

Dear Readers,

You have my heartfelt thanks for supporting *Songlight*. The response to the first novel in this trilogy has been phenomenal and it would not be where it is without you. To everyone who has put in a good word for this story and helped it into the hands of its readers, thank you!

It is my great delight to present *Torchfire* to you. Writing it was the most intense experience of my career so far. I hardly came up for air while this story was taking shape. I was travelling with my characters every step of the way, feeling every reversal of fortune as keenly as they did. In *Songlight*, we met our main narrators, Lark and Nightingale. In *Torchfire*, they will be joined by a new narrator, Petra.

Again, I have taken inspiration from John Wyndham's 1950s post-apocalyptic novel *The Chrysalids*. This book ends when the telepathic young protagonists meet a new society, the Sealanders. The Sealanders believe that they have evolved into something more sophisticated than humanity and that they are the new inheritors of the Earth.

It has been my plan from the beginning to involve this disturbing ingredient in the story and the result is the airship *Celestis*, which flies into the trilogy in the early pages of *Torchfire*. Suddenly we have a bird's eye view of the globe and another flawed society to explore. It has been wonderful imagining this new ingredient and fleshing out its characters, layer by layer.

We last saw Lark fleeing from her hometown of Northaven, a fugitive. We last saw Nightingale trapped in the Brethren's Palace, witnessing the aftermath of a murder. I will leave you in the hands of these two remarkable young women, whom I now love like daughters, as they take you by the hand and draw you into their increasingly perilous adventure.

With all best wishes,  
Moira Buffini

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*ADVANCE READING PROOF*

# TORCHFIRE

The hottest dystopian trilogy of the decade continues . . .

Welcome back to a world where songlight is either your greatest power or your greatest curse.

Peace between the Aylish and Brightland feels more fragile than ever now that the evil Brother Kite has seized power.

But there is a new threat on the horizon. Arriving on a reconnaissance airship, the Teroans are a race of elite Torches who see mere human beings as no more than collateral damage in their plan to control the Earth.

The future of civilisation is on a knife edge, but who will triumph: those with songlight, or those without?

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## PRAISE FOR SONGLIGHT

‘Think *The Handmaid’s Tale* but with mindreading. A class act.’

*The Times*, Best Books of 2024

‘The most gripping dystopia to be published this year.’

*The Bookseller*

‘Thrilling, post-apocalyptic drama . . . with shades of

*The Handmaid’s Tale*.’

*Daily Mail*

‘Has Hunger Games-style franchise potential written all over it.’

*TLS*

‘One of the most gripping reads of 2024.’

*Sunday Times Ireland*, Best Books of 2024

‘A storytelling masterclass.’

*SFX Magazine*

‘Will leave readers thirsting for the next instalment.’

*Guardian*

‘One of the most compulsive reads of the year.’

*Irish Examiner*

‘One of the best YA dystopias in years.’

*The Bookseller Buyer’s Guide*

‘*The Handmaid’s Tale* for teenagers . . . thrilling.’

*iNews*

**‘Unputdownable . . . Captures the human spirit and all its messy  
and beautifully complex emotions.’**

*Kirkus*, starred review

**‘Stunning.’**

*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

**‘Superb . . . A clever concept, intricate plot and lashings  
and lashing of secret telepathy.’**

*The Times*

**‘Like the hook in your favourite song, Buffini’s melody will stay  
in your head long after you turn the last page.’**

Michael Grant, author of *Gone*

**‘Written with passion and energy, this dystopia will enthrall  
and inspire a new generation.’**

*New Statesman*

**‘Immersive, gripping, thought-provoking.’**

*Irish Times*, Best Books of 2024

**‘A complex book with many layers, fascinating characters and  
outstanding world-building.’**

*Irish Independent*

**‘Rich and immersive storytelling.’**

*The Observer*

**‘I just loved this book. Mesmerising . . .**

**Bold, bright and haunting.’**

Josh Silver, author of *Happy Head*

## READER REVIEWS

‘**Phenomenal . . . a perfect 5-star review.** It delves into a fictional war, intricate politics and profound love. The characters are both heartbreakingly lovable and remarkably resilient. I was personally held hostage by this book until the final pages.

I will be waiting for the next release.’

‘An **extraordinary** debut that questions the cost of power, the dangerous game of politics and the ability to trust even in a time of chaos.’

‘**Epic . . .** the wordbuilding is nothing short of amazing. Moira keeps giving you hope and then crushes it again.’

‘**Captivating . . .** you become so invested in each of the characters.’

‘5 stars from me . . . **Loved every single second** reading it.’

‘This book was **amazing**, I couldn’t put it down. It’s a **heart-wrenching** story and we’re only really into the beginning of what’s to come! I loved this so much.’

‘The almost folkloric juxtaposition between the pretty perfection of the town and its folk and their hidden actions are chilling and believable. This took me by surprise and I can see it being a **big hit**.’

‘**Easiest 5 stars ever . . .** anyone who loved *The Handmaid’s Tale*, will adore this book.’

**‘Brilliant!** I loved it so much and was SO sad to finish it.  
When is the next one coming?’

**‘I read this all weekend and couldn’t stop! A classic.’**

**‘Loved it.** How long do I have to wait for the next one?’

*‘The Chrysalids* is one of my favourite novels and by merging its themes of empathy, communication and imagination with that of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Songlight* stands as a dystopia that addresses many of the most urgent topics of today.’

**‘It is a brilliant, page-turning read.’**

**‘A joy to read.** I loved Elsa, she had moments of strength and extreme vulnerability. The world, and songlight, had so much depth.’

**‘Electrifying.’**

**‘The writing is so engaging, really draws you in and on with the characters, who are all brilliantly conceived. I laughed, cried and I actually cannot wait to read more.’**

**‘I couldn’t put the book down and still can’t stop thinking about it.’**

**‘A brilliant book.** Original, moving, dramatic and exquisitely written.’

**‘This is incredible!** It’s up there with *The Hunger Games* and the Scythe trilogy . . . I already can’t wait for the next books!’

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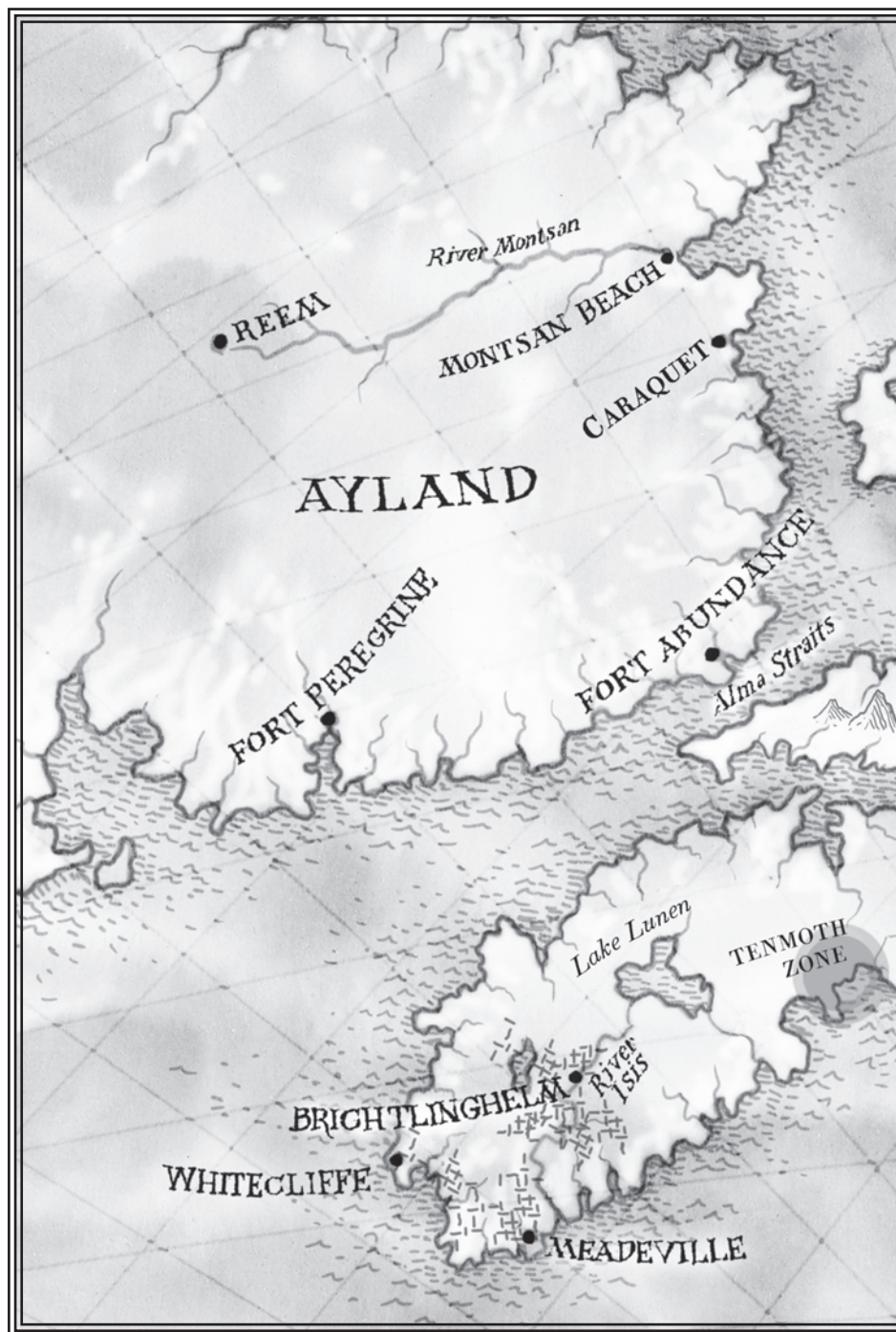
*ADVANCE READING PROOF*

# TORCHFIRE

MOIRA BUFFINI

faber

*Dedication to come*





## PROLOGUE

# LARK

Lying with my mother in the bottom of a boat.

A half-dream, half-memory comes.

I am a tiny girl again, in my parents' bed. The four of us are curled in a heap: my brother Piper, a year older, his long legs and boyish feet digging into me; my pa, his big seaworker's arm stretching over us both; and Ma, Curlew Crane. She gives me slow smile like a beam from her soul and Pa says my name.

'Elsa.' I hear it in my core.

I am warm and safe in my dream-memory and I fight against waking, but the cold creeps in. I feel the motion of the waves, hear the low whirr of the boat's turbine. The battery hums underneath me, powering us south.

I remember.

We are on our way to Brightlinghelm, four of us, fleeing on the waves: Ma, Heron Mikane, Yan Zeru, whose true name is Kingfisher, and me. Piper is not here, nor Pa neither. Our family is split by war and death. Pa only lives in my dreamworld now. And Piper proved himself my enemy last night. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the whole town I had songlight and denounce me as unhuman. I saw the look in his eyes as he

stared at me and I can still feel the pain of it pulsing through my body.

My arm is wrapped around Ma. Her face is ghostly in the moonlight and she smells of congealing blood. My hands are sticky with it. There's a bullet lodged in her shoulder threatening her life. We left Northaven in a hail of gunfire and the sound of it is ringing in my ears.

My consciousness sharpens as I sit up on my elbows. Kingfisher is lying next to Ma, resting, warming her with his body heat. The moon casts enough light on his face for me to see the shape of his jaw, his fine brows, his long hair falling over his cheek, his muscular shoulders. I am instantly vexed at myself. For even in a situation as desperate as this, I'm still distracted by this boy's fine looks.

I wrench myself upright and see a large figure, hunched at the tiller in a silhouette, the moon over the sea behind him. Heron Mikane is steering the boat. His face is in shadow but I know his expression – broken fortitude. The past follows Heron like a rising wave, ever threatening to overwhelm him. He twists and looks behind us at the moon-trail on the water, as if Death herself is running towards us.

Curl is bone cold. Her chest is barely moving when she breathes.

‘Ma . . .’

‘Don't wake her,’ whispers Kingfisher in his low Aylish lilt. ‘She's holding well. Sleep is what her body needs.’

His hand brushes mine and in an instant, I feel like I'm back in the fire and turmoil that we fled from in Northaven. In my fear and anger then, a roar came out of me. I had sent my songlight far and high. *Nightingale!* I had cried.

There was anguish in her beam as she saw what was being done to us.

*Lark!* Her songlight had felt like it was burning through me, turning me into a thousand stars.

*LARK!*

Nightingale helped me, even though she's locked in Sister Swan's gilded cage.

I will find her. And free her.

The dawn will soon be here and our boat will be visible. The chase will close in on us. I lie once more next to Ma, trying to warm her with my body, trying to rest my racing mind.

I breathe, while the sea moves us up and down, holding us between the earth and moon.

# PART ONE



## PETRA'S DIARY

### *Celestis – Day Four*

Four days have dragged by since our voyage on *Celestis* began. Ten days since I last saw Fenan. I'm writing his name all over this page, as if I'm scoring it upon my heart. Fenan Lee. Fenan Lee. Fenan. Why should I bother writing anything else?

I feel a heaviness, despite being up so high. This airship drifts more slowly than the clouds, nothing but ocean underneath. The airship *Angelus* flies ahead of us. It's an impressive sight but I stare at it unmoved. *Angelus* will veer north first, up the west coast of the great continent. Shortly afterwards we will follow, taking the east coast. *Solarus*, flying behind us, will continue on across another ocean, the longest journey of all. We will soon lose contact with Sealand, our home. In days of antiquity before the Great Extinction, there was a network of satellites all around the globe and communication was as easy as my truevoice. On our journey, we'll be quite alone.

Things are still tense, even with my mild-mannered father. He is patient with me but something in him has withdrawn. I can feel his disappointment and it's worse than Mother's anger. There's an iron frost all over her. I caught her looking at me and it was like she was looking at a stranger.

## *Day Five*

How will I stand it, stuck in this cabin with my parents? Five months until we return home.

The only possibility of privacy is this little book. Fenan pushed it into my hand at our last meeting and said words I won't forget, beautiful mouth-words with his gentle voice.

'I can't change the way things are. Our lives will be on separate paths,' he said. 'But write your thoughts, Petra. That way, I can read them, even if we're far apart. Think freely.'

'I will,' I said. And I kissed him, lovingly, wholeheartedly.

Mother caught us. She sacked Fenan as my language teacher and in her screeching truevoice, she called the Division Enforcers – how I HATE HER; she didn't need to do that. I was screaming at her, pleading, but she wouldn't listen. She told me to SHUT UP, I was giving her a HEAD PAIN. Now she and Father have forced me to come on this STUPID VOYAGE.

MY HEART WILL BREAK. I want to be with FENAN, back in Sealand City.

I LOVE HIM.

WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO HIM? HOW WILL HE BE PUNISHED?

## *Day Six*

I'm avoiding the rest of the crew. I talk to them at mealtimes but spend most of my time in the cabin. When my parents come in, I

hide this diary under my mattress. At night, Father fills the silence, talking about his work with the cartography team. He's kind to me but everything he says is unbelievably boring. I stare out of the window at the clouds below.

I hardly see Mother, THANK GOODNESS. She's mostly on the viewing deck, looking at pictures of extinct ocean animals, drawing boring diagrams, making boring plans. Tonight she came back looking all self-satisfied.

'This is the first global assessment that we eximians have made in generations,' she said, mistaking me for someone who cares.

I have earplugs at night because my parents snore.

## *Day Seven*

I have picked up my language work again but nothing pleases Mother. She has had another rant at me, telling me I am letting the family down with my morose behaviour. I must be prompt and smiling at evening communion. I was late yesterday and almost ran into Air Admiral Xalvas, our commander, as he was entering to begin the thought-share. He said 'Good evening, Petra' but I could sense his affront. If I'm late again, Mother will slow-roast me. She said Xalvas is a man of first merit from one of Sealand's sovereign families. She went on and on and after a while, all I could hear was blah blah blah.

I concentrate on the ancient sapien languages that Fenan was teaching me. When Mother sees I'm working, she leaves me alone.

I'm not the only offspring on this voyage. Xalvas has brought his

son, three years older than me. He's training him for leadership. Charlus. I instantly don't like him. He's too tall and looks a bit like a mantis. I'm the next oldest at seventeen – but not old enough to be treated like crew, as Charlus is. Perhaps that's why I feel I don't belong. Mother says I'll get treated like a child if I act like a child and I want to tell her to GO AND JUMP.

## *Day Eight*

Dear Fenan,

I want to pull your lips to mine and press my body close to yours. It felt as if both our spheres of being were pulled into that kiss and all our differences dissolved. What does it matter that you are not eximian? Fenan Lee, I want to kiss you and hold you, listening to your sapien heart. Because how different are we, really?

## *Day Nine*

This afternoon, I walked the whole length of *Celestis*, staring down at the blue, up at the blue, feeling so small in this cruel blue world. Sky and ocean. They have brought me on this trip to punish me. Or save me.

## *Day Ten*

In communion this evening, I spoke for the first time. Xalvas asked me to describe the ancient sapien audio I've been studying, voices coming down the veins of history – our ancestors. I am practising their grammar and pronunciation, mouth-words, as Fenan taught me, in one of the old global languages. I told the crew that although millennia had passed since those tongues were spoken, some of the word roots and structures might endure. If we do find sapien civilisations of any kind, it will give us a starting point for communication. Air Admiral Xalvas remarked how interesting that was.

Beautiful view of the stars tonight. The Southern Cross is the biggest constellation. *Celestis* is a tiny ship, crossing a small planet, on an outer spiral of a commonplace galaxy. We are insubstantial small fry and our existence is a second in time.

## *Day Eleven*

We started passing over atolls and islands mid-afternoon. It was such a relief to see land down below. The airship *Angelus* has left us and turned north to explore the western coast. We will not see her again for many months. I watched until she disappeared and Garena came to join me. She's our archivist, only four years older than me, and I feel kindness emanating from her. I helped her to capture images of an ancient sapien town – a tumble of ruins, poking through the snow. No one has lived there since before the

Great Extinction. *Celestis* has slowed to a snail's pace now, while Father's cartography team maps the coast.

## *Later*

I wonder if Garena might be the kind of person I could talk to about Fenan? I asked her if she's ever been up to the sapien quarters and she said no. She would need written permission from Commodore Bradus, our Division Enforcer. The sapiens do everything for us. But no one seems to think it's weird how separate we are.

## *Day Thirteen*

Father lost his patience. He told me how lucky I am to be on this mission. He said, 'We're here making a new future.' He says everyone is sick of my low spirits and I'm letting him and Mother down. He made me cry.

He said Garena needs an assistant in the archive and I am to work with her from now on. I arrived at Garena's desk, hardly able to communicate. But she was kind and after a couple of hours she was making me laugh. I wonder if she knows why I am here? Does Air Admiral Xalvas know?

Thinking back to that awful day when they discovered me with Fenan. My mother's truevoice was full of shock and pain.

'How could you think we'd let him be a match for you?' she had cried.

‘Don’t you understand?’ cried Father. ‘We’d have to cut you off; we’d never see you again.’

## *Day Sixteen*

Huge excitement today. We saw our first wild sapiens, down below. There was talk of sending a landing party, but Xalvas urged us northwards. ‘This voyage is for reconnaissance,’ he said. ‘The next will be about contact.’

Charlus asked if I wanted to see the scouting crafts. He took me down to the hangar and showed me how one worked. He acted like he could fly it, but I know that he’s still training. He’s only flown the simulator.

## *Day Twenty*

Garena has seven brothers and three sisters. Her parents used sapien surrogates, like mine did. It’s nice that our bodies will never be stretched and ruined by childbirth. We talked about how messy and awful it must have been. It’s made me think about the sapien who carried me. That woman looked after me until I was three because my parents were away doing an off-planet tour of duty on our Martian colony, Terra Nova.

There’s a hole in my memory about my surrogate. I suppose I must have called her mama and I remember the feeling of her tight hugs but I never knew her name. What did she think about me,

growing in her womb? Did I hurt her? I wish I could remember more about her and I ache with trying.

## *Day Twenty-One*

We're over a vast river basin. Garena showed me the signs of ancient habitation under the water. She said that thousands of years ago, there was a population of fifteen million down there. Fifteen million, loud with the filth and music of sapien life. Now it's silent but for lapping water. An underwater city, home to little fishes. I look in the archive for some record of its name. I find an audio recording where an ancient sapien woman calls it Benos Arees.

The biology team is ecstatic because they saw a flock of rare migratory birds. I haven't seen Mother's face look so bright since we left Sealand City.

## *Day Twenty-Five*

Garena told me how, in a suicidal frenzy of destruction, the sapiens here cut their rainforest down. Why did they destroy the Earth when they had science and culture and knowledge? What madness gripped them? It's the greatest mystery of ancient times.

Learning of the Great Extinction has made me feel so sad. Perhaps we eximians have this sadness in our souls.

I could never be with Fenan. In my heart, I know this.