Automators have outlawed cameras too. They are the only ones allowed to have them.

They don't want witnesses to their wickedness is what Ma used to say.

For Harlon and Ash any photograph would be a piece of magic, like a fragment of the real world. But this photo turns out to be even more important. It shows a woman smiling, one long hand shielding her eyes from the sun, the other holding

the hand of a small child. The background is out of focus, but it seems to be a beach and their bare feet are washed by a wave.

‘Tui must have taken it, though I have no idea where they were. I know he kept his camera after the Automators made it against the law to have one. I think it’s a good likeness.’

She’s right. There are the intense, deep-set eyes, the quiet smile. He’s captured them perfectly, even the ugly zigzag scar on her left cheek.

‘It’s Ma!’ Ash says. ‘Ma, all young. Is that you, Harlon?’

Mayo nods.

‘Where are me and Xeno?’

‘Not born yet,’ says Mayo, ‘but I think you are also in this photo. I believe your mother was pregnant with you when this was taken.’

Harlon clears her throat. It takes a moment to find her voice.

‘Your nephew took this picture? So he was...’

‘Your father. Yes, I’m sure of it. You are very like him. I saw it in you both at once. But I wasn’t certain, until now.’

Harlon and Ash look at each other, searching in each other’s faces for this father that they’ve never known. Harlon strokes the image with a finger. Why can’t she remember this? Remember him?

‘What does he mean about fighting and it not being safe to tell you anything?’ Ash is lit up with this discovery of the father that he’s longed for, thinks Harlon; he wants to hear that his pa was a hero.

‘I think Tui and your ma were rebels. I think Tui vanished because they went to join the Green Thorn, the force who fought against the Automators.’

A rebel warrior! That's it! *That's* who Ma was in the time before. That's who she was in the house earlier.

'Where's our pa now?' Ash asks. 'Is he still where this photo was taken?'

Harlon knows what Ash wants. He wants Mayo to say yes, he's on an island, in the deepest part of the ocean. Then at least something would make sense and they'd have a real place to get to. But Mayo sighs and Harlon can see the news she will deliver won't be good. She takes Ash's hand.

'Not long after this letter arrived, having reached me through many secret hands, over several months, I saw your mother, quite by chance. I was in a village I don't often go to, selling honey at the market. There she was, buying supplies. You were with her, Harlon, and even in her winter coat I could see that she was pregnant. But Tui wasn't there, and she looked hunted and alone. Desperate. I wanted to help, but I guessed that she was on the run, that her survival depended on no one finding her. With my family connection to Tui I could only put her in danger. The Automators were very determined to kill every one of the Green Thorn rebels they could find.'

Mayo sighs and looks down at her hands

'I thought about her, about you, so many times. I thought about trying to find you, but I didn't know her name, her real name or any false one she might have used. I never knew you were so close. Just the other side of my own mountain.' When she meets Harlon's gaze her eyes are full of tears.

'But what happened to our pa?' Ash asks. 'Where is he now?'

'I'm not certain, but I guess something very bad happened, Ash. I never heard from him again. I think...'

She cannot finish so Harlon does it for her.

‘...that he’s dead.’

‘You don’t know that,’ cries Ash. ‘You can’t be sure. Maybe he’s still alive. Maybe we could find him...’

Ash crumbles. He’s exhausted, a frightened child once again. Harlon guides him to the nest of blankets and pillows she and Mayo have made in the little loft space above the kitchen. In a few minutes he’s asleep. Harlon lays her hand lightly on her brother’s head; she hopes he will have a few hours of peace.

Mayo is sitting waiting for her, when Harlon returns to the fireside.

‘I’m more sorry than I can say that I didn’t have better news to give you,’ Mayo says, ‘and that in all this time I didn’t come to find you all.’

‘You did the right thing,’ Harlon tells her. ‘Ma was very careful. I always thought she was hiding Ash and Xeno, but she was hiding herself too for all those years on the mountain.’

Harlon gazes at the photo, at Ma’s smile. How seldom Ma had smiled in the years that came after. She must have been afraid all the time. Afraid that they would come and find her.

‘Yes, I think when the Diacoch came – which I assume is what drove you out into a blizzard – it was perhaps your mother as much as the twins that they were after.’

A thought occurs to Harlon.

‘I suppose Breen Avvon wasn’t her real name.’

Mayo shrugs.

‘Perhaps not. I never knew her name,’ Mayo says. ‘Tui’s photo is all I have of her.’

Harlon looks at the picture once again. Travel like ghosts,

Ma told them. Harlon can't help feeling that all these years they've been living with a ghost that called herself Breen Avvon. And now she's gone.

'I wish I remembered him,' Harlon says.

Mayo lays her hand lightly on Harlon's head.

'Oh, he's in there somewhere, I bet!'

Mayo smiles to wipe away some of the sadness.

'Where will you go, Harlon?' she asks. 'When you leave here?'

Harlon shakes her head. An island lost in the deepest ocean seems more like a dream than a destination.

'I don't know. The coast? It's probably safest if we leave Rumyc behind.'

'And your sister?' Mayo asks softly. Harlon feels her heart wring.

'If she's still buried, then she's gone,' she whispers. 'We can't wait here. I have to think of Ash.'

Mayo reaches for Harlon's hand and encloses it in her long fingers.

'If she finds her way to me, Harlon, I will keep her safe.'

'I know,' Harlon breathes. 'I know.'

Mayo releases Harlon's hand and gets up.

'You have had quite enough for today,' she says. 'Now you must rest.'

Harlon curls up round her brother. He used to creep into her bed when he was small. His familiar warmth is comforting and so is his conviction that Ma and Xeno are alive. She clings to it and falls asleep.

She dreams a familiar dream, of waves sighing on a sandy shore and her feet, very small, beside much bigger feet.

Somebody is singing in the dream. A man's voice. Her father's voice? Harlon has heard this song many times when she has dreamed this same dream. It's so familiar that it's a part of her.

*I dreamed I saw my daughter dear,
Oceans, oceans away, so deep,
She came to me to sing her song
Ocean deep, away!*

*That song it rang the world around
Oceans, oceans away, so deep,
That song it rang the world around
Ocean deep away,
Ocean deep away.*

Harlon looks up into Pa's face.

I won't forget you, Pa, she tells him, not this time and he smiles a sad smile and turns away to walk back into the sea.

2

Three Braids

Harlon



When Harlon wakes, the dream slips through her mind's fingers, as it always does. By the time her eyes are open, all memory of it has gone, and Pa with it.

The pale light of a new day is seeping round the shutters. Harlon has slept through an afternoon and a whole night. Ash is still asleep but Mayo's up and loading food into an ancient rucksack.

'Blizzard's over,' said Mayo. 'I've got a rucksack ready if you need it. Food and blankets all packed.'

'Thanks, Aunt Mayo.'

'Hmm. Aunt. I like that. No one's called me that since Tui was a lad.'

She takes Harlon's hand.

'You don't have to leave. You can stay here if you like or I can take you somewhere. I want to help. I want to help fight the Automators. I can't just sit on my mountain any more. You know, I still have my little transport, hidden in the barn. She'd still fly...'

Harlon shakes her head.

'They'd shoot you down, Aunt Mayo, you know they would. Thanks, but I think it's safer to go on foot.'

Harlon leaves Ash to sleep and goes outside to clear her head a little. Everything is still. She loves this peace that always follows a mountain storm, the sense of life drawing in a long, slow breath. She breathes too and looks around. Familiar peaks seems to be in the wrong place. Somehow, with the avalanche and then the blizzard, they wandered much further than she thought. But it was probably a lucky mistake. They're further now from where any pursuers would expect to find them. Further from where Xeno would expect to find them, too. Is she wandering, looking? Or buried, already frozen into the heart of the mountains? Harlon takes another breath.

Focus on what you can change, not on what you can't.

Then, she hears it. The high, sweet tinkling of goldfinch voices. They are flying directly above her when one breaks away and flutters down. It lands on a fence post thirty paces away and looks straight at her. It is like every other goldfinch and yet not; it is more intense than any bird she's seen before. Purposeful. Somehow it makes her think of the Gula and its deep glance, and of Ma's mantra.

Assess. Think. Act.

The small bird looks as if that is exactly what it's doing. It flutters closer, hopping from post to post until it's right next to her. It drops three small strands onto the post right in front of her. It takes one last keen look at Harlon and flies off, leaving her to wonder why a bird would do this?

But the message the bird has delivered sweeps all those questions away. She stares at the three little threads in her hand. The first strand is hair, wayward and springy and even confined in this minute braid, unmistakably Xeno's. The

second is another tiny plait: alpaca wool, spun by Ma, dyed deep blue, and knitted, untidily, into Xeno's favourite sweater. The one she always wears.

These aren't just random strands pulled by a bird from the body of a girl lying frozen on a hillside. They are carefully plaited. They are messages that Xeno has sent to say *I am alive!*

But the third strand carries the bad news. It's another carefully made braid but this time of the soft metal limunim, the stuff the Automators' flying transports are made of. This strand says that Xeno is a captive, already aboard an Automator craft, flying away in the sky. The thought of her in the Automators' power makes Harlon burn white hot. She knows at once that she must find wherever Xeno's been taken. Keeping her promise to head to the mysterious island will have to wait.

The morning sun is already melting the snow. It drips off the eaves of Mayo's cabin as Harlon climbs into Mayo's old and cranky lectric truck. It was a surprise to find that Mayo didn't have a horse and cart.

'I can't negotiate with anything bigger than a beetle,' is how she explained it.

'Ready, Nap?' Mayo says, and Harlon nods. A hasty haircut and a sacking tunic has made her into Mayo's nephew and apprentice, Nap, on his way to learn more about the honey trade in the capital. The more they use the name together, the more natural it will seem. Harlon rather likes the idea of trying out the life of a boy.

She has tried to make Ash stay behind. It will be hard to find and free Xeno, *and* keep him safe. But it was impossible

to persuade him, so now he's hidden in the back of the truck amongst the honey jars. If the Diacoch *are* still on their trail and they are stopped on the road they'll be looking for a girl and a boy, not an apprentice and his mentor. So Ash must stay hidden until they get to town. He too has had a makeover: his hair is the same gingerish hue as Mayo's, so if need be he can be another 'nephew', Satty.

The plan is that 'Nap' and 'Satty' will pick up a lift at the market to the transporter refuelling station at Ty Rhos, the bigger town a day's journey to the south. Mayo's heard that Listeners are held there for questioning before being taken on to Fidrac. What happens to them there, she doesn't know, but Mayo and Harlon have both seen the empty husks of Listeners returned from captivity. If Harlon can get there within two days, she may have a chance of catching up with Xeno.

And if she's not there?

One step at a time Harlon, one step at a time, Ma's voice says, but Harlon already knows she'll go the Automators' headquarters if she has to.

They bump down the track, through pools of mud and meltwater, stopping every hour or so to change the battery on the lectric and to take turns at driving. Mayo's little truck is even more rickety than Ma's old lectric. Harlon asks about Green Thorn.

'They were successful for a while. They blew up a tar station in the White Sea; set fire to Automator buildings and factories. Stood by villagers who tried to stop the smashing up of windmills and solar plants. But the Automators got too strong;

they killed every Green Thorn fighter they could, and then their leader just vanished.'

'Who *was* the Green Thorn leader?'

Mayo shakes her head.

'Boogam, the Ghost, they called their leader. But no one ever knew exactly who it was, man or woman.'

'Are there any Green Thorn still left?'

'A few, I think, but very few. I've heard nothing of them for a decade. Only Listeners stand against the Diacoch now, and what can *we* do when they steal us away in the night?'

The road descends from the high mountains. Down here it's closer to real spring, and snow survives only in the coldest spots. As they near the town, the fields grow wider where the hedgerows have been grubbed up to make room for the giant tar-powered machines that Automators send to cultivate the land.

'They spray these fields with poison now,' Mayo says, 'to kill the insects. This land once rang with insect voices but now it's quieter every year.'

On the outskirts of the town there are solars and windmills still standing, but there are new billboards by the road that suggest they may not survive for long.

Wind power? Solar? Why wait for the weather when you can use Black Gold?

Escape the tyranny of nature! one reads: one of the Automators' favourite slogans.

Sick of winter work outdoors? Start a new life in the city! And, Eat meat every meal for health and strength.

The Automators are tightening their hold, even here, so far

from the capital. The town will be more dangerous than they thought.

The last billboard shouts a chilling slogan.

Suspect a Listener? Speak out!

Mayo laughs grimly as they pass it.

‘They want to cut the world to fit their shape and fill their pockets. They don’t want humans listening to any voices but their own.’

New streetlights jitter on and off along the slushy streets as they reach the town. Harlon is nervous under her disguise and glad that Mayo’s called her Nap all day long. They pull into a potholed yard behind the pub where Mayo says she always stays. Mayo nods toward the open back door and the saloon bar beyond, where a woman in a tall red hat is pulling pints.

‘She has a sour face and doesn’t do much trade,’ Mayo says, ‘but that suits us well.’

Mayo backs the lectric to the stable door, so Ash can climb out into the shadows and stay safely hidden. They unload the spent batteries and put them on to charge. The last still has some go in it and they leave it connected, *just in case*, Mayo says.

Two horses whicker softly in the hay-smelling dark as they scent Ash in his hiding place between the bales.

‘Don’t move from that spot,’ Harlon tells him. ‘I’ll bring some food out later if I can.’

As Mayo and Harlon cross the courtyard towards the back door of the bar, Mayo staggers. Harlon takes her arm to keep her upright. Mayo’s face is bleak. Horrified.

‘What is it? Is it the beetles again?’

Mayo shakes her head.

‘No. It’s the silence. I’ve heard quiet in the fields where poison’s been sprayed before, but never this nothingness.’

Mayo is distressed; it takes a moment for her to gain control of her breathing.

‘There are many insects here, in the barn and the old buildings,’ she says. ‘Cockroaches, earwigs, beetles and their grubs in the wood. There is a chorus of their thoughts and voices that I can always hear in the background of my mind, but now it is silent! Like falling into a pit.’

She shakes her head as if to dislodge something from her mind. Then pastes a smile across her fear and pats Harlon’s arm.

‘I’m probably just getting old. And hungry. Lets go in.’

Harlon’s stomach answers with a growl and they step inside.

‘Remember now, *Nap*,’ her aunt whispers, ‘don’t speak unless you have to.’

The place is small; there are just three tables, jammed against the wall opposite. There is a yellow light over the bar, guttering candles on the tables and elsewhere, brown shadows. Two old men curl over their glasses as if deep in conversation with the ale. The front door, with a glass panel, opens to the market place beyond, where people are busy preparing by lantern light for the trading that will start at dawn.

The landlady gives the smallest nod of recognition as Mayo and Harlon take a seat at a dark table. Harlon, remembering Ma’s training, takes the seat with its back to the wall, facing out into the room with a clear view of both doors. Something about this place is already making her feel twitchy.

Mayo orders drinks and food and, a few minutes later, the landlady brings a loaded tray, her red hat swaying as she moves. She bangs two glasses and two full bowls down on the table and clatters out a pair of spoons.

‘Eight jars of honey, for you and the boy, dinner and bed,’ she demands.

Mayo puffs out her cheeks but she doesn’t argue.

‘I’ll put the honey in the barn,’ she says and picks up her spoon.

More customers come in: old farmers who hunch mumbling over their pints. Then the unmistakeable flash of black and red insignia and two Automators step through the door, one fat, one skinny.

‘Diacoch!’ Harlon breathes.

‘Keep calm,’ Mayo whispers. ‘Eat, don’t attract attention.’

But that is easier said than done. The food in Harlon’s bowl is an unrecognisable mass of brown lumps that tastes of misery. Harlon can force it down because she’s very hungry but Mayo is having more trouble. She pecks at her food with her spoon, but can’t seem to swallow.

Behind the bar, the landlady folds her arms and nods, drawing the Automators’ attention to Mayo’s reaction to her food. The skinny one removes the uniform black mask to reveal a spiteful scowl pinned to a vague, female face.

‘Something wrong with your dinner, old woman?’ the skinny one shouts.

Mayo stares down at her bowl, tries to eat a bigger spoonful but gags and coughs. The Automators step across the room at once, as if this was a sign they’d waited for. They grab her by her shoulders and haul her from her chair.

'Can't stomach the food of a *real* human, eh?' the short one gloats, his rasping voice coming through the mask that he still wears.

'A filthy Listener that's what we have here, I think!' he says.

'Maybe two?' the skinny one says, grinning at Harlon.

Their eyes have a dead look to them and Mayo hangs limp their grasp. She mouths a single word to Harlon.

RUN!

Without warning Mayo's body tenses in a huge, convulsive wriggle of such energy that the Automators are taken by surprise and loose their grip. She leaps up onto the bar with the grace and energy of a teenager, as thousands of insects stream out of the tangle of her hair. For a moment her head is lost in a rippling glitter of iridescent beetle backs and cut-glass wasp wings. They fly around the Automators, biting and stinging. The old farmers yell and rush outside. There is chaos. No one is looking Harlon's way as she slips out through the back door.

She darts into the barn.

'Ash! Ash, we have to go.'

He pops up from the bales, and beside him is the Gula!

'What's that doing here?'

'Not a *that*. A *she*.'

'Why did you bring her?'

'I didn't. She just came.'

There's no time for explanations. They jump into Mayo's electric truck and hurtle into the night: a girl, a boy, a Gula and a year's supply of the best honey on earth.

Harlon takes a small road heading south towards Ty Rhos. It's full of potholes. The electric lurches and the Gula stinks and

Harlon feels she might throw up. The Gula looks at Harlon with unblinking black eyes and twitching nose, then turns away and looks at Ash, as if they truly are in conversation.

‘Are you *talking* to each other?’ Harlon asks.

‘No!’ Ash cries. Then, ‘Yes. Sort of. She’s kind of in my head.’

‘*She’s* in *your* head? Isn’t that the wrong way round?’

‘Let’s not talk about it now,’ Ash says. He leans out through the window.

‘No one following,’ he says. ‘The road’s all dark.’

Harlon relaxes a little. Maybe Mayo’s still keeping the Automators distracted and off their trail.

‘The Gula says you ate sheep. Yuk!’ Ash says. ‘She can smell it on you.’

‘*That’s* what that bowl of lumps was!’ Harlon fights the green wave of nausea that rises in her. She should have guessed. She remembers the billboards with pictures of roasted bits of body on. ‘Meat,’ the Automators called it, hiding the idea of dead flesh behind a word. Most humans south of the White Sea hadn’t eaten flesh in three centuries.

‘Maybe flesh eating is a test, another way to spot a Listener,’ Harlon suggests. ‘Mayo gagged on it and that’s when those thugs pounced.’

Ash shakes his head.

‘Poor Mayo! What will they do with her?’

Harlon thinks it’s likely they may beat her badly, even kill her, but that’s another thing she doesn’t want to say to Ash.

‘She might get away. Or they might take her to the same place they’ve taken Xeno, I guess. That’s where I have to go.’

‘*We* have to go,’ Ash corrects her. He seems to have grown

up a lot in just a day. Still she wishes that she'd made him stay safe at Mayo's. She has no intention of allowing him to come with her to the Automator holding station at Ty Rhos now.

A loud bleeping interrupts her thoughts and a red light flashes on the dashboard, showing that the battery will soon run out. At the same moment they are caught in a blinding beam of light, shining down from above: the searchlight of an Automator transport, an airship floating above them. A booming voice shakes the windows.

'Stop at once! Get out of the veekle by order of the Head of Intelligence.'

Assess.

The road behind is still dark, so this must be the only pursuit. On either side the land is flat, no sudden drops.

Think.

Ash must not be taken. They will find out he is a Listener and she knows what that can lead to. Ash *will not* be taken. They don't know he's here, it's only Mayo's 'nephew' that they're after. So they can have Nap and maybe they will lead her right to Xeno. Maybe Xeno, Ma *and* Mayo are in the skyship right above them now!

Act.

Harlon kills the lights and hits the accelerator. She judges that the veekle has enough charge for one last spurt. She shoots them out of the transporter beam. If she can outrun them for a moment that will be enough. She swirls the wheel, jinks the lectric off the road, smashing Ash and the Gula against the passenger door. Ash's startled face is lit with the green glow from the dashboard.

‘Head west, Ash. To the coast like Ma said. Find that island,’ she tells him, then presses the button to open the door. Ash and the Gula tumble out into the dark. She swings back and onto the road, flicks on the lights and races the approaching beam, getting it as far away from Ash as possible before the battery finally runs out and the transport catches up with her.

The skyship beam is blinding.

‘Get out with your arms raised. Do not carry a weapon or we will destroy you.’

Harlon feels bleak and afraid, but somewhere, somehow she *will* bring her family back together.

The space inside the transport is smaller and scruffier than Harlon expected. Most of its huge silver egg shape is gas, of course, held inside that limunim skin, with just a small oval hold for passengers and ‘cargo’. Cargo is what she is, shoved inside a cage next to a small porthole, where wisps of cloud shoot by. There’s no light, but as her eyes accustom to the dark she sees boxes and boxes of tinned food, cases of rifle bullets and two other cages with the humped shapes of captives inside: one small, one large. Xeno and Mayo?

‘Xeno?’ she calls out softly. ‘Mayo?’ But there’s no reply. She tries again, a little louder this time, and one of the humps responds.

‘Shut your mouth, you idiot. D’you want to get us all beaten?’

The other hump whimpers and then curses.

Wherever Mayo and Xeno are, it isn’t here. Harlon feels her heart fall through the bottom of her stomach. She was so sure they would be here, that this would be the key to rescuing her sister, but all she’s done is break her family apart even more!

She thinks of Ash. What brought the Gula to his side? Harlon cannot guess but she hopes the creature will keep her brother safe. Oh Ash, so much for protecting him and Xeno. She's failed so badly! And Mayo, has she already suffered the same fate as other members of her family, beaten to death by Automator thugs? Can Automators simply beat a person to death in a bar without any kind of consequence? Perhaps. There's so much that she doesn't know, that Ma didn't teach her up there in their little mountain bubble.

Harlon's hands are cuffed behind her back and the cage is too small even to kneel. She lies uncomfortably on her side. She'll never sleep like this! And then she does.

Morning sun streams through the porthole. They're heading south all right but they've gone too far. The journey to the holding station would be just an hour or two at most. They've been in the air for eight or more. Every moment on this transport is carrying her further and further from Xeno. Further from Ash.

Suddenly the whole idea of 'rescuing' Xeno seems ridiculous. She's been running blind since the moment they left Ma behind. Everything is hopeless.

What can she do now?

A metal door opens in the end wall and an Automator comes in, masked and armed. A girl judging by the build, tall but quite slight. She's an ensin. The lowest rank, recruited at gun point, was what Ma said about them. Ensins were the dogsbodies who didn't even get trained in fighting. But this one clearly wants to look like something that she isn't.

‘Privy time for you, Listener scum,’ she growls. Only the slightest waver in her voice gives her anxiousness away.

I *do* need the privy, Harlon thinks, and I’m thirsty too, but I don’t suppose there’ll be anything to drink or eat.

She sits up and remembers too late that’s not possible. She hits her head on the cage roof and the ensin smirks. She pulls her cudgel from her belt with a swagger and holds it ready.

‘You first.’ The girl’s toughness is almost convincing but it cheers Harlon to think that she could take the ensin’s weapon in about two seconds. Harlon replies quietly and keeps her eyes low.

Don’t reveal that you are a threat. Perceived weakness can be a weapon.

Another of Ma’s favourite lessons.

The girl unlocks the cage, and Harlon allows herself to be pushed towards the far end of the hold. She can see now that the humps in the two other cages are a woman with ragged black hair, and a boy about Ash’s size. They’ve both been beaten. The woman’s eyes are closed; the boy is very still. Harlon thinks he isn’t breathing.

The privy is just a trap door in the corner of the floor. Above it on the wall, Harlon notices, are two parachute packs. Harlon wonders how they work and if she could wriggle through the trap door with one. Certainly not while she is handcuffed.

‘You have to undo my cuffs,’ she tells the ensin. ‘I can’t go through my clothes.’

The ensin covers her nervousness with a scowl but undoes the cuffs. Harlon rubs her wrists. She wants to keep the girl

thinking she's a boy, Mayo's innocent Nap, so she starts to open her trousers and says.

'Don't I get any privacy?'

The girl blushes, the colour of it reaches the little space between her mask and her helmet.

'I've seen it all before, boy, just get on with it,' she says but turns her back all the same. Harlon lifts the trap door and squats. Warm air rushes up through the hole. Below is a forest stretching in every direction. This is the Southern Forest that she has read about but never thought she would see. What's an Automator transport doing here? There are no cities in this part of Rumyc and nothing further south but the free port of Angellis where Automators don't yet have much power. What do they want down here?

Harlon finishes, and the ensin turns to face her, smirking behind her mask.

'You just shat on some of your little mates,' she says. Harlon keeps her face blank, with no anger and no question in it, but the girl goes on and this time her ferocity isn't faked.

'Down there,' she says, 'there's a load of you lot. But not for long. We're going to put an end to all of it. The forest, the Listeners and the rebels. We're...'

But she doesn't get the chance to finish her explanation because the transporter lurches suddenly and drops, smashing the two of them and the cages against the wall. The cage doors buckle and fly open and the woman and the boy roll out onto the floor. Harlon springs towards the parachutes. Through the trap door Harlon sees the craft has dropped much closer to the treetops. A vast flock of birds of all sizes and colours is rising up around the craft, gleaming like fragments of rainbow.

Their cries surround the ship as they start to peck and claw at its thin silver skin, through which little eyes of blue sky begin to appear.

The ensin seems to think that there's some point to putting the prisoners back into the broken cages. She tries to hit Harlon with her cudgel. Harlon wrenches it from her and shoves her to the floor. Then she pulls the parachutes from their hooks. They are easier to understand than she thought. She throws one to the woman.

'Put it on and hold the boy,' she tells her.

She shrugs her way into the other. Just in time. The compartment begins to break apart. For a split second the woman, the boy, Harlon and the ensin seem frozen in the air as the floor beneath them peels away. The ensin is very close, her helmet and her mask stripped off by the rushing air, her eyes filled with terror. She's not an Automator anymore, just a kid, alone and frightened. Like Ash. Before Harlon even knows she's done it, she's grabbed the girl and slipped the harness round both of them. In less time than a heartbeat, the ship is merely wreckage and they are falling through the tattered ribbons of its silver skin to the green canopy below.

The Gula Speaks

Trail is all things
Nose, eye, ear, skin, all attend it, deep.

Paw, hold the ground
pull running from the body,

Claw hold the ground
pull climbing from the body,
with no rest, no cease,
to follow it.

On rock, ice, thorn, root, mud, blood.

In dark, blaze, freeze, dry.

The trail gives hunger, food

The trail gives thirst, drink

The trail gives loss, finding

The trail asks

The trail gives

The trail is and is and is.

Fear is on *this* trail, also.

Dark is on *this* trail, also.

Alone is on *this* trail.

Pain is on *this* trail.

Sorrow also.

Breaking on *this* trail and blood.

Unmaking maybe on *this* trail.

Ending maybe on *this* trail and death

I see it

I smell it
I hear it
I know it.

No other Gula on this trail
Human cub is on this trail
Cub *is* this trail
I follow this trail that is this cub.
It shines with stink and bright-dark;
It calls in the night
It bites deep in bone.
It beats in the heart
this trail, this trail of all things, all things, all things
this trail sings against
no smell
no sight
no sound
no touch
this trail is life against unlife
this trail is and is and is
all and all and all
while I still live
I follow, follow, follow,
to an end where everything begins again.

3

Run with the Gula

Ash



Inside Ash's head the Gula is talking.

Cub, she says. Cub!

It's what she calls him.

Run, Cub, run!

Neither 'cub' nor 'run' are really words, the way the Gula uses them. Run is more like the rhythm that her paws make as she lopes between the trees. It beats inside him, helps to keep him going, along the valley side, away from the mountains.

They head west, the way Harlon told them. The way Ma said. Towards the sea. But the choice of direction is the Gula's and Ash tries not to think about the island that isn't on a map or the promise he made to get there. It doesn't sound real. He doesn't think of anything much. Not Xeno or Harlon. Certainly not Ma.

He just follows the Gula. Follows what she calls 'the trail'. She showed it to him in his mind, a thread as fine as spider silk that leads them on. It glows. Not just with light, but with everything, touch, sound, smell. It sings with life, with purpose. Now, sometimes, Ash can feel it singing as they run. He doesn't understand why it seems important, but it does. And anyway, he can't think of anything else he can do.

The way Ash hears the Gula isn't the way he's used his siardw to listen in to other creatures' thoughts before. It's not eavesdropping. He isn't doing the listening; she's doing the talking. She *wants* to speak. She's in his head, not the other way around, but while she's there he can sort of talk back to her.

It's a new feeling. Before, being a Listener has felt like being a spy. Sneaking in amongst the thoughts, in dark and silence. Sometimes not really understanding what you hear, sometimes not even really hearing. Ash was almost glad as his ability diminished as he grew older, glad it was just his friends the alpacas that he listened to, and then only to try and make their lives more comfortable.

But the Gula *shows* her thoughts, or what she smells or sees. She digs around in his brain to find things she can use to speak to him. She finds words and chews on them like bones, to get their meaning, spits them out in a sort of raspy wheeze that Ash hears inside his mind.

Sister gone, the Gula told him when he saw the transport airship leave, although it was too dark and too far to tell if they had lifted Harlon or left her in the lectric.

Smell it, the Gula said.

Ash ran to the abandoned veekle anyway, because he wanted the Gula to be wrong. But she wasn't wrong. He sat in the dark in the truck and cried then. He didn't feel tough or clever anymore, the way he'd felt hiding behind the honey jars with the Gula. He just wished with all his heart he had stayed in Mayo's cabin like Harlon had wanted.

The Gula had pushed a jar of honey towards him.

Eat, new sun, maybe nothing.

She was slurping her way through jar after jar. He guessed

‘eat today in case you can’t eat tomorrow’ was pretty central to the Gula’s thinking. Ash felt too sad to eat, too lost and too confused. Ma’s words about the island and destruction of their home blew around his head and made no more sense than flying snowflakes. He did force down a handful of Mayo’s dried fruit and nuts and felt a bit calmer.

The back seat of the lectric would have been a good place to sleep, but they could hear other veeckles moving around on the roads leading from the town. It didn’t feel safe to stay.

Go, the Gula said. *Go, get safe*.

So Ash picked up Mayo’s pack. The Gula held it with her teeth and growled.

Slow, she said. *Heavy, heavy*, and tugged the pack in time with the growly words inside his head.

Ash pointed to the blankets and tried to speak to the Gula in his head. Using words the way *she* did felt awkward, like trying to draw with a blindfold and thick gloves, the pencil in your wrong hand.

No fur, cold, he managed. He rattled the remaining tin of nuts.

Food.

The Gula snorted.

Eat now! she said.

Belly full, no run, Ash told her. He pulled at the pack and at last she let go with a disapproving *snufff*. She barged out of his head the way she’d barged in. In spite of everything being so terrible, his home and family lost, Ash smiled: who would have guessed that you could argue with a Gula? It made him feel a bit braver.

Snow has turned to sleet and freezing rain as they head along the valley side between the trees. Nothing stops the Gula. She lopes along in front of Ash just close enough so he can see her dark shape against the forest floor. Just far enough to keep him running. They have run for hours. Ash didn't know that he could run for so long. The Gula's paw beat has taken up the empty space that the last days have left inside him, driving any other thoughts away.

When light shows between the treetops they stop. Gulas are night animals so Ash will have to be nocturnal too.

She nips into his head again to say, *Eat*, and then she's gone. She scrabbles in the rocks beside the little stream that they just crossed, and drags something long, long dead out of a hole. She chews on skin and crunches bones. The smell is beyond disgusting. Ash tips Mayo's dried berries straight into his mouth. He eats the whole tin. Harlon would lecture him about rationing. But he's a Gula now. He uses the tin to scoop up water, making sure it's upstream from where she found her meal. Harlon would approve of that.

The Gula wriggles into a big pile of fallen branches.

Sleep, hide.

Ash follows, dragging the pack in after him. Inside, the pine needles make a dry bed, but a prickly one, so he pulls Mayo's blanket from the pack. An envelope is tucked inside it. The letter from Pa to Mayo with the photo of Ma and Harlon on the back. Mayo must have slipped it in the pack. He doesn't look at it but puts it inside his shirt, right next to his heart and closes his eyes.

He tries to think in a straight line about all that's happened, trying to make it all add up, but his thoughts keep jumping about. If Xeno was here, the half of himself that's missing, thinking would be easier.

Xeno. Thinking of her hurts. Not thinking of her hurts. It is somehow his fault that she's been taken, because he never told Ma about the starling thing that happened, the day before the Automators came...

They'd been about to snowboard down a favourite slope, him and Xeno. She was up ahead, chirping at him to hurry up.

'Make snow sing!' she called. 'Snow sing loop sky-blue!'

It was the kind of thing she always said before a descent. For Xeno everything sang. As she waited and he struggled through powder towards her, a starling had dropped out of the sky. It landed on a rock right close by. Ash wondered what a lone starling was doing up here? Where was its flock? It wasn't unusual for Xeno's siardw to attract a bird's attention, so one would swoop down to take a look. Mostly, once they'd checked it out, they'd fly off. But this was different. Xeno and the bird were too still, as if they were frozen.

As Ash got closer he could see the starling was more like a thing than a bird. Its beak looked as if it was made of metal and its head was bald. Xeno screamed at the bird, 'No!' then picked up her board and swiped at it. It took off and wheeled into the sky.

'What was *that*?' Ash asked, as he reached her. She said nothing, just picked up her board.

'Are you alright?' Ash insisted. 'What happened?' Still she didn't answer, so Ash caught her by the arm. She shook herself

free and glared at him, but he could see she was afraid, very very afraid. The sight of her fear was so shocking that Ash had stepped back, as if he'd been slapped. Xeno jumped on her board and raced away. She didn't wait for him and beat him to the bottom by minutes. She *never* did that. When they got in, she went straight up to her room and shut the door.

He knew that there was something not right in it all. But Ma was always telling Xeno to be careful about using her siardw.

'Don't talk to strangers!' she would say, half joking. 'Humans or birds.'

That starling had certainly been strange and he didn't want to get Xeno into trouble. But now he wishes he *had* told because the next night the Automators came and he was sure the starling had something to do with it.

If only there were someone here to answer questions. To tell him what he should do. Is it right to just trot after the Gula? Or should he try to find his sisters? Or head home; maybe Ma is waiting. Waiting in the ashes. Yeah, Ash, yeah.

He stares at the sleeping Gula. How can she spend so long inside his head, whole hours sometimes? If he spent more than minutes inside Alba's head he'd feel weird, like a dislocated toe standing straight up, the way a toe should never, ever be, wrong. Is the Gula feeling like a dislocated toe? Everything is wrong: lonely, broken, horrible. He wants it to stop; he wants to wind back time, to go home, to...

Cub. The Gula's eyes snap open and she pops up, back inside his head.

Cub. *This is trail. Gula trail, Cub trail.*

We follow.

See, this trail?

The glowing line shimmers to life in his heart again, winding off to the west, toward a setting sun.

Follow, only follow.

Follow is enough now.

For some reason the Gula's trail makes Ma's lullaby rise up in his chest. Is he singing it or is it singing him?

Follow, only follow.

Follow trail is all for now, the Gula says.

Sleep sleep. It's like a paw covering his eyes. *Sleep, Cub, sleep.*

The Gula puts her snout into his face to wake him up. Her eyes are like beads of glass shining in her face.

Wake, go now, Cub, she says. Ash stows the blanket in the pack and wriggles outside after her. It's not raining or snowing and the sun is sinking between the trees.

He stretches, lifts the pack onto his shoulders. Immediately the Gula's in his head. She has a picture to show him. It is of himself running with the backpack jog-jog-jogging on his back. It looks ridiculous. She shows it again. And then again. And now she starts to make a noise with her outside voice, and sort of coughing: *chuck chuck chuck, chuck chuck chuck.*

She's laughing. The Gula is laughing at how he looks carrying Mayo's crazy old pack! He's so astonished that he does something he didn't know he could do; he shows her a picture in his head. It is the Gula chewing on that stinky *thing* she pulled out of the hole, the sound is very, very loud: crunching, slurping, sucking.

The *chuck, chuck chuck* sound gets faster and faster, and then

Ash is laughing too, until his belly aches. So you can argue with a Gula *and* tell jokes!

She is right about the pack. It rubs his shoulder and slows them down. The blanket is pretty wet now and the food's almost gone. He puts on the jacket Harlon left behind – Ma's old one, the one that's too big – and leaves everything else. The Gula approves.

Cub fast, she says and Ash sprints off ahead of her.

Gula slow, slow, slow, he says.

This is the right thing, Ash thinks. Just head west is what Harlon said and that's what he's doing. That's the trail and it's enough.

They run on and on, loping between the trees, under a frosty sky. They rest somewhere near midnight on the edge of a clearing, where the Gula has found an old deer carcass. Ash has one handful of nuts left. Shooting stars fall between the dark branches and owls call. Ash catches the fearful shiver of a mouse's thoughts. Strange, he hasn't been able to do that since he was small. Being with the Gula is making his siardw stronger, sort of waking it up, as if a part of him has been asleep for ages.

They set off again and once again the rhythm of running takes over. It's already getting easier. Still, he'll be glad of the rest that dawn will bring.

But at first light the Gula doesn't stop.

Run, Cub, run is still beating and keeping Ash's feet pounding on, even though he is more tired and hungry than he knew a person could be.

And then quite suddenly the paw-rhythm stops.

HEAR! The Gula says.

All quiet, no birds, no nothing.

Ash listens. She's right. Yesterday the treetops were awash with the bird songs of early springtime, but here, there is silence. Ash reaches out with his siardw. It's not like the beacon of his sister's power but still he should pick up something; there are squirrels here, little red ones with tufts on their ears, and beech martens – the Gula's cousins – hunting them. And mice of several kinds. In every part of the forest they've passed through Ash has picked up faint echoes of their nervous scurrying thoughts: little snatches of life, tastes of nuts and new shoots, the warmth of the inside of nests, the joy of branch scrambling.

Here there is nothing. Nothing at all. And as they walk on they discover the reason.

The forest ends abruptly in a tree graveyard. All around, the bodies of great noble trees lie toppled on each other. Ash has seen trees destroyed by wind and avalanche, trees whose branches have been harvested for wood, but never a whole tree killed. Never a whole forest destroyed.

The first huge trunk Ash comes to is almost twice as broad as he is tall. It has been brutally severed by sawing. Ash lays his hand on the old tree's rough skin and shuts his eyes. He's glad it's only early spring and the tree will have been more than half asleep when this was done to it. But still he can tell it has suffered, is still suffering. So are the trees around it. Their distress prickles underneath his feet through the web of roots and fungi that connect them. Ash has never felt anything

from trees before, but this feeling is so strong, it makes him want to cry out.

The Gula is horrified too. She stands in the wreckage of the tree, looking at him, sniffing the air. For the first time, Ash can see that she's afraid; she doesn't know what to do. He wants to tell her *let's go, leave this dark place*, but she has left his head and he has no idea how to get into hers. So he starts to move, and, to his relief, the Gula follows.

But the silence only gets worse. They reach the edge of a slope, recently thickly forested and now a mangle of felled trunks and ruined branches. Below them smoke fills the valley and now the sound of distant human shouts and screams drift up with the smell of burning and breaks the horrible quiet.

The Gula barges into Ash's head. *Closer, closer?*

She's said it twice before he realises it's a question. She's never asked him anything before.

Closer, he agrees. They both want to find out the reason for this carnage.

Danger! the Gula warns. *Stealth, stalk, hide.*

Together, they move down the valley through the maze of trunks and branches. The Gula seems to flow between, under and over the wreckage of dying trees. Ash creeps low, sometimes even dropping to his belly. He's good at this. It's one of the drills that Ma and Harlon set that he enjoyed. There is a small pulse of approval from the Gula. There, Ash thinks, you didn't know I could do that!

Just before the felled trees run out and give way to meadows and small ploughed fields, they stop and peer over the trunk

of a young beech. Now they can see what's going on. Between the curtains of smoke that the breeze shifts, there is a village. It's a bit like the places where Ma and Harlon went to trade their wool. Ash knows all about those because he often stowed away without his sister or Ma knowing, and took a quiet look around.

But this village isn't really a village anymore; it's just a bonfire, set alight by Automators. The black and red figures of the Diacoch move amongst the buildings, making sure the fire spreads to every one. The school and the healing house are already blazing, and now the roof of the meeting house is lit. The windmills have been toppled and the solars have been smashed. The uniforms move slowly. They don't need to hurry; no one is going to get in their way because the people have already been rounded up.

At first Ash thinks it's a trick of the smoke. Or that he's so tired and hungry that he's seeing things. But the Gula's low growl inside his head confirms it's real.

The terrified villagers – parents, children, old people – are being herded from their village by *giant dogs*. Not just big dogs like the mastiffs some mountain people use to protect their flocks from wolves. These are twice that size. Almost as tall as a man, with huge muscled shoulders and heavy heads. They are a sickly white, with thin, stubby tails that hang down like rope. They make no sound, just grimace silently to show their gleaming metal teeth.

The Gula sniffs the air.

No smell, no sound, unlife.

Both Ash and the Gula are so caught up in the horror of it

all that they don't sense the Automators that have crept behind them. The Gula's warning, *Run, Cub! RUN!* is too late. A whip cracks and its leather tentacle is round Ash's ankle, pulling him over the roots and rocks to the black boots of the two Automator officers. They are fighting ranks, with the ivory fist badge on their collars. To get that you have to have a talent for brutality. One of them, a skinny man, grabs Ash by the hair and pulls him to his feet.

'Look what we caught!' he cries.

In panic, Ash looks around. If they catch the Gula they'll kill her. But she's disappeared, melted into the shadows. All that's left of her is a thought reaching out to him.

Cub, it says.

CUB!

Ash is tied and bundled under the arm of the larger officer who smells much worse than the Gula. There's no point struggling. He can't escape so it's best not to draw any attention to himself. They mustn't find out that he's a Listener.

They walk through the cordon of dogs. Up close they are even more mechanical. They don't react to their Automator handlers, except to move and let them pass. Their eyes are black, like holes, and don't reflect any light. Ash picks up nothing, not the slightest pulse of life from them. But something is controlling them, some one. In the middle of their line are two small figures in Automator uniforms with a different badge, not the fist but the bared teeth of a red dog. They are unmasked so Ash can clearly see their faces. One of them is a child, as dead eyed as the dogs, a girl, with a large L branded into her forehead. She says nothing but she watches

every move the dogs make. The other, a young woman, speaks quietly into the child's ear, and every time she does, a moment later, the dogs react. The Listener child controls the dog; the woman controls the Listener. This is what happens to Listeners who are taken by the Automators: they are turned into tools of the Automators! Will that be Xeno's fate? Ash cannot bear the thought of it.

Ash is dumped just the other side of the rank of dogs and he scuttles away like a crab, in fear and horror. He mingles with the crowd of crying, distraught villagers who are too frightened and upset to pay him any mind.

Ash glances up towards the hillside. He knows he won't see the Gula, perhaps he might feel her? But there's nothing. Just that 'less than silence' feeling. How would she rescue him anyway? It's hopeless.

The dogs, under the control of their two minders, pace back and forth, herding the people down the middle of the valley. Behind the dogs, a crowd of Automators, all fighting ranks, are swaggering and barking orders. They're done with their burning and smashing now. They walk on, their rifles slung over their shoulders. Ash is very afraid that this will end in all the people being felled like the trees. He can imagine such a terrible thing quite easily now.

Then Ash sees where they're being taken: two skyships, transports, squat where the valley flattens out, tethered to the ground by ropes. *Harlon*, Ash thinks. Harlon? Maybe Xeno too and Mayo, even Ma. They would be captives but together.

Ash looks at the big black numbers on their sides. One has

a four and a six the other, a line of three twos. What were the numbers on the transport that took Harlon? It was dark but the craft's own lights shone up the side: 2, 1, 7. Ash can close his eyes and see them still. Neither of these transports has Harlon in it.

There are more Automators at the entrance to the transport holds. They have stripes on their arms, capos, the highest rank of fighters. Ash has seen them on village streets, pulling Listener children from the arms of screaming mothers. They enjoy their jobs. There are higher ranks Ma once told him, controllers and commanders, but they sit in warm offices behind desks and don't get blood on their hands.

They are sorting villagers into adults and children. They take the children and if the parents resist they beat the children, or threaten to throw them to the grinning dogs. It works quite well. Even though the Automators' faces are mostly covered, Ash can see that they find the screaming and the crying simply boring, they've done this many times.

Ash can't escape. A line of dogs and other Automators form a barrier of eyes and teeth and weapons. But he is so overloaded with the shock and horror of it that he wriggles his way a little to one side, just so he can have a moment away from what's happening.

Now he's standing very close to two Automators, ensins, who do all the other dirty jobs: mending engines, loading cargo, washing floors. One is older, judging by his belly and the wrinkles round his eyes; the other is just a kid, maybe Harlon's age. He is skinny and nervous-looking. He fiddles with the ropes that anchor the smaller of the transports. He

too is trying to avoid what's happening. They're talking quietly, but Ash is close enough to hear.

'Did you hear about transport two one seven?' the old one says.

The boy immediately looks alarmed.

'Did you say two one seven?'

The old one is gruff and impatient.

'You deaf as well as useless? Yeah, *two one seven*.'

The old man says the numbers very slowly. Neither the boy nor Ash can mistake this number now.

'My sister's ensin on two one seven.'

It has never occurred to Ash that Automators might have sisters. Ash holds himself very still and quiet as the boy asks.

'What happened to it?'

The fat man looks down. He can't look the boy in the eye now.

'Caught fire over the Woken Forest,' he tells the boy. 'Went down with all hands. No survivors.'

The boy just stares. Ash sees tears filling his eyes, just like the ones that are filling his own. The fat ensin looks over his shoulder, at the higher-ranking Automators busy sorting villagers.

'Pull yourself together,' he hisses. 'If the capos to see you blubbing like a baby we'll both catch it. Look on the bright side. It went down with all the Listener scum they caught up in the mountains.'

Ash feels like his heart has stopped. He hardly notices as he is shoved into the hold, with dozens of other wailing children, packed into wooden crates ten at a time, like cargo, like *things*.

The number on the side of the transport that took Harlon throbs in Ash's head. Xeno and Ma were probably in there too, and Mayo.

All the Listener scum they caught in the mountains.

He doesn't feel that they are dead, but maybe that's how it is; people feel alive to you even though they're not. Until Mayo said that Tui had been killed, Pa had felt alive to Ash, even though he'd never seen him or even heard his name.

So, now they're *all* dead. All his family.

The cargo hold is closed, shutting in the darkness and the crying. Ash feels the transport leave the ground. He's never flown before. It's what Xeno always wanted, to fly. That's why she wanted to be a bird. Somewhere far below is the Gula. But the trail is broken; he can't see its golden thread. Everything is lost. Unlife has swallowed him.

The Elephant Speaks

These are words.
They are not my way. Our way.
But I have learned to use them.
I learned this over long times.
They are small and go in one direction.
Many things I live will not fit in them.
But they are all that humans have. And so I use them.

It is raining.
The wetness falling. Dripping from the leaves. Making secret
pathways to the river.
Water has its own thoughts, no being may oppose.
Water tells its thoughts to every wrinkle of my skin.
And my skin is very great and very wrinkled.
My skin hears the thoughts that travel in veins of trees, my
sisters,
My skin hears the thoughts that water brought down from
the clouds;
These thoughts have travelled from the far-off blue.
The blue that is Great Grandmother of all the land, and in
her live her swimming children.
I will never see them, the tiny ones more in number than the
leaves
or the great ones, bigger even than my kind
but the clouds bring to me the echo of their singing
thoughts and being.

Through the rain I know them.
Through the rain I know many things.

Through the air I know many things also.
The speaking of the plant people
Asking for help
Offering reward
Sending warnings and alarms.
Their scents are strands that twist and blow inside my trunk.

Through my feet I know things also.
The crackling in the long fingers of the mushroom people
that reach into all things alive and dead.
Their meanings are deep, deep and old,
sometimes hidden, always bigger than the sky
with ends and edges beyond my understanding.

There are little pebbles underneath my feet also.
Sweet with smooth roundness,
small with age and history, yet tender, like baby-things.
They tremble with the deep business of the rocks
the long crush and grind that has made them
and the slow dance at the hot melted heart of the world.
They tell news that runs long back in time, and forward also.
This I feel and know.

In all things there are voices.
The raindrops in the river
The ocean into cloud
The leaves fallen on the forest floor

The sand made rock and sand again.
The blood, the bone, the muscle and the skin
The wood, the sap, the petal and the seed
The mushroom veins that lace together life and death.
Connected one to another in
a long singing, singing, singing;
that holds all life as one.

Without the life there is no singing;
without the singing, there is no life.

Yet now there comes a dead silence.
It spreads and spreads;
It has been brought by some of human kind.
It creeps in every place,
into earth and water:
silence in the rock and wood and bone,
silence in the bodies and the minds.
Silence that undoes all singing
Silence that can undo all life.

All my kin, sisters, daughters, have been taken by that
silence.
Taken in blood and burning and death.
Made more than dead.
Made nothing.
Ended.
Empty. Gone. Silent.

Their low voices do not shiver through my feet, sing in my
tusks, roll in my belly.

We do not say *move to new water*

We do not say *find the best fruits*

We do not say *rejoice a calf is born*

We do not say *these are the tusks of one who was living*

We do not talk in the touch of trunks

We do not speak in the stink of musth

We do not sing

We cannot sing

We *are* not *we*

We are not we.

I is all that remains.

Only I.

But without we, what is I?

Without we what can I be?

Where is the song for me?

I have wandered broken, half alive.

In that long pain and brokenness

I found another kind of we to be.

A new kind.

A we that has never been in the whole of life's long story

A we made of *different kinds of kin*.

A we with four legs, six legs, eight legs, two legs,

A we with wings,

A we with roots and leaves and branches.

A we with words.

Every day I build this new we;
I put my thoughts inside new minds and feel the strange fizz
of other livings,
to make a song strong enough to sing through the silence.

I put my thoughts also inside humans.
Sometimes in fear
for there are shadows there.
Still I go,
for humans minds brought forth the silence and the
nothingness,
in human minds the singing must begin again.
In human minds the change must begin.

Can I make these minds kin to me,
and kin to all?
This is what I try:
to make a new we of all beings;
to make a new singing of all life together.
One kin, one song!
If not, the silence will take all things,
life will be unmade, undone to nothingness and
never-ending quiet.

Although I am afraid.
Although you are full of words and shadows,
I sing
I sing
I sing.