

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

The Gifts of Odin: The Violaceous Amethyst

Aoife Lennon-Ritchie / LNNAOI001

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree
of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2011

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Descriptive Abstract:

When the Millers wake up on Christmas Eve on the island of Yondersaay, Granny, Dani and Ruairi find that everyone on the island, except them, has turned into a Viking.

Evil Jarl Silas Scathe is convinced Ruairi Miller is the Boy King of Denmark. Believing he now has the key to finding the treasure the Viking God Odin buried here centuries ago, Jarl Scathe has his henchmen kidnap Ruairi to be sacrificed on a funeral pyre at sundown.

Granny Miller and Ruairi's sister Dani must somehow unearth the secrets of the island, and battle their way across it, in their attempt to rescue Ruairi before sunset.

The Gifts of Odin: The Violaceous Amethyst, follows the Miller family as they battle tarantulafish, learn secrets from trees, and go up against a conniving, double-crossing, espresso-drinking villain.

Informative Abstract:

I have been innovative within the genre of literature for young adults, both in terms of the structure of the plot, and in terms of the story being told.

The novel is written from a third-person limited perspective. There is no single voice running through the piece, rather, each chapter adopts the tone and perspective of the main character in that chapter.

At many points in the book, there is a story within a story. And at several moments in the book, there is a story, within a story, within a story. For example, the narrator tells a story about Granny and the Miller children. Within that, Granny recounts stories to the children. At a few points in Granny's story, one of her characters, Rarelief, recounts a story to another of her characters, Dudo. All the while Granny and the children are in the midst of their own story.

I have challenged myself to attain a seamless transition into scene through dialogue, and from scene to scene without the reader reacting to a change in voice. At the same time, I have relayed a fast-paced, innovative and entertaining tale.

PART I YONDERSAAY

Granny Miller

Granny Miller was seeing things. In the hallway of her city-house on the edge of the park, all along the wall hung the most beautiful pictures of puffins and Yondersaay terriers and stumpy little Yondersaay ponies you have ever seen. Granny hung these pictures here years ago so that every time she walked down her corridor she could feel like she was at home on Yondersaay, the island where she grew up.

But lately, as Granny Miller walked down her hallway – in her frilly night-gown to brush her teeth in the morning, or in her hat and coat when she went out for a walk a little while later, or at night, in her frilly night-gown again, when she went to make sure the front door was locked – something strange happened. She couldn't figure out if she was still a little bit asleep in the mornings, or perhaps she was still dreaming. She walked more slowly and drove more slowly and climbed stairs more slowly now that she was older so it's not all that unreasonable to think that maybe she also dreamed more slowly too. What if she hadn't fully finished dreaming when she woke up in the mornings? Because as she gets older she sleeps less and less, so maybe the dreams kept going until they were finished. Even if she was already awake.

Or maybe it was her glasses. She thought she needed new glasses; the ones she had were very thick but perhaps, as she was that bit older now she needed even thicker ones.

Because what had been happening was this: every time Granny Miller went down her corridor in those past few days the puffins and the Yondersaay terriers, and the Yondersaay ponies, the short stumpy ones, had seemed alive. Not that Granny had stopped to have a proper look mind you. It's creepy to even think about it. Sometimes they stood and watched Granny Miller walk down the corridor. Sometimes they'd have a little chat with each other, looking around the picture frames and squawking or barking or neighing to each other. Anyway, they looked like they were squawking or barking or neighing. They didn't make any noise because Granny Miller only put in her hearing aid when company came. And just the other night, one of them seemed to wave his wing at her.

That would be bad enough – inanimate photos and paintings of birds and animals that lived on an island thousands of miles away in the middle of the North Atlantic squawking and watching and barking. But the other morning in the park a little Yondersaay terrier had raised his leg at the bench where Granny Miller had sat to throw her leftover bread to the ducks. And he said ‘hello there’. Granny Miller had said ‘hello there’ back before she realised whom she was talking to.

And later, as she was walking home, a group of little children passed by riding tiny little Yondersaay ponies and, she could have sworn this, one of the Yondersaay ponies looked back, puckered up, and blew her a kiss. She put it out of her mind instantly. She didn’t want to think about it. Because if she thought about it it might occur to her that she was going dodderly bonkery loopde loop bananas. And it occurred to her that she didn’t really want that to occur to her. If she was going mashed potato brain she would remain blissfully unaware of it until they carted her off, rocking back and forth cackling to herself and counting her fingers over and over, to Sunnydale heights.

But that night, when she was in her bed with her fluffy puffin-shaped hot water bottle, with her lacy night-cap over her white curls and her cosy slippers tucked in under the bed, she realised that try as she might, she simply could not stop thinking about it. She must be going mad. There was no other explanation.

Unless...

Unless! She shot bolt upright in bed. Unless she was home sick! That explained it! She made a decision right there and then. She hopped out of bed, jumped into her cosy slippers and made a phone call.

Dani and Ruairi

Everything Ruairi ate went straight to his bones. He was always hungry and always growing. The more he ate the taller he grew but he always seemed skinny skinny skinny. Nothing bulked him out, it all went up. Mummy gave him cream pies for breakfast and sugar waffles for lunch to try to fatten him up, but it all went into his bones.

And his hair. His hair grew as long as string and as wispy as an incredibly wispy thing. He had to have a haircut at least once a week or it would be impossibly straggly. And Mummy didn't like anything straggly.

Daniela's hair could get a bit straggly if left untended so every morning while Dani ate her cereal, Mummy would have a go at her hair. She would plait it or curl it, bunch it up or braid it, tie it in string and ribbon or smooth it under an Alice band. No matter what she did a scraggly bit always came loose at some point in the day. Mummy didn't want to be always fussing over Dani's poor hair so when it happened she just had to bite her lip and ignore it.

The thing that was always on Mummy's mind, even more than Dani's hair, was safety. Mummy had grown up in a tiny little village in the middle of the countryside where everybody knew everybody and where everybody had an opinion about everybody else. Probably there were some bad enough people who lived there, but there was very little crime. Mummy supposed it was because they would be too afraid of getting a bad reputation to do anything untoward. If a shopkeeper over charged or sold faulty goods word would get around very fast and people would stop going in to that particular shop. If things disappeared while someone was cleaning a house or doing up a garden, the cleaner, or the gardener would find it more and more difficult to get work.

In fact, there *was* a crime wave one time when Mummy was growing up. A teenager tried to mug an old lady. It went terribly wrong for him. He put on a balaclava so he wouldn't be recognised – all of his face was covered except for his eyes. He crept up behind the old lady and grabbed her handbag. He gruffed up his voice as best he could and said:

“Don’t turn around or I’ll crack you over the head. Gimme the bag, Lady.” But of course, despite the gruffing up, the old lady, who knew everybody in the village, recognised his voice at once.

“Jimmy Mac Sweeney, is that you? You should be ashamed of yourself. Wait til I tell your poor Mother what you’ve been up to. You’ll break her heart. Shame on you.” And she turned around and looked at him with disappointment and tutted at him and shook her head. Jimmy Mac Sweeney toed the ground in front of him, his head hung down and his shoulders slumped.

“Ah, please Mrs. Maloney, there’s no need to mention it to her. Here, look, I don’t even have your bag, I was only messing with you. It was all a big joke, there’s no need to tell anyone, it was all a big joke.”

And that was the end of the crime wave in the village where Mummy grew up.

Things were very different in the city, where they lived now, of course and Mummy was always on high alert. She had drilled Dani and Ruairi in safety and self-defense since they were tiny. And every now and then when she read something particularly gruesome or scary in the newspapers she would drill them even harder than usual.

Daddy had made her promise that her New Year’s resolution would be to stop reading the newspaper for a whole month. She had reluctantly agreed.

‘What are the two Vs?’ Mummy asked Dani and Ruairi over breakfast.

They didn’t even have to think about the answer, they’d been asked so many times before. ‘Vigilance and Velocity,’ the both mumbled together without looking up from their cereal.

‘And what do they mean?’ Mummy asked

‘Keep your eyes open, and if anything looks dodgy Run Away.’

‘Good,’ said Mummy. ‘Now, what do you do if you get lost and can’t find me or Daddy?’

‘We go up to a police officer or to a woman who has children with her and ask them for help,’ Dani said.

‘But Mummy we have cell phones. We can just *call* you,’ Ruairi said.

‘Yes, Mummy,’ said Dani, ‘and we know our address and how to use the subway, we can just meet you at home.’

Mummy was used to such objections. She ignored them and pressed on. ‘And what do you do if someone tries to attack you?’

‘Run Away,’ they mumbled.

‘What?’ Mummy said.

‘RUN AWAY.’

‘Yes, you must always Run Away. Do not try to fight. What if someone points a gun at you, or a knife?’

‘Run Away,’ Ruairi said.

‘Can we go now?’ Dani asked.

‘One more. Ruairi, what do you do if someone says they’ll hurt your sister if you don’t come with them?’

Ruairi put his spoon down beside his cereal bowl; let his shoulders hunch in front of him. He made a big snoring sound. Dani couldn’t help laughing.

‘I mean it Ruairi, these things happen, you never know. Better to be prepared I always say,’ said Mummy.

Ruairi picked up his spoon and started eating again, ‘Run Away,’ he mumbled, ‘I always *Run Away*.’

‘Yes, Ruairi, good lad. You Run Away. Dani, what do you do if someone says they’ll hurt your little brother if you don’t do what they tell you to do?’

‘Run Away,’ Dani said. She was scribbling in her exercise book as she spoke. She was pretending to be doodling but really she was finishing homework she said last night that she had absolutely definitely already finished.

‘Good. Why?’ Mummy pressed on.

Dani recited her answer like it was a boring poem she’d had to learn off by heart for English, or a list of dates she’d had to learn off for History, ‘because they’re probably lying, they probably don’t even have Ruairi. And if they’re not lying I am much more use being free to run and get help, and I have to trust that Ruairi will also Run Away when he gets the chance.’

‘Good girl,’ Mummy said, smiling, ‘you must trust each other to do the right thing and Run Away when you get the opportunity. It is always your best chance. Now,’ and Mummy went to the toaster to bring the popped up toast to the table, ‘what do you do if the house goes on fire?’

Daddy, who had been reading the newspaper the whole time, lowered the corner of the paper and peered over at Dani and Ruairi. ‘What do you do if you get fed up with Mummy asking these silly questions all the time?’

Dani and Ruairi both shrieked ‘RUN AWAY!!!! RUN AWAY!!!!’ and ran around and around the table. They went so fast that they twirled Mummy with their speed. Daddy got up and took Mummy in his arms and spun her in the air. He gave her a kiss and said.

‘You’re nuts about this stuff, isn’t that right kids?’

‘Definitely,’ Dani said.

‘Totally nuts,’ Ruairi said.

‘You’re nuts Mummy, you’re nuts,’ Dani and Ruairi shouted. Mummy pretended she was not amused by this at all, but they could all tell she was trying hard not to laugh.

‘Okay, okay, that’s enough,’ she said finally, frowning so they would think she was cross.

‘Dani, come here, I haven’t done your hair yet. How would you like it?’

‘Mummy, do you know what? You’re going to find this difficult to believe, so brace yourself,’ and Dani turned around and looked her Mother square in the face, ‘I really don’t care,’ she said and spun back around to her breakfast.

‘Really? You don’t care huh?’ Mummy said. ‘Well in that case I will curl it into a hundred ringlets and I will tie it up in fifty pretty pink bows.’

‘NO! Come ON! Ponytail, a ponytail is fine. Geez,’ Dani said.

Mummy was getting to work on Dani’s hair when there was a knock at the door. It was very early so nobody had even changed out of their pyjamas yet. Daddy threw a dressing gown on over his pyjama bottoms and went to see who could possibly be at the door at this hour of the morning. He opened the door and found a beaming Granny Miller standing there in her good maroon coat and good maroon hat with the puffin feathers, surrounded by piles and piles of trunks and cases.

‘Are you ready?’ Granny Miller said.

‘Ready for what, Granny Miller?’ Daddy asked.

University of Cape Town

Going to Yondersaay?

‘Ha ha very funny Daddy,’ Granny Miller said as she squeezed past him into the house. Daddy looked from Granny Miller to the cases and back again. He started to carry them all inside; Granny Miller clearly wasn’t going to. He stumbled back through the front door laden down with trunks, cases and hat boxes.

‘Aaaaaaaagh!’ he heard, ‘aaaaaagh! Aggh!!’ He dropped the cases and boxes which spilled all over the floor. He jumped over them and raced into the kitchen to defend his family from whatever was making that monstrous screaming noise.

‘Why aren’t you ready!’ It was Granny Miller, leaning back against the door frame, one hand clutching her chest, the other against her forehead, palm facing away in a dramatic swoon. She shrieked once more, a little more quietly this time, at the sight of Mummy and Dani and Ruairi calmly sitting around the kitchen table eating and chatting and, and this was the worst bit for Granny Miller, happily still in their pyjamas.

‘The taxi is picking us up in an hour to take us to the airport. We can’t miss that flight as there’s only 30 minutes layover in Nova Scotia and there’s only one flight this week that will take us from here to Nova Scotia and on to Berlin, and from there to Oslo, and then there’s the ferry, and then it’s a short hop to Inverness airport or maybe Dublin airport, I forget, and then we catch the Yonder Air flight to Yondersaay.’

‘What on earth are you talking about Granny Miller?’ Mummy asked, still mostly concentrating on forcing Dani’s straggly bits into a ponytail.

‘It’s all agreed!’ Granny shrieked. ‘We agreed it all last night, don’t you remember? I called you up, quite late I admit it, and you answered Daddy,’ and Granny Miller turned to Daddy as he came in the door. He slumped onto a stool, relief flooding over him when he saw his family was not being hacked to bits by a psycho killer.

‘And I said to you,’ Granny continued, ‘do you remember now? I said to you, Daddy,’ and Granny sat down at the table and buttered a slice of toast, ‘I’m feeling a bit homesick and if

it's alright with you and Mummy, rather than me coming to you for Christmas, I'd like to take you all to Yondersaay this year.' Granny took a bite of her toast.

Daddy and Mummy looked at each other with blank expressions on their faces.

'What time was it, Granny, when you rang last night, I don't quite remember?' Mummy asked.

'It was about four in the morning, but that's not important—'

'Not important!!' said Daddy.

'What's important is that you said mmhmm.'

'Mmhmmm. Mmhmmm! Granny it was four in the morning, you could have asked me if I wanted to eat a jellied snot and frog-spawn sandwich and I'd have said Mmhmm!' Daddy said.

'Well, it's too late. A promise is a promise. I've already booked the flights and as I said, the taxi will be here to pick us up in an hour. So I suggest you get packing.'

Dani and Ruairi were tremendously excited but Mummy and Daddy stayed just where they were. Dani and Ruairi both sensed they needed to nudge their parents in the right direction. Ruairi said 'a promise is a promise!' and winked at Granny Miller. Granny Miller winked back at him. Dani hid her homework and all other reminders of school under the fruit bowl and said 'yes, you're always telling us how despicable it is to break a promise.'

'And you're always saying we should spend more time with Granny Miller,' Ruairi said.

'Yes,' Dani said, 'and this would be the perfect opportunity.'

'Well... ' Daddy said.

'There's only one flight from here to Nova Scotia, and the taxi will be here in less than an hour,' Ruairi said.

Dani, Ruairi and Granny smiled secretly at each other and waited. Everyone looked at Daddy and Mummy.

In the end all Mummy and Daddy could do was look at each other and shrug. ‘Well ok,’ Mummy finally said.

Dani and Ruairi started whooping and cheering. They ran up the stairs shouting ‘Yaaaaaay, we’re going to Yondersaay!’ They packed their suitcases as fast as they could, remembering to remember that it would be icy and snowy on Yondersaay at this time of year.

Dani and Ruairi were running between their bedroom and the bathroom and to the airing cupboard looking for things, trailing clothes behind them. They upended drawers onto the floor; they took clothes out of the wardrobe and put them onto the bed looking for particular things with the end result that with everything everywhere they couldn’t find a single thing that they absolutely needed.

Mummy and Daddy were downstairs talking and Dani and Ruairi could hear little snippets of their conversation while they were packing.

‘Why is it so important?’ Mummy said.

Dani put her head over the railing at the top of the stairs and shouted down, ‘Mummy, where’s my blue jumper? Mummy! My BLUE jumper!’

Mummy was saying, ‘can’t you email it in? No one will insist you present it yourself.’ She came to the bottom of the stairs, ‘it’s in the ironing basket Dani. Get Ruairi’s fleece when you’re there, and don’t forget your wellington boots and woolly socks.’

‘If I don’t go that extra mile it looks bad—,’ Daddy was saying.

Mummy said, ‘well, I don’t understand why this is more important than spending time with—’

‘I can’t FIND it, Mummy! My BLUE jumper, WHERE IS MY BLUE JUMPER!’

Mummy and Daddy’s heads both appeared at the bottom of the stairs at the same time, ‘Watch your tone, young lady,’ they said together, and the heads disappeared and the living room door snapped shut. And that was the last that could be heard of their conversation.

Yondersaay's Buried Treasure

Luckily the taxi was twenty minutes late so the Millers had just enough time to get ready. They piled into the car once all their luggage was safely stacked in the boot or strapped to the roof. Dani and Ruairi, fizzing with excitement earlier, were still very excited indeed but were a little more subdued and quiet than before. Granny Miller sat between them in the back seat while Mummy sat up front with the hatboxes and vanity cases that Granny insisted on bringing despite there being no room in the boot or on the roof rack. Daddy was not with them. He had said he would follow on as soon as he could.

Mummy twisted around to look at her children.

'Cheer up guys,' she said, 'you'll see him in a day or two.'

'It's fine Mummy, he'll be there soon,' Dani said.

'Yes, Mummy, he'll be with us soon,' Ruairi said, 'and we're still totally happy to be going to Yondersaay.'

'Totally,' Dani said, glancing back one last time to see if she could still see Daddy waving at the curb.

'We'll have the best trip ever,' Mummy said. 'He'll be jealous he missed it. Granny?' Mummy said.

'Yes dear?' Granny said.

'We have such a long journey ahead of us, will you tell us one of your stories to keep us going?' Mummy said.

'Well now,' Granny Miller said, 'I suppose that would be one way to pass the time. But what if nobody wants to hear my story Mummy?'

'Of course we do, Granny,' Mummy said, 'don't we?'

'Yes please Granny,' Ruairi said, 'only not the one about the one-eyed tortoise who took a hundred years to lay an egg.'

'Or the one about how handbags were invented,' Dani said.

'You don't like those stories?' Granny said, and Dani and Ruairi shook their heads.

‘Ok, let me see,’ Granny said and she closed her eyes and thought for a moment.

‘It wasn’t today or yesterday,’ Granny began. This was the way she always began her stories.

‘Granny, you’re supposed to say ‘Once Upon A Time,’’ Dani said.

‘No Dani, ‘Once Upon a Time,’ is the ordinary way to begin an ordinary story. But this is a story about Yondersaay. And there are no ordinary stories about Yondersaay. Besides,’ Granny said, ‘when you hear a story that begins with ‘Once Upon a Time,’ you start out with a set of expectations. You are not surprised when the beans turn out to be magic beans or when the frog turns into a Prince. You expect everything to end ‘Happily Ever After,’ with the baddies slain and the goodies safe and content. But this is not one of those stories. This is a true story, it really happened, in real life. It wasn’t today or yesterday, but it really happened. There are no magic beans or handsome frogs, and I’m sorry to tell you, Yondersaay stories don’t necessarily end up all ‘Happily Ever After’.’

‘Ok Granny,’ Dani said. Mummy gave her daughter a look. Dani said, ‘sorry for interrupting.’

‘That’s quite alright, Dani,’ said Granny Miller as she snuggled herself further into the back seat of the taxi.

‘It wasn’t today or yesterday,’ she began again, ‘it was a long, long time ago when the world was warmer and it was believed the sun moved around the earth.’

‘Was that in the olden days Granny,’ Ruairi asked, ‘that Daddy always tells us about, when children only had crusts for lunch and had to walk seventeen miles to school in their bare feet, uphill, both ways?’

‘It was long before then, Ruairi, long before crusts were even invented,’ Granny continued. ‘There was a Viking King of old called King Dudo the Mightily Impressive. He was Lord over all of Denmark. He pillaged and plundered as far north as the turn in the World, and as far south as the oceans of sand. He was a mighty warrior in his youth and was greatly feared by all who knew of him. He had a tireless energy and a thirst for the sea. He accumulated gold

and jewels wherever he landed and brought many a victory to his Viking warriors. All who fought with him worshipped him and all who fought against him trembled in fear at the very sight of him. And he was a powerful sight – instantly recognisable for his stature and bulk and for the way he dressed.

‘King Dudo was a big man, broad and tall with tanned skin tight across bulging muscles. His hair was long and blonde and fell in thick waves to his elbows. He wore little armour. He liked to move fast and he found armour slowed him down. He wore a breastplate that covered the right side of his chest only. His right arm was his leading arm; he had no need for the weight of a plate across his left side when that side was naturally protected by the stance he took when fighting. He carried a golden shield encrusted with some of the rubies, emeralds, and diamonds he had gathered on his pillaging trips. It was shorn on the left side - it was not fully circular which made it lighter and easier to manoeuvre. This meant that he could not protect anyone but himself in battle. To those who did not know him, that might have appeared a selfish indulgence. But as King Dudo often went forward alone into oncoming attacks, forgoing the protection of his comrades, his men had no doubt as to his selflessness and bravery. Atop his head was a golden helmet also adorned with jewels. It came down across his forehead and a flat strip protruded right down over his nose. Attached to his golden helmet were two golden wings that flowed and moved in the breeze. They gave King Dudo such an air of power that at times his leaps were so high and his actions so lithe it appeared that he was being transported by them, held aloft and supported in mid-air by the wings on his helmet.

‘King Dudo earned his reputation at a very young age, when, newly crowned as King, he led a small company into battle against a most disagreeable neighbour - King Ethelred the Unready. The council expected that King Dudo would be gone at least a month, so they were surprised when he arrived back shortly after lunch. King Dudo had turned up to battle at the appointed time but there was no one there. He and his men marched across the battlefield into their opponents’ camp and seeing that King Ethelred the Unready, and all his men, were still in

their pyjamas, they took the opportunity to round up all of the enemy into one spot, tie them up, and declare the win.

‘He didn’t kill anybody that time, but King Dudo the Mightily Impressive was a ruthless and brutal warrior, never hesitating to slay an enemy and take his goods and land.

‘He was a fair ruler, however, apportioning out his plundering in a fair and equal manner among his subjects. He was a smart man and knew the value of work,’ Granny said as she was helped out of the taxi by Dani and Ruairi. Mummy paid the taxi driver and helped Granny pile all their luggage onto three trolleys. They joined the queue at the check-in desk.

‘When the snows were falling or the seas were rough and his men were forced to stay on land, he employed his men in gainful activity rather than allow them to mope and brood and begin to squabble and fight in boredom. He sought advice from smart men from the south who taught him some of their ways. He had someone instruct his men in the construction of sewerage systems and road-ways. He encouraged a happy society while all were on land, knowing of course that true happiness could only ever be achieved by his men when they were being borne by waves to other lands, on their way to battle.

‘All in all King Dudo the Mightily Impressive was well loved by his subjects, and much feared by his enemies.

‘Now, one bright autumn, King Dudo and his warriors,’ Granny continued, as she took her boarding pass from the lady at the desk, ‘were sailing westwards from their homeland through the northern-most seas of the world. They were dressed in thick layers of skins and furs against the cold of the northern air. They had made such westward expeditions in the past and had encountered lands of ice, lands covered for miles in trees in vegetation, and lands swarming with creatures that were strange to them.’

‘Our flight has just been called,’ Mummy said.

While the Millers queued to get on the first of many many flights, Granny kept going with the story.

‘Among their number on this westward voyage,’ Granny said, ‘was a famous monk from the lower lands called Brother Brian the Devout and Handy with Numbers. Brother Brian the Devout and Handy with Numbers had the gift of navigation and was an expert star-reader to boot. His job was to guide King Dudo and his Viking warriors to wherever in the world they wished to travel.

‘After roiling upon the waves for many weeks, their supplies diminishing and cramp and fatigue setting in, the Vikings were anxious for a sight of land. Many of them had been this way to the west before and knew that there were numerous islands and jutting headlands about this far from home. Some of them were surprised they had not found land yet and secretly doubted Brother Brian’s ability. A whispering campaign began at the backs of the longships – “Brother Brian has gotten us lost!”

‘Now, while it is true that Brother Brian the Devout and Handy with Numbers was tasked with getting the Vikings safely to and from the lands of the west he had another task. Another *secret* task.’

Granny Miller unfastened her seat belt and pulled down her tray table.

The Millers were all together in the middle of the plane in a row of four seats. Granny had taken off her hat and coat upon entering the plane and Dani could see that she was wearing her stretchy trousers.

‘Granny,’ Mummy said, ‘you’re not supposed to pull down your tray table until they serve the food, it’s not safe in the event of an emergency landing.

Just at that precise moment, a very smiley, very tanned airhostess turned out of the airplane galley pushing a trolley piled high with trays of food.

‘You were saying, Mummy?’ Granny smiled at Mummy.

Mummy smiled and said, ‘nevermind!’

The airhostess pushed her trolley down the aisle, handing out trays of food. ‘Chicken or beef?’ she said to Granny with a big smile when she got to their row.

‘Yes please,’ Granny said, smiling back at her. The airhostess held the chicken tray in one hand and the beef tray in the other. She looked confused.

‘You can just put them both down here, thank you,’ Granny said. The air hostess looked at Granny. Granny did not break eye contact. The air hostess shrugged and put both trays in front of Granny,

‘Oh, and the vegetarian option too please,’ Granny said, pushing the chicken tray halfway on top of the beef tray to make room for the vegetarian. She turned back to Dani and Ruairi and continued with her story before the airhostess had a chance to object.

‘It was long known that in the middle of the north-most seas,’ Granny continued, as though she hadn’t been interrupted at all, ‘between the homelands of the Danes and the far off lands, below the turn in the world but above the craggy cliffs of Scotch Land, lay an island. This island was often the subject of the songs and tales of the court Skalder—’

Ruairi said ‘Granny, I can’t remember what the skadler is. Chicken please. Just the chicken.’

‘The Skalder, Ruairi, is the person who entertains the court of the King with fantastical songs and folk-tales of famous battles and celebrated warriors. He sings tales of star-crossed lovers and bewitched merchants, of enchanted mysteries and of Valhalla the great hall of the dead. The songs and tales told and sung at the court became widely known among the all the people in the land of the Danes. Most of the stories would have been told in one form or another for generations in every house no matter how humble, and every castle no matter how grand, in all the land.

‘The stories were rarely written down, people weren’t always able to write then, and so the stories often changed or were embellished with the retelling. They got more and more fantastical and amazing and were eventually dismissed as fairy tales and myths. No less entertaining for that, but to say that they were not taken as the fact of the matter would be a way of saying it.’

‘Pardon?’ Ruairi said.

‘They weren’t to be believed, Ruairi. It was probably true that there was some basis of fact in all of the stories but they had been retold and re-sung and re-enacted so many times by so many people who added their own little flourish here, their own little exaggeration there, that no one could say precisely what was true about the stories, and what was not.

‘One of King Dudo’s favourite stories when he was a little boy was of an enchanted island cloaked in secrecy, hidden in the waves of bitter-cold seas. It was said to be home to all the gold and jewels of all the Viking warriors that had lived in the hundreds of years before the time of the story. The island was called Yondersaay.’

This was always the part of Granny’s stories Dani and Ruairi liked best. They felt that Yondersaay was in some way their home, their island, although Dani and Ruairi had not been born on Yondersaay. They were born at the far corners of the earth because Mummy and Daddy moved around a lot for Daddy’s work. All the same, it said ‘Yondersaanian’ on their passports in the box beside ‘nationality’. And of course they looked like Yondersaanians. Ruairi had the dark copper hair of his father. Mummy was not a Yondersaanian but was often mistaken for one, with the same lighter, blonder, red hair that Dani had. And they all had the light-coloured eyes, blue for Mummy, grey for Ruairi, green for Daddy and Dani, and the pale complexions that were characteristic of that part of the world.

Granny went on with her tale about the enchanted island. ‘Now, the story goes, this lost island in the middle of the seas, close to the homelands of the Vikings, but not too close, close to other pillaged lands, but not too close, happened to be the place that, for hundreds of years, Viking warriors had gone to to bury their armour, weaponry and wealth in preparation for the afterlife in Valhalla, the hall of the dead.

‘It was well known, undisputed and unquestioned, among the Vikings that after death warriors would meet again in Valhalla in preparation for one great final battle. It was also well known, undisputed and unquestioned, that anything a Viking buried in his earthly life would become his again when he reached Valhalla. And so it was that every Viking, before he died, sometimes a long time before he died, would bury his favourite weapons and his most prized

jewels, all his most coveted possessions, in preparation for his final battle in Valhalla. Some enterprising Vikings got into the habit of putting a bit of every plunder aside to bury, and went about burying a little at a time over many years, a Viking pension, so to speak.

‘It was in the perfect position. Just that little bit out of the way and easily missed unless you knew where to look.

‘The riches buried there were legendary, sung about the world over by the Skalders and other story tellers. They were said to include the most intricate and exquisite objects ever invented, created, mined, styled or carved. Some of the weaponry dated back to the first ever pieces of forged iron, and other pieces displayed the most modern sophistication.

‘The treasures were not just things that happened to be found lying around or crafted here or there, oh no. It was widely believed that Yondersaay was the chosen burial place of The Gifts of Odin, and not all of them were of this world, I can tell you. Some of the gifts that were specifically crafted for Odin, the Father of all the Vikings, and given to him throughout his many life-times, were imbued with enchantments and powers. These gifts were given to Odin by other Gods.

‘Some of the presents, of course, were from mere mortals and their value was more sentimental than monetary. Other gifts were simply impossibly beautiful. You’ll have heard of course of some of the gifts, like The Black Heart of the Dragon’s Eye, The Violaceous Amethyst, The Tome of Tiuz, and the Fjorgyn Thunderbolt, but there were other, more obscure gifts, for instance the Sword of Lapis Lazuli and its mate the Asiatic Shield, the Cup of Memory, and many many others.

‘It wasn’t long before it became known the world over that this island in the middle of the north-most seas was home to world’s greatest treasures. To ensure that the island would not be sacked and plundered of its treasure, an enchantment was cast upon it by Odin, God of the Vikings. The island disappeared from sight and became almost unreachable.

‘The Skalder’s tale goes that a great king would one day breach the island’s enchanted fortresses. A lone warrior with neither weaponry nor army, with no council to advise him and

no magic to aid him, would conquer the jewel-filled island and become its King and Master. It is not known how he was to achieve it, what power or ruse he would employ, what deal he would strike, or indeed who he would fight or duel. It was simply known that somehow, this lone man, this great man, would prevail. The island and all its wealth would be freely bestowed upon him. So the Skalder's tale goes.

'King Dudo was an intelligent man. He doubted that there was such a thing as an enchanted island in the middle of the seas stuffed full of gold and jewels. Nevertheless he did think there was a possibility, a tiny possibility, that there was an island off the beaten track that had remained undiscovered for many years, which might, just might, be a nice place to go and have a look around. And who knew, there might be some pleasant looking trinkets buried there.

'It was with this in mind that King Dudo the Mightily Impressive enlisted the famous monk Brother Brian the Devout and Handy with Numbers.

'Brother Brian had been working for King Dudo for some time and had been researching the island. He scrupulously documented all known tales and songs about the island and cross-referenced them with other similar stories from other lands and put together all the information he found that pertained to the island. Specifically, to the location of the island.

'He spent months working on his calculations. He drew up charts, he plotted graphs, and he consulted the leading astronomers of the day to double check his maps of the skies. When he felt he knew the exact location of the enchanted island he sent a messenger pigeon from his monastery to King Dudo's castle with the news. He set out straight away for the upper lands to lead King Dudo the Mightily Impressive on his quest.

'King Dudo had asked Brother Brian to keep all of this hush-hush. He didn't want his men to think he believed in fairy-tales. They were just going to go out of their way a little to look for the island, and if they didn't find it, no harm done, they'd be in the western lands before they knew it. Brother Brian, although a monk who wore a habit that looked a lot like a dress, was no less concerned about his reputation among the Viking men. He was also very pleased to be on first name terms with the most powerful man in the land, so he gave King Dudo a quick

wink and assured him that yes, of course, this would be their little secret. Brother Brian had never been in battle but he had often seen warriors smash their forearms together in celebration or in a show of camaraderie. He raised his right forearm to give King Dudo such a Forearm Smash, but King Dudo was having none of this. He walked away and left Brother Brian hanging. Brother Brian pretended that all he had really wanted was to wave to someone who was walking by a little way off. The man he waved to smiled uncertainly and waved back. Brother Brian went on his way whistling nonchalantly, but all the same, he was relieved there had been no other Brothers about to see.'

Granny had to shout now because of the noise of the wind on the gangplank of the ferry that she and Dani and Ruairi and Mummy were now boarding. Granny was eating a steaming hot pie that Mummy had gotten for her in a sailor bar in the port. They shuffled up the gangplank, all huddled close together, in their winter clothes.

'About three weeks into the voyage,' Granny continued once they were all settled aboard their ship, 'a few days after the warriors started wondering why they hadn't found land yet, dusk fell on a clear calm ocean. The night was full of light from the crystalline moon and the monk turned a little in his position in the prow of the lead longship and made a long slow nod of the head towards King Dudo, closing his eyes as his head reached its lowest position.

'It was a very cool move. Brother Brian had been practicing it in his head for *weeks*. He turned back to the waters in front of him and waited for King Dudo to make his way forward from his position in the stern where he was surveying his fleet, and take his seat beside him.

"We are close," Brian said to Dudo and looked to the stars and back down at the books and scrolls and charts laid all about him, "all my information, all my years of training, all my expertise tell me, we are very close."

'The boat glided quietly and slowly through the water. Most of the Vikings were sleeping, and just a skeleton night crew bore them onwards through the water. The night was

clear and bright. The moon was up and the stars were near. The ocean was flat and calm. Not so much as a seabird disturbed the stillness of the night. The monk and the King looked all around; it felt to them that they could see for miles. If the island was here, they would see it.

‘They looked and looked. An hour passed, then two. But no land came into view. All of a sudden King Dudo swung his head around to the left.

“‘Ssh!” he said. Brother Brian swivelled his gaze around and looked hard but he could see nothing.

“‘It sounded like—’ King Dudo said and then stopped short.

“‘Like what, my Lord?’ Brian asked.

“‘Oh, nothing, it’s ridiculous, for a minute there I thought I heard something that sounded like children laughing. It’s nothing. The ocean is playing tricks on my mind. Ok, enough of this. We’ve looked. It’s not here. Let’s get my men to land.’”

‘The monk did as King Dudo said and altered the course of the fleet of longships. King Dudo didn’t notice that Brother Brian went pale when he told him he had heard laughing children. Brian turned away immediately and marked their location in their charts. He would never, *ever* be coming this way again.

‘You see, Brother Brian, being devoutly religious, was also a deeply superstitious man. In the land where he grew up, it was widely believed that to hear a voice and not to be able to see the body that the voice came from was a sign that you were being haunted by a ghost. The most terrifying ghost stories Brother Brian had ever heard started with the disembodied laughter of a child.

‘Because King Dudo had heard disembodied children’s voices and Brother Brian had immediately marked their position on his charts, no one would, on purpose, come across this spot again for hundreds and hundreds of years. This was because, when Brother Brian made it back to his monastery in the lower lands, he wrote a book of maps based on his travels with the Danes. This book, ‘Brother Brian’s north-most sea excursions – hospitable hostelries and bloodiest battle grounds,’ became the best-selling book about the area and was reprinted edition

after edition. At the back of the book was an extensive glossary with maps and directions and all of them studiously avoided this particular little patch of haunted ocean. So every traveller who travelled the north-most seas and who used Brother Brian's Excursions book as their guide, and the publishing house will brag that that is absolutely everyone who travelled the north-most seas, followed Brother Brian's routes. And *all* of Brother Brian's routes avoided this spot.

'Brother Brian, convinced that he had made a terrible mistake in his calculations spent the rest of the voyage, when he wasn't navigating, going over his charts and calculations. At the end of a month's recalculations Brian found that he had indeed made a mistake. He slapped his forehead. It was a stupid error. He vowed to beg King Dudo's forgiveness, if King Dudo were ever to be found alive, of course. "I'm terribly sorry, my Liege," he would say, if it turned out that King Dudo hadn't died a gruesome and bloody death like everyone believed, "I beg your mercy and forgiveness. It is to my shame and embarrassment that I admit to a heedlessness and recklessness in my long division and multiplication. It appears I forgot to carry the two."

'I'm very sorry to interrupt, Granny,' Dani said as she handed her passport over to be stamped at passport control.

'Yes dear?' Granny Miller asked squeezing through the space between the control booths. Ruairi, putting all his strength into it, gave her a big push until she popped out the other side. She put her newly stamped passport into her handbag and led the way into the arrivals hall.

'I'm sorry Granny, but wasn't King Dudo in the boat with Brother Brian just a minute ago? Why does Brother Brian think that King Dudo died a gruesome death?'

'A gruesome and *bloody* death,' Ruairi said in a scary voice, putting his passport back in his inside pocket beside all his boarding passes.

'I haven't gotten to that part yet,' Granny said. 'If you'd listened carefully, you'd have heard me say that Brother Brian took a month of sweating over his calculations to find out what mistake he'd made with his sums.'

'Yes, I remember that bit,' Dani said.

‘Well, a lot can happen in a month, Dani. Now, may I continue?’ Granny Miller looked around at Mummy and Ruairi and Dani who all said ‘Yes, please.’

‘Now,’ Granny Miller said as the Millers made their way from the arrivals hall up two flights on the escalator to the departures hall where they stood in the queue to get on their next flight. ‘Where was I? Oh yes, I remember.

‘Leading the fleet of longships away from the patch of water that had terrified him out of his wits, Brother Brian beckoned in a north-westerly direction towards a jutting headland familiar to all who had travelled this way with King Dudo before. They arrived as the sun rose. The Vikings had camped here in the past when they had travelled west. The land was cold and inhospitable; there were no settlements here. However, the Vikings were able to find shelter and were confident they would find something to hunt in the nearby forest.

‘All ashore, the men set up camp and made ready for their first meal on land in a very long time. The plan was not to stay here but to recuperate over the next few days for the onward journey. They would make any necessary repairs to their ships and stock up on water and whatever food they could find.

‘The nearby forest was one of snow-covered trees that began inland a ways from the bay. A team was dispatched to bring firewood to the camp and to begin the hunt for fresh meat to eat.

‘A man of action, Dudo was of this party. He was not one to hang back and leave the dull or arduous tasks to his men. When they reached the trees, three men set about gathering wood into slings to drag back to camp. The rest fanned out as silently as they could manage given the crispness of the icy snow underfoot, to try to come upon some woodland animals to hunt. King Dudo positioned himself on the flank of the group and they all fanned ever wider, creeping their way softly into the depths of the forest. Each man knew his duty and knew the position of the other men. They had hunted together in this manner before.

‘King Dudo heard a rustling noise just ahead and off to the right. He fell back and around in a wider circle along the edge of the forest and signalled his intentions to his men.

They altered the course of their circle and tightened around the spot where their King had heard the noise. King Dudo crouched down and moved silently, expertly, approaching the area he had pinpointed as the location of the animal that had made the noise.

‘Reaching the edge of the field of trees, coming out alone from the dimness of the forest canopy, King Dudo found himself in a clearing between the brown dankness of the trees and the blue stillness of the sea. It was such a beautiful place. There were trees to his left and where he stood now was a hollow of white. To his right was the sea. There was nothing else.

‘King Dudo, distracted by the beauty of this place, walked away from the trees, across the white hollow, towards the water. His men continued forwards in their hunting circle, not noticing the King had wandered out of position. King Dudo looked out across the vast ocean towards his homelands. He tried to imagine what his Danish subjects were doing at that precise moment – sleeping, eating, or working in the fields. In that instant he considered himself to be a lucky man. He had sailed the waves, he had explored foreign lands, and he had seen beauty of a kind most of his subjects couldn’t imagine.

‘King Dudo was startled out of his reverie by a low grumbling noise not twenty feet behind him. He turned, slowly and quietly. Before him a giant white bear padded noiselessly out of the woods. The King looked at the bear and the bear looked back. The bear bared its teeth and juices slavered from them.

‘King Dudo was trapped. There was no escape. He could not go back – there was only icy cold water behind him; he could not go forward – there was only the bear; and the hollow was a narrow one, there was no space to go around. He stood as still as he could, trying his best to come up with a plan. He could not call out to his men for fear of startling or angering the white bear.

‘The bear continued towards King Dudo, and slowly made its way down into the hollow of white. As it did so King Dudo the Mightily Impressive heard the loudest CRACK he had ever heard, and felt the earth move beneath his feet.

‘I CAN’T HEAR YOU VERY WELL NOW, GRANNY,’ Dani shouted to her great great great Grandmother, who was seated right beside her, on top of their luggage and thousands of boxes, in the hold of the cargo plane that was taking them on the next stage of their journey.

‘LET’S WAIT ‘TIL WE LAND,’ Granny shouted back. ‘WE’RE NEARLY THERE NOW.’

‘WHAT DID YOU SAY?’ Ruairi shouted at Granny.

‘WE’RE NEARLY THERE!’ Granny said.

‘WHAT?’ Mummy shouted over the noise of the engines of the tiny plane. Granny pointed out the window at the airport building that every second appeared closer.

University of Cape Town

Dudo and the Bear

‘The hollow started to shift,’ Granny said once they’d landed and had walked across the tarmac into the airport building. ‘It looked as though the white hollow of earth with his weight and now with the weight of the massive white bear, had broken clean off from the rest of the earth. And had started to drift away.

‘The loud crack was not heard only by King Dudo. Immediately there were the voices of his men from the trees, and the sounds of twigs breaking and branches being pushed aside and he knew they were coming to him. He hoped they would not get to him too late.

‘The loud crack was not heard only by King Dudo and his men. The white bear was standing just beyond the fissure and was terrified by the loud split and the movement of the ground beneath him. Full of anger and fear, the enormous white bear reared itself up on its hind legs and bellowed a deafening roar directly into the face of brave King Dudo the Mightily Impressive.

‘The roar was loud enough and angry enough and scary enough to spread a ripple of terror through the men who were now rapidly approaching the edge of the woods and the space where the white hollow used to be. The warriors got to the edge of the earth just in time to see their Lord and King float gently away on a partial glacier. His only company was an enormous, ravenous, snow-white polar bear.

‘One of the warriors was so intent on saving his King that he jumped straight into the water. He was stunned so badly by the icy cold that he could not swim, he could not move. In fact, he required his own rescue party. Two men remained behind to save their overzealous comrade while the rest ran at full speed to their fellows on the beach. They shouted as loudly as they could to raise the alarm even before they were in sight.

‘All available men took to their boats. The rowers sliced the water with all their strength and ploughed through the waves in the direction of King Dudo and the white bear. They put their full might into each stroke of the oar, cutting through the blue water like hot swords through melting ice.

‘Men ran along the decks of the boats casting about for signs of their King. The fleet headed straight out for the open seas. Suddenly their visibility was hampered by a heavy fog. A thick grey fog had been resting atop the trees since they had set foot on land and had been threatening to descend for as long as they had been on the headland. And now, at this most crucial of moments, the promise was fulfilled and the fog tumbled down past them. It stirred up the waves and blocked their view entirely.

‘This Viking squad was a hardy bunch and desperation did not set in immediately. They kept on their course. They took turns shouting for their King and remaining quiet listening for responses. But they heard nothing. Not a sound but their own shrieks and eventually their own sighs of despair.

‘What was that dear?’ Granny stopped her story abruptly and turned towards Dani and Ruairi.

Dani and Ruairi looked at each other and at Granny Miller.

‘What?’ Ruairi asked.

‘What did you say my dear, did you ask me something?’

‘No, Granny,’ Ruairi said, ‘nobody said a thing.’

‘Oh! I could have sworn.... oh well, if you say you didn’t say anything... if you’re sure now.’

‘No, Granny, we didn’t so much as open our mouths,’ Dani said.

‘Ok, well, if you’re sure. Now. Where was I? Oh yes,’ and Granny settled back into the comfiness of the armchair in the corner of the departure lounge and sipped the cocoa Mummy had bought her at the coffee shop.

‘And so it was that King Dudo’s lifeless body washed up on the unfamiliar shore of an unfamiliar land in the middle of the north-most seas.’

‘NOOOOO!’ Dani and Ruairi called out together.

‘What, my dears?’ Granny Miller calmly looked over her glasses as Dani and Ruairi jumped up from where they had been lying on the floor of the airport concourse propped up on the backpacks they carried as hand luggage.

‘No Granny,’ Dani said, ‘that’s not where we were, we were floating away on the ice with the bear, and the Vikings, and the fog, and they Vikings were calling out trying to find King Dudo.’

‘Is he dead?’ Ruairi whispered sadly to his mother. Mummy shrugged. She didn’t know.

‘Oh yes, that’s right, that’s right. Well. They didn’t find him,’ Granny said and continued.

‘And so it was that King Dudo’s lifeless body washed up on the unfamiliar shore of an unfamiliar—’

‘But the bear, Granny, what about the bear?’ Dani asked.

‘Yes Granny, the bear, what happened with the bear?’ Ruairi wanted to know.

Granny was looking a little confused now, ‘What bear now?’ she asked.

‘The bear! The ravenous snow white bear!’ Dani and Ruairi called out.

‘The ravenous bear... the ravenous bear. No. Doesn’t ring a bell,’ Granny said.

‘The big white bear that broke off from the land with King Dudo, the one with the fangs and the slavering and the...the... big-ness,’ Ruairi said demonstrating how big the bear was with his arms.

‘Oh, right, I’m with you now. *That* bear. The *ravenous* bear. Yes, but,’ Granny paused. ‘Are you sure you want to hear about the bear?’ Granny looked at the two of them. They nodded at her.

‘It’s just that, well, I thought maybe you’d rather not hear about the bear. Ruairi was looking a bit queasy and Dani was getting very agitated when I started talking about the bear. Maybe you’re not old enough for the bear story yet, it can get quite gruesome. It looked like it was getting to be a bit too much for you.’

Dani and Ruairi sat down and tried to look as un-agitated and un-queasy as they possibly could.

‘Oh no, Granny,’ Dani said, ‘we’re not agitated or queasy or anything, no, not at all, we were just worried that maybe the hot chocolate wasn’t chocolatey enough for you Granny, or that you maybe needed another pie, that’s what had gotten us worried Granny.’

‘Yeah,’ Ruairi went on, ‘not the bear, no way, I couldn’t care less about the bear. In fact, if you don’t tell us about what happened on the hollow with the ravenous, slavering, snow white bear we won’t mind one bit, not one bit, only—’

‘Only?’ Granny looked amused.

‘Only,’ Dani went on, ‘it might get a bit confusing later on, you know if there are details pertinent to the rest of the story and we don’t know about them. It would probably be good background, for later on, you understand.’

‘Ah, yes, I see, for later on. Yes, I understand,’ Granny said and flashed a quick smile at Mummy.

‘Well in that case, ok.’ And Granny muttered to herself, ‘the fog, the Vikings shouting, the ravenous bear... yes, yes. I know where we are but we’ll have to pause a few minutes, they’ve just announced our flight. This is the last one my younglings, the next time we set foot on land, we will be on Yondersaay.’

The Ravenous Bear

‘King Dudo stood perfectly still on the edge of the ice floe,’ Granny said, as soon as they were all settled on the Yonderair flight to Yondersaay, and she had unbuckled her seat belt and lowered her tray table. ‘You’re both sure you’re old enough to hear this story?’

‘YES!’ Dani and Ruairi said, and then more calmly, ‘well, ok, if you want to.’ Mummy looked towards the galley and saw the Yonderair steward roll the dinner cart out of the galley kitchen and into their aisle. Mummy was watching out for it - Granny Miller had lowered her tray table mere seconds before every meal was served on every flight they’d been on all day.

‘Dudo studied the bear and the bear studied Dudo,’ Granny went on. ‘Staying as still as he could he went through a list of options in his head. Could he fight the bear? King Dudo looked at the massive creature. It was twice the width of the King, at least. On his hind legs it was over three times as high. It was also powerfully built, sinewy and strong. One swipe from one of those paws would be enough to knock the life out of the biggest, strongest Viking in King Dudo’s army.

‘Dudo thought about wrong-footing the bear and trying to get him to lose his balance and fall into the water. But he had noticed the bear’s poise and elegance when it had padded so gracefully out of the woods to face him. This animal was equally at home on the ice and in the water. There was no way King Dudo could get this magnificent creature, who had spent all of its life walking and running on snow and ice, to lose its balance. And even if somehow, against all probability, King Dudo managed to get the bear to topple into the water, there would be nothing, absolutely nothing, to stop the bear from simply floating to the surface again, swimming back to the ice, and climbing back to where it was now, standing growling in front of him. Nothing in the world.

‘So, attacking, no. Wrong-footing, not a chance. Escape? King Dudo had seen what had happened to his brave but foolish warrior who had jumped into the water to save him. The

King could not spend more than a few minutes in the water and survive. He would perish in the icy waters.

‘So what to do? Was there any chance the bear would decide King Dudo was not a threat and would leave him alone? Maybe. If it had just eaten its fill, but this bear was simply too big and too angry and too hungry-looking to leave him alive. And King Dudo, if you remember, had just spent weeks and weeks in a very uncomfortable boat with not that much to eat. He was hungry himself, and weary and weak.

‘In all his travels King Dudo had never seen an animal as big and as powerful as this before. He had no idea if trying to calm the bear and convince it to leave him alone was his best option. It seemed to be his best option, but how he would go about convincing it he wasn’t at all tasty?

‘King Dudo had heard that lullabies sometimes work to calm domesticated and farm animals ahead of a procedure by an animal-doctor. King Dudo was hesitant, however, to give singing a go. For one thing, his men might hear him and think he was bonkers – he heard them calling out for him. He hadn’t heard them in a while, but he was sure they could not be too far away.

‘And for another thing, he didn’t have the most beautiful singing voice in the Land of the Danes. In fact he possibly had about the worst singing voice that had ever been heard. So he rejected that idea out of hand.

‘King Dudo was counting out all his options on his fingers when he heard the bear snarl at him. The big white bear came back down onto four legs and, growling, quietly inched closer and closer across the ice.

‘King Dudo stood stock still, and never once taking his gaze off the bear. He threw all his doubts out of his mind, and acting automatically, without thinking much about it, with as much vigour and energy as he could muster.... opened his mouth and started to sing.

‘When King Dudo was a little boy and was upset by someone in the playground, or was low with an illness, his mother would come to him to soothe him and comfort him. The song

she sang to him all those thousands of nights ago was a song he had neither heard nor thought about for many many years. It was a song of love, but it was also a lament. The song spoke of the depth of love one feels for someone and how that love changes year after year, slowly over time, and eventually becomes something else. Something less.

‘The song spoke of how bright the first flames of love are, of how much control that love has over the heart of the person who has just fallen intensely in love. The song was about how helplessly, devotedly, overwhelmingly in love you are when you first find your Heart’s True Love.

‘But the song was not just a simple love song. It was also a lament, a deeply sad song. For it didn’t only speak of the power love exerts over you, but how despicable and flighty love can be. The song was about how love can fade. And not about how *your* love can fade, that would be bearable. It was about the love your Heart’s True Love feels for *you*, how it can shrivel up and disappear, leaving you desperate, distressed, and alone.

‘As Dudo sang the song it occurred to him for the first time that when his mother sang that song to him, maybe she was not singing of the love between two people who had found their Heart’s True Love. Maybe she was singing of the love he had for her. The love of a little boy, or girl for that matter, has for their Mummy has no equal. And yet, as the years go by, the little boy or little girl becomes independent. They don’t need their Mummy quite so much anymore. Their love for her changes, fading maybe. The child doesn’t notice of course, but the Mother’s heart breaks a little bit every day.

‘Or maybe the song was about two lovers who drift apart over the years and never get back the intensity of the love they felt when they first met.’

‘The bear was at first perplexed by King Dudo’s singing and stopped in his tracks. He cocked his head to the side as though trying to figure out what was happening, why was his lunch behaving in this strange manner?

‘King Dudo closed his eyes and sang the chorus of his song. Feeling that this was his last moment alive he sang, and he felt the song. And in feeling the song, he felt the loss his

mother must have felt when he grew up and grew away from her. And, acutely, he felt the loss of never having experienced a love of his own. King Dudo was not a married man and was no longer very young. Nevertheless, before this day, he still held a profound belief that one day he would meet his Heart's True Love. He thought of his parents' love for each other, which was still as strong as the day they first laid eyes on each other and knew they had found their Heart's True Love. And he thought of their love for him, as unblemished and pure as the white of this bear's fur.

'And in singing his song King Dudo found himself wishing a lost hopeless wish that he had the chance to spend a year, a month, a day even, with his own Heart's True Love. He sang and he wished. He wished and he sang. "Let me live to spend a year, a month, a day even, with my Heart's True Love."

'King Dudo was approaching the end of the song. There were two other verses but he couldn't remember them. He considered starting from the beginning again, since it seemed to be working – he was still alive. Instead he hummed a bit after the song had ended and slowly went quiet.

'He couldn't hear anything. The snarling was gone. The growling had stopped. There was no soft padding of paws on snow and ice even.

'Slowly, King Dudo opened one eye. And then the other.

'The bear was no longer there.

'In its place on the ice before King Dudo, was not the enormous, angry, ravenous polar bear. Instead, there stood, wet and dripping, a woman!

The Woman on the Ice

Granny grabbed the arm of a passing Yonderair steward and said, in as sweet a way as she could, ‘you wouldn’t mind grabbing me an extra few packets of peanuts, would you? I’m peckish.’

‘Certainly madam,’ he said and went to get them for her.

‘Really, a woman?’ Dani said.

‘Are you sure?’ Ruairi said.

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ Granny said. The steward came back and handed Granny a few packets of peanuts. ‘The woman’s skin was as white as the bear’s fur had been. Her hair was long and wild and a shade of red King Dudo had never seen before. Her eyes were a piercing blue and were focussed straight on him. She was standing before him wearing only a thin dress, soaking and shivering, wet from head to toe.’

‘NO WAY!!’ Ruairi said jumping up on his seat. ‘Did the bear turn into a woman? Did the bear become a woman, did it, Granny? Did it?’

‘Was it his wish coming true?’ Dani asked, ‘Did the bear turn into his Heart’s True Love?’

‘But then,’ Ruairi looked puzzled, ‘then, why did King Dudo’s lifeless body wash up on the shore of the hidden island?’

‘Ah,’ Granny Miller said, ‘that’s a very good question. And it’s very simple to answer. King Dudo could not believe his eyes. The bear was somehow gone, and in its place stood a woman. The woman stretched out one arm to him and took a step towards King Dudo. King Dudo was startled out of his wits. He instinctively let out a cry and took a step backwards. But there was nothing behind him to land on, so King Dudo tumbled head over heels into the coldest, iciest water he’d ever had the misfortune to plunge head over heels into. He somersaulted round and round in the air. Seconds before his body made contact with the icy waves he smacked his head on the edge of the floating ice. The woman raced to the edge of the little white island. She knelt down and thrust her arm after King Dudo into the water to try to

catch him. She almost had him when a wave came under the island rocking it up and sweeping King Dudo out of her reach.

‘The sea had been calm, as you know, and it was still relatively calm, but King Dudo and the bear had floated a long way and he was now close to the shore of a land different to the one he had broken off from. The tide was going in. King Dudo, stunned by the fall and the shock of the cold and the bang to his head was unconscious in the water.

‘The woman on the ice regained her balance as soon as that first wave had passed. She stood up again and made the most elegant dolphin-like dive into the water. She swam down and down beneath the waves forming above her head. She spotted King Dudo drifting downwards. She darted after him and grabbed King Dudo’s hand. She swam up to the surface and with all her might hauled him up behind her. The woman swam towards shore holding King Dudo’s face safely out of the water so he could breathe. She dragged him onto land and laid him safely on the sandy beach as far from the water’s edge as she could.’

‘Wow,’ Ruairi said.

‘Wow indeed, Ruairi,’ Granny said.

‘King Dudo woke up on a crisp clear morning in a strange bed. He made to rise but felt a searing pain in his head. He rose slowly leaning on some furniture. Once on his feet, a wooziness came over him and he settled back down on the bed. He half lay, half sat, propped up on the softest, plumpest, most luxurious duck-down pillows he had ever felt.

‘Though of course King Dudo didn’t know them as pillows, they weren’t called pillows, they were called downdles. Pillows were not invented yet. As you know, pillows were invented in a small hospital town in 1427 in the south of France by a pioneering Polish surgeon called Docteur Tchopemov.

‘Docteur Tchopemov had specialised in amputations like most respectable physicians in Europe at the time.’

‘Um Granny?’

‘Yes, Dani?’

‘I’m sure the story of Docteur Tchopemov is utterly fascinating, I really am. I’m positive in fact, but do you think you should tell us now?’

‘What do you mean Dani?’

‘Maybe,’ Ruairi said, ‘you could tell us about Dudo first of all and then come back to the story about how pillows were invented?’

‘Well,’ Granny said, ‘It’s not a vital part of the story, I will grant you that,’ Granny said. ‘But actually, now that you stop me a moment, I think I would rather like to have a wee rest before we land on Yondersaay, if you don’t mind. I’m pooped,’ and Granny Miller she pinned up her tray table and pressed the button on the arm rest that made her chair swing back almost flat.

‘But Granny, we do mind! What about the rest of the story?’ Dani said.

‘What about King Dudo, and the woman who turned into a bear?’ Ruairi said.

‘Ursula?’ Granny Miller asked from a fully reclined position. She let out a big yawn, ‘but I’ve already told you about all of that, no?’ Dani and Ruairi shook their heads.

‘It’s been a very long day,’ Granny Miller said, ‘and we’ll be there before you know it. A quick rest and Robert’s your mother’s brother.’

‘But Granny,’ Dani said, ‘we can’t leave it, the suspense will *kill* us. And Mummy’s brother is called Tony.’

‘Forget it,’ Ruairi said, ‘we’ll have to wait. She’s already asleep. Listen.’

And Granny let out a nasal snore that sounded half like a rocket taking off and half like a kitten purring.

‘Try to get some sleep, my darlings,’ Mummy said, ‘Granny’s right, it has been a long day. We’ll be on Yondersaay very soon now.’

Landing on Yondersaay

Daniela didn't remember falling asleep, and neither did Ruairi.

'It's time to wake up now, folks,' Granny Miller said as she roused them. 'We're here. We're finally here on Yondersaay.'

Ruairi and Dani woke up and looked around them. 'You know,' Granny said as she wrapped her scarf around and around her neck, 'Not very many people have ever been to Yondersaay. And if they have, they always tell me that they fell asleep on the plane and forgot how long they were in the air. They look back, out the window, to see the cliffs at the top of the country they're flying from, and then the sea splashes up and they fall asleep. Strange no?'

'And no ordinary people every come to Yondersaay, only people who are invited. From the ground when people look up at a Yonder Air plane, I've been told, it looks as though it's flying backwards, not moving forwards at all. Its nose is pointed straight up,' and Granny stuck her nose in the air. 'The wings are all poised to glide,' and Granny threw out her arms, 'but you never see it moving up. True story!'

The Millers' plane was the only plane at the landing strip. The plane door opened and a powerful blast of icy wind sent a ripple of shivers, like a Mexican wave, down the plane among the passengers. If anyone had forgotten, they were quickly reminded that it was cold on Yondersaay in the wintertime. The Millers dressed up warm for the two-minute walk down the steps of the plane at the end of the runway into the tiny terminal building. Ruairi loved the crunch his boots made on the layers of snow on the ground and he loved the way the soft flakes of snow landed on his face and melted into mush. The first thing Ruairi always noticed was that there weren't any trees as far as the eye could see. But he always forgot again when he was back at home, so noticing the lack of trees every time he came to Yondersaay was always a bit of a surprise for him. As far as he knew, there were only three or four trees on the entire island.

When the Millers got inside the terminal building, their bags were already there, waiting for them. The terminal building was just one big room, one departures desk, one baggage

carousel, one café, one lost luggage hatch. The carousel didn't move at all, which disappointed Dani as she was hoping to have a go on it when no one was looking.

Dani looked about the hall for super speedy baggage handlers but all she could see were a few really really old people dotted about the place in plastic chairs or wooden benches looking like they had been dropped off en masse at nap-time.

And they all knew Granny Miller. One old man in an old man hat and an old man coat turned his face under his hat to look at Granny Miller and raise his cane a bit. A wrinkly old woman in the corner woke up, waved at Granny Miller, and fell straight back to sleep. Dani looked all around the one big room and saw all the old people saying hello to Granny Miller without actually getting up and saying hello to Granny Miller. She turned around to watch Granny Miller smile or nod back. It was difficult to tell if Granny Miller saw all the hellos because she often did odd things with her face, at least they seemed odd to Dani. And then of course her glasses were so thick that Dani couldn't even see in far enough to see her eyes, and she didn't know how on earth Granny Miller could possibly see out. Then again, Granny Miller did have a habit of bumping into things.

Dani noticed that the man manning the bar wasn't ridiculously old. In fact he wasn't old at all. Nor was the man manning the lost luggage booth. Dani looked at the man manning the bar and back to the man manning the lost luggage booth, and back again.

They seemed to be the same person. The man handing out 'Visit Yondersaay' leaflets – pointless exercise Dani thought since they were already there, visiting Yondersaay – was also identical to them as was the man filling the vending machines and the man outside brushing the new snow from the pathway. Granny could see her looking at them.

'They're the five twins,' she said.

'Twins come in twos, Granny,' Dani said.

'Not these ones. Five of them came at once,' Granny said and walked on before Dani had a chance to object.

The Millers collected their bags, showed their passports to the man in the uniform, and walked outside into the snow to find their car.

‘Hello Margaret,’ Granny Miller said to the person clearing the snow from the path. Dani raised her eyebrows.

Gargle View Cottage

By the time the little mauve car Mummy had hired at the airport turned into the driveway of Granny Miller's country cottage in Yondersaay village it was already dark. It gets dark very early at this time of year, but it was, as a matter of fact, very late. Dani and Ruairi were sleeping in the back seat when the car pulled into the garage. Mummy and Granny Miller were so tired they could hardly remember how long they had been travelling. It seemed like days.

Dani and Ruairi went upstairs to unpack everyone's pyjamas while Mummy went to the kitchen. Prepared, as always, she had brought a few essentials with her in her suitcase to tide everyone over. She made everyone a quick Tea of baked beans on toast while Granny went outside to chop some wood for the fire.

Dani and Ruairi were exhausted but they were so excited to be on Yondersaay that they absolutely knew they wouldn't be able to get to sleep.

'I think we should be allowed to stay up late tonight, Mummy,' Dani said. 'There's absolutely no way we could possibly get to sleep.'

'No way at all,' Ruairi said, stifling a yawn.

Mummy did not agree. 'Darlings, you're exhausted. We're all exhausted. It has been a long long day. Now go upstairs and get ready for bed.'

'But Mummy—'

'That's enough now, you'll thank me tomorrow. You'll be so well rested and will have so much energy that you'll be able to run all over the island and do everything you want to do. I'll be up in a minute to kiss you goodnight. And Ruairi, I will be checking your teeth.'

Ruairi and Dani looked to Granny Miller for an intervention but she was already dozing on the sofa and was no use at all. They trudged upstairs and started to get ready for bed.

Granny Miller was excited to be on Yondersaay too. But her excitement was different to that of Dani and Ruairi. Being on Yondersaay wasn't like a holiday for Granny Miller. This is where she grew up. And even though she didn't get to come here so often any more it still

felt like home. And so, excited though she was, she was very able to fall into a doze on the sofa, and just as able to fall into a deep sleep as soon as she went to bed a few minutes later.

Mummy decided to leave the dishes until the morning; she was sure she would be up hours before everyone else, if she did get to sleep at all. She had a lot on her mind and she slept poorly when she had a lot on her mind.

She went upstairs and kissed her children goodnight and told them how much she loved them. And even though it was abundantly clear that Ruairi had not brushed his teeth but had just rubbed some toothpaste on the front ones so that it smelled like he'd brushed his teeth when she leaned down to kiss him, Mummy did not scold him or make him go back to the bathroom to brush his teeth properly. Instead she cuddled him close and gave Dani a big tickly kiss on her neck.

Mummy didn't go to bed but came back downstairs and lit the fire in the living room. She curled under a blanket on the giant sofa by the window and thought hard about how she would break the bad news to everyone in the morning, that Daddy might not be spending Christmas with them this year after all.

She sat thinking and thinking in front of the fire. Eventually the flickering of the flames had a hypnotic effect. Slowly, she drifted off.

Mummy was asleep in front of the fire. Granny was asleep in her bed. But no one was asleep in Dani's bed, nor in Ruairi's bed. In fact, there was no one awake in their beds either. Because while Mummy was pottering about downstairs and while Granny was humming to herself in her bedroom as she put on her lacy night-cap and tucked her comfortable slippers under her bed, Dani and Ruairi were putting clothes and coats and hats and scarves and wellies on over their pyjamas and climbing out of their window and onto the roof of the garage.

'If Mummy thinks we could fall asleep now, she's *mad!*' Dani said to Ruairi as they shimmied down the rose trellis on the side of the garage that faced away from the road.

'I know,' said Ruairi as Dani jumped over him and landed on the ground with a soft tumble, 'we only just got here, and it's not even that late.' They looked up at the sky – it was

pitch black. They looked around – the lights were off in all of the houses on Gargle-View Avenue, every-where was quiet except for a solitary owl toowit toowooing softly some way off.

‘I think it probably is quite late Ruairi,’ said Dani.

‘Yeah, but not *that* late,’ he said. ‘Ok, what’s the plan? Where to?’

‘Let’s see if any dead bodies have washed up on the shore. Murdered bodies wash up here all the time. They float in from all over,’ Dani said, frightening Ruairi a little. They vaulted over the garden wall, hunched down and padded as quickly and as quietly as they could in the direction of the harbour.

‘Or we could skim stones across the River Gargle. There will most likely be people at the harbour, fishermen and such-like. We might be seen,’ Ruairi said.

‘Good thinking, Ruairi. Mummy would have a conniption fit if she found out we’d been walking around on our own after dark,’ Dani said. Ruairi looked more than a little relieved.

‘Besides,’ Dani said. ‘Murdered bodies are just as likely to wash up near the mouth of the River Gargle as they are in the harbour.’ And she turned on down the road and smiled a little to herself.

Ruairi was about to suggest going to the Crimson Forest instead but he remembered just in time all those stories he’d been told over the years about how it was haunted. He didn’t want to appear frightened so he caught up with Dani and they made their way to the banks of the River Gargle, by the tidal pool. All the time, Ruairi was trying to come up with ways to convince Dani that they should go somewhere else, somewhere they’d be less likely to come across dead bodies. But he couldn’t come up with anything, so he stuck close to his sister and hoped for the best.

The tidal pool is the ideal place to skim stones. It’s also a brilliant place to swim in the summer time. The river turns a bend at the very bottom of the mountain and then it takes a jump and crashes straight down, turning into a waterfall for a minute. It splashes into a wide, deep pool. The pool is violently turbulent just under the waterfall, so that patch of water is best

avoided. It smoothes out as it comes away, and eventually it flows on past the pool, narrows and becomes a river again until a little while later it opens out again when it meets the sea.

The pool has rocks and boulders all around it. It is the favourite jumping-off-and-into-the-water spot for everyone who likes to jump off things into the water. Some of the rocks and boulders are not very high, some are very high, and yet more are extremely high. On his summer holidays, Ruairi always dived from one of the medium high boulders. Dani always dived from as extremely high a rock as she could get to.

Ruairi was naturally cautious but he would always follow Dani, even if whatever she did scared him witless. Dani would always go first, of course. And if she got hurt, as she often did, Ruairi would tell her to be more careful, but he would always help her invent stories for Mummy and Daddy.

Dani and Ruairi stole up the high street to the crest of the hill and then broke away from the village, turning right before the path to the Crimson Forest, in the direction of the River Gargle. They were almost at the tidal pool when they heard a noise that made them stop in their tracks.

‘I think there’s somebody there,’ Dani whispered.

Ruairi looked a little scared, ‘A murdered body?’

‘Don’t be silly, murdered bodies are dead bodies, they don’t make noise. Let’s go closer and see who it is.’

‘Or we could go back. Maybe we should go back,’ Ruairi said. But Dani was already moving closer. She got down on all fours and crawled to the edge of the river. She could see all around the pool from there.

‘Look, can you see that?’ she said to Ruairi when he joined her. It was very dark by now and they were far away from the lights of the village, but after a second or two of looking hard Ruairi could make out two dark shapes on the other side of the pool.

One was a massive bulking man, slowly weaving up and down the banks of the pool with what looked like an upright vacuum cleaner. Closer to the edge of the pool was another

man. He was very thin, and perhaps it was the way he was standing, but he looked crooked and a bit stooped. He had a very pointy nose and a very pointy chin and he stood there looking on as the massive person heaved himself backwards and forwards waving his vacuum cleaner from side to side. A voice came from further back from the water's edge and Dani and Ruairi saw two more people.

'With all due respect, it's past two a.m. and we have been looking for a solid year now. I think it's time to call it a night,' one of the two men said.

'It must be a metal-detector, they're looking for something,' Dani whispered to Ruairi.

'But why are they looking now, in the dark? They'll never find anything in the dark,' Ruairi said.

'I don't know,' Dani said.

The pointy man turned to face the man who spoke; he addressed him sharply.

'Enough! I know it is here somewhere. I can feel it. The proximity of it simmers the marrow of my bones. We will continue our search here until day-break and tomorrow we will go back through the Crimson Forest one more time and we'll literally comb through every branch, every leaf, literally every—'

He was interrupted by the huge man with the metal-detector.

'Ssssh!' the massive man said and took a step towards the edge of the pool and looked through the darkness across the river towards the spot on the ground where Dani and Ruairi lay.

'What's that?' And he pointed in their direction.

Dani and Ruairi looked at each other accusingly.

'I didn't say anything,' Ruairi said.

'Well neither did I!' said Dani.

'There's something glowing,' the man said. The other three came close to the edge to have a look.

Dani and Ruairi slowly looked down at their winter jackets and they saw, all along the bottom end of their jackets, and all around the necks and around the cuffs, and even in places on their hats and scarves, something was glowing in the dark.

Mummy, who was terrified of anything bad happening to her children, had sewn yards and yards of yellow glow-in-the-dark tape onto every visible inch of their clothing.

‘Mummy!’ they whispered together. They scrambled as fast as they could out of sight of the men and ducked behind a boulder.

‘I don’t see anything,’ the crooked man said.

‘It’s moving! Look!’ the big man called.

As soon as they were out of sight Dani and Ruairi took off their jackets and turned them inside-out. They turned their hats inside out and tucked their scarves well inside the tops of their jackets. They gave each other the once over and when they were sure there was no more reflective material visible they gave each other the thumbs up and got ready to make a run for it.

‘When did she manage to do all this?’ Ruairi said, ‘Granny only gave us our new winter coats this morning.’

‘She must have sewed it on in the plane while we were sleeping,’ Dani said. ‘Sometimes that woman goes too far.’

‘There’s definitely something there,’ the big man said. ‘I’m going to take a look,’ and he started towards the bridge.

That was all Dani and Ruairi needed to hear. They bolted out from behind the boulder and ran as fast as they could, never once looking back, towards the village and home.

Almost out of breath, they ran down the hill, right in the middle of the high street, not caring if they made noise now, and onto Gargle-View Avenue. They jumped over their garden wall and climbed up the rose trellis on the side of the garage. They tumbled through the open window, got undressed and got into bed as quickly as they possibly could.

‘No way did they see who we were,’ Ruairi said.

‘No. Absolutely no way. It was way too dark, and we were quick as lightning – Ruairi you’re getting really fast, I could hardly keep up with you,’ Dani said, genuinely impressed.

‘Thanks Dans,’ Ruairi said and grinned from ear to ear, ‘I think it’s all the broccoli I’ve been eating.’

‘You do eat a lot of broccoli,’ Dani said and they both drifted into a quick and sound sleep.

University of Cape Town

Tarantulafish

As she predicted, Mummy was the first one up next morning. The sun was high in the sky by the time everyone else made it down for breakfast. She had already been out for a morning stroll. Mummy loved coming to Yondersaay. She found the place at once vibrant and peaceful. There was always lots of activity, many people to chat to, tonnes of things to get up to, but it all happened at such a lovely slow pace that she never felt pressured or stressed. Mummy particularly loved the village at dawn when the only people about were the returning fishermen and the odd delivery van. She returned with fresh milk and hot bread out of the baker's oven just as day broke over the harbour. The light of the new day ran up the high street and along the side avenues, across the hill at the top of the village and fell downwards into the Crimson Forest and the River Gargle before bouncing back off the mountain. Mummy loved the orangey-yellow glow of the mountain first thing in the morning.

Dani and Ruairi sprawled out on the rug in front of the fire in the living room eating toast and pretended to read their books while Mummy put some porridge on for them.

'What do you think they were looking for?' Dani asked Ruairi.

'Maybe it was a dead body,' Ruairi said, going pale.

'Why would they be looking for a dead body with a metal detector?' Dani said. 'A dead body wouldn't beep, only something metal would.'

'Maybe it had lots of fillings,' Ruairi said.

'What are you two talking about?' Granny Miller asked from her armchair.

'Nothing, Granny,' Dani and Ruairi said together.

Granny Miller was downloading pictures of puffins and Yondersaay terriers and Yondersaay ponies from the Yondersaay.com gallery page. She had decided the pictures in her city-house hallway needed updating. She, of course, hadn't told anyone just why she thought the pictures of puffins and Yondersaay terriers and Yondersaay ponies in her hallway needed updating. And she had no intention of telling anyone. Ever.

Dani suggested that she and Ruairi would get dressed and go for a walk by the river, just to have another little look around. Ruairi was not sure he wanted to do that.

‘What if they’re still there?’ Ruairi asked.

‘No chance, not in broad daylight,’ Dani said.

Luckily for Ruairi, just as they were getting up to go, Mummy said she had something to tell them.

‘I don’t want you to get upset now guys. But. Daddy may not be coming.’

‘What do you mean may not be coming?’ Ruairi said, ‘why not? He said he’d be right behind us, he said he just had to go to a meeting.’

‘Yes,’ Dani said, ‘he said, it’s unavoidable kids, the blah blah blah has to be signed off before the holidays, but, he said BUT, I’ll get a plane to Helsinki and take a boat from there.’

‘Come hell or high water, he said,’ said Ruairi.

‘Come hell or high water,’ Ruairi and Dani said together, ‘I *will* be with you for Christmas,’

‘He promised!’ Dani said, very upset.

‘Darling you *made* him promise. You wouldn’t leave until he promised. It’s out of my hands, guys, you’ve got to be grown up about it. There’s nothing we can do,’ Mummy said.

‘But there’s plenty of time,’ Dani said. ‘It’s the day before Christmas eve, there are bound to be loads of flights to Helsinki or even Scotland and plenty of time to get a boat.’

‘He promised,’ said Ruairi pushing his toast away from him and determining to refuse his porridge when it came.

‘Come on now guys. If he doesn’t make it here for Christmas it isn’t because he willingly broke his promise to you. It’s because... it’s because...’

‘Yes?’ Dani and Ruairi wanted to know. Granny Miller gave Mummy a look now, her eyebrows went up a bit and her mouth puffed a little. Only Mummy saw it.

‘It’s because of... the tarantulafish!’

‘The what??’

‘The tarantulafish. The waters to the south of the island are tarantulafish infested waters you know.’

‘Rubbish!’ snorted Dani.

‘Nonsense!’ said Ruairi.

‘It’s true. Granny Miller, isn’t it true?’

‘What dear? Tarantulafish, oh yes. Once when I was a little girl it was rumoured that Dougal Mac Laggan went for a swim on the wrong side of the island and got caught in their web. He never came back. Of course, some people say he was actually sent to boarding school on the mainland, but that doesn’t make sense to me. Because if he really just went to boarding school on the mainland then why did he never come back? Answer me that. Everyone always comes back to Yondersaay,’ Granny Miller said and wandered into the kitchen for some more toast, and to see if the porridge was nearly ready. Dani and Ruairi asked her to come back to tell them more but she couldn’t hear them as she hadn’t put in her hearing aid yet.

‘Anyway, say we did believe in Tarantulafish,’ Ruairi said,

‘Which we don’t,’ said Dani,

‘Right, which we don’t,’ said Ruairi, ‘but say we did, what do they have to do with Daddy coming for Christmas?’

‘Good question,’ Mummy said. ‘As you know there’s only one harbour on the island where the big boats can dock safely. And it’s right here in the village, at the bottom of the hill. Usually there are lots of boats coming to and fro, in and out of the harbour, but today all you can see are the little sail boats and fishing boats bobbing away out a bit in the water, anchored to the spot. Look, you can see from the window. Nothing’s coming in. And nothing’s going out,’ Mummy said.

‘Let me guess, the tarantulafish are eating all the boats that try to go in or out,’ Dani was not convinced.

‘Close. They’re not eating the boats, they only eat meat, they’re blocking them. The tarantulafish have a gigantic web under the waves inside a massive burrow where they live for

most of the year. The burrow stretches for miles and miles. It is believed that the beginning of it is quite close to land, but that the end of it is miles out into the ocean. Some people think the burrow starts at the mouth of the River Gargle, where the river runs into the sea. Others think it's just off the Beach of Bewilderment.

'The strands of the web seem to be higher in the water at the moment, dangerously high. A few were spotted by the shrimpers early this morning when they were coming back to dry land after a night in the boats. They only narrowly missed being trapped themselves. I spoke to them myself early this morning. It was all they could do not to about turn and high-tail it right back out to sea. They radioed out a warning and all ferries to and from the island have been suspended until further notice,' Mummy said.

'That won't stop Daddy,' Ruairi said to Dani, 'he'll find a way.'

'Daddy'll be here. I know he will,' Dani said. 'There's always the airport, or the helipad. He can charter a helicopter.'

'If only there wasn't a storm on its way in from the Shetland Isles. Unfortunately, all flights, in all aircrafts, have also been suspended until further notice,' Mummy said. 'And another thing about the tarantulafish, they're constantly disconnecting the phone lines that run under the water between the island and the mainland. They love shiny things and the copper cables are exactly the same weight and thickness as their silk, so they use them as part of their web to line their burrow. And the phone lines are the same lines that provide internet access to the island,' said Mummy. 'I wouldn't be surprised if Daddy wasn't even able to phone us or email us on Christmas day either.'

'Hmmm, funny how we've never heard about these tarantulafish before now. I mean, you make us watch the news headlines every night and never once has the newscaster said anything about tarantulafish,' Dani said.

'Yeah!' said Ruairi, 'not once.'

'That's not the least bit odd,' said Granny Miller, affronted. She was back now with her hearing aid in and with a pile of buttered toast on a plate in one hand and a steaming bowl of

porridge in the other, ‘they are *local* tarantulafish, they belong on the *local* evening news. What would we be doing telling the National news about our tarantulafish, they’re Yondersaay tarantulafish! The idea of it!’

‘Well turn on the local news then Granny,’ Dani said slyly. ‘Let’s see what they have to say about them.’

‘Well wouldn’t you know, we’ve just missed the morning news,’ said Granny.

‘Pity,’ said Mummy.

‘Convenient,’ said Dani.

‘We’ll catch the six o’clock news,’ Granny Miller said. ‘In the meantime the mayor has called the fire brigade onto the case twice because they’re trained for such eventualities, being firemen and all,’ Granny Miller said.

‘Trained to lower burrow entrances and to wrest telephone cables from underwater spider-webs in tarantulafish infested waters?’ Dani asked.

‘Exactly! Um, well, no, not quite. They’re trained in underwater fire fighting,’ Mummy explained.

‘Oh now I know you’re talking rubbish. There’s no such thing as an underwater fire. That’s just impossible,’ Dani said.

‘Improbable certainly. Impossible, not at all,’ Mummy said.

‘Look out the window,’ said Granny Miller. ‘Do you see that mountain?’

‘Yes,’ Dani and Ruairi groaned together.

‘You would have to be positively blind not to notice the mountain,’ Dani said.

‘It’s King Kanute’s Seat,’ said Ruairi.

‘Well it wasn’t always King Kanute’s Seat,’ Granny said, ‘good gracious, do they teach you history at all in that school of yours? A fair while back, when I was a tiny little girl, so, not a year or two ago—’

‘I’ll say,’ Ruairi whispered to Dani.

Granny Miller pretended not to notice and continued, ‘—King Kanute’s Seat was not King Kanute’s Seat but a furiously angry volcano called Volcano Mount Violaceous. Very temperamental, it was. It would erupt at a moment’s notice and spew ash all over the island. The number of times my poor mother had *just* gotten her washing out on the line to dry and what do you know, old Violaceous would have a fit and out would spew this filthy ash and she’d have to haul it all back inside and wash it again from scratch. This was in the days before washing machines, which gives you an idea just how long ago it was. She had to spend a whole day doing the washing all over again.

‘And then, all of a sudden, things changed.

‘One Christmas morning, the island woke up and Volcano Mount Violaceous was no longer angry. The volcano was never what you would call predictable so it was a few days before the Islanders noticed that something was different. There were no rumblings or spewing noises coming down the peaks into the village. All the ash that was already in the air was settling finally and it wasn’t being replaced with new ash. It was like someone had taken a duster to the sky and cleaned away a layer of dirt.’ Granny Miller walked around the room wiping her napkin backwards and forwards through the air. ‘The days were brighter. The sun glistened overhead; some people took to wearing sunglasses. Or, reflectacles as they were known then. Sunglasses hadn’t been invented yet. The nights were brighter too – the stars were able to twinkle down to us. And the sounds of rumbling just stopped, like someone had turned off a radio in a far away room.

‘The Mayor put together an expedition squad to scale the peaks of Volcano Mount Violaceous and have a look inside. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, the teachers - great-grandparents of the Andersons who teach in the school now – were selected because they knew a bit about geography; Dr. Turbot, great-grandfather of Henry and Lloyd, was an obvious choice. Being the island geologist, it was his job to know about rocks and volcanoes and such things. I believe Hamish Sinclair’s granddaddy; Hamish Sinclair Senior Senior went because like Hamish Sinclair and Hamish Sinclair’s Daddy Hamish Sinclair Senior, Hamish Sinclair Senior Senior

was hugely strong. He carried all the equipment. And the sandwiches. The baker, Lewis Mac Avinney's great grand-mother, Old Mrs. Mac Avinney packed them the loveliest lunch you can imagine, crusty bread with butter from Walsh's Dairy, thick slices of cheese from the same place, ham, baked, honeyed around the edges—'

'Granny,' said Dani perhaps a little too loudly,

'Yes Dear?' Granny looked over her thick glasses at her.

'I'm sorry to interrupt, Granny, but, are the contents of the expedition squad's packed lunches going to have any real bearing on the story? I mean, does the bread come alive at some point, or does the cheese figure out what happened to Mount Violaceous?'

'My dear, you're possibly a little young, but when you get to my age you will agree with me that the details of the good packed lunch will be of the utmost importance in any tale. The joy a good packed lunch can bring...'

Granny Miller sighed and looked wistfully into the middle distance.

Ruairi and Dani waited patiently. Ruairi cleared his throat quietly. 'Where was I? Oh yes,' Granny Miller continued eventually, 'the expedition squad set out for The Volcano Mount Violaceous shortly after breakfast. I won't bother you with the details of that particular breakfast, but oh, I can still smell the bacon sizzling on the pan and black pudding rounds as thick as your wrist...ahhhh. The expedition squad set out across the Beach of Bewilderment, and crossed the River Gargle at Tidal-Pool Bridge.' Granny had hoisted Ruairi's book bag onto her back and was wading across the living room carpet as though she was hiking across sand on a windy day. 'They scaled the peaks of Mount Violaceous on the west side.' Granny climbed up onto a chair, tottered for a minute and then launched herself into the air and landed heavily on another chair, 'pausing only for Old Mrs. Mac Avinney's delicious packed lunch, crusty bread, slices of cheese thick oozing out—' Granny climbed onto the table by the window, holding onto the curtains like they were a rope. She leaned backwards, picked up her slice of toast, and took a bite.

‘Granny! Be careful! Please!’ Ruairi said running to stand under Granny Miller with his arms out wide so he could catch her if she fell.

‘What happened next Granny?’ Dani was sitting cross-legged on the carpet.

‘They scaled the peaks of Volcano Mount Violaceous.’ Granny jumped off the table, did a tumble and roll, bounced up and started to climb up the brick fireplace. Ruairi ran behind her and put cushions on the floor underneath her.

‘All the while suppressing little butterflies of fear that perhaps old Violaceous was just taking a break and that at any minute lava and ash would spew from the top of the mountain and engulf them in terrifying flames, leaving them either dead, or worse, burned and hideously scarred for life.’ Granny picked her way up the chimneybreast and peered over the mantelpiece, down into the grate of the fireplace. Last night’s fire was out, there was only ash in the grate. ‘But the little butterflies of fear were all for nothing. It never happened. In fact, nothing happened at all. When they got to the top of the mountain they peered over and looked in. They got the surprise of their lives.’ Granny jumped back down to the floor.

‘The teachers had to call, not just on their knowledge of Geography, but also on their History training, but they couldn’t think of a single historical event that matched this strange occurrence.’ Granny went to the bookshelf and pulled down a dozen books. She put on her reading glasses and leafed through all the books around about her. ‘The geologist had to call to mind everything he’d ever learned about rocks and volcanoes but even he couldn’t come up with an answer. In the end they decided it was a mystery. They could not agree on what had happened, they could only agree on what it looked as though had happened.’ Granny came over and sat down on the sofa.

‘It looked as though, during the night before Christmas morning, while everyone was sleeping, dreaming of the presents they would get when they woke up and the wonderful things they would eat on Christmas day, a sliver of a glacier had been swept south from the north pole. It had slid over the earth as we all slept; swooshed up the side of Violaceous Mountain, and finally, it had fallen into the hole at the top of the mountain. It careened into the throat of the

volcano, and came to rest on top, blocking it up, cooling it off and sealing in all the fire and ash.’ Granny paused, ate some porridge, and looked and at Dani and at Ruairi and back again.

‘No one knows how or why the glacier decided to glide into our volcano or even how it got there so quickly. Of course, you know that on Yondersaay to say ‘to move at a glacial pace’ means to go as fast as is humanly possible.’

‘So there was no more volcano?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Well, that’s what it looked like. And, slowly, what we see out the window, the thing that dominates every view on the island, came to be known as King Kanute’s Seat. But that’s another story, for another day.’ And Granny Miller took a big bite of her buttered toast.

‘I’m still not quite getting the connection Granny. What exactly does this have to do with Daddy getting safely to Yondersaay for Christmas?’ Dani asked.

‘Volcanoes don’t just go away,’ Mummy said.

‘Exactly right Mummy,’ Granny Miller said when she’d finished eating, ‘And the island council were worried that all the ash-spewing and lava rumblings were still going on, building up and building up just under the surface of the glacier. The Mayor and the council called an island meeting to have a talk about Mount Violaceous and to agree about what should be done. After the Islanders debated, they took a vote and decided that the fire brigade should get ready and train just in case one day the volcano blew up underneath the glacier.’

‘The island geologist – you know Henry and Lloyd, they’re also the pig-farmers out on Faraway Farm, well their Great-Granddaddy, Dr. Turbot – reckoned that if the volcano came to life again and erupted, if once again it woke up and decided to blow, it would be blocked by the glacier sitting on top of it. Some of the ice would melt. There would be fire and ash rising from the belly of the mountain. The cap of ice would start melting slowly from the underside up, but there would still be a plug of ice sealing the mountain slowing down the fire. One possible problem is that the ice that melted and slushed downwards into the mountain on top of the building fire, wouldn’t be cold enough or plentiful enough to quench it. The mayor pointed out that even if the water wasn’t cold or plentiful, it would still drown the fire. The glacier is tightly

packed. It fully blocks off the insides of the mountain. Fire needs oxygen, none could get in. No oxygen could get through the thick layers of ice and water. The Mayor was right. The glacier, one way or another, would stop Mount Violaceous and keep King Kanute in his seat. Everyone at the meeting breathed a sigh of relief.

‘They were just about to move to ‘other business’, the last thing on the agenda, when little Albert Mac Avinney, the baker’s apprentice, also the baker’s grandson, slowly and tentatively raised his hand. The mayor called for silence and everyone turned and looked at the little boy sitting between his grandparents at the back of the hall. “Yes, little Albert Mac Avinney, what is it?” the Mayor wanted to know. “The caves,” little Albert Mac Avinney said. “Air will get in through the caves.”

‘And he was dead right. There’s a network of caves in and around and under King Kanute’s seat. It’s a veritable labyrinth. There are hundreds of openings all around the mountain, some begin in very prominent places and some entries are hidden.

‘Some begin under the sea, some open at the top of the cliffs and work their way down. They meet and mingle out of sight, deep underground. Some lead directly to the belly of the mountain, some are dead ends; some tunnels lead you to a maze. And there’s the massive tunnel leading from the Beach of Bewilderment as well.’

‘Is that what that is? I know that one,’ Dani said. ‘It’s just over the sand-dunes as you come from the beach towards the mountain. I thought it was just a cave. I didn’t know there was a tunnel leading into the volcano there too?’

‘It does seem like it’s just a cave, Dani,’ Granny said, ‘but if you crawl right to the back, there’s a hole there that leads on.’

‘Can we go and have a look at it?’ Dani asked. ‘Can we?’

‘We’re probably not allowed to, that would be dangerous,’ Ruairi said.

Granny smiled at Ruairi, ‘yes, indeed, Ruairi. No one’s allowed to go wandering around in those tunnels. Besides, I have a feeling it’s all blocked up.’

‘Oh well,’ Ruairi said.

‘I’m sure we can unblock it,’ Dani mumbled to herself.

‘I mean it, Dani, you must never wander around in any of these caves, either of you,’ Granny said. ‘You may find yourself hopelessly lost, unable to find your way out.’

‘Everyone at the meeting knew what little Albert Mac Avinney was getting at. It would be impossible to block off all the caves and all the tunnels from the outside, there are simply too many. And even if that were an option, there’s no one on the island who knows where all the entrances to the caves are. Well, almost no one.’

‘Little Albert Mac Avinney was right, oh, yes, he was right, this was a big problem. But he hadn’t sat down, he had something else to say. All eyes turned back to him.’

“‘Although it would be very difficult,’” little Albert Mac Avinney began, “‘maybe even impossible to block off all of the cave openings around and about and under the mountain, from the outside, it may be possible to block them off from the *inside*.’”

“‘Tell us more, my young man,’” said the Mayor,

“‘If the belly of the mountain is filling with water,’” little Albert continued, “‘someone in the water would be able to see where the tunnels ended. They would be able to see bubbles coming into the melting water and feeding the fire. They might be able to block off the tunnels and stop the bubbles.’”

‘He was right. Everyone in the town hall agreed that little Albert Mac Avinney was exceedingly clever. Old Mrs. Mac Avinney, little Albert Mac Avinney’s grandmother, beamed with pride.’

‘Eventually it was decided additional resources would be required. Not only would they need someone to put out the fire under the melting glacier. They would also need bubble-spotters, people to find the ends of the tunnels, swim to them and block them up, keeping out all bubbles of air, and finally, they might, they just might be able to put Mount Violaceous out once and for all.’

‘Hence the fire brigade scuba squad!’ Granny Miller said triumphantly.

‘Sometimes,’ Mummy said, ‘you can see the firemen in the lake or the swimming pool in their fireman’s helmets and fireman’s boots and scuba gear under the water doing drills with their hoses, practicing putting out underwater fires. And at other times you see them doing drills with boulders, carrying massive rocks from one side of the swimming pool to the other, that’s when they’re practicing blocking up the tunnels and keeping out the bubbles. Sometimes you see some of them with giant bubble-blowers under the water testing other firemen to see if they can spot the bubbles. They often do it all blind-folded, getting ready for the day when King Kanute’s seat becomes Volcano Mount Violaceous once more.’

‘So they were the obvious choice, obviously,’ Mummy said, ‘when it emerged that the tarantulafish were mucking about on the ferry route again. To scuba on down there, dismantle the web, and create a clear passage. While they were there the plan was for them to wrest all the stolen telephone lines out of the tarantulafish burrow, connect it back up to the island and Bob’s your uncle. Two birds with one stone.’

‘Tony. Tony’s our uncle,’ Dani mumbled.

‘But you can’t force them to go,’ Granny Miller said.

‘Why not?’ Dani asked.

‘It’s their job, you just said so.’ Ruairi was getting suspicious again.

‘Ah, you see, actually, it’s not their job really. It’s just an extra thing they do. There aren’t enough house fires or even chimney fires, or oil spills, or road traffic accidents on the island to warrant a full time fire service. The firemen, and firewomen of course, are also the local farmers, and the butcher, the baker, the cobblers and a couple of university students. And now the draper is saying he’s not terrified of the tarantulafish, not absolutely terrified of them at all, it’s just that the run up to Christmas is his busiest time of year and he can’t really leave the shop. And the Mr. Lachlann who owns The Bewildered Inn overheard him say that and spread the word so nearly everyone else is saying the same – they’re not scared of the tarantulafish, not a bit scared. It’s just that Christmas is such a busy time of the year, they can’t close their shops, the customers would be up in arms,’ said Mummy.

‘It’s not a very busy time of year for the cobbler. But he has a migraine. So he’s out too. There’s nothing to be done about it,’ Granny Miller said with finality.

‘You can fix it Mummy, you’re a good swimmer,’ Ruairi said.

‘Ruairi, I would, my young man, I would. But I forgot my tarantulafish-proof scuba gear, and I’m allergic you see. So. Well, that’s that,’ said Mummy.

‘I’m not buying a word of this,’ Dani said.

‘You’re not?’ Ruairi said to her. And then said, ‘no, me neither, we’re not buying a word of this!’

‘Look darlings, let’s not let it ruin our holiday,’ Mummy said. ‘Daddy’ll get here if and when he can. I just want to prepare you in case he can’t make it. You need to be grown up about it. Ok?’

‘Ok,’ Ruairi mumbled.

‘If you want us to be so grown up about it,’ Dani shot back at her mother, ‘why tell us all that nonsense about tarantulafish and underwater volcanoes? That’s not very grown up!’

‘Grown up it may not be, Dani,’ Granny Miller said over her glasses, ‘but it’s the truth, the absolute truth, and nothing short of it.’

‘Whatever,’ Dani said.

‘Come on now, kids,’ Mummy said. ‘We have to make the most of our holiday and just hope for the best. If Daddy gets here, he gets here, if he doesn’t, well, we’ll deal with that when the time comes. We’ll occupy our minds with other things.’

‘We’ll concentrate on having the best day-before-Christmas-Eve ever,’ Mummy said as cheerfully as possible. ‘Why don’t you come with me and help me get everything ready for Christmas day? We need some milk which we’ll get at the dairy where we’ll also get some cheeses and some lovely thick cream for the pudding which we’ll get at the baker’s with the crusty brown bread for the smoked salmon that we’ll get at the smokehouse which we’ll eat before the turkey and ham we’ll get at the butcher’s, which wouldn’t be Christmassy at all without some Brussels sprouts which we’ll get at the greengrocers where we’ll find everything

else we need except the brandy for the brandy butter which we'll have to take a turn out to the distillers to get. And if we go the long way through the Crimson Forest we'll hunt for some holly and mistletoe to decorate the table. Let's do all of that today, and tomorrow we can spend the entire day dressing the Christmas Tree, building snowmen, eating chocolates (which we'll get at the greengrocers) and watching Christmas movies on TV.' Mummy was fetching all their coats as she spoke.

'Wrap up warm my darlings. There's a nip in the air and though the snow looks soft as velvet, it comes down quite sharp. It will take an icy bite out of your noses and cheeks if you let it.' Mummy put on layers and layers of coats and scarves and two pairs of gloves. Mummy loved the snow but hated to be cold.

Daniela and Ruairi decided that Mummy and Granny were probably as disappointed as they were about Daddy and that there was no point in being huffy with them. There was nothing anybody could do about him just yet. They would just have to hope the weather changed and Daddy managed to get a flight or a boat in time.

The Butcher

The Millers got their hats and coats and scarves and headed towards the high street. It was a beautiful day - bright and sunny, clear and crisp and dry. But cold. Very cold. There was no sign that it would snow again soon but the ground was thickly covered in a layer of white. The houses all looked as if their roofs were thatched with white straw; there was at least a foot of snow atop every building. Cars that hadn't been driven for a day or two were also snow-covered. All the Millers wore their winter boots and heavy winter coats. They were wrapped up warm; the only parts of them showing were their cheeks. Bright red cheeks.

Which were almost as red as their hair.

They weren't in a rush, but it still took them nearly an hour to get the two blocks from Gargle View Cottage to the bottom of the high street. Everyone they met along the way knew Granny Miller and wanted to stop and ask her how she was and say how they hardly recognised Dani and Ruairi anymore, they'd grown so much, and to chat about what a lovely sunny day, if a bit cold, it was turning out to be. The woman from the chemist's, the postman, a short little fat bald man who was arguing with his very tall very thin wife, stopped them and had a quick chat. A big balding man, the draper, drove up to them in a tiny blue car the size of a bumping car at the dodgems pulled over and had a conversation out his window. *Everybody* knew them, and wanted to say hello.

Granny Miller and Mummy didn't seem to mind all of this. Granny Miller grew up here, and Mummy grew up in an even smaller place. They were both well used to it. They actually seemed to like it even. But to Dani and Ruairi it was *torture*.

'Hurry up Mummy,' Dani whispered to Mummy at one stage. Ruairi said to Dani he was getting very cold and *very* bored. He stood behind the tall thin woman Mummy was talking to and mouthed 'Pleeeeeeease, let's go!' and then he made a face at her behind the woman's back, and Mummy had to say goodbye immediately or she would have burst out laughing in her face. From then on when they met people they all waved to them and said things like 'hi, how

are you? Lovely to see you. Yes, it's a lovely day,' but they didn't stop walking. They kept talking and they kept waving and, and most importantly they kept walking until they were past them.

Their first stop, when they finally got there, on this wintry morning on the day before Christmas Eve, was the butcher's shop.

Some incomer once asked Hamish Sinclair, out of politeness, when she was standing around the butcher's shop waiting for her ham to be sliced in the slicer and wrapped in the grease-proof paper, why he'd decided to become a butcher. Hamish Sinclair thought that this was the single most stupidest and ridiculest question he had ever been asked or was likely to be asked in a trillion years. He let out a big sigh, crossed his arms, and rolled his eyes at her. The coloured bits went so far up in his head that the poor woman thought they would get stuck up there and then what would she do.

Hamish was a Sinclair and the Sinclairs were the butchers like the Andersons were the teachers and the Mac Fadyens were the whiskey makers. Because if he wasn't a butcher then there would be no such thing as a Sunday Roast or a mid-summer barbecue or a chicken sandwich. On Sundays, there'd be carrots and potatoes and parsnips, and a big gap in the middle of the table. It would be confusing. People would still be hungry after Sunday lunch and they wouldn't know why.

And what would be done with all the extra animals? The island would be positively overrun with woolly sheep and ageing cows. Not to mention the ferocious smell of poo. People wouldn't be able to walk for poo. There'd be poo everywhere. And he'd be covered in purple spots if he was going to spend his days going around cleaning up cow poo and herding pigs and chickens off the high street so people could walk down it.

Hamish Sinclair had handed over the greaseproof wrapped sliced ham to the woman and hoped she had no more stupid questions for him because Hamish Sinclair had no time for ridiculous questions, especially at this time of year. There simply wasn't time to explain things

to people who were hard of understanding. If someone had a mind to ask him a stupid question like that now, at his busiest time of year, he would probably have blown a fuse, shouted like mad at them, and kicked them straight out of his shop.

He wouldn't have needed to fling out Dani and Ruairi, as it happens, because when Dani and Ruairi walked into the butchers on this sunny if cold morning, there was no way on this snowy green earth they were going to say anything at all to this man. They stood stock still, rooted to the spot. Eventually they pulled themselves together and tried, as nonchalantly as possible, to sidle back the way they had come, out of the shop. However, Granny Miller was right behind them, grinning at Hamish Sinclair, wishing him a good morning, and blocking their way out of the shop.

'That's the man from the River Gargle tidal pool,' Dani whispered to Ruairi without moving her lips.

'Definitely,' Ruairi said. 'He's even bigger in real life.'

'He was in real life last night,' Dani said.

'I mean up close. He's even more massive up close. What is he? Half-human, half-Gorilla?' Ruairi asked.

'Or one quarter mountain, three quarters abominable snowman?' They both laughed, Mummy shot them a look that warned them not to be rude, but they honestly couldn't help it. They tried to make it look like they were laughing at something funny they'd heard earlier. Eventually they stopped and just stood there trying very hard not to stare at Hamish Sinclair.

Hamish Sinclair was dressed in white wellies and a white butcher's coat that he was positively sewn into. It looked like a sausage skin on him, like he'd been pumped into the coat, the way sausage meat is pumped into sausage skin, and that you would have to cut him out of it with a scissors. If you pronged him with a fork he might explode. He wore a white hair-net. He wasn't pleased about the hairnet, it was a blow to his manly image, but he worked with food so by law he had to wear it. He had thought about putting a cap on over the hairnet but that had looked ridiculous.

His shoulders were wider than the whole entire meat counter. His head skimmed the roof. And to say he was hairy was an understatement; his forearms looked as though they could use hairnets.

The thing that made Hamish not just big but scarily big was not his height, or his width, or his hugely muscular arms and thighs. What made the difference was his voice. His voice was so deep, so booming, and so loud that even if he were tiny it would give the impression of a giant speaking. He didn't smile much either, and he didn't talk cheerfully about the weather like everyone else they'd met on the island had. He sighed quite a bit and he looked at people as though he was doing them a big favour by being there.

He hardly glanced at Dani and Ruairi but when his eyes did flicker their way they both gasped. He was polite but both Dani and Ruairi thought there was something terrifyingly scary underneath the surface.

Mummy and Granny Miller ordered a turkey and a ham for Christmas dinner, and some sausages and bacon and black and white pudding for Tea. They ordered some venison for venison stew, and some sliced meats for sandwiches. Mummy and Granny talked about getting a Turducken – a chicken inside a duck inside a turkey – for Christmas dinner instead of a turkey and a ham but decided against it in the end. Raising chickens inside ducks inside turkeys could be cruel if not carried out in a closely monitored and regulated environment. A chicken couldn't possibly have much quality of life if it grew up inside the bum of a duck. And the poor turkey with both a chicken and a duck in its bum. What if the chicken and the duck didn't get on and started pecking? It didn't bear thinking about.

Granny Miller wanted to know if it was organic.

All the same they told Hamish Sinclair they wouldn't rule it out for next Christmas but they would to look into it a bit more beforehand.

'I'll have your order run over to Gargle View Cottage later this afternoon, Granny Miller,' Hamish said. He did not ask for Granny Miller's name because he already knew it. And he didn't ask for Granny Miller's address because he already knew that too. Dani and

Ruairi were not thrilled that this particular person knew where they lived, but everybody knew everybody on Yondersaay. Of course he knew Granny Miller's address. Mummy thanked Hamish Sinclair and wished him a Merry Christmas, and they all left the shop.

'Watch out for the mad one on your way out, she's back from her break. She's clearly cracked. No meat! Real men eat nothing BUT meat,' Hamish Sinclair called out to them as they were leaving, and then he mumbled 'and the occasional Cadbury's crème egg.'

Dani had a quick glance back into the shop on her way out the door. She had a habit of doing this, turning back and having one last look into a place as she was leaving it. She thought she caught Hamish Sinclair looking at Ruairi with a strange expression on his face. She was probably imagining things. But she tried to freeze the image of his expression in her mind for later when she had time to figure out what he was thinking and why he was looking at her little brother that way.

A very angry woman about Mummy's age was pacing up and down outside the butcher's shop. She was shouting 'Meat is murder! Meat is an atrocity!' in such a wild way that Dani and Ruairi were more than a little frightened of her. She was wearing old trousers made out of patches and a coat that may well have been made out of her own hair and bits of things swept off the floor.

'Meat is murder! You are a murderer!,' she shouted viciously at Granny Miller as she stepped across the picket line, 'you may as well have slit the cow's throat yourself—,' and then she paused, and a big grin spread all over her face, her shoulders relaxed and she became positively sweet. 'Granny Miller! Is that you? I didn't recognise you for a minute there, you're looking fierce well. How are you, lovely day isn't it?'

Granny turned around and looked at the protester. She was delighted to see someone she hadn't seen in ages.

'Little Alice Cogle! I don't believe it. It must be years! Well, how are you, you know you haven't changed a bit,'

Alice Cogle blushed and said that Granny Miller was very kind to say so. 'I'm the best, doing very well.'

'And you're doing this now, Alice,' Granny Miller said as she looked around uncertainly at the posters and placards on the ground, 'How are you finding it?'

'Well the hours are good, you know, nine to five, which suits me down to the ground. And you, are you back for the Christmas is it?' Alice Cogle asked.

Dani and Ruairi wandered on up the street towards the bakery, which was just a few doors down from the butcher's shop. They went quickly, and didn't even glance in the window of the new boutique in case Mummy noticed it and decided she wanted to go in for a browse.

'Exactly right, I'm here with the family for the few days,' Granny Miller was saying to Alice Cogle as Dani and Ruairi turned the handle on the bakery door. 'I have to say it's lovely to be home. And have you stopped doing part time work for Eoin Lerwick at the greengrocers?' Granny Miller asked. The conversation ended here as far as Dani and Ruairi were concerned because it was at this exact moment that the door of the bakery closed behind them.

Granny Miller and Alice Cogle's muffled conversation carried into the bakery but Dani and Ruairi didn't hear any of it. Even when the door closed after Mummy who came in a few minutes later because she had stopped to look in the window of the new boutique, and Granny Miller was saying outside to Alice Cogle, 'that's odd!', they didn't hear.

Because as soon as they set foot inside the door their attention was utterly, wholly, and absolutely taken over by the delicious tarts and cakes and buns in front of them. They were suddenly *starving*. The shop was three times the size it was the last time they were here, on their summer holidays two and a half years ago. There were cafe tables now, and an espresso machine on one of the counters. Mummy sat down and ordered an Americano with a splash of hot milk, and two hot chocolates for Dani and Ruairi. She said they could have one thing each. Neither Dani nor Ruairi had the slightest idea how they could ever in a million years come to a decision.

The Baker

You would never know by looking at him that Lewis Mac Avinney wasn't just the man who stood behind the counter at the bakery. Lewis Mac Avinney is the grandson of little Albert Mac Avinney who many years ago came up with the idea to block off all the bubble passages inside Mount Violaceous. And Lewis Mac Avinney must have inherited Albert's keen intelligence because, besides running his family bakery he also had two PhDs, one in romantic literature, the other in astro-physics, and a medical degree.

'It is my understanding,' Granny had said when she had told Mummy about Lewis Mac Avinney earlier, 'that when he goes to Germany they have to call him Herr Doctor Doctor Doctor Mac Avinney.'

'That could get exhausting after a while,' Mummy had said.

Lewis was also filthy rich, by all accounts, though there was never any outward sign of this, and it didn't change his personality one iota. He was still as sweet and kind now as a multimillionaire Doctor Doctor Doctor as he had been when he was the best in his troupe of cub scouts at helping old people cross the street. Naturally he got plenty of practice at that on Yondersaay; he became a veritable champion at it. There are quite a few old people on Yondersaay.

Lewis Mac Avinney held patents for a hundred different inventions, mostly in the astro-physics field. But his big love was the family bakery on Yondersaay. He was constantly trying to develop new and interesting cakes and breads for his shop, but so far none of them had really worked out.

His list of failed bakery inventions included a raspberry shortcake that stuck its tongue out at you; a coconut crumble that lifted itself up into the shape of a hula dancer, sang 'Tallulah plays the hula in Hawaii' and crumbled into a pile on the plate; The Current Bun™ with its caffeine-free jolt of energy that gave you little electric shock; French sticks that were rude to you; and wry bread that made droll witticisms about the state of the economy, or the shape of your nose.

‘What can I get for you, Granny Miller?’ Lewis Mac Avinney asked when Granny Miller finally made it into the warmth of the shop. He had a very quiet voice, very kind sounding. Granny Miller immediately felt relaxed and sat in a heap in a big armchair. She ordered a pot of tea and a raspberry shortcake. When Lewis handed the raspberry shortcake to Granny Miller he stood and watched it for a minute. It didn’t stick its tongue out at her. Lewis Mac Avinney gave a little sigh, went back around the counter and made a note in his notebook.

Mummy hadn’t ordered anything to eat so Lewis brought her over a plate with samples of about ten different cakes.

‘How come she gets all of that!’ Ruairi said looking from his limp pain au chocolat to Mummy’s massive plate of cakes and back at his pain au chocolat again.

Lewis gave Mummy a big smile and said ‘hi,’ in a very shy way. Mummy looked at him and he blushed behind his little spectacles, turned away, and went back behind the counter.

Dani leaned over to her Mummy and sang quietly in her ear, ‘Mummy has a *boyfriend!*’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Dani, Lewis is simply demonstrating the Christmas spirit,’ Mummy said and went to the counter to put in her order for cake and plum pudding for Christmas day.

‘Oh it’s *Lewis* now, is it?’ Dani said, and she and Ruairi sniggered and stuffed as many of Mummy’s cakes into their mouths as they could before she came back.

Dudo meets Jarl Olaf

‘I’ve ordered us all some more coffees and hot chocolates,’ Mummy said when she came back from the counter. She glanced at her nearly empty plate, Dani and Ruairi avoided her eye. ‘I thought it might be nice to rest a bit before we do the rest of the shopping. And if Granny’s up to it, maybe she could tell us a bit more about King Dudo and the mystery woman and the buried treasure.’

‘Only if you want to, Granny,’ Dani said, trying not to appear eager.

‘Yes, Granny, only if you’re not too tired,’ Ruairi said scraping his chair around in front of Granny so he could hear better.

‘It would be my pleasure,’ Granny said, ‘but we might need more cakes too, Mummy.’

‘Sure thing, Granny,’ Mummy said, ‘but keep room for Tea. I’m making smoked salmon Pâté with crusty bread from here and smoked salmon from the smoke house, followed by a cassoulet of duck leg and—’

‘Now. Where were we?’ Granny said, cutting Mummy off, ‘ah yes, King Dudo was propped up on the most luxurious and most softest downdles he had ever had the good fortune to be propped up against. He had a nosy look at his surroundings. He was in a very nice dwelling place. It was smaller than he was used to, but then again, he was the King of the Danes, he was used to the very best of everything, downdles excepted.

‘He had the feeling there were people nearby, he heard voices outside of the room. “No I will not!” he thought he heard. “Forget it!”’

‘Dudo cleared his throat a little so whoever was there would know that he was awake. All the voices stopped and several feet shuffled away. An elderly man popped his head around the entranceway.

“Ah,” he said, “you have awoken. Welcome to my humble home. You are most welcome. I am Jarl Olaf Barelegs the Balding On Top.”

“A Jarl?” King Dudo bowed to the elderly man. On his way back up from the bow he noticed that the man did not wear trousers or leg-coverings of any kind. Instead, he wore a very short kilt, “You are Lord of this country? I thank you for your warm welcome.”

“Indeed I am Lord of this place; however, you are not in any country. You have landed on the island of Yondersaay.”

Dani and Ruairi grinned, ‘Yondersaay!’ they said.

Granny looked at them over her glasses and continued.

‘King Dudo gasped, “Yondersaay!” he said. Jarl Olaf Barelegs the Balding on Top nodded gravely. “Yes,” he said, “King Dudo,” for he knew that King Dudo was King Dudo. “You have breached the boundary of the enchanted island in the middle of the north-most seas. You have arrived at a place you’ve most probably been told doesn’t exist. But exist it does, and on it you are.”

‘King Dudo was speechless. The one place he’d always dreamed of, the one place out of all the many places in the world that he had one day hoped to conquer, and now, here he was.

“Rest, King Dudo. I will send my daughter to tend to you. She will find fresh clothes for you and will make something for you to eat.”

‘The woman from the ice!’ Ruairi said, ‘I bet his daughter is the woman who turned into a bear, no wait, the bear who turned into a woman, on the ice, when King Dudo sang and cracked his head and fell in! I bet it’s her!’

‘Ursula?’ Granny said. ‘Well, let’s see. Jarl Olaf left the dwelling place and King Dudo waited for the Jarl’s daughter to arrive. He hoped against all hope that the woman who next entered the dwelling place was the woman who had appeared before him on the ice. He wished it in his heart and in his bones. He thought hard and concentrated on making the wish come true – he closed his eyes and hoped and wished and wished and hoped “please let me see her again” he said to himself. He heard a rustling at the entranceway and opened his eyes.

‘Before him stood the Jarl’s daughter. She had pale skin and blue eyes. She was a true beauty. She smiled at him and walked towards him with his new set of clothes. There was grace

and elegance in every movement. She came to him and sat down beside him. She put a hand on his shoulder and gently asked him what the matter was.

“Are you ill my Liege? You look so desolate,” She asked him this because, sitting beside her, King Dudo had a look of such sadness on his face. His whole body gave off an air of melancholy and disappointment.

‘The beautiful girl sitting beside him, smiling sweetly at him and tenderly touching his shoulder, was *not* the girl from the ice.

‘I am very well, nothing is the matter,’ he said to her. He forced a smile and accepted the clothes.’

‘It’s not her? Where is she?’ Dani asked, ‘what happened to her?’

‘Did she turn back into a bear again?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Maybe we never see her again,’ Granny Miller said.

‘I think that’s improbable,’ Dani said with finality.

‘Oh you do, do you? And why do you think that?’

‘Because in stories people always end up with their Heart’s True Love. And they get married and live Happily Ever After,’ Dani said folding her arms.

‘But this isn’t some *story* Dani, this is real, this really happened in real life. It wasn’t today or yesterday, but it did really happen. And it’s a sad fact that in real life people don’t always end up with their Heart’s True Love. And in real life, sometimes, and I’m warning you now before we go any further, sometimes the baddy doesn’t get his comeuppance. And sometimes... sometimes the good person dies.’

Dani leaned over to Ruairi, who was looking a little distressed at the news that sometimes the goodie dies, and whispered, ‘I still think he’ll see her again.’

‘Well, as it happens,’ said Granny, sighing, ‘the next day King Dudo was feeling much stronger and decided to go for a walk outside. He wanted to have a look around the island. He came out of the dwelling place into the light of the morning, and who should he see but a red-haired, blue-eyed, pale-skinned woman!’

‘I KNEW IT!’ Dani shouted, and both Dani and Ruairi leapt up onto their bakery chairs, which were surprisingly bouncy and started jumping up and down shouting and screaming ‘Yay! He’s found his Heart’s True Love! He’s found his Heart’s True Love! We knew he would, we knew he would.’

Mummy shushed them. Granny ignored them and continued with her story.

‘Dudo was frozen to the spot. He stared at the woman. She was carrying an empty pail towards the dwelling place. She glanced at him as she approached him, and glanced away again as though she hadn’t even noticed him. She walked straight by him, an inch from him, and into the dwelling place and out of his sight.’

‘Oh,’ said Dani, and stopped jumping.

‘It’s her twin sister!’ Ruairi said and sat down on the chair. ‘Her *evil* twin sister,’ he added and narrowed his eyes.

Granny went on. ‘She came back out of the dwelling. This time her pail was filled with garments. She walked by King Dudo without even glancing at him, and around the back and out of sight again.’

‘King Dudo was startled, and a little embarrassed. Even if she didn’t have feelings for him, she should at least *remember* him, no? King Dudo walked in the direction the woman had gone and saw that she had walked to a gargling brook to the back of the property. She was up to her knees in the brook, her skirts hitched high and fastened by a ribbon at her waist. She was singing a little tune, and washing the garments she had carried there. King Dudo approached the bank of the brook and called out, “Well, hello there!” The woman looked up at King Dudo and politely said “Hello” and went back to her washing.’

‘The King was bewildered. He really had expected more of a reaction than that. He was King Dudo the Mightily Impressive after all! The glorious and brave King of all the Danes. He was a handsome man, and brave, and known throughout the world as being Mightily Impressive. Mightily Impressive I tell you! And brave! He was not used to this sort of reaction from a woman, especially a peasant woman who washes her own clothes. He was used to

women blushing coyly when he approached them. They were, as a rule, only too delighted to have the King say such pithy things to them as ‘well, hello there.’ The King was confused and a little bit angry. He turned around and stomped off to find the Jarl.

‘King Dudo found the Jarl at the harbour shooting the breeze with some of the local men. Jarl Olaf greeted him warmly and introduced him to the men.

‘This is Soxolf the Unshod,’ the Jarl began.

‘Very pleased to meet you, Soxolf,’ King Dudo said holding out his hand to shake. Soxolf folded his arms, stuck out his chin and turned his head away. The Jarl continued introducing the men in quick fire succession, ‘Bling of Brand Island, Magnan the Generous, Avorage the Ordinary, Thorar the Smouldering, and Pal the Friendly.’

The men were a surly bunch, except for Pal the Friendly who smiled and waved until Soxolf kicked him in the shin and Avorage poked him in the ribs with his elbow. Pal, looking a little unsure of himself, adopted the posture of the other men. He folded his arms and stuck his nose in the air. He glanced back at Dudo every now and then unsure if he should smile or not. On balance, he decided in the end, best not.

Magnan grunted, and Bling spat on the ground near Dudo’s feet.

The King noticed all of this of course and was more than a little put out by it. He was sorely tempted to say “Don’t you know who I am!” and he almost did. The Jarl, however, noticing that King Dudo was getting angry, got up and told the King he would take him on a walk and show him the island.

““You must understand,” said the Jarl as they walked away, “everyone is frightened that you will try to sack and pillage the island. They think you may be their enemy and they do not think I should have welcomed you to my home.”

““Ah!” said King Dudo. “Now I understand, thank you Jarl Olaf.” And they walked on and Jarl Olaf took King Dudo on a walk through the Crimson Forest, which was filled with thousands and thousands of trees of all kinds, of bushes and shrubberies and the prettiest little flowers.

“Do you have a question to ask me, My Lord?” the Jarl asked King Dudo. During the past few minutes, King Dudo had turned to the Jarl a number of times as though he was about to say something. He was at this moment kicking an imaginary stone in front of him and whistling in a most tune-less manner. “No, not a thing, not a thing, whatever could have given you that impression?” King Dudo said. “But if you insist,” he continued, “I suppose I could come up with some random thing to ask you, nothing important, you understand, nothing I’ve been thinking about all morning, or anything like that.”

“I understand, My Lord, but yes, please, if you could grasp some random query out of thin air I would be very happy to try to answer it, I love answering random unimportant questions,” the Jarl said.

“Oh, good,” said the King, “well, in that case, just to please you, you understand, could you tell me—”

“Yes?”

“Do you know—?”

“Yes?” the Jarl waited patiently.

“There’s a girl,” the King said.

“A girl?” the Jarl asked.

“Yes, I was just wondering who she was and if she also might think that I’m a grotesque enemy just out to plunder and pillage.”

“We have many beautiful girls here on Yondersaay. I of course know every single one of them, as I know all people on my island. We are all one big loving community,” the Jarl said and swirled his arms around in the air to demonstrate the closeness of his community.

“Describe her for me.”

“She has skin the colour of polished ivory,”

“Pale skin. Yes.”

“And eyes reminiscent of bluebells,”

“Blue eyes. Yes.”

“And hair the strangest colour of red I have ever seen, it is the colour of a sunset over the oceans of sand, the colour the sea goes before a rain, the colour—”

“Red hai—NO!”

“No?”

“No. I know no one like that.”

“But—”

“Nope, I’m afraid not, nuh-uh.”

“But you just said you knew everyone on the island, that you were just one big loving community,” and the King swirled his arms in the air the way the Jarl had done. “Besides, you must know her; she was in your house just now.”

“Oh *that* red-haired girl. Oh yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. But she’s no one.”

“Really...” King Dudo was not convinced.

“Just a servant girl, a mere peasant,” the Jarl continued. And in a low voice he leaned into the King and said to him behind his hand, “It is widely believed that she has, um, very hairy toes. And she’s not a good sort. And she has smelly knees by all accounts. You are not interested in her. No, no, no. We’ll forget you even saw her. Very hairy toes.” And Jarl Olaf Barelegs the Balding On Top led King Dudo the Mightily Impressive on through the forest to a spot under a taut young oak where a luscious picnic had been laid out in preparation for them.

“I wish to introduce you to someone,” the Jarl said to the King as they sat by the picnic. The King looked around but he could see no one, no one at all. All of a sudden he heard a voice from above him.

“Hello,” said the voice. King Dudo was startled. He looked up but could see no one. He looked all around – no one. He got up and walked around the tree – no sign of a living person who could have spoken. No one.

“I have decided that I am going to be utterly forth-coming with you about the island, King Dudo. I believe there are things you wish to know about Yondersaay. And I think it is right that you should have answers. It is for this reason that I am introducing you to Rarelief the Splendiferous.” And at that the Jarl looked straight up. King Dudo looked up also. Just then the tree moved forward and down as though taking bow and said, “I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, your Kingship.”

‘Now let’s do the rest of the shopping!’ said Granny Miller and made to heave herself out of her comfy chair.

‘But Granny, that’s not the end of the story, is it?’ Dani said.

‘It can’t be,’ said Ruairi.

‘In truth it is not the end of the story. But it is getting very late,’ Granny Miller said. ‘And we still have oodles of shopping to do. But I’ll tell you what, if it’s alright with Mummy, you can stay up late tonight and I’ll tell you what happens next.’

Dani and Ruairi turned to their Mother.

‘We’ll be very good all day,’ Ruairi promised.

‘Yes, and we’ll help with the dishes,’ Dani said.

‘And we’ll brush our teeth,’ Ruairi added.

‘Well it *is* the night before Christmas Eve,’ Mummy said. ‘Oh, ok then.’

And Dani and Ruairi gave a cheer, not too loud, because they were in a bakery, and they all said goodbye to Lewis Mac Avinney, put back on their winter coats, and went back out into Yondersaay village.

The Greengrocer

‘That butcher man was looking at you in a funny way,’ Dani said quietly to Ruairi as they made their way out of the bakery and followed Granny Miller and Mummy down the street.

‘Are you sure? I mean definitely totally sure?’ Ruairi said a little panicked at the thought. ‘But we were certain they didn’t get a good look at us last night,’ he said.

Dani thought a moment. ‘Maybe that’s not why he was looking at you like that.’

‘Then why?’ Ruairi asked.

Granny swung open the door to the greengrocers at the bottom of the village. If Dani and Ruairi had been thrilled and delighted with the changes they found in the bakery since they’d last been on the island, their reaction was equal and opposite when they walked in the door of the greengrocers.

The greengrocers was the place Dani and Ruairi liked most on the island because of ‘The Thing’ Eoin Lerwick had. They were not quite sure what ‘The Thing’ was and they knew not to ask for details. Daddy had winked at them and put a finger to his lips when he had told them about it years ago, so they knew it was all hush-hush. He had whispered to them that Eoin Lerwick had ‘A Thing’ for Granny Miller.

Every time they went into the shop Eoin Lerwick would get them whatever sweets they wanted from the rows of jars on the shelves behind the counter and let them play with whatever toys they wanted from the toy shelves along the back wall. And then he would sit them down and tell them the most amazing stories. They were always terrifying. Terrifying or hilarious, one or the other, or sometimes both. He would act some of them out as well. It was lovely to see Granny Miller laughing so hard. They had been best friends growing up and knew each other inside-out. He had two pet birds, not puffins but ravens, called Thought and Memory, and he could make them do tricks. He could speak to them and they understood him. At least that’s what it looked like. They would rest on his shoulders and swoop around the shop like synchronized swimmers in the air, and they would fetch anything Eoin asked them to fetch.

Once, in the middle of summer he asked Thought to fly out, find a snowflake, and bring it back for Granny Miller. Thought was gone a very long time, and they'd all but forgotten all about her and were about to leave when in she flew, the tips of her wings covered in snowflakes. She had hovered just above Granny Miller's head and beat her wings; a tiny blizzard of snowflakes had fluttered down onto all their upturned faces.

The shop had always been full of exotic fruits and vegetables, and had the most amazing things to buy.

It was not like that on this day, not on this particular day before Christmas Eve.

On this particular day before Christmas Eve, Eoin Lerwick was nowhere in sight. His birds were distinctly absent and the shop was, quite frankly, a dump. It was dark and dirty. They walked in and looked around. All the lights were off, and there was no produce in the front window or in crates on the street like there usually was. There was hardly any stock on the shelves and what was there was covered in dust. It was like the shop had closed down years ago.

All of a sudden, a lanky sliver of a man with greasy hair and a pointy nose and a pointy chin appeared in the centre aisle before Granny Miller. He appeared silently, as if he'd slithered out of nowhere with almost no movement.

'With your permission—,' he said as he bent down to move a crate out of Granny Miller's way.

'Hello, Mr. Scathe. Is Eoin here please?' Granny Miller asked.

'You have *literally* just missed him,' Mr. Scathe said to Granny Miller in a voice that was at once high-pitched and quiet.

As soon as he said that, Ruairi and Dani gasped and instinctively stepped backwards towards the door. They stood next to each other and stuck their elbows into each other. They didn't look at each other. They didn't need to.

'I will leave a message for him, see I'm writing it down now, and I'll give it to him as soon as he comes back,' Mr. Scathe continued. Granny started to speak again but he cut her off

‘—no, I’m afraid I don’t know how long he’ll be, he didn’t say. I’ll *literally* get him to call you as soon as he gets back.’ And he smiled at her. But his eyes didn’t change.

Ruairi and Dani wanted to leave, the shop smelled foul, there were things going off all over the place, and they had no doubt that this man was the stooped man from the River Gargle the night before. They left the shop and didn’t once complain as Mummy and Granny continued with their shopping.

University of Cape Town

The Night before Christmas Eve

After dinner on the night before Christmas Eve Mummy, Granny Miller, Dani and Ruairi were quite excited about how close they were to Christmas. They reminded Mummy about her promise that they could stay up late to hear the rest of Granny's story. But nobody wanted to settle into it just yet. It was very dark outside by this time of course, and it was icy cold, but they all decided what they would most like to do was to go for a brisk walk along the beach.

When Granny Miller was a little girl growing up on the island her Mummy used to take her out for night-time walks at this time of year looking for shells and pebbles to decorate the Christmas table. She once told Granny Miller that if you see a stone or a shell sparkle in the moonlight you must pick it up and make a wish. She was always surprised at how some shells could be alive with colour in the moonlight but look dull and uninteresting in the full beam of daylight. Granny Miller thought of the times she had taken Daddy for night time walks when he was a little boy spending his Christmas holidays on the island. Dani and Ruairi loved that they were allowed to go for walks at night. They never did it at home, because the city is too dangerous for night time walking.

Without anyone ever thinking about it, or deciding it, moonlit walks on the Beach of Bewilderment, on the other side of the Crimson Forest, over the bridge of the River Gargle, at the foot of Volcano Mount Violaceous, a day or two before Christmas, collecting shells and stones for the Christmas table, had become a Miller family tradition.

When they got to the beach, they were surprised by how much they could see. The moon was full and bright, and the stars seemed a thousand watt. The beach was soft underfoot, the sprinkling of snow the same colour as the sand it covered.

The wind was strong and the waves were crashing loudly, making conversation almost impossible.

Granny Miller had long ago told Dani and Ruairi the legend of the beach; if you found yourself wandering alone on the Beach of Bewilderment, and if it was past dusk, and if you had something serious weighing on your mind, the beach had powers to bewilder and

discombobulate you. Granny was very good at telling stories about people who had gone stark raving bonkers because they happened to wander onto the beach when they were puzzling something out. One woman, apparently, was wondering what she should serve for dinner when her in-laws came to visit. She got bewitched by the beach and forever afterwards talked only about lamb chops and pavlova, and wore a fruit-bowl on her head.

Dani and Ruairi were running about pretending they had been bewitched and bewildered by the beach.

Mummy was thinking about Daddy and wondering if he would decide to come to Yondersaay for Christmas after all. He had told her in private before they left that he might not make it at all. He might have too much work to do. Mummy had been annoyed and angry with him and was wishing now that she had just told him that she hoped he would come. They hadn't spoken since, though Mummy suspected that he and Granny were secretly texting each other. She hoped Granny was trying to convince him to come.

Granny Miller was remembering growing up on Yondersaay, and for the first time in a long time, her mind brought up her friendship with Eoin Lerwick the greengrocer. She remembered how much fun she and Eoin had had growing up together, and she tried to remember how long it was since the last time she had seen him.

It was very strange but the harder she tried to think about Eoin Lerwick and the last time she'd actually seen him, the fuzzier her memories became. She could pick out the time when they were Ruairi's age and they had gotten lost exploring the caves on Mount Violaceous. One of Eoin's birds, tiny then, had eventually found them and led them out. And she could pick out numerous trips to the beach and boat trips to the mainland and picnics in the Crimson Forest when she was Dani's age and even Mummy and Daddy's age, but not for the life of her could she remember anything more recent than that. It was very puzzling.

Just as she was about to shout to Mummy through the wind to see if she could remember when she had last seen Mr. Lerwick, the wind picked up and blew hard against them. And then snow started to fall. Night time snowfall on Yondersaay is a very beautiful thing.

Dani and Ruairi looked up into the sky and saw emptiness all the way up into the black. The snow fell from just there, it seemed like, a couple of feet away, appearing in front of them falling softly down as though someone were standing on a ladder and sprinkling it from that height and no higher.

Mummy herded everyone back the way they had come and shouted over the sound of the waves that it was the perfect night for hot chocolate with roasted marshmallows and Granny's story in front of the fire.

'And if you're up to it,' Mummy said, 'if you're not too tired—'

'We're not tired Mummy,' Ruairi said, holding in a bit of a yawn.

'Well if you want to, we can decorate the Christmas tree tonight while we listen to the story instead of waiting until tomorrow.' Dani and Ruairi said they would like to stay up to dress the Christmas tree and hear the rest of the story and roast marshmallows. So they turned into the wind and made for home.

As they were leaving the beach, Ruairi spotted a shining stone the size of a quail's egg. He couldn't be sure because although the moon gave off great light, it was still more dark than not, but it looked as though the stone was purple. Bright purple. He picked it up, put it in his pocket, and hurried after everyone else. He would surprise Granny Miller with it on Christmas morning and she could put it on the Christmas table with the rest of the stones and shells they'd collected.

King Dudo meets Rarelief the Splendiferous

Back at home, Mummy put some logs on the fire and Granny got the box of Christmas tree decorations down from the attic. Dani and Ruairi got into their pyjamas, put on their slippers, and helped Granny down the stairs with the box.

Mummy made hot chocolate with melted marshmallows while Granny, Ruairi, and Dani unpacked the decorations and got them ready one by one to put on the tree. When they were all set, Granny continued with her story of King Dudo the Mightily Impressive.

‘Where were we? Ah, yes, the Jarl had brought King Dudo to the foot of an oak tree in the Crimson Forest. And the tree had spoken to Dudo.

‘King Dudo stood staring at the tree with his mouth wide open. He stared and stared, his jaw hanging down and his eyes wide open. The Jarl gave a little cough moved his weight from one leg to the other.

‘Finally King Dudo pulled himself together. “The pleasure is mine,” he said. Rarelief the Splendiferous grinned from ear-branch to ear-branch. King Dudo thought he saw Rarelief blush but it was very hard to tell, his face was made of bark. The tall, skinny, young-looking Oak tree bent a branch down, King Dudo took hold of a twig and they shook hands.

‘King Dudo settled himself on a knobby root at the base of Rarelief the Splendiferous’s trunk.

‘Jarl Olaf made to take his leave, “I’ll leave the two of you to it. My Liege,” he said turning to the King. “Rarelief here will tell you all you need to know about this island, its history, and its many secrets. He was here before any of us were born and he will be here long after we have all returned to the earth. He has no reason to conceal or deceive. Rarelief will give you a true and objective answer to any question you may ask. I’m afraid, no matter how good my intentions, there are some things I am reluctant to talk about, and perhaps there are some issues that I cannot be unbiased about.” And with that Jarl Olaf Barelegged the Balding On Top shuffled off and King Dudo and Rarelief the Splendiferous were all alone.

‘Rarelief the Splendiferous began by telling King Dudo the history of the island, and within that history was Rarelief himself. He was a tiny sapling when Odin, the majestic God of all Vikings decided that of all the Viking lands, Yondersaay was the most perfect place to prepare for Valhalla. Odin made the island his home for a short while to explore the landscape and to get to know the people. He bestowed upon the island many of his own powers. He made it his treasure trove – the place where he and his hundreds of thousands of followers, over many generations, could amass their personal fortunes and weaponries ahead of their final battle in Valhalla.

‘He enshrouded the island in a mysterious invisibility and bestowed upon it many secret gifts. All of which Rarelief the Splendiferous related, in detail, to King Dudo.’

‘What were they Granny, will you tell us?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Ruairi, darling, I’m afraid some of them are so secret that even I don’t know about them. I can tell you about some of the enchantments that Odin bestowed upon the island, and I can also tell you a little bit about each of The Gifts of Odin, but not more than that, I’m afraid. Like I said, the island is shrouded in mystery,’ and with that Granny, at the top of a twenty-foot stepladder balanced precariously against the tree, let a haze of silky silver tinsel icicles float down over the tree to land randomly but evenly on the branches.

‘Odin was a great and powerful God who had battled many great and powerful Gods during his hundreds of years in existence. He had accumulated the most amazing objects you’ll hear of, some through force of war and combat, some came to him as gifts and offerings. I will briefly tell you about one treasure,’ Granny said, slowly climbing down from the twenty-foot stepladder. She approached the little table by the fireplace where Mummy had piled mounds of mince pies and slices of trifle and stacks of toasted marshmallows for the hungry tree trimmers.

‘Let’s pick one, Ruairi, can you remember them all?’ Dani said. ‘There’s the Cup of Memory, and the something something Thunderbolt, and the Sword of Lapis Lazuli.’

‘And the shield that goes with that,’ Ruairi said.

‘The Asiatic Shield,’ Dani said.

‘Right. And what else?’ Ruairi said.

‘Oooh, ooh,’ Dani said, ‘tell us about the Black Heart of the Dragon’s Eye. That sounds evil.’

‘I want to hear about The Tome of Tiuz,’ Ruairi said. ‘What is a Tome and what is a Tiuz?’

Granny, too preoccupied, ignored them. She had a sparkly yellow bauble in one hand and a garland of tinsel in the other. Granny looked at the table and at the sparkly yellow bauble to the tinsel and back at the table again. She wrapped the garland loosely around her neck like a very shiny scarf and tucked the sparkly yellow bauble under her chin. Then she filled both hands with mince pies and slices of trifle and toasted marshmallows, and slowly and carefully, not using her hands, climbed back up the twenty-foot stepladder beside the Christmas tree. Granny Miller stuffed a few of the marshmallows into her mouth and the rest into the pocket at the front of her frock.

‘I will tell you of one treasure,’ she said while chewing marshmallows, ‘one of Odin’s most prized possessions. And I will tell you about that particular one because it was created right here on Yondersaay. It’s something you haven’t listed yet. Its name has something in common with something else on Yondersaay, something big and rocky and lava-spewing.’

‘Volcano Mount Violaceous is big and rocky and lava-spewing,’ Ruairi said.

‘It must be The Violaceous Amethyst!’ Dani said.

‘Well deduced the pair of you. You are absolutely right, it’s The Violaceous Amethyst,’ Granny said.

Granny took the sparkly yellow bauble in her one free hand and leaned into the tree to hang it.

The Violaceous Amethyst

‘Odin first came to Yondersaay because he had heard tell that the Yondersaanian Vikings had no equals in all the Viking lands. Their craftiness in war, their surety upon the waves and their bravery and courage in battle had made them famous across the lands.

‘Odin came to the island one summer when a great battle was underway between the Yondersaanians and some Vikings from Groenland. Odin decided he would observe, unseen.

‘He chose a position high above the waves of the north-most seas with a clear view of the ocean and island alike. He saw the two Viking armies battle tirelessly. He also saw, as he was certain he would see, a dozen or so Valkyries riding their airborne horses very close to the action.

‘The Valkyries were women, equally lauded and feared, who were responsible for deciding which of the warriors were to be slain and borne by them to Valhalla. They carried out the will of Odin, the God of all the Vikings, for it was he who decided the outcome of any given Viking battle. He decided the victors of war. The Valkyries were known as the choosers of the slain and as demi-Goddesses of death. Their job was to choose the bravest of those who had been killed in battle, those most deserving of an afterlife in Valhalla, and gather their souls. They brought these brave warrior souls down to Valhalla and looked after them there.

‘Odin loved to watch the Valkyries work. They possessed a toughness and fierceness that no man could ever equal. They were swift, graceful, and deadly. They were also, as a rule, uncommonly beautiful.

‘It was not widely known at this time, but if you were to capture and hold a Valkyrie, you could make her grant you a wish.

‘What was widely known, very widely known, was that Odin, Lord over all the Viking Gods, Father of all Vikings, was a bit of a womaniser.

‘On this particular day, above this particular battle, Odin happened to catch a glimpse of a beautiful Valkyrie that he had never set eyes on before. She was tall and strong and had eyes

that were a deeper blue than the darkest ocean. She had blond hair to her thighs and skin of the palest ivory. She expertly directed her steed among the warriors in battle. Like the other Valkyries, she wore a scarlet corset and rode bearing a shield and a spear. And Odin was smitten with her.

‘After the battle Odin called her to him. Her name was Svava and she was more beautiful up close than Odin had imagined possible from afar. He told her of his desire for her and invited her to visit the island of the victorious Vikings with him.

‘Svava and Odin retreated to Yondersaay and there they had a passionate but short-lived affair.’

‘Yuck! You’re not going to tell us about the kissing, Granny? Please tell us there’s no kissing!’ Ruairi said.

‘No, Ruairi, I will not tell you about the kissing on this occasion. But there may be kissing later on in the story. I’m not promising anything!’ Granny said, and chuckled, as Ruairi pretended to be sick into a bucket.

Dani laughed. ‘I don’t mind the kissing so much,’ she said.

‘You’re weird,’ Ruairi said.

‘Much as Svava loved being on Yondersaay with Odin,’ Granny went on. ‘She had a burning desire to return to battle with her sisters. Odin could not convince her to stay with him.

‘Before she left, Svava determined to bestow upon Odin a most special gift. She thought for days about what would be the best thing. What do you get the God with miraculous powers who has everything? He already had a magical horse and enchanted armour. He already had the ability to change his appearance, to disappear from view, to blend and to escape. It was a tough one.

‘Keeping it secret from Odin, Svava went about creating something so special, so wonderful, that it would become a legend in its own right.

‘Svava and her sisters cast deep beneath the compressed rock of the Volcano Mount Violaceous. The search for the perfect Amethyst would usually take years of excavation, but

Svava, with an intuition to match her beauty, uncovered the perfect one in a fraction of that time. Svava found the right stone, the perfect stone. Not a large stone, but perfectly formed, and it was stunning in its opalescence. With the help of her sister Valkyries, she imbued this Amethyst, the Violaceous Amethyst, with the powers that would make it the perfect piece.

‘It was a particularly powerful gift because to the uninitiated it just looked like a pretty bit of jewellery, a nice trinket, something attractive to hang around one’s neck. In reality it possessed the power to protect its bearer from intoxication, from poisoning, from transformation, from manipulation even. The stone also possessed the power, like Odin himself, of changing its appearance. Under ordinary circumstances, all things being equal, its colour was a tender purple. Under certain conditions, it appeared clear, or white, even yellow sometimes.’

‘Svava bestowed upon the Violaceous Amethyst some other powerful properties but these were kept secret, and I’m afraid, my younglings, those secrets are lost to History. Mysteries. Like the secret enchantments and powers that Odin bestowed on the island, those little details never did get recited and sung and enacted by Skalders and balladeers. No one knows what they are.

‘Svava gave her lover his gift, and she was gone.

‘But back to Rareliel the Splendiferous,’ Granny said.

‘That’s it?’ Dani asked.

‘But what happened to Svava?’ Ruairi asked.

‘I will tell you all about it, but on another occasion. Unless you’d like me to switch to this story?’ Granny Miller asked.

‘No, Granny, that’s ok,’ Dani said.

‘We can come back to it another time,’ Ruairi said.

‘Well alrighty then. Now, where was I? Oh, yes,’ Granny said and took a few marshmallows from the front pocket of her frock.

‘Once Odin had settled on the island and decided it was his ideal hiding place, once he had protected it and enchanted it, and bestowed many secret gifts upon it, he had to find the most perfect place upon the island to hide his treasures.

‘Odin had wandered the island for many a day and night evaluating this gorge and that ravine, assessing this clearing or that rubble of boulders. To help him make up his mind he made it possible for everything on the island, every leaf and flower and boulder and brook, to speak with him, and to answer his questions. For example, he asked the gargling river about seasonal swelling and flooding and found out that the banks are routinely burst in winter and the land all about gets soggy and wet – not a good place to hide valuable treasures. They might get washed away one year, or at the very least be exposed if the earth on top was washed away.

‘He asked the boulders on the borders of Mount Violaceous which of their caves would be a good hiding place and was informed that when the volcano blows everything within the caves gets scorched – not an ideal place to hide garments of war made from leather and hide, or tools made of wood. He enquired of the sands on the Beach of Bewilderment about the possibility of digging down and burying the treasure beneath them. He was reminded, by a flock of passing puffins, that the tarantulafish have a habit of scavenging along the beach and were likely to dig up the treasures and use them out at sea to line their nests – no longer buried, the treasures could never find their way down to their Masters when they reached Valhalla.

‘Eventually one day, at about dusk, Odin took a stroll through the Crimson Forest despairing of ever finding the perfect hiding place when he sat down at the base of a very young sapling to think about where on the island the best hiding place was.

‘Odin was sitting and thinking when the sun started its descent. Under the canopy of the Crimson Forest trees Odin was barely aware of the time of day. It was only when he felt the final rays of the sun’s warmth on his shoulders that he had a look around him and took in the sunset. It was autumn and the leaves on the Crimson Forest trees were multicoloured and magnificent. There was already a colourful blanket of fallen leaves at his feet. Odin looked

about him and took in the spectacle of the setting sun's play of light on the multi-coloured trees. "Beautiful," he thought to himself.

'As he sat there looking about him, the setting sun broke through the branches high above the young sapling where he sat. A gentle beam fell upon the sapling's leaves and to the Viking God's astonishment, the leaves sparkled purple in the light. Odin had never seen such a thing. Yellowing leaves turning bright purple in the fading evening light. Odin addressed the tree.

"How has this come to be, young Sapling? Tell me the secret of your leaves."

'The sapling turned its branches to Odin and said.

"I'm afraid I cannot tell you, your Godship, even if I wanted to. Me poor Mother here," and he twisted one branch in the direction of a solid, regal-looking oak standing protectively behind him, "is forever fretting that I have some atrocious canker. All me mates keeps predicting it will spread to me branches and me trunk and finally me roots and that I'll be rotted away to pieces in front of them." The young sapling started to sob.

"Nonsense," said Odin. "Your leaves are glorious and beautiful beyond belief. There is no sign of any illness or disease whatsoever. And I should know, I am a God! And we Gods know everything. What is your name?"

'The tree stopped sobbing and looked at Odin. "Freakylief the Diseased, your Godship," he said.

"I shall rename you," and here Odin took a minute to think. "Henceforth you shall be known as Rareliel the Splendiferous!"

'For the first time Rareliel the Splendiferous felt real pleasure. His Mother immediately turned to all of the other trees to brag about her splendiferous son.

"And in honour of your singular beauty," Odin went on, "I shall bestow upon you a great honour."

'Wow, a great honour,' Ruairi said. 'What great honour?'

‘What do you think, dummy?’ Dani said. ‘He buried the treasure underneath him. Jeez, keep up.’

‘Cooooool!’ Ruairi said. ‘Can we go looking for him tomorrow? Can we go treasure-hunting, can we, can we?’ Ruairi asked Mummy and Granny.

‘That might be a bit difficult,’ Granny said.

‘Why?’ Dani and Ruairi asked together. Granny waited a minute. Ruairi twigged first.

‘Because there are no trees on the island. Well, hardly any trees on the island.’

‘Spot on, Ruairi,’ Granny said.

Ruairi looked to Dani and said ‘Keep up!’ Dani elbowed him in the ribs.

‘Stop it!’ Ruairi said.

‘The Crimson Forest is only called the Crimson Forest because the Islanders could never agree on a new name for the area. All the trees disappeared ages ago, no one remembers when; no one remembers for sure even that there ever were trees here at all. Perhaps the trees in the story are an example of how the truth gets distorted from telling and retelling a story. Perhaps the naming of the area known as the Crimson Forest was just ironic. Who knows? All we do know is that there are perhaps three or four trees on the whole island, and they’re all out of sight in the hollow of the Crimson Forest. And if the treasure was buried under any of them it would surely have been discovered decades ago. There are lots of shrubberies, and bush-like structures and millions of tiny colourful flowers at certain points in the year in the forest. But hardly any trees at all. Not nearly enough to warrant the title ‘Forest’.

‘The island council voted to change the name a few years ago to Crimson Valley or Crimson Meadow or some such. There was a majority in favour, but it was quite rightly pointed out to the assembled crowd, probably by one of the Mac Avinneys, that if the word Forest was to be rejected because of the area’s lack of Forestial qualities, then the word Crimson should also be replaced, because there was nothing remotely Crimsonian about the place either. And that’s where the Islanders came unstuck, they couldn’t agree on a new word to replace Crimson, and so The Crimson Forest remained the name of the area.’

‘Rarelief the Splendiferous talked for hours and hours and Dudo listened attentively. Every now and then the King asked a question, but for the most part he lay back and took everything in. When he was hungry, he ate from the magnificent picnic; when he was tired, they took a break and Dudo rested for a while.

‘Dusk was approaching, a time of day Dudo was eagerly awaiting. He was dying to see the tree’s leaves glisten purple in the last beams of sunset. Rarelief sensed this. He caught Dudo glancing towards the horizon, watching the sun getting lower in the sky.

“‘It’s not gonna happen,” Rarelief said.

“‘What won’t happen?

“‘My leaves will not turn a sparkly purple for ya, my Liege, not for you.”

“‘Not for me? Why not?”

“‘You’re not from here, are ya? My King, You were not born here, you do not rule it, you are not part of one of the island’s families. King of all the Danes so ya may be, a Yondersaanian, I can tell ya, you are most definitively, not. A tree whose leaves turn purple at sunset? Pretty easy to spot, wouldn’t ya say so? Odin woulda said so. Because Odin did say so.

“‘In mortal fear that a plunderer, having heard tell a story of a purple-leaved tree, would crack through the island’s enchanted border, seek out yer man with the purple leaves – that’s me by the way - and shovel out me treasures, he shrouded me transformation from all but those who are born of this island and those are part of the island’s clan. And for extra double sureness didn’t he make the forest a Haunted Forest. He instructed all of the trees and flowers and shrubberies in the art of effective haunting. That was a grand school that was. So that if someone not of the island, some incomer, wandered in here they’d be in no hurry to hang around.”

“‘What a pity,” King Dudo said. “I was rather looking forward to seeing your leaves turn purple. Thank you for not haunting me by the way.’

“‘You’re most welcome,’ Rarelief said.

“Rarelief, I must tell you that all my life I have dreamed of adding this island to my kingdom. You must know of the legend of the one king who will win the island and become its Master. Until now I had sort of flattered myself that it might be me, you know, I did get here and all, and well, they don’t call me King Dudo the Mightily Impressive for nothing. I’d rather not go to war with the Yondersaanians, but it is sort of what I do. Conquering and pillaging and plundering is sort of what I do for a living.”

“It wouldn’t do ya a hate a good,” Rarelief smiled benevolently, “you cannot take this island by warring alone,” he said.

“Oh no?”

“No.”

“Well how then?”

“There are two ways and a grand total of two ways alone that this island could be yours. The first way yid probably love, as it’d make powerful use of your plundering and pillaging abilities, but there’s no chance in a gazillion it would work for you. You cannot just make war with the island and the Islanders you know, oh no, you must extinguish all in the ruling clan’s line. For starters you’d have to exnay old Baldy there, and for good measure you’d have to do away with his daughter.”

“Well I’d hate to do that, it would be exceptionally rude, they’ve both been so kind and hospitable,” Dudo said.

“But that even that wouldn’t do the deed for ya. Oh no. The Jarl has a brother in Scotland. You would have to go there, find him, kill him, and then get yerself back here and claim Yondersaay as your own.

“Now I’m not saying I know how you got onto Yondersaay yesterday. Because I don’t know. Nobody knows. But it’s beyond even an idiot’s reason that you could ever find your back here. And all the killing, and the offing, and the murdering, will have been in vain. Sure, you might have enjoyed it, but if ya can’t get yerself back here onto the island, well then, ya can’t become its Lord and Master. And that’s a fact.

“The other night, the Jarl told me, every single one of the Islanders gathered on the shore to have a gander at you and all your mighty ships sail by. Everyone could see you looking and looking and looking, but not seeing. The children were having such a gas looking at you not seeing anything, they made the most odious faces and hand gestures at the lot of you. A couple of the young ones, I’m not naming names, broke into fits of the giggles.

“Well my goodness, didn’t a panic break out, the Islanders thought they were done for then. They saw you look right at them, right into their eyes, and you were floating no more than yards away from them. And you looked, and that spotty fella in the dress looked all around. But you turned northwards and sped away. Everybody all breathed a sigh of relief just then I can tell you.”

“So it’s a mystery, an entire absolute mystery, how ya managed to wash up on the beach like ya did yesterday morning,” Rarelief looked at King Dudo, clearly expecting him to tell him the secret of his arrival on the island.

‘King Dudo was silent. Rarelief continued.

“So ya got here once, so ya did, and no one has the foggiest how ya managed it. It might be the case that someone helped you?” Here Rarelief paused again hoping that King Dudo would explain. He raised an eye-brow-branch. King Dudo sat and waited for Rarelief to continue, saying nothing. “Or,” Rarelief continued, “it might be the case ya found the island because you were not looking for the island. You were unconscious and half drowned, you couldn’t have been seeking it out. At the very moment you reached the perimeters of the island, because you did not actively desire it, being unconscious and half drowned, you were somehow able to wiggle yerself in through the enchanted boundaries and wash ashore,” Rarelief said. And paused. “Or it might be the case that somebody helped you.”

‘King Dudo said nothing.

“But, and I’ll say it again, yill not get yerself here again. Someone would have to invite you, and as you may or may not have noticed, your Kingship, the Jarl is a kind and trusted leader, he and his daughter are terribly loved. You’d find it hard to find a single islander

on your side if they came to harm by your hand. In fact every single islander on this island would, in all likelihood, become your sworn mortal enemy. For life. To the death. And I reckon there'd be plenty a bloodshed if you insisted on persisting in this way."

"And the other way?"

"Pardon?"

"The other way I can win the island."

"Oh yes, the other way, that way is altogether more nice for everyone involved. I take it you are unwed?" Rarelief asked the King.

"I have not met my Heart's True Love yet," Dudo mumbled. "No. I'm not married." King Dudo could not disguise his sadness.

"You're getting on a bit, aren't you?"

"Hey!"

"Bit late to be thinking about your Heart's True Love, if ya ask me, probably about time you face facts, settle, take what you can get. Don't you think? A king should marry and bear heirs."

"I'm really not that old! Besides what does it matter to you?"

"Because," Rarelief continued, "the only other way to become Master of the island is to marry the Jarl's daughter. Then the island will legitimately be yours when the old man kicks the bucket, and much as I love old baldy there, he does have a terrible wheeze on him, so I daresay he's not long for this world.

"His daughter is a stunner, isn't she?" Rarelief asked.

"Hmm."

"She is not to your satisfaction?"

"She's very nice."

"I see."

“No, I mean, she’s lovely. She is beautiful and kind. I am certain she would make a loving and supportive wife. It’s just...” King Dudo let out a big sigh. “She’s not my Heart’s True Love.”

“Well, you only just met,” Rarelief said, “Give her a chance. Take her on a date, get to know each other. But don’t wait too long. I gather she is leaving the island soon.”

“How soon?”

“At the end of the week.”

“At the end of the *week*?”

“Yes, she accompanies her father to their country cottage in the southern lands every year when the harshest of the winter months set in. They take all their staff with them. Like I said, he has a bit of a wheeze on him. It gets very cold here in winter.”

“A course, you could wait until she gets back in the summer,” Rarelief continued, “but really, do you really want to spend months here on your own-some waiting for her to get herself back? Aren’t your men out there looking for ya? Besides if you wait you might miss your chance. The Jarl’s daughter is no spring chicken, she’ll be wanting to settle down soon too I’m sure, and she gets a lot of attention when she goes south, her colouring being unusual in southern lands. Her uncommon beauty goes down a bomb there. She’ll be hotly pursued and this year she might just say yes. She always says no, you see.”

“Why? As you say, she’s no spring chicken.”

“Some rubbish about waiting to find her Heart’s True Love.”

“Ah.”

“So you’ll have to really make her fall for you if you want her to marry you. And you’d better get moving. You have three days and counting.”

“By the winged moustaches of Thor, that is not a lot of time!”

“It should be ample.”

“Ample? Are you kidding me!”

“Should be no trouble for a charming impressive hero like yerself.”

“Well I suppose there is some truth in that, Rarelief, I *am* incredibly charming and incredibly impressive. I really cannot deny that. I have often been told as much. Often. There’s just one problem.”

“And what would that be now?”

“Well, I was going to ask you, since you know so much about the island. There’s this woman—“

“Let me stop you there.”

“Huh?”

“Forget her.”

“Why?”

“If you have any interest in possessing this island and all its treasures and mysteries, and they are plentiful—”

“Yes, I know, you’ve told me all about them. In great detail.”

“If you truly desire this island, you must forget about this other woman and concentrate on the Jarl’s daughter. She’s the only one for you.”

“Well, she did totally blank me.”

“Who, this other woman? Well, there you go.”

“I mean, she didn’t even *acknowledge* me, it was embarrassing. I was all ‘well hello there,’ and she was all ‘nothing,’ and then I was all ‘hi,’ and she was all ‘hmmph,’” King Dudo said as he folded his arms and turned his back on Rarelief.

“Like I said,” Rarelief said, “forget her. What’s the point? She clearly doesn’t get you. You need someone who gets you. Take Olaf’s daughter on a date, see if she gets you.”

“Yeah but three days...”

“You’re the King of all the Danes, and look at you. How could anyone resist?” King Dudo looked at his muscles and his flowing hair and stood up tall with his chin in the air and his hands on his hips.

“You are right,” he said proudly. “I am great. How hard can it be?”

The wooing of the Jarl's daughter

'Dudo went straight back to the village in the harbour, sought out the Jarl, and asked his permission to take his daughter on a date.

"May I have the honour of asking your daughter to come for a walk with me, your majesty?" he asked.

"Why of course you may, my majes, um—Liege. Of course you may."

"A question," Dudo said

"Ask anything," said the Jarl.

"What is her name?"

"Her name?"

"Yes, what is your daughter called?"

"Her name is ah, she's called, um..."

"Yes?" asked Dudo.

"Brunhilda."

"You seem uncertain."

"No, no, her name is Brunhilda. Hilly to me, her father, her daddio, her pops."

"Well okay then,' Dudo said, 'I shall herewith ask the beautiful, what was it again?"

"Brunhilda. Brunhilda Thunder Thighs."

"The beautiful Brunhilda Thunder Thighs, on a date. Ok then. Off I go. I'm going. I'm heading in the direction of your house right now to ask, um, Brunhilda on a date. Here I go." And the King walked off in the direction of the Jarl's dwelling place, found the beautiful Brunhilda and asked her if she fancied going for a stroll. Brunhilda smiled coyly and said she would. She went inside to get her handbag, oh no wait handbags weren't invented yet. Do you want to know when handbags were invented?' Granny asked.

'NO!' both Ruairi and Dani said at once, a little too loudly.

The wooing of Brunhilda Thunder Thighs

‘He’s not really going on a date with the other one, is he?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Well let’s see,’ Granny said. ‘The King asked Brunhilda Thunder Thighs out for a stroll along the promenade – there was a promenade along the harbour, just like there is now, only there weren’t so many people inline skating and cycling along it then as there are now, obviously, it being winter.’

‘And inline skates not having been invented yet, yes, we get it Granny,’ Dani rolled her eyes.

‘Oh now, my dear young great great great granddaughter, you are quite wrong there. Inline skates were invented by the Yondersaay Vikings not too long before this outing of Dudo’s and Brunhilda’s. They were all the rage. Would you like me to tell you how they were invented?’

‘Yes of course Granny, but do you think we should hold that back for tomorrow, you don’t want to tell us all your stories, tonight, do you?’ Dani asked.

‘I suppose you’re right,’ Granny conceded.

‘But you’re sure, Granny?’ Ruairi asked.

‘About what, Ruairi?’

‘About inline skates. Are you sure they weren’t invented a lot more recently than that?’

‘Absolutely. We’ll go down to the Yondersaay museum tomorrow and I’ll show you the fossilised remnants of inline skates made from bone, stone and iron. It is commonly known that those guys who ‘invented’ inline skates in the eighties had been on holiday on Yondersaay the week before,’ Granny said, outraged now.

‘Suspicious,’ Ruairi said, narrowing his eyes.

‘Very suspicious,’ Granny said, narrowing her eyes right back.

‘Anyhoo, back to Dudo and his date. The beautiful, ebony-haired, thunder-thighed Brunhilda ran inside. She said she was going to retrieve her handle-bagorium, as handbags were called then, but really she had Ursula help her brush out her long hair and dab some of the

red dye-powder they used in fabric dyeing onto her high cheeks and her full lips. Ursula squeezed her arm and wished her good luck.'

'No, I don't believe it Granny!' Ruairi said. 'Ursula can't have wished Brunhilda good luck, she must be her mortal enemy! Dudo is her Heart's True Love, he must be, so how can she be wishing Brunhilda luck? Did she poison the dye? Or put a snake in the handle-bagorium?'

'You'll have to wait and see Ruairi, but don't bet on it,' Granny said. Ruairi was confused. 'It's real life, Ruairi, I keep telling you. Ursula has paid no attention to Dudo this whole time. And you must remember, King Dudo wants to possess the island of Yondersaay above all else. He's been dreaming about this his whole entire life, and now here it is, his for the taking. Who says Dudo is Ursula's Heart's True Love, and who says Dudo is even fussed about finding his anymore?' Granny asked.

'I'm not convinced,' Dani said, 'I want to hear more, Granny. I'm with Ruairi on the poison and the snake. Ursula won't just take this lying down!'

'We'll see,' Granny said, 'but I don't know, I hope you won't be disappointed. Now, where were we? Oh yes, Ursula was helping Brunhilda to get ready for her stroll on the promenade. Unbeknownst to both of them, the King was spying on them.

'He was peering into the dwelling place through a slat in the window covering. He scrutinized Ursula's face. She didn't look jealous. He had hoped, when he saw her there, helping her Mistress to get ready for a date, that she would be at least a little bit jealous. She looked a bit tired perhaps, but certainly not jealous. He could detect no ill feeling between the two women whatsoever.

"Huh!" King Dudo thought, "just as well. She was not pretending, she has no interest in me after all. It really will be easy to give the beautiful heiress all my wooing attention. I shall woo her good," he decided.

'Brunhilda emerged a moment later looking radiant. She truly was a magnificent looking woman. She smiled sweetly at the King as she held up her hand for him to kiss.

“Sheesh,” King Dudo thought, “she may have been brought up in a tiny habitation on an island in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of farmers, peasants and fishermen, but she sure does know how this wooing business works.” King Dudo suspected she had sent off for a copy of ‘The Rules: Courtship in Court.’

‘The King and Brunhilda walked slowly along the promenade chatting amiably. It started out a bit awkwardly, as these things often do but once they’d established that Brunhilda’s favourite colour was Blue and Dudo’s was yellow, and that they were both evening people as opposed to morning people, their conversation ambled along quite affably.

‘They found that they had rather a lot in common, all things considered. Very soon they were perfectly comfortable in each other’s company. There were quite a few silences but they were easily filled with talk about the weather or the choppiness of the waves coming in to shore. Their conversation didn’t get very deep, mind you, but it was pleasant enough, and importantly, it was not strained.

“I suppose you miss your homeland?” Brunhilda ventured as they reached the pier.

“Not really,” King Dudo said, “I like seeing new lands and meeting new people.”

“What a coincidence,” Brunhilda responded, “me too.”

“How wonderful,” King Dudo replied.

‘As King Dudo and Brunhilda strolled contentedly along the promenade they heard ecstatic screeches of laughter coming close up behind them.

“Watch out!” cried a voice, but too late. A startled Brunhilda jumped off the path just as two people, hysterically laughing, hurtled up to them on inline skates. One of them was a big strong handsome man, and he was holding the hand of a woman.

‘A red-haired woman.

‘Ursula.

‘King Dudo wasn’t fast enough off the path. The woman crashed straight into him and he ended up in a tumbled heap at the bottom of the verge at the side of the promenade. The

strong handsome young man came to a toppling halt a little way up the path and Brunhilda ran to him to see if he was hurt.

‘King Dudo found himself lying flat on his back at the bottom of the little hill, He was just about to right himself when Ursula flopped right down on top of him. Face to face at last, albeit lying down, and in a very odd position, King Dudo seized the opportunity and addressed her.

“Hi. I’m Dudo,” he said as Ursula jumped up.

“Yes, I know,” she said and leaned a hand down to help him up.

“We’ve met before,” he said.

“Yes, you’re the guy who said ‘well hello there’ when I was doing laundry in the brook.”

“That was not our first meeting.”

Ursula, looking away, absently twiddled her necklace.

“I believe you saved my life.’

“It was nothing.”

“HA! So you admit it! It was you! You were on the ice. There was a bear and then there was you—“

“Hurry up Ursula!” the strong handsome man, who happened to have the nicest set of pristine white teeth Dudo had ever seen, called out from the promenade.

“Well, goodbye then,” she said and made her way up the verge with great difficulty; she was wearing inline skates after all. Once she hit the path she bladed off and she and the strong handsome man with perfect white teeth glided away hand in hand towards the harbour.

‘King Dudo straightened himself up and stepped up to where Brunhilda waited patiently on the promenade.

“Who was that?” King Dudo asked Brunhilda.

“You know who that is, that’s my Mis—I mean my servant-girl, Ursula, the one who toils for us. In the fields and in the home. She’s a servant. She toils.”

“No, I mean, the man, who is the man?”

“Oh him, that’s Thorar the Smouldering. He is the Jarl’s right-hand man.”

“I see. And are they betrothed?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. He is probably just wooing her. She gets wooed a lot, does Ursula.”

“She does eh? I shall take you home now Brunhilda,” said Dudo and strode off purposefully back up the promenade they way they had just come.

“What? Oh ok,” and Brunhilda ran after King Dudo. “That was a quick date. You only picked me up ten minutes ago.”

“Yes, well, I realise now that I have not been doing this right. We need to have more *fun!*”

“That’s great... I think...”

“I will pick you up here tomorrow. At day break!” King Dudo announced with much gravitas and vehemence. “And we shall have *fun!*”

Granny stretched herself out on the sofa where she had been since the tree was trimmed to everyone’s satisfaction. She sipped the cocoa Mummy brought her and snuggled her feet deeper into her cosy slippers.

‘It’s not going very well for Dudo and Brunhilda, is it Granny?’ Ruairi said.

‘Not what you’d call a great first date,’ Dani said.

‘Maybe he’ll ditch Brunhilda and try Ursula instead,’ Ruairi said.

‘It’s not like Dudo to give up now, is it? He is tenacious, and he has set his mind on wooing Brunhilda,’ Granny said.

‘We’ll see,’ Dani said.

‘Yeah Granny,’ Ruairi said. ‘We’ll see.’

The wooing of Brunhilda continued: the more fun version.

‘The next morning a beautiful Brunhilda Thunder Thighs emerged from her dwelling place to find a beaming King Dudo waiting for her. He had two pairs of inline skates.

“‘Are you ready for the best date of your life?’” he asked an uncertain-looking Brunhilda.

“‘Sure, but, have you ever skated before, my Liege? It’s not as easy as it looks. Perhaps we should get you some padding—”

“‘Nonsense, I have faced the toughest enemies and tamed the most vicious tigers. I have braved the stormiest seas and climbed the most forbidding peaks, I shall take to skating like a baby dragon takes to barbecuing.”

“‘Well, if you say so.”

‘Five minutes later, Brunhilda was doing loop de loops and pirouettes around Dudo on the path while Dudo moved along inch by inch, his arms outstretched, his feet barely moving. He had his winged golden helmet on and had downdles strapped to his elbows and knees.

“‘Yes, I’m getting the hang of it now. See?’” he said, giving Brunhilda a huge smile. “‘I haven’t fallen once in at least two minutes,” he said as his left leg shot out in front of him and his right leg shot out behind. He did windmills with his arms and managed to balance precariously inches from the ground. Brunhilda rolled her eyes and went to his rescue.

“‘Perhaps you were right, Brunhilda, perhaps a picnic in the forest is the way to go. We’ve hardly chatted at *all*. I want to get to *know* you,” Dudo said.

‘Brunhilda and Dudo wandered within the shelter of the trees in the Crimson Forest in the direction of a clearing Brunhilda knew of. They arrived and Brunhilda set out a blanket for them to sit on. They sat and chatted quite easily with each other, there was no awkwardness between them. ‘Yes,’ thought Dudo, ‘this woman is very sweet and very calming, I can be at ease with her, perhaps she is right for me after all.’

‘Dudo decided that now, in this setting, a mere day before Brunhilda was to sail out of his life possibly forever, now, amongst the pretty flowers and statuesque trees, now was the time to propose. He moved himself in front of Brunhilda and was just about to arrange himself so that he was on one knee, when from high above came sounds of screeching laughter, very similar to those he and Brunhilda had heard on the path the day before. They both turned and looked up and what should they see but Ursula and Thorar the Smouldering floating in the air on giant eagle wings that were strapped to their arms. They had jumped off the top of Mount Violaceous which was rumbling and spewing softly in the background.

‘Dudo and Brunhilda rose from the blanket and looked up. They shaded their eyes from the sun to get a better view.

“‘I think they’re headed this way,” Dudo said as the two gliders swung around in their direction.

“‘This is a habitual landing place for eagle-gliders. There is moss underfoot, it is soft.” And, as Brunhilda predicted, Ursula and Thorar made synchronised swoops slowly downwards and downwards. “‘Don’t they look grand together? They make a striking couple, no?” Brunhilda asked.

“‘Hmmm” said Dudo.

‘Ursula and Thorar were perhaps ten feet from the ground when a circling gust blew through the trees and slammed into their wings. They both lost control of their equipment and were sent tumbling downwards at a far greater speed than planned. Ursula’s wings came right off her arms and she splattered straight into King Dudo who went down with a crash.

“‘Mother of—” King Dudo said as he tried to right himself. “‘We meet again. You do know how to make an entrance, servant girl.”

‘Thorar landed with a bump and rolled and rolled away along the moss-covered forest floor. Brunhilda ran to see if he was hurt.

‘Ursula stood and helped Dudo to his feet.

“You were telling me,” King Dudo said, “yesterday, of the bear, and the ice, and our first meeting.”

“I was?” Ursula responded.

“Yes. Yes, you were,” Dudo said as he motioned to Ursula to sit down on the picnic blanket. “The first time you crashed into me and caused me to scramble in the dirt. Sit, please,” Dudo said. “They will be some time, I think. I saw poor whatshisname hit his head on a rock, but don’t fret, my darling Brunhilda will revive him in a tick.” Ursula moved to go and help them. “You doubt Brunhilda’s nursing abilities?” King Dudo asked, pouring beverages for the two of them and motioning once more for Ursula to sit down.

“No, of course not, it’s just…” Ursula began.

“I think it best to leave the boy’s revival to her kind hands,” Dudo said and handed Ursula drink and a sausage roll.

“Revive yourself, peasant. Eat and drink,” Dudo said. Ursula reluctantly partook of the mead and the sausage roll.

“So!” King Dudo continued. “You were telling me,” and he sat back and crossed his arms, “me, the bear, the ice, and then you showed up. And don’t deny it, you admitted it yesterday. Unless you have a twin sister—”

‘An *evil* twin sister,’ Ruairi whispered to Dani, narrowing his eyes again.

“—and I find that highly unlikely.”

“I do not deny it. It was I,” Ursula said. “I was having a stroll along the beach and I heard an unearthly wailing sound and I figured someone or something was in trouble.”

“I take it you are referring to my singing,” Dudo said.

“And so I took to the water and followed the wailing, I mean singing, and found you and the bear on the ice. I climbed onto the little island, wrestled the bear—”

“You did what now?”

“I wrestled the bear and forced it back into the sea—”

“No, no, hold on a minute, you’re telling me you fought with the bear, all on your own, alone, with no help, just you, and you won?”

“Sure. It was no biggie. We are an island of warriors, you know. To be honest, I sort of wanted to ask you why you hadn’t fought the bear yourself; it would have seemed a lot simpler a solution than trying to deafen it with your wailing.”

“I, eh, um, I didn’t want to hurt such a magnificent creature” Dudo said. “I didn’t think it would be fair.”

“I see,” Ursula said, unconvinced, “and well, then I was going to dive back into the ocean and swim away but you opened your eyes. And then I couldn’t just swim away.”

“You couldn’t?” Dudo asked, softening for the first time. He sat up straight and looked at her closely. “Because you felt something? You felt something deep inside your core, like your heart turning into a million butterflies floating and dancing within your ribcage, and you knew, you just knew that after all the wishing and hoping, after all the years of longing and dreaming, of never meeting your Heart’s True Love, you realised that in front of you was—?”

“No. Because you fell off the ice and cracked your head,” Ursula said.

“Oh. So, it didn’t mean anything to you?”

“Not at all.”

“So why bother? King Dudo asked in a huff.”

“Well, I could hardly let you drown now, could I? You looked so pathetic.”

“Pathetic?”

“Like a wet rat.”

“I have had enough of this insolence! Peasant! Servant girl! Away with you,” and Dudo snapped around and turned his back on Ursula.

“You did ask!” Ursula said as she got up from the blanket and walked into the woods, humming, in the direction of Brunhilda and Thorar. From the woods, Dudo could hear Brunhilda and Thorar burst into laughter, clearly at something Ursula had just told them.

‘Dudo strode across the clearing and stood at the edge of the trees. “Brunhilda, Brunhilda, come away. Our picnic has been ruined by these interlopers. I am taking you eagle-gliding.”

““Oh no no no no,” Brunhilda said, emerging from the trees. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, my Liege, I’d much rather go back to strolling. Strolling was fine. I liked strolling. Let’s do some more strolling.”

University of Cape Town

Brunhilda's Last Day

'The following morning, on Brunhilda's last day before heading south for the rest of the winter, she and Dudo went for brunch in the harbour. Dudo was not comfortable. He still hadn't gotten used to the brace on his neck. The cast on his leg was itching like madness, and the bruises all over the rest of his body still hurt like all hell.

"Well, this is just lovely," Brunhilda said, "even nicer than strolling, which of course you'll be able to do again in six to eight weeks depending on how that break heals. Just lovely. I never much cared for eagle-gliding anyway, very overrated. And of course it was not your fault at all that you careened head first off the mountain as soon as you took off. It was a bad day for wind."

"Brunhilda, beautiful Brunhilda, I've been thinking," Dudo said through his wired-jaw.

"Yes?" Brunhilda replied sipping elegantly on a beverage.

"I have something to ask you."

'Dudo heaved himself off his seat and painfully got himself into a position which from certain angles could look like he was on one knee. "You are a very nice person, and we get on quite well, don't we?"

"I think we do, yes, and thank you, you are a very nice person too, not very sporty, mind, but very nice, yes," Brunhilda said.

"One comes to a point in one's life," King Dudo continued, "when one thinks one might be better off being with someone else, someone nice, to do things with and share things with and bear heirs with. Do you agree?"

"Yes, I think I do agree, King Dudo. I think I do. Someone nice is far preferable to someone who is not nice. And one really should get around to bearing heirs before it is too late for one."

"Well, in that case, Brunhilda, and I know we don't know each other very well as yet, but I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

“I was wondering....” And Dudo took Brunhilda’s hand and looked earnestly into her eyes and shouted, “You have GOT to be kidding me!” For just then Ursula and Thorar, laughing hysterically as usual, came speeding into the harbour riding the backs of two dolphins.

“No seriously, come ON! Does that servant girl ever do any work? SERiously!” Ursula and Thorar came to a sharp halt at the water’s edge next to where Dudo was kneeling before Brunhilda. They sent a wave of salt water into the air as they halted. Brunhilda ducked out of the way, but Dudo, slow to react, was drenched from head to foot in bucketfuls of icy-cold salt water.

‘Dudo glared at Ursula. Ursula looked back coyly, “Oops,” she said.

‘Dudo, dripping from head to foot, shivering from the iciness of the water, turned to Brunhilda. “Beautiful Brunhilda. Will you marry me? Today at sundown?”

“Um, ok,” Brunhilda said, and Dudo rose, and wetly limped, as quickly as he could, with as much dignity as he could muster, which wasn’t very much at all, away from the harbour towards the dwelling place.

“Wonderful,’ he shouted back over his shoulder. ‘I’ll see you later.’”

The wedding of Dudo and Brunhilda

‘The wedding of Dudo and Brunhilda,’ Granny began.

‘That can’t be right, Granny. Are you sure you’re remembering the story right?’ Dani said.

‘Yes Granny, how can Dudo marry Brunhilda when Ursula is his Heart’s True Love? You sure you’re not mixing it up?’ Ruairi said.

‘Do you want to hear the story or not?’ Granny said sternly.

‘Yes,’ Dani and Ruairi replied.

‘Do you want me to tell it to you the way it really happened, or do you want me to make something up so it all ends Happily Ever After?’

‘The real way, Granny,’ Ruairi said.

‘Well alrighty then,’ Granny Miller looked at Dani and Ruairi and sighed. ‘We’d better take it upstairs, it is ludicrously late. Go brush your teeth and get into bed and I’ll come up and finish the story up there. I’ll just make myself a quick sandwich while you’re getting into your jammies. I’ve barely eaten a thing all day.’

Mummy stayed downstairs, tidying up and doing the dishes, while Dani and Ruairi got ready for bed and Granny made herself a quick roast beef and mustard, and tomato and bacon and lettuce and chicken tikka sandwich. Mummy and Granny had a quick chat in the kitchen about Daddy, which the children couldn’t hear. Granny asked Mummy how she felt about Daddy staying away for Christmas.

‘I’d rather not talk about it Granny Miller, if you don’t mind,’ Mummy said. ‘But yes, I am very disappointed. We had a bit of a fight before we left and I think he might not come for Christmas.’

‘Don’t be too sure about that, Mummy, I’m sure Daddy will do his very best to be here with you, Dani, and Ruairi,’ Granny said.

Mummy turned and looked at Granny Miller, ‘have you been in contact with him, Granny?’

‘WE’RE READY!’ Dani and Ruairi shouted from their bedroom.

‘That’s the children,’ Granny said hastily. ‘I’ll just go and finish the story about King Dudo and maybe we’ll chat again later.’ And Granny Miller bounded up the stairs to Dani and Ruairi’s room.

‘I’ll finish tidying up,’ Mummy shouted up after her, ‘I’ll be there in a wee while. Don’t wait for me.’

‘OK!’ Dani and Ruairi shouted back down.

Restored after her sandwich and full of vigour, Granny Miller was ready to continue. She threw herself down into the giant beanbag on the floor of the bedroom. Her feet stuck up and out, and her arms flopped back over the sides of the beanbag, but she was comfortable.

‘Where were we?’ Granny settled down deeper into her puffy beanbag and began again.

‘The preparations for the wedding and the wedding feast got underway immediately. Word spread quickly and as everyone on the island always wanted in on a good party; all the Islanders came together in the village and got stuck into the preparations.

‘There was much goat-sacrificing and mead-drinking in honour of the happy couple. The island’s men - fisher-men and farmers naturally, but also warriors to the core - were a little saddened that there wasn’t going to be a bloody battle between them and the Dane’s men. They had been gearing up for a good battle. However, they bore the disappointment rather well and got over it very quickly. In fact, once they heard there was a party in the offing and when it came to getting everything ready they didn’t hold back.

‘As the day wore on, smells of cooking mingled with the smell of the sea and wafted all over the island. Banners and lights were hung around the village in preparation for the ceremony at sundown.

‘As the hour approached men and women, dressed in their finest gear, which happened to be their battle gear, paraded down the main thoroughfare of the island. They held aloft huge flaming torches which they used to light hundreds of giant candles that they placed all over the

settlement. They also carried a longship on their shoulders. Usually now, in Viking times, and you may not know this Dani and Ruairi, a longship was burned only at funerals. But not on Yondersaay. There have always been lots of very old people on Yondersaay, and not that many funerals. The Yondersaanians loved a good longship burning as much as the next Viking, but rarely got a chance to do it, because of the lack of people dying. So it was long the tradition on Yondersaay that longship torching was no longer confined just to funerals alone, the locals could, and did, perform the ritual at any big occasion, happy or sad.

‘The villagers began gathering at the point chosen by the bride as the wedding venue. Brunhilda had decided against having the wedding at the harbour, an obvious choice since the sunset over the waves is uncommonly beautiful. It was too close to the promenade, the site of her groom’s embarrassment on not one, but two occasions.

‘She had decided against the clearing in the Crimson Forest for similar reasons, despite that spot coming alive in a chorus of animal music upon the setting of the sun.

‘And she didn’t choose anywhere on Mount Violaceous because her groom had fallen off the mountain so disastrously the day before.

‘Instead, running out of options, Brunhilda chose as her wedding site the banks of the gargling brook, by the clearing, just beyond the waterfall, with the woods behind them and the shimmering sea in front.

‘A stunning location, without doubt, but Brunhilda was not to know that this was where Dudo had seen Ursula for the first time after his escape from the ice.

‘Brunhilda was not to know that this was where, believing Ursula to be his Heart’s True Love, Dudo spoke to her for the very first time.

‘Brunhilda was not to know that this was the spot upon which her groom was hurt more deeply than he had ever been in his entire life. He had never been hurt even a tenth as much by any other woman, nor by any savage beast, nor by an adversary in battle. He had not broken any bones at this beautiful site, chosen by his bride as the setting of their imminent wedding, nor did he suffer any public indignity.

‘His Heart’s True Love had rejected him, right here on this very spot, and he would never be the same again. Up until that moment, alone and lonely as he had been, there had always been hope, no, more than that, a belief deep in his core that she, his Heart’s True Love, was out there waiting to be discovered, a belief that one day they would meet and that then he would be complete.

‘But it was here on the banks of the gargling brook, by the clearing, just beyond the waterfall, with the woods behind them and the shimmering sea in front that Dudo the Mightily Impressive, minutes from his marriage to the beautiful Brunhilda Thunder Thighs, realised that forever more he would go through life an incomplete man. For it was on this spot that King Dudo the Mightily Impressive, crushed and broken, came to understand that he would never spend a year, a month, or even a day, with his Heart’s True Love.

‘Brunhilda was not to know this.

‘As the sun was about to set and the wedding was about to begin, as a beautiful woman prepared to become his bride, Dudo knew his heart should have been soaring in exquisite delight.

‘While he stood thinking and waiting, as the crowd settled onto chairs and benches and stools behind him, Ursula approached him.

“‘Wintersuckle flowers,” Ursula said as she as she pinned some tiny flowers to his sleeve. “The bride’s handmaiden traditionally bestows these as a gift to the groom on the day of his wedding,” Ursula explained. “They grow wild on the island and survive even the harshest of conditions. They represent continuity and stability, and fertility. May you and your bride have a long and loving life together and may the Gods reward your devotion to each other with many healthy children.”

‘Dudo was taken aback by the sweetness and sincerity with which Ursula spoke to him. He saw a gentleness in her face when she fastened the flowering buds to his clothing that he had never seen before.

“I am grateful for this gift,” Dudo said to Ursula, and he looked into her eyes, deep into her eyes for the first time since he saw her on the ice. “Thank you. You make things seem very clear to me.”

“I do?”

“Yes, yes you do.”

‘Ursula blushed and walked away.

“I will bring your bride to you. As you are alone here on the island, Thorar will stand with you.”

‘Dudo turned and welcomed Thorar the Smouldering. Thorar smiled and slapped Dudo on the back, “my congratulations to you both,” he said to Dudo. “It is my pleasure to stand with you today.”’

‘Ursula had walked away while Thorar spoke. Dudo instinctively turned to watch Ursula leave. He didn’t even realise he was doing it. Just as he was about to turn back and chat with Thorar. Ursula glanced back at him.

‘Ursula saw Dudo looking at her, and Dudo saw Ursula looking at him. His heart soared. She blushed, smiled quickly, and looked away. Dudo turned back to Thorar but he could not concentrate on what Thorar was saying, all he could think about was Ursula and the way she had looked at him just now.

‘While he was deep in thought soft music started up. The village musicians had fanned out along the bridge across the River Gargle and were now playing sultry music that echoed and enhanced the atmosphere of the latening day. They played in the glow of the setting sun and a hundred candles laid out across the bridge.

‘The sun was fast sinking behind Volcano Mount Violaceous. The birds were singing their evening tunes, and the night insects had started their mating songs, when Brunhilda emerged.

‘She truly was a stunning bride, beautiful and radiant, with a serenity and peacefulness on her face to make many an anxious bride delirious with envy. The perfection of her form was

ably presented in a dress of the purest fabric ever seen in those times. White and flowing, it set off her raven hair, her white skin, her blue eyes and her red lips. It was clear to Dudo, as it was to everyone present, that this woman, his bride, was a natural beauty. And Dudo hadn't seen or heard anything from her or about her to make him doubt that her heart was just as pure and beautiful.

'However, magnificent as Brunhilda was, Dudo could not help his heart from yearning for the woman, simply attired in an everyday dress, with neither make-up nor jewelled adornment, who was walking quietly, her eyes on the ground, behind her.

'Ursula.

'When the heiress reached the King their hands were joined by an ancient man in flowing green robes. He was the resident ceremony-official-maker. Dudo had noticed him earlier, snoozing on the ground propped up against a rock. Dudo had never seen anyone so old. He had been hoisted into position by the Jarl and Thorar while everyone else's attention was diverted by Brunhilda's arrival.

'The ceremony-official-maker raised his arms and the crowd quietened. He began, "It is with very heavy hearts that we gather here to mourn the loss—" the Jarl leapt with great speed to the ceremony-official-maker and whispered something in his ear.

"WHAT? The old man shouted," the Jarl whispered a bit louder, "OH I SEE, A MARRIAGE, NOT A FUNERAL" and the old man turned to the bride and groom and smiled. He slowly raised up his arms, he closed his eyes and lowered his head. The assembled wedding guests, everybody on the island, awaited the old man's pronouncement.

'The old man did not move. The Jarl cleared his throat. After a minute a soft snoring sound came from the old man and carried all the way to the back of the crowd. Tittering started up. The ceremony-official-maker was standing upright, his head bowed down as though in preparation, and his arms were still raised in the air. The Jarl gave the old man a swift kick to the ankle. He roused himself with a snort and started speaking again as though he'd never stopped.

“We are here on this beautiful evening to celebrate the coming together in marriage of” and hear the old man paused, his eyes flickered towards the Jarl who coughed ‘cough-hilda’

“Brunhilda! And...” again, he glanced towards the Jarl.

“Cough-udo.”

“And King Dudo of the Danes. Let us hear from the Groom,” and the old man bowed his head again.

‘Dudo turned to the assembled crowd. He looked into the faces of his would-be subjects. The young men, all of them to a man, would be a huge asset to his Viking fleet. He would be honoured and proud to go into battle with any one of them. He thought of the treasures buried deep beneath Rarelief’s roots. He thought of the beauty of the island and the kindness of its inhabitants.

‘He turned to the Jarl, a just, honest leader, a much-loved man - man who had been hospitable and generous when he had not needed to be.

“My Liege,” King Dudo said. He was addressing the Jarl but he spoke loud enough for the entire congregation to hear, “This island represents the culmination of a life-time’s dreaming. Yondersaay would be the jewel in the crown of Denmark. My countrymen would hail me as their greatest King for centuries if I were to sail home and proclaim Yondersaay mine.

“As you know, there have been songs sung and legends told of the mighty King who will single-handedly engineer the island’s surrender, who will possess the island despite its being hidden from view in the north-most seas and inaccessible to the merest mortal. I have come to love this island over the past few days, it has become to feel like a second home to me. I have seen myself so many nights in my dreams as this one heroic King to possess the island.”

‘Here King Dudo paused for a moment. He drew a deep breath and continued. “And your daughter is a genuine beauty. Your daughter Brunhilda possesses a perfection of heart, mind, and body, so pure as to bring hope to the most dejected, to raise the spirits of the most hopeless, and to bring light and peace to the most curmudgeonly.

“So it is indeed with the heaviest of hearts that I say to you,” and Dudo looked at the Jarl and then turned to his bride, “that I confess to you, that I lay bare my soul. I am not the King of the legends. I am not the one King the stories predict will single-handedly acquire your island,” and here King Dudo looked back at the Jarl. “I am very sorry to say, I cannot marry your daughter.”

‘The crowd drew a collective intake of breath. They gasped in shock. Soxolf the unshod, silent when Dudo first met him could plainly be heard, by everyone, to say, “he’s ditching her at the altar? What cretin would do such a thing?”

“I’m sure he has his reasons,” Pal the Friendly whispered back.

“My Lord,” Dudo continued despite the crowd’s rumblings getting louder and louder, “your daughter is indeed a great beauty and a charming person, and although mastering your island has been my life’s desire, I must decline. I must relinquish my life’s dream and leave your island disconsolate, empty-handed, and alone. I hope, nevertheless, my Lord, that I will always be welcome at your table. You and yours will always be welcome at mine.”

‘King Dudo turned to face Brunhilda.

“It is with the utmost sadness and regret Brunhilda, that I renege on my promise to marry you. And that I should do it today of all days, on your wedding day, while you stand before me at the alter, is unforgivable. I have been a coward and a fool and I should never have allowed myself to take our courtship this far. You have done nothing wrong and I will be eternally ashamed at the way I have treated you, at the humiliation I have brought upon you, and the disappointment you must feel.”

“Actually, to be honestly truthful, I really don’t mind,” Brunhilda said. “Not at all. If we’re being a hundred percent honest, I wasn’t all that pushed.”

‘Thorar beamed a glistening white-toothed smile at Brunhilda. Brunhilda caught the smile and smiled shyly back at Thorar.

“No, no, I know you’re just covering up your humiliation and disappointment,” Dudo said. “My poor brave Brunhilda.”

“No. No, I’m really not, my King,” Brunhilda said. “You are a very nice man, courteous and kind, but frankly, you’re not really my type. I’m more into men of action.”

“Men of action!! I am King Dudo the Mightily Impressive!”

“Well if you say so.”

“Anyway, never mind,” Dudo said, “you’re humiliated and disappointed and you’re covering up your hurt, I understand, I get it,” and he patted her on her head. “Poor sweet broken-hearted Brunhilda.”

Brunhilda shrugged. She glanced towards Thorar the Smouldering. Thorar came to Brunhilda’s side, and stood close to her. So close that no one in front of them could see that secretly, behind their backs, they were holding hands.

Dudo turned to address the Jarl once more. “I feel I owe you an explanation, my Liege,” Dudo said, as he glanced at Brunhilda and Thorar. “Incidentally, I commend your daughter for so skilfully hiding her grief,” and he turned back to the Jarl. “I must tell you, my Liege that I have met my Heart’s True Love and though it exacts such a heavy price - the grief and disappointment of your daughter - I simply cannot take another as my wife.

“The woman I speak of has spurned me, it is true. And it is also true that Brunhilda and I would be certain of some happiness and we may grow to love each other in our own way in time. However, my heart will never fully be hers. I have met my Heart’s True Love and I know what True Love is. It could never be the same with another.”

“It just so happens my Heart’s True Love is not the heiress of Yondersaay,” and Dudo indicated Brunhilda, “nor is she a royal or dignitary of any kind. In fact she is a simple peasant with no royal blood at all.”

“I see,” the Jarl said.

“It is with ease that I give up this island and the glory it would bring. I would happily give up my throne and my entire fortune for just one day with her. For she is my Heart’s True Love.”

‘Throughout all of this, as he spoke, as Brunhilda and Thorar were united, Dudo was aware of Ursula. She was standing still at Brunhilda’s side. She was not looking at him but straight ahead. He did not turn towards Ursula as he spoke of his Heart’s True Love, nor did he indicate her in any way nor so much as glance at her. He was simply aware of her.

‘Dudo had finished speaking. The gathered crowd took in the news. There would be no party. This was disappointing. They had been goat sacrificing and mead drinking all day in preparation. The people in the crowd whispered among themselves, trying for the life of them to come up with some reason, any reason, to keep the party on as scheduled. Dudo, in this moment, as the crowd got louder and louder chatting amongst themselves, trying to come up with a reason for a party, allowed his mind to wander.

‘His mind paced its way back to all of his encounters with his Love from seeing her on the ice to now, this moment. And he remembered something, or figured out something. At least, something occurred to him that hadn’t occurred to him before.

‘When Dudo had tried to talk to Ursula at the brook and she blanked him, it hurt. It hurt even more when, seemingly unmoved by the encounter in any way, she had hummed a song to herself. Ursula, Dudo now realised, hummed the same song when he saw her in the woods, and the same song was on her lips while she conducted her menial tasks around the dwelling place. In fact, every time King Dudo had seen Ursula, every single time, either as he encountered her, or as she wandered away from him, she was humming a song.

‘The same song.

‘His mother’s song.

‘The song Dudo sang to the bear on the ice,’ Granny paused and looked at Dani and Ruairi. They were getting excited. Dani leaned into Ruairi and whispered ‘I knew it!’

Granny went on. ‘The assembled Islanders were still chattering away to each other about how best and where best to continue the festivities. Their attention was no longer on the wedding party in the clearing; they were neither watching nor listening to what was going on.

‘Dudo turned to look at Ursula with his realisation fresh in his mind. Ursula had not moved an inch, she was still standing off a little to the side, looking straight ahead of her.

“Look at me,” he said.

‘Ursula did not move.

‘Dudo walked to her and softly said, “look at me.”

‘Ursula looked at the King, and for the first time Dudo saw what she had not allowed him to see all of this time. Dudo saw his heart in her eyes. He saw his love for her reflected there. Dudo saw in those eyes what he had been looking for his entire life.

“I will go away now and you will never see me again,” Dudo, in almost a whisper, said to her, “Just tell me one thing and I will go.”

“If I can, my Lord,” Ursula said.

“Tell me you do not love me,” Dudo said.

‘Ursula did not speak. She looked away from Dudo, she looked to the Jarl and then to Brunhilda trying to get them to tell her what to do. They looked back at her but their faces held no answers. Ursula turned back to the King and said, in a low voice, “I cannot tell you that.”

‘Dudo, encouraged, said, “I think your heart lies with mine. Tell me it doesn’t. Tell me it doesn’t and I will leave and I will never come back.”

“I cannot tell you that, my Liege,” she said.

“Ursula,” Dudo said, taking her hand in his, “Ursula Swan White, of the sundown tresses and the sea-ice eyes, tell me I am not your Heart’s True Love.”

‘Ursula shook her head but remained silent. Dudo persisted, “I defy you, tell me to go away. Tell me to leave this island and never come back.”

“My King,” Ursula said, looking up, resolute at last, “That I can do.” Strong and firm, with tears nevertheless springing into her eyes, she proclaimed, “I can and I will tell you, go away and never come back,” and Ursula turned from King Dudo, her Heart’s True Love.

‘Dudo was stunned, “But why?” he said. He waited for a response, for an explanation but none came, “you cannot wound me like this and not tell me why. You cannot shatter my heart into a million pieces and not explain your reasoning.”

‘The ceremony-official-maker, who had been right there all the time looking from one to the other and back again as they spoke, looking more and more confused, finally caught up to what was going on. In a very loud voice he said “What is this? Is the marriage off? What did he say just now, what did he say? Brunhilda the heiress of Yondersaay? How preposterous! Brunhilda is not the heiress of Yondersaay.”

‘Dudo turned to the minister. The Jarl, Ursula, Thorar and Brunhilda tried desperately to shush the minister but he was having none of it and swatted them away like flies when they approached him.

““Brunhilda is not the heiress of Yondersaay?” Dudo asked turning to face the ceremony-official-maker.

““What on earth gave you that idea?” The old man said, “*Ursula* is the heiress of Yondersaay.”

‘Dudo was astounded. He didn’t know what to think. Ursula the heiress of Yondersaay? He looked to Ursula for an explanation, but it was the Jarl who spoke.

““Let me explain, my Lord,” he said. “It is true what the old man says,” and he looked around but the old man had fallen back to sleep. “Brunhilda is not my daughter, she is my servant girl. Ursula is my daughter. Do not blame then, I insisted they switch positions. I could not risk you marrying my darling daughter just to gain control of the island. My sweet girl deserves to spend her life with someone who loves her for herself, not for her inheritance.

““I forbade Ursula from having anything to do with you, though I knew how she felt. I made her swear on my life and on the lives of all who live on Yondersaay that she would reject you and turn you away. She thought, we both thought, we were doing what was right for Yondersaay and for our people.

“I beg your forgiveness my Liege, and your understanding. Ursula is no longer bound by her oath,” he turned to his daughter.

“I release you from your promise; you must act in the best interests of your Heart, not of mine.”

“It didn’t work,” Ursula said, indicating her necklace. For the first time Dudo really noticed her piece of jewellery. It looked like a smooth clear piece of glass; like something roughly hewn, or that had washed up on the beach. It was fastened around her neck on a simple string.

“It is the Violaceous Amethyst,” the Jarl said to Dudo. “It protects its bearer from intoxication. I was afraid you would ruthlessly and carelessly seduce my daughter if you knew who she was. She wore it and still she loves you. That means that your love for her is genuine. If you had tried to deceive her and manipulate her, it would have kept her safe. You got through to her simply by loving her. And she got through to you simply by being herself.”

“I thought it was supposed to be purple,” Dudo said.

“When it is close to the source of its power,” and here the Jarl indicated the Volcano Mount Violaceous from which it was mined, “it can allow its hue to be affected by the heat of the lava beneath the earth. Besides, a purple rock hanging around her neck would have been a bit of a giveaway, Rareliel the Splendiferous was certain to have told you about The Violaceous Amethyst.”

“Fair point,” King Dudo said.

“If you can forgive me for this deceit,” the Jarl continued, “if you can forgive Ursula for lying to you, if in your heart you harbour no ill feelings, you are truly at liberty to woo my daughter, my real daughter, Ursula,” and the Jarl left the hollow by the gargling brook.

‘Dudo and Ursula were soon alone. The villagers, having decided that *not* having a new King was a thing they could celebrate, moved the festivities to the harbour. Brunhilda and Thorar, holding hands openly now, and hardly able to keep their eyes off each other, followed the Islanders to the party on the shore.

‘The sounds of revelry carried all the way to the brook where Ursula stood in the fading day-light. Barefoot and in her simple dress the King felt he had never set eyes on anyone so beautiful.

“‘I love you,” he said when he was sure they were alone. “And I always will.”

“‘I love you too,” Ursula said.

“‘Will you be mine?”

“‘I will.”

“‘Shall we wake him?” Dudo gestured to the minister who was once again snoring under a rock.

‘Ursula smiled. “Yes, but I want to do this properly, I am an heiress after all.”

‘Less than an hour later, as the last of the sun’s embers warmed the water by the pier, Ursula walked towards her Heart’s True Love. In the company of her lifelong friends, dressed beautifully, with her hair adorned with rubies and emeralds, smelling of the sweetest flowers from the beds of the Crimson Forest, Ursula said ‘I Do’ to King Dudo the Mightily Impressive, brave and noble King of all the Danes. She took him to be her husband for better, for worse, for richer for poorer for as long as they both drew breath.

‘Cheers went up, fireworks sprayed across the sky and all inhabitants of Yondersaay made merry until the wee hours of the morning.

‘And so it was that King Dudo became Lord and Master of Yondersaay, the enchanted island in the middle of the north-most seas. The following morning the Jarl headed south with Brunhilda and Thorar. Before he left his dwelling place he spoke in his private quarters with King Dudo.

“‘When I die the island will pass to you and your family. My daughter will bear you heirs and in your family the island will stay forever. It may not be traded or forcibly taken. Whosoever takes it in this manner and believes it his can never truly be the owner. The island

will stay in our line forever more. Should the line end, only then shall whosoever claims it be the true owner.

“There is one last thing I must do for you before I leave. I wish to introduce you to someone,” the Jarl said. With that, the door to the dwelling place opened and in walked the ancient, stooped, hard-of-hearing, bumbling old ceremony-official-maker who had tried to marry Brunhilda and Dudo, and who had succeeded in marrying Ursula and Dudo. Only he didn’t look quite so ancient, or stooped, and when Dudo spoke to him he didn’t seem quite so hard of hearing nor as bumbling.

“This is Odin, the Father of all the Vikings,” the Jarl said to Dudo who couldn’t disguise his shock. Dudo kneeled in front of the mighty Odin, God of all the Vikings, keeper of the treasures of Valhalla and bowed his head.

“My Lord, I am overwhelmed by this great honour. I am at your service, how may I please you?” Dudo said. Dudo saw, from the corner of his eye, two ravens of the darkest black were resting nearby.

“Your offer is a kind one,” Odin said, in a voice at once gravelly and pure, “but it is I who am at your service. Should you or anyone on Yondersaay need aid or protection, you can be certain that I, or my friends,” and he motioned to the two ravens, “will be close at hand and will battle to protect you. You will one day be Lord and Master of all of Yondersaay, and with that honour comes a heavy duty. The treasures of all of the Vikings of old will be in your protection, and will remain in your family’s protection until the final battle in Valhalla. We shall help you keep it safe.”

Granny looked up from her puff. Both Dani and Ruairi were fighting sleep. They were fighting it off as bravely as any Viking warrior fights off the fiercest enemy.

‘Time to call it a day, my younglings,’ Granny said trying to get out of the puff. Dani and Ruairi helplessly drifted into a deep sleep. Granny squirmed and wriggled in the puff. She tried to heave herself this way and that, but it was no use, she could not get out of the puff.

‘Mummy!’ she called, ‘HELLLP!’ There was no response from downstairs. ‘Maybe I’ll sleep here,’ Granny mumbled as she struggled one more time, ‘MummEEEEEE!’

Christmas Eve

What first made Daniela suspicious when she woke up on Christmas Eve and looked out her window was not the fact that there were a hundred men running down the island high street with lit torches in their hands and glistening battle-axes over their shoulders. It was not the fact that these men looked remarkably like the Vikings of old, and were dressed whiskers to big-toe in leather, chain-mail and sheep-skin, with horny helmets on their heads. It was not the fact that some of the men, in the middle of the crowd, were hoiking a massive Viking longship on their shoulders in the direction of the harbour. It was not even the fact that these normally quiet, normal men, the village shopkeepers and local farmers, the teacher, the distiller and the publican, with upturned throats were singing to high heaven 'Up HellyAa. Up HellyAa. I'm a Viking. The sea is the place for me. Up HellyAa.'

It was the fact that, right in amongst all the other Vikings, a fair bit off to the right at the back a little, Dani could see someone who looked a lot like Hamish Sinclair, albeit with a leather skirt, a sheepskin waistcoat, lace-up leather sandals and a winged helmet. Hamish Sinclair who maintains that vegetables are for wimps, that real men only eat meat and the occasional Cadbury's crème egg, Hamish Sinclair, Dani saw now, with not a shred of embarrassment, was openly and brazenly, eating an apple.

'There's something not quite right here,' Dani said.

'No flies on you,' said Granny Miller.

End of Part One

PART II CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas Eve Morning

‘I’m flabbergasted!’ Granny Miller said, ‘I can’t believe my eyes.’ She rubbed her eyes hard and looked again. ‘Are you two seeing what I’m seeing?’

‘Uhuh,’ Dani and Ruairi said, leaning right the way out the window now.

‘And, just to be extra, one hundred percent, completely sure,’ Granny said going pale and clutching her chest. ‘Is what you’re seeing, by any chance, all my life-long friends and acquaintances, all the people we know from this island, is it all of them,’ and Granny took a deep breath, ‘is it all of them looking like Vikings and acting like Vikings, and doing things the way you’d expect Vikings to be doing them?’

‘Uhuh,’ Dani and Ruairi said again.

‘Is there any chance I haven’t woken up yet?’ Granny said, pinching herself all over and collapsing into a heap on the beanbag on the floor.

‘We’re awake Granny, it’s really happening,’ Dani said.

‘Really,’ Ruairi said.

‘Let me think about this for a minute,’ Granny said. She moved herself a bit and put her hand under her bum. She lifted her hand out and found that she had collapsed on a mince pie. She looked at it, shrugged, and started to eat it. Dani and Ruairi waited for her to say something.

‘Well, I suppose, it is Christmas Eve,’ Granny said. ‘In all honesty, this does ring a bell.’

‘What on earth do you mean this does ring a bell?’ Dani and Ruairi couldn’t believe their ears.

Or their eyes.

‘Granny Miller,’ Dani said, ‘everyone on Yondersaay is here on the high street. Look, there’s the butcher eating an apple, the draper drinking mead from a helmet, the cobbler setting

things alight with a flaming torch. Even the pig-farmers from Faraway Farm are here. They're carrying a longship down the high street on their shoulders with the shrimp-fishers. And everyone is a Viking!

'You're not strictly speaking a hundred percent correct in that statement, my dear Dani,' Granny Miller said as Dani and Ruairi heaved her up out of the beanbag. She eyed them both over her very thick glasses and looked back out the window again. 'Everyone on the island is a Viking. Except us.'

Dani and Ruairi looked down at themselves to make sure they weren't wearing sheepskin and leather, and sure enough, they were both still in their pyjamas. They all went to look out the window again.

'Yes,' Ruairi said, 'that's right, everyone on the island is a Viking, except us.'

'For as long as I can remember,' Granny Miller said, 'very strange things have come to be on Yondersaay on Christmas morning. We get presents and pull crackers and eat wonderful food, sure, but often things have seemed a little, how shall I put this, a little odd, or a little not quite right all of a sudden come Christmas morning. For example take the glacier in Old Mount Violaceous. Also, people have woken up in places they don't remember going to or have discovered tattoos they didn't have before, or with a hair cut they didn't remember getting. It's usually put down to having one too many hot toddies, or rum punches, or glasses of mulled wine at Christmas Eve parties. But the draper. Well, he's a teetotaller.'

'A what?' Dani asked.

'A teetotaller is someone who never drinks a drop of alcohol. It brings them out in hives, I believe. The draper woke up one Christmas morning in the crow's nest of a sailboat that was half way to Australia. It took him a week to get home. So that was the end of the rum punch theory. Sort of. There was a whispering suggestion that the draper lost the run of himself on this particular Christmas Eve and had a fair go at the gin and tonic when no one was looking. They say he only said it took him a week to get home because it took a week for the hives to die

down, that he was in his attic the whole time. He gets at least one bottle of calamine lotion for Christmas now from someone, as a joke. That's what you put on hives.

'Nevertheless, over the years there have been enough significantly mysterious occurrences on Christmas mornings on Yondersaay to suggest that something other than booze is responsible.' Granny moved the curtain back from the window and looked out into the street again.

'Yep, I'm almost convinced that something that isn't alcohol is causing the strange Christmas morning goings-on.'

'Ya think!' Ruairi said and pointed out the window. 'Hello! Granny! It's eight o'clock in the morning and everyone on the entire island—'

'—except us,' Dani interjected.

'—except us,' Ruairi continued, 'is a Viking!'

'Well,' said Granny Miller, 'I think it's about time we found out what exactly is going on around here. Let's wake Mummy and go out and see what we can see. Look. Everyone's in very good humour at least, they're all singing and chatting. Maybe we can join in without attracting attention.'

'Some of them are doing a weird dance,' Dani said.

'Some of them are wearing inline skates!' Ruairi said.

Dani and Ruairi reluctantly turned away from the window. They went down the hall to wake Mummy. Granny kept looking out. It was all very troubling. All the same, it cheered her to see all her old friends having so much fun.

'Granny!' Dani called from down the hall. Granny went to see what the matter was. 'Mummy's not here,' she said.

Ruairi ran downstairs to see if she was asleep on the sofa or in the kitchen having her breakfast already. There was no one on the sofa, and no one in the kitchen. Granny and Dani followed close behind Ruairi.

‘Look,’ Ruairi said, ‘there’s a bowl and spoon, a cup and a plate and a knife in the sink. Mummy must have had her breakfast already.’

‘Look at this,’ Dani said. There was a note stuck to the fridge. Dani read what it said.

‘Morning my darlings, up early so thought I’d go to the Crimson Forest to look for holly and Ivy. Back soon. Love you, Mummy.’

‘Well we’d better go get her and make sure she’s ok,’ Dani said.

‘Or maybe we should wait here until things are back to normal,’ Ruairi said, a little frightened. ‘What if she comes back and we’re not here, she might go back out again and then we might come back, and she wouldn’t be here so then we’d go back out again, and then she’d come back again and we’d end up missing each other over and over and over.’

‘We’ll leave a note, Ruairi, look,’ Dani said and she turned over Mummy’s note and wrote *‘Gone out to look for you. We’ll be back here every hour on the hour. (Hope you’re not a Viking). Love, Dani and Ruairi.’*

‘And Granny,’ said Granny,

Dani wrote *‘and Granny.’*

‘Ok, so let’s go,’ Dani said.

‘Wait!’ Granny shouted as Dani and Ruairi scrambled into their wellies and coats.

‘Not in your pyjamas, it’s freezing out there. Get upstairs and get into your proper clothes.’

‘Granny,’ Dani and Ruairi pleaded. ‘It’s not that cold, and look, most of the people out there are wearing no more than a few strips of leather!’

‘Go! And there’ll be some breakfast here waiting for you when you get downstairs.’ Granny dodged any objections by quickly adding, ‘which you can bring with you and eat as you walk.’

‘I’ll bring my backpack too,’ Dani said, ‘just in case. It has all sorts of handy things in it like a rope and a torch and a Swiss army knife, and an umbrella, and a flare and an alarm and—’

‘You’ve been watching too much television,’ Ruairi said as he ran ahead up the stairs.

In precisely two minutes and thirteen seconds, Ruairi was timing it on his watch, Dani, Ruairi and Granny Miller, in proper clothes, outdoor boots, thick coats, hats and scarves, were walking among the Vikings along the high street. Dani, fearless, was a little ahead of the others.

‘Hello!’ Dani said loudly to a woman and man who passed close by. The man stopped and looked at her. The woman stopped too. They came up to her and asked her where she got her clothes. In English, with Yondersaanian accents.

‘I have not seen such an assortment of colours before, nor such an abundance on one personage. It is quite a strange arrangement,’ the woman said.

‘Oh, well, you know, I do what I’m told,’ and she rolled her eyes towards Granny. Granny had just joined them and immediately recognised the small man and the hugely tall woman as Jimmy and Janice Mc Kellan from the post office.

‘Well hello there Jimmy, and Janice, grand day for it, isn’t it?’ Granny said to them.

The Mc Kellans looked bewildered.

Janice, in her leather bodice and skirt, turned to her sheepskin-clad husband and whispered very loudly, loudly enough for Granny and everyone else close by to hear, ‘is this ancient lady addressing us? She’s looking at us. She’s smiling at us. She seems to be talking to us.’

Her husband whispered back, equally loudly. ‘Just nod your head, my dear, and smile, she may have the old-person’s forgetting disease, but just in case she has something else, something worse, let’s take our leave.’ And with that, Janice and Jimmy Mc Kellan, in Viking form, backed slowly away from Granny, Ruairi and Dani, nodding and smiling all the while.

‘They have a point, my dears. Look around you. We’re the weird ones. Everyone else, as far as they’re concerned, is perfectly normal.’

Dani, Ruairi and Granny continued on up the high street. They soon noticed that everyone was headed back down towards the harbour. When they got to the brow of the hill by

the bakery, they were able to look down and get a good view of the pier. Hundreds of Vikings, all of whom Granny knew or knew to see, were milling around.

‘They’re getting ready for a party, look,’ Ruairi said.

On the sandy bit of the shore by the harbour, they could see men stacking a pile of wood and other combustibles. And a little further up, more men were piling earth and sand in a big mound.

‘Make way! Make way!’ they heard from behind and looked around just in time to see the majority of the fire brigade and the amateur rugby team jog past with a huge longship on their shoulders. They were singing the song that had woken Dani and Ruairi that morning.

‘Up HellyAa, up HellyAa. I’m a Viking, fierce to see. The sea’s the place for me, up HellyAa!’ They were surrounded by other strong-looking men carrying lit torches.

‘Look,’ Granny said, ‘it’s Lewis Mac Avinney, from the bakery,’ Granny pointed out a very burly-looking man in early middle-age, with a chiselled jaw and powerful arms and legs dressed with straps of leather arranged in such a way that displayed how his muscles bulged effortlessly.

‘Whoa Daddy. Come to Mama!’ Granny said under her breath.

‘Granny!’ Dani and Ruairi glared at Granny.

‘I’m just saying. You know him, he usually has slicked back hair and wears little round glasses and Argyle jumpers,’ she looked him up and down again. ‘Who knew?’

‘Seriously, Granny,’ Dani said.

‘If I were a hundred years younger—’

‘—Granny, he wears a dress,’ Dani added.

‘I could overlook that,’ Granny said.

‘And he’s a Viking,’ Ruairi added.

‘Your point?’ said Granny and moved to the side. Dani and Ruairi stood beside her and watched the longship go by.

‘Wow, it’s massive,’ Ruairi said, awed by the longship.

‘Yes indeed,’ said Granny.

‘Are they going to put it on the water, Granny?’ Ruairi asked. ‘Can we have a go on it Granny?’

‘I don’t know what they’ll do with it Ruairi, but my guess is that it’s destined for that big pile of wood down there on the shore. In all of the stories we were told about Vikings when we were growing up, whenever there was a big party on the island a longship would be burned on a pyre. If you remember, it’s what the Yondersaanians did to celebrate the wedding of Dudo and Ursula.’

‘What a shame to torch it, it’s fantastic. Will they sail it first maybe?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Do you know Ruairi, I have no idea. Believe it or not, I have actually never been around actual Vikings before. I am very old, granted, but, and you might find this hard to believe, I am not old enough to have been around in Viking times. I have heard all the stories, all through my childhood, and have told them many a time since then. The stories are all I have to go on, so all I can tell you is what I think might happen, or what the stories say usually happens.’

‘That might not be true Granny,’ Dani said.

‘What on earth do you mean Dani?’ Granny said.

‘Maybe you were a Viking before, one other Christmas Eve, and you just don’t know it. You said strange things happen every Christmas morning and no one can figure out why. Maybe everyone changes into a Viking every single Christmas Eve every single year and then forgets all about it when they wake up on Christmas morning. Maybe you have been a Viking one day of the year for all of your life. And you forgot,’ Dani said.

‘Yeah, Granny, and you forgot,’ Ruairi said.

Granny’s eyes opened wide. ‘I need a minute to think about this,’ Granny said. ‘I’m flabbergasted,’ she added and stumbled backwards to the bench on the footpath. ‘Flabbergasted!’ She plopped down onto it and put the back of her hand to her forehead. She sat and watched as her life-long friends and neighbours happily passed by on their way to the

big Viking party in the harbour, dressed head to toe like the Vikings of Old, oblivious to the fact that they looked so odd and strange to Granny and to Dani and to Ruairi.

‘Impossible!’ Granny Miller said.

‘I don’t think it is impossible, Granny,’ Dani said.

‘Improbable, then,’ Granny said, taking a deep breath.

‘I don’t know,’ Dani and Ruairi said together.

‘No no no no no no,’ Granny said, ‘I can’t take all of this in! Have we checked to make sure that I’m not still sleeping? I’m dreaming a lot more slowly these days...’

‘Look!’ Dani shouted, ‘It’s Mummy!’

‘Where? Where?’ Ruairi asked. He couldn’t get a good look because of the crowds of people so he jumped up on the bench beside Granny Miller and looked down the hill, over the crowds of people towards the harbour.

‘I don’t see her, I don’t see her,’ he said.

‘There! There!’ Dani said and took off down the hill.

‘Wait, Dani, wait!’ Ruairi said. He strained to see, but she was off.

‘Stay here Ruairi, stay here on this bench,’ Granny said, ‘I’ll get Dani and we’ll come back for you and then find Mummy.’

‘Ok,’ Ruairi said. He immediately regretted it as Granny disappeared into the crowd. ‘She’s so quick!’ he said to himself. He watched and could see Granny’s head popping up here and there as she wove her way nimbly through the crowd in pursuit of her great great great great granddaughter. He thought about following after them but felt certain he’d lose them in the crowds. Already he’d lost sight of Dani and could only make out Granny out because the puffin feathers in her maroon hat came popping up every now and then as Granny hopped this way or that.

As Ruairi stood there, on his own, on the bench at the top of the hill on the high street, a group of massive Viking men went charging by, swinging battle-axes and swords in the air. One of them bumped into the tiny blue dodgem car that Ruairi had seen someone driving the

day before. The car alarm went off and the screeches startled the bunch of Viking men who turned back and started attacking the tiny blue car with their battle-axes and their swords. One of them jumped on top of the car and started stamping on the bonnet. The alarm didn't stop, but the bonnet did cave in completely. The car swayed from the force of the stamping. Another Viking jumped on the roof of the car, and another kicked a door.

The kicking Viking stood to the side when he saw another man charging for the car from all the way across the street with his shield up and his sword outstretched. The running man emitted a loud war cry and slashed his sword into the rear tyre which burst with a pop and deflated with a long low hiss. Still the car alarm blared.

Ruairi sidled towards the end of the bench furthest from them and did his best to keep a hold on where Dani and Granny were in the crowd further down the hill towards the harbour.

Granny caught up with Dani about halfway down the hill. Dani was standing in front of a Viking woman.

'You look so different, Mummy,' Dani said to the woman. The Viking woman turned to Dani and smiled a smile Granny and Dani had seen a million times. They were both so relieved when she smiled that smile. It really was Mummy. Only Mummy could smile like that.

'Thank you. I think.'

'Oh yes. It's a compliment, you look, you look...' and Dani gave her Mother the once over. Mummy was wearing a tight leather bodice with a fringed leather skirt that was shorter than Dani had ever seen her Mother wear. Her hair was down, and wavy, but not at all styled. It was positively straggly, and it looked really nice. Mummy was standing with another Viking woman. Dani and Granny recognised her as Alice Cogle, but it was clear from the way Alice stood back a bit from Granny and Dani that the recognition was not mutual. Alice was holding a golden piece of jewellery designed in a twirl that wrapped around the upper part of the arm.

'...I like the bracelet,' Dani said to Alice.

‘It’s beautiful isn’t it?’ Mummy said. ‘They’re from him.’ At that, Mummy turned and looked to a tall handsome man who was standing just beside her.

Alice leaned in to Granny and Dani confidentially. ‘He is wooing her!’ she said.

Dani and Granny turned and looked at the man. ‘Lewis Mac Avinney!’ they said together.

‘Yay for Mummy,’ Granny gave Mummy a wry smile.

‘Granny!’ Dani said, appalled. ‘It’s Mummy! Mummies don’t get wooed! Anyway, she’s already been wooed, she’s married to Daddy.’

‘No, no I’m not married. You are mistaken,’ Mummy said. ‘I have not yet decided if I am to be wooed by this man,’ and here she tilted her head towards Lewis Mac Avinney, and barely looked at him. ‘But I am free to be wooed. I have not yet found my Heart’s True Love.’

‘You *are* married, and you have two children!’ Dani said.

‘I have not borne any offspring, my dear, but I can tell you,’ she said turning and looking properly at Dani, ‘I do have dreams of one day having children, and in those dreams my daughter is beautiful and sweet and also strong of character and brave of deed. Just like you.’ And Mummy and Dani looked at each other closely. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me....’ And Mummy smiled at Dani and leaned down to catch a name.

‘Dani,’ Dani whispered. ‘Daniela. You don’t recognise me?’

‘Oh, but of course I do, Dani-Daniela, sure I do. Well, no, actually, no I don’t recognise you, but you do look very familiar.’

‘Familiar? I look like you. I’m your *daughter*,’ Dani said.

But Mummy didn’t hear the last bit of what Dani said. She didn’t hear Dani tell her that she was her daughter, because at just that moment, the burly Viking had grabbed Mummy by the hand and was leading her down the street towards the festivities. Mummy turned back and quickly grabbed Alice’s hand; ‘Aldis the Irregular, where I go, you go,’ she said. And they were gone.

Dani was just about to run after them when Granny caught her by the arm.

‘Look!’ she said. Dani turned and looked back up the hill. They could see Ruairi standing on the bench at the top of the hill where they’d left him. Tall as he was there was a man standing beside him who towered above him, broad as a tree trunk.

‘Hamish Sinclair!’ Dani said. ‘Oh no,’ and darted off back up the hill towards her little brother. ‘We’ll get Mummy later, let’s go save Ruairi.’

‘I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about, Hamish is a good boy,’ Granny said. ‘But now that you mention it, Ruairi is looking a little worried and Hamish is looking more than a little Viking-esque today. Who knows what kind of a boy he is when he doesn’t know who he is.’ And she ran as fast as she could, which was very fast indeed, after Dani, up the hill, towards Ruairi, and the great big, hairy looking, scary looking Hamish Sinclair.

University of Cape Town

The Boy King of Denmark

‘It’s well you might say to me that you’re just a schoolboy but I remember what you were to look like when I was to see you,’ Hamish Sinclair said as Ruairi stared up at him from the bench.

‘Look out for him’ my father did be telling us last thing at night when we’d had our Tea and our bath and the spuds dug out from behind our ears and we were drifting off to sleep in our beds. ‘He’ll be pale and slight, eyes grey as the fins of dolphins and hair the colour of copper.’

‘And here you stand before me, pale and coppery as they come. He warned us all you’d be slippery and make up a story, for why would the true Boy King of Denmark come to the island he wants to rob off its people and not pretend he was just an ordinary ginger.

‘You can cry ‘nay’ all you wish, ‘til the tears dry up in your eyes and the tongue falls asleep in your mouth, but everyone knows, and so do I, that there’s a secret sign, a way to tell for sure that your blood is blue and from what line you come.

‘I just, now, right at this minute in time, can’t for the life of me quite remember what it is.’ And with that, Hamish put one arm around Ruairi’s middle and lifted him clean off the bench.

‘You’re coming with me ‘til we can find out the true meaning of this, and until I can remember what it is I am to do with you.’

‘There’s no need for that,’ Ruairi said, ‘we can sit here while you remember, really, this bench is as good a place as any for remembering. Maybe I’ll remember something before you remember something, and then we’ll have all our remembering done, right here on this bench,’ Ruairi said, trying to sound as reasonable as possible. Hamish paused and considered Ruairi’s suggestion. Ruairi gave a big grin. His arms were pinned at his sides and Hamish’s massive arm was wrapped around him as though the boy were a big loaf of bread.

‘Let’s sit,’ Ruairi said, still grinning.

‘No, no. Come with me. The Jarl will know. We will ask the Jarl.’

‘Can’t we just phone him? I have a cell phone, we could just sit here nicely on the bench, side by side, remembering, and we could give him a quick ring, from the bench, and see what he thinks. What do you say?’

But Hamish was already moving and had made it clear out of the village before Ruairi had finished his sentence. Hamish’s strides were longer and faster than Ruairi thought possible, even for such a big man. He was striding in the direction of the Crimson Forest.

Granny and Dani got to the top of the hill to the bench just in time to see Hamish and Ruairi disappear at great speeds around the bend on the road that led to the Crimson Forest.

Let’s go,’ Dani said. ‘Wait. What about Mummy?’

‘Mummy will be fine,’ Granny said, ‘the only danger she’s in is of having too much fun, with the wrong man. If I know my great great great grandson, he will not let that happen.’

‘Daddy? What can Daddy do, he’s thousands of miles away.’

‘Daddy texted me last night. It was supposed to be a surprise for all of you because there was a big chance it wouldn’t happen, but, he managed to get a last minute flight to Helsinki yesterday.’

‘But I thought there was a storm and that all aircraft were grounded until further notice,’ Dani said.

‘Apparently this flight went via the North Pole and so it avoided the storm front completely. Daddy wasn’t sure if he’d be able to get from Helsinki to Yondersaay or if he’d be stuck in Helsinki on his own for Christmas. He checked into a hotel in the harbour to have a shower and a shave and went down to the bar to check the weather forecast on the television. While he was in the bar he overheard some Japanese fishermen talking,’ Granny said.

‘幸運私達は日本に住むのが常であった!’ Dani said.

‘Yes, indeed, Dani,’ Granny said, ‘It is very lucky that you used to live in Japan. Daddy overheard the men talking about Yondersaay. He bought them a drink and got into conversation

with them. It turns out their entire crew had docked over night and were about to return to the waves. They belonged to an illegal Japanese tarantulafish hunting vessel. Tarantulafish are a delicacy in Japan. The fishermen had been roaming the northern seas looking for tarantulafish when they heard that there was an outbreak around Yondersaay. They were planning on heading straight for Yondersaay that afternoon.

‘Daddy was able to persuade the fishermen to take him with them. He introduced himself to the captain and told him he’d spent every summer on Yondersaay when he was a boy and knew where the underwater tarantulafish burrows are.’

‘Wow, how does he know that?’ Dani asked.

‘He doesn’t,’ Granny said, ‘as I told you, no one knows exactly where they are. He was bluffing so they would take him. And the bluff worked. The last text I got from Daddy said he was on his way to Yondersaay and would be docking early this morning.’

‘I knew Daddy would make it, I knew he would come,’ Dani said.

‘So Mummy will be well taken care of, we don’t have to worry about her. Let’s get after Ruairi,’ and Granny and Dani ran after Ruairi and Hamish in the direction of the Crimson Forest. They left behind the buzzing high street with the scores of singing and chanting Vikings who were preparing for a party. They barely noticed the group of men rocking a shrieking car backwards and forwards on the pavement, or the women dancing in circles down the high street towards the shore.

Rare Relief the Splendiferous

Granny and Dani reached the edge of the Crimson Forest just in time to see Hamish Sinclair, with Ruairi tucked under his arm, wading through a shallow part of the River Gargle, just before the whirlpool. He climbed easily onto the bank at the far side and took off in a trot towards the foot of Mount Violaceous.

‘Why didn’t he use the bridge, I wonder?’ Dani asked Granny.

‘He’s not the brightest, Dani, maybe he doesn’t know what it is. Or maybe bridges hadn’t been invented yet, in Viking times,’ Granny said.

‘You think?’ Dani said. ‘Well, let’s get after him, we could make up a good bit of time by not having to wade across like he did.’

‘Yes, indeed Dani,’ Granny said and they took off again through the valley known as the Crimson Forest towards the River Gargle.

It was still very early in the morning on this particular Christmas Eve, but as Granny and Dani made their way across the carpet of colourful winter flowers, meandering in and out of tufts of shrubberies, they found it dark. Clouds were obscuring the sun’s rays and they were now in the shadow of the Mountain, away from the openness of the village and the harbour.

‘It’s quite gloomy in here, isn’t it Granny Miller?’

‘Aaah!’ Granny shrieked and spun around.

‘What is it?’ Dani asked.

Granny looked all around and could see no one. ‘Nothing,’ she said, ‘I thought I felt something but it must be my imagination,’ she said as she turned around and headed towards the river again.

‘Ahh! Ahh!’ Dani shouted and grabbed the back of her head, ‘somebody threw something at me.’

‘Oww! Granny said grabbing her shin, ‘and at me! Quick, behind here.’ Granny and Dani ran to hide themselves behind the only Oak tree in the whole forest, perhaps the only Oak tree on the entire island. They made it just in time – they narrowly missed being pelted with

hundreds of little missiles that went hurtling by them and into the Oak. Dani bent down to pick one up.

‘It looks like an acorn,’ she said.

Granny risked a look around the broad tree, ‘there’s no one there, no one at all. But look! Look at those two skinny Elm trees over there.’

‘They’re moving. They’re shaking,’ Dani said.

‘They’re laughing at yiz,’ said a booming voice from above.

Granny and Dani both screamed. They hugged each other and looked up. The Oak tree was talking to them.

The Oak tree chuckled a bit and as he did so a smattering of colourful leaves sprinkled down onto the forest bed.

‘Allow me to introduce myself,’ the oak made a theatrical bow, moving one enormous branch down and bending it in front of him and bending another down behind him like actors do at the end of a play, ‘me name is Rarelief the Splendiferous.’

Granny and Dani didn’t know what to say. Dani walked all the way around Rarelief and looked him up and down. She picked one of his fallen leaves off the ground and examined it.

‘So you really exist!’ Dani said.

‘You’re the guardian of Odin’s Treasure!’ Granny said.

‘I do. I am,’ Rarelief replied.

‘But how is that possible?’ Granny said. ‘People must have looked here for the treasure millions of times over the years. How could they not have found it?’

‘I know how to keep it safe,’ Rarelief said and tapped his nose with a branch. ‘Those two fellas over there, by the by, are Dizzie and Dozie the incurable Elm twins who, even though they’re ancient and over many hundreds of years old, simply refuse to stop acting the cod. They’re fairly feisty, I can tell ya. They do, however, do their haunting job quite well, don’t yiz think? Yiz have to hand it to them, yiz did feel haunted, didn’t yiz? Didn’t yiz?’

‘Is that what they were doing, haunting us?’ Dani asked, ‘It’s sort of hard to feel haunted in a forest with no trees.’

‘Whist, would ya, ya don’t want to hurt their feelings now, do you?’ Rarelief replied.

‘No, of course not, no, they did an excellent job,’ Dani said and shouted over to the two Elms ‘EXCELLENT JOB YOU TWO, OF HAUNTING, EXCELLENT JOB!’ and she gave them two thumbs up. Granny smiled awkwardly and did the two thumbs up sign as well.

‘But I sorta do see what ya mean,’ Rarelief said, ‘It’s not easy to do our job ya know when there are entirely three trees in the whole forest. And we only get to do this whole haunting lark one day of the year now as well. The island being all normalised the rest of the year nowadays.’

And Rarelief looked disconsolately at the few acorns the Elms managed to pitch at Granny and Dani.

‘But we do our best, yiz can grant us that. The shrubberies are fantastic haunters, but I reckon they’re a little on the short side. You may not have noticed them scratching at you as you wandered past them. They do a good oohing noise as well when the wind is up. But it’s not very windy today, sorry to say. And the hundreds of thousands of tiny flowers, well, the less said about them the better. Their idea of haunting is to look slightly less pretty than usual. Not very effective. But sterling efforts,’ Rarelief said, stressing the last bit and saying Sterling Efforts very loudly. The flowers looked pleased and for a minute flickered so that all of their colourful little petals caught what little sun there was and transformed themselves, for that instant, from very pretty flowers, to stunningly beautiful ones. And then they turned back again into their haunting poses.

‘If you had a few more trees,’ Granny was saying.

‘Well we do, I mean there are, there are thousands of trees,’ Rarelief explained, ‘they’re just not here.’

‘Where are they?’ Dani asked.

‘I’ve spent most of my life on this island Mr. Rarelieff, sir,’ Granny said, ‘and I confess to never having seen more than you, Dizzie and Dozie here, anywhere on the island, ever.’

‘But you say there used to be trees, Mr. Rarelieff?’ Dani asked.

‘Yes, thousands of us, right here in the Crimson Forest, all the way from the dip in the valley beyond the village there,’ and he pointed back the way Granny and Dani had come, ‘all the way up there,’ Rarelieff said and turned a branch towards the mountain, ‘to where the incline starts to become steep and where the lush earth becomes solid rock. All this valley was home to me family, our families,’ he said indicating the two Elms, ‘most of the trees were Elms and Oaks but there were some other kinds too. And they’re all gone disappeared now.’

‘Where have they gone to?’ Dani asked.

‘They were robbed!’ said Rarelieff.

‘Robbed?’ Dani said.

‘How could anyone steal thousands and thousands of trees?’ Granny wanted to know.

‘Well it’s a long story,’ Rarelieff said and Granny made to settle herself on the ground.

‘I love a good story,’ she said.

‘But Granny, we have to find Ruairi,’ Dani said.

‘The little red-haired boy who came hurtling through here under the arm of the massive huge Viking?’ Rarelieff asked.

‘Yes,’ Dani said.

‘Ah, well I could tell you a thing or two about that as well. You have time, they won’t sacrifice him til sundown, and we’re hours away from that yet. You’re better off being armed with the knowledge of old Rarelieff here before ya go any further. Many surprises lie up yonder that way.’

‘*Sacrifice* him?’ Dani and Granny said together.

‘Yes, yes, apparently he’s the Boy King of Denmark,’ Rarelieff said by way of explanation.

‘He’s not the Boy King of anything, he’s my little brother,’ Dani said.

‘It won’t do no use to insist on it, they’ll have made up their minds,’ Rarelief said.

‘Well, we’d better get after him then, Granny,’ Dani said, worried now.

‘You have time, and I have things to tell you that will save you more time in the long run. Things you cannot know about the island and her secrets,’ Rarelief admonished.

‘All the same, Mr. Rarelief, we’d really much rather get on. Goodbye now,’ Granny said.

‘Goodbye,’ Dani said. And they ran off in the direction of the River Gargle.

Rarelief hummed a little hum to himself. He swept the snow off one of the knobbly roots that stuck out of the ground and piled dry leaves on top of it.

‘What are you doing?’ Dizzie called over to him.

‘I’m making a comfy bench for the girl and the old lady.’

‘But they’ve gone, Rarelief, they couldn’t get out of here fast enough. I doubt they’ll be back any time soon,’ Dozie said.

‘Wanna bet?’ Rarelief asked.

‘The elms bent towards each other and whispered. They looked up and said, ‘Yes we do!’

‘Ok,’ Rarelief said, ‘if they’re back within 5 minutes you take that family of squirrels that are forever tickling me, every time they go up and down me trunk, and give them a comfy new home in your branches.’

‘Deal,’ Dozie said, ‘and if they’re not back within five minutes you take all the new birds that are hatched from nests in our branches, until they’re potty trained,’ and with this Dizzie and Dozie turned their lower branches so that Rarelief could see hundreds of white splashes of bird poo all along the length of the wood.’

‘You’re on!’ Rarelief said.

A puffy green shrubbery a little way off in a clearing said he had a very good view of the sun and would be official timekeeper. All three trees, so all of the trees in the entirety of the

Crimson Forest, and all of the shrubberies, and all of pretty flowers roundabout turned and looked towards the river. And waited.

A couple of minutes passed. Everyone was tense, no one made a sound. Even the pooping baby birds stayed still in their nests and watched.

The shrubbery in the clearing disturbed the silence, ‘Ok then, just let me know when to begin the count-down.’ Dizzie, Dozie and Rarelief let out loud sighs and rolled their eyes. ‘I’m only joking, I’m only joking’ the shrubbery called back, ‘two minutes left.’ He chuckled away to himself.

‘You are easily amused,’ a big flat grey shrubbery near him said. The shrubbery in the clearing was still laughing heartily at his joke.

All the plants and animals turned back to look in the direction of the River Gargle and as they did so, Granny Miller and Dani Miller, soaking from head to foot, trudged up over the bank and made their way, dripping wet, back to the foot of Rarelief the Splendiferous. They slumped down onto the bench that Rarelief had prepared.

Dizzie and Dozie groaned. Rarelief beamed.

‘Well now, what brings the two of you back here so soon?’ Rarelief asked Granny and Dani.

‘We couldn’t get across the river,’ Dani mumbled.

‘Excuse me, I couldn’t quite catch that? A wee bit louder please,’ Rarelief said trying his best not to sound smug.

‘We couldn’t get across the river,’ Granny said. ‘We walked across the bridge but we didn’t get more than half way across when the bridge stood itself up on one side, and we slid all the way back to where we started. It was sort of fun at first—’

‘We did it a few times,’ Dani admitted.

‘But then the bridge started to get angry and started shaking and lurching first and then it just flung us back onto this side of the river,’ Granny said.

‘It hurt,’ Dani said.

‘So then we did what we saw Hamish had done, we came down the bank a bit and tried to wade across, but the water started flowing in the wrong direction. It swooshed us into the tidal pool,’ Granny said.

‘And the tidal pool swung us around and around and around until I thought we’d drown or get sick,’ Dani said.

‘Or both,’ Granny said.

‘Or both, exactly,’ Dani said, ‘and then the whirlpool rose right up and spat us out on the bank again.’

‘We only did that once,’ Granny said.

‘I’m sure,’ Rarelief said.

‘It was quite scary,’ Dani said.

‘Very scary,’ Granny said.

‘I hear you,’ Rarelief said.

‘We thought we’d try one more thing then,’ Dani continued, ‘we thought we’d try to walk behind the waterfall. But that didn’t work either.’

‘I don’t believe it!’ the oak said, barely suppressing a laugh.

‘No. It spat at us,’ Granny said.

‘It spat at you?’

‘The waterfall, yes,’ Dani said. ‘It turned itself clean around and sent big jets of water into us, knocking us backwards onto the rocks on the ground. So we thought we might just come back here, Mr. Rarelief, sir, and take you up on your offer, if you didn’t mind terribly, and we thought that we’d, you know...’

‘...Listen to what you had to say,’ Granny finished. ‘We thought you could help us after all. If you didn’t mind.’

‘I don’t mind one bit. Sit there and dry yerselves and I’ll tell you all me knowledge about this day.’ And Rarelief peeled off big sheets of dry moss from between his roots which Granny and Dani used as towels to get themselves dry.

‘This day?’ Dani asked.

‘Christmas Eve. And all the Christmas Eves. And don’t be anxious, you will be off again in search of The Red King—’

‘The Red King?’

‘The boy. What did you call him, Small Brother King of Nowhere?’

‘No, I mean, he’s not a King, a Boy King or a Red King, he’s no kind of King. He’s Ruairi. His name is Ruairi and he’s my little brother.’

‘Well fear not, small girl, you’ll be back on your way after him in no time, no time at all,’ and Rarelief told Granny and Dani all they needed to know to help them get safely to where they needed to go.

University of Cape Town

All the Christmas Eves

‘Things started going downhill after King Dudo the Mightily Impressive’s fiftieth year. You realise of course, that 50 in Viking times is getting on to being ancient,’ Rarelied began.

‘Fifty in our times is getting on to being ancient,’ Dani muttered to herself.

Granny turned and looked at her, ‘you might think so Dani, but I know a lot of fifty year olds and indeed sixty, seventy and eighty year olds who would disagree vehemently with you.’

‘Well of course *they’d* think 50 isn’t ancient. It’s all relative Granny,’ Dani explained.

‘Dani, am I to take it that you wish to have a little break from Mr. Rarelied’s story to have a debate about how old *ancient* is?’ Granny raised an eyebrow over her glasses at Dani.

‘No, no, of course not Granny,’ Dani said, ‘please keep on with the story, Mr. Rarelied. Obviously fifty is not ancient at all, merely... um... non-young?’

‘If we were at home, I’d make you wash your mouth out with soapy water. Fifty, ancient, indeed!’ Granny said.

Rarelied chuckled, ‘A fifty year old Oak tree is a sheer babby.’

‘By the way,’ Dani said, ‘just one quick question.’

‘Ask away,’ Rarelied said.

‘So King Dudo and Queen Ursula didn’t stay here, on Yondersaay?’

‘They spent a lot of time here over the years, but after the big splash wedding in the harbour, the Mightily Impressesives went back to the King’s castle in Denmark. He had a Kingdom to run ya know, and a course no one knew for sure that he hadn’t died a gruesome and bloody death on the ice floe at the hands a the ravenous bear. He had to get back to let his people know he was alive and well.’

‘Ah, I see,’ Dani said. ‘Another quick question?’

‘Shoot,’ said Rarelied.

‘I don’t mean to be rude, but my brother has been kidnapped and all. Is there any chance we can hurry this along?’

‘Okidokey, hold your horses, I’ll skip ahead where I can. Ok, where was I?’ Rarelief said.

‘You and he have a lot in common,’ Dani said to Granny.

‘Fast-forward a bunch of years,’ Rarelief continued, ‘and King Dudo, Mightily Impressive though he may have been when he was a young fella, was starting to lose it a wee bit. It wasn’t so much that he had the old person’s forgetting disease, although it is rumoured that he did have a touch of that in his later years, it was more that he had grown rather fond of the quiet life at home with his Heart’s True Love of a wife and their gorgeous wee daughters.

‘He just didn’t keep himself on top of state affairs the way he used to. Someone made the suggestion to him that he hire a secretary to help him keep the affairs of state in order, and didn’t he do just that. But the secretary, who had come highly recommended, was more than he appeared to be. This fella, the secretary, took advantage of his position and abused the power King Dudo gave him. And all a this without King Dudo having a clue about it. He signed decrees and made orders in King Dudo’s name, without ever even consulting Dudo, at all. Not one bit.

‘Things got quite dire, so they did. Dudo and Ursula came back from their summer holidays on Yondersaay one year to find that the people of Denmark were out in the streets and the lot of them were rioting. Dudo got his whole council together to discuss the situation. The secretary said the riots were a result of certain particular investments coming to nothing. And right there and then he ran through a long list of risky investments made with the Danish sovereign coffers, which had nose-dived.

‘Dudo shook his head; he had no recollection of making any of these investments, so he didn’t. But the secretary had Dudo’s ear now, and was so trusted by him. Didn’t he convince Dudo that the mistakes were Dudo’s and Dudo’s alone. Many believe, but none have a shred a proof, that this secretary fella used potions and charms to weaken the aul fella’s mind and make him doubt himself.

‘Not wanting to believe that this trusted confidante, this friend of his could have deceived him so dreadfully and despicably, didn’t Dudo take the blame for all the troubles that had befallen his beloved country. Dudo apologised profusely to his council and to his subjects. He took to his castle defeated and ashamed.

‘Yer man the secretary said he would take care of everything, and refused to allow Dudo to see anyone, including his council. Dudo’s men, however, those close to him, those who fought with him, were not fooled by this man, this secretary, no way, no can do. They did their very best, no word of a lie, to reach out to Dudo and try to help him. Didn’t they send secret messenger pigeons flying in to the castle. But Dudo, convinced utterly and surely of his guilt, and tied to the secretary who never left his side, sent the pigeons back out the window, unanswered.

‘Dudo had lived his entire life with the wellbeing of his people as his first, main, and primary concern. The idea that one bad decision of his, trusting this man, had undone all his good work, that his people had been robbed and were suffering as a result, was too much to bear. Dudo didn’t want to believe that his secretary could have done all this; he couldn’t face it. No way did he want to think yer man his friend had done him over and stabbed him in the back. And so the King buried the thought away, deep in his mind, and let it fester and rankle, deep in there away from the light of day.

‘Dudo, known for being a man of action, did not act. And a course, ya would have expected him to. But he did not go after revenge, and he did not try to fix all the problems that were going on. No, he didn’t. He retreated into himself, into his family life, and buried his head in the sand.

‘It wasn’t long before Dudo started to get letters from fuming creditors from other lands. He responded with messages promising no end that the florins were in the post. The messages kept coming. When pressed for monies that he owed, when weeks and weeks passed, didn’t Dudo stick his head further and further into the sand. He sent out messages saying that the first boat with the florins was pillaged, that he was sending another boat with more florins.

But of course there were no boats. There were no florins. The state coffers were as empty as the head of yer man in who ran by here a wee while ago, Hamish Sinclair, who runs the butchers.

‘The treasures that had accumulated over many many years of warring and plundering and pillaging and all the rest, had dwindled and disappeared almost overnight. It was all gone and none of it was left. And Dudo believed it was he and he alone who had squandered the last pennies of his country’s wealth.

‘When the creditors started arriving at King Dudo’s castle in person to ask after their payments, Dudo took to hiding himself in his quarters.

‘When the King of Groenland came, Dudo sent a parchment out to the hallway where he was waiting. Written on the parchment were the words:

“I’m not here. I’m off in Antwerp pillaging diamonds to pay you back. Kind regards, Dudo.”

‘The King of Groenland was not a bad man. He was an old adversary of the Danish King’s. Both aul fellas had known each other for a long time or more, and each had great respect and admiration for the other one. Knowing something was not quite right, the King of Groenland forced his way past the guards in the castle hallway and stormed into King Dudo’s quarters. The secretary was at the door, he made only a vague attempt to stop the King from bursting in on Dudo.

‘The King of Groenland slammed open the door to find King Dudo in his bath, up to his armpits in bubbles, with nothing on except for his large golden winged helmet and a pair of stripy blue armbands. Dudo was playing with a flock of yellow rubber duckies and a longship bubble machine.

“Leave us!” the King of Groenland said to the secretary and he came inside to talk to Dudo in private. The King and the King, together face to face the pair of them, talked and talked. Eventually the Groenlandish King emerged and ordered to be taken to the kitchen for a bite to eat before he was to make the long journey back to his Kingdom.

‘The secretary spoke quietly to Dudo while the King of Groenland was eating in the kitchen. The secretary made a deal with Dudo. Didn’t he tell King Dudo that he would, in a flash and in one stroke, make all his problems disappear for him, that he would negotiate on his behalf with all of Denmark’s creditors, that he would arrange for the coffers to be at least partially restored. He would do all of this, he said quietly to King Dudo, in return for one tiny, minute, and miniscule favour.

‘King Dudo, dried and dressed now, asked what the secretary wanted. The secretary came closer to the King, he bent down in that crooked way he has, he put his lips to Dudo’s ear and he whispered something.

‘King Dudo listened and then took a moment to think.

“‘I assent,” King Dudo said finally. “I agree to this request, on the understanding that you will go to this place at once and will never come back to Denmark.”

“‘I promise,” said the secretary bowing low and backing away from the King. He left the King’s quarters and made his way to the kitchen where he spoke to the Groenlandish King. He came back a short while later to bid King Dudo a farewell.

“‘It is settled,” the secretary said.

“‘Then we are agreed,’ King Dudo said and stood up to face the man. Dudo looked him full in the face and said, ‘I hereby invite you to Yondersaay and allow you the right to attempt to claim it as yours.’”

‘NO!’ said Granny.

‘NO!’ said Dani.

“‘He did NOT just give away Yondersaay to that scheming, double-crossing—’ Granny said,

‘—poisoning, lying, two-faced—’ Dani interrupted,

‘—calculating, conniving, underhand—’ Granny continued,

‘—manipulative, son of a—’ Dani went on,

‘—secretary, did he?’ Granny said.

‘In truth he did’ Rarelief said.

‘NO!’ said Granny.

‘NO!’ said Dani.

‘Uh-huh he did,’ said Rarelief.

‘And what did Ursula have to say about this? No way bear wrestling, dolphin surfing, eagle-gliding Ursula Swan White took this lying down, no way!’ said Granny.

‘When Ursula entered King Dudo’s quarters a short while later,’ Rarelief said, ‘she noticed that her husband, for the first time in many months, seemed to be back to himself. She was happy, a course, but she was a tad suspicious. Something didn’t seem right, and for the first time in many many months, the ever-present lingering secretary was nowhere to be seen.

‘King Dudo told her about her arrangement with the secretary fella.

‘Well, Queen Ursula was furious, she was fuming, outraged and livid all at once. She could not believe what she was hearing. Her husband had thrown away their children’s birthright, the island of her forefathers, Odin’s land of treasures. She screamed and shouted and exploded out her rage, all over the place. Finally, after a prolonged fit of frothing anger, Ursula turned to her husband and with white-hot calm, she said:

“‘And to think for all those years, I shaved my toes for you.”

‘King Dudo came to Ursula, he wrapped her in his arms, he took his face in hers.

‘And he whispered something in her ear.

‘This calmed Ursula. She sat down on the enormous royal bed. Dudo sat beside her and took her hand in his. They smiled at each other, their love for each other as strong as on the day by the River Gargle when they first told each other they were in love.

“‘At least,” she said eventually, “we can be certain we’ve seen the last of that secretary of yours. I never liked him. I never liked Silas Scathe.”’

‘Silas Scathe!’ Granny and Dani gasped. ‘Mr. Scathe!’

Violaceous Hall

Violaceous Hall was a castle of colossal proportions. But you would not know that to look at it. From the outside. If you scan the entire mountain and look carefully at it, all you can see is a little stone shack the size of a tool shed perched halfway up the south side of the mountain with no discernible path to the door. It looks abandoned and unused. It could possibly be used as a shelter for mountain-climbers lost in a blizzard, but may not even be very effective at that; it's hard to tell if there's a proper roof, or if it's properly balanced on that rock. It looks precarious. It might tumble to the sea if you tried to rest in there, or shelter from a storm. Perhaps the floors are made from now rotten wood; perhaps if you went in there you would fall through the rotten timbers. You might be better off, as a climber caught unexpectedly in a storm, to shelter in the cave there to the right a bit, twenty feet below the shack. That's what you might think if you caught sight of Violaceous Hall.

From the outside.

If you were scanning the entire mountain and looking carefully at it. If you didn't know what you were looking for.

The façade of Violaceous Hall is like one of those puzzles you sometimes see, the ones where there's a picture on a card, and if you squint a bit at it or look past the picture somehow, you see something else entirely, another image buried deep inside. Not everyone can see the hidden image in those puzzles. But when you look at one you do know what you're looking at – a picture with another picture underneath. You know there's something to find. You know you're supposed to look at it with a faraway-stare, or with a squint, until the hidden image reveals itself to you, until its secret is unlocked.

Looking up at the mountain from the Beach of Bewilderment or from Crimson Forest, you would have no idea that there's a hidden image on the face of the cliff. You would have no clue that something truly magnificent was staring down at you.

Even if you did have an idea, or if someone traced the outline for you, if you could make out the windows set back into the hill – anti-glare glass preventing accidental detection,

the various storeys and levels, you would still be overwhelmed by the magnitude, the sheer vastness of Violaceous Hall as soon as you set foot inside it.

You don't expect a mountain dwelling to yield such expansive halls, huge rooms with high ceilings. Or the light. You do not expect a castle which has been carved into the rock in such a way that makes it almost impossible to see with the naked eye, to be so illuminated, so flooded with light, as light-filled as a greenhouse in summer. You might also think that a house built into the side of a mountain, with walls and floors of rock, would be cold. But even when there are no fires in the huge fireplaces, Violaceous hall is warm, comfortable.

Even as the hallways and rooms retreat deeper into the rock-face, light and heat penetrate the tightest corners, the smallest back room and the most spiral of stairwells. Lavishly furnished and decorated, there is an atmosphere of elegance and grandeur.

Every part of the castle is like this. Except of course for the dungeon. Where the grand hall is filled with light and is warm even in winter, in the dungeon it feels like the coldest winter all year round and like night time at all hours of the day. Light sometimes trickles down the stairwell into the tiny passage that leads to the dungeon. That light is stopped abruptly by the heavy metal doors that seal off the rooms of torture from the rest of the world.

There is no escape from Violaceous Hall dungeon except through those metal doors. And they are locked and guarded night and day. The walls of the dungeon are impenetrable rock. If there had ever been any caves or tunnels down there they had been blocked off and their whereabouts lost from memory years ago.

The metal gates, heavy and slow to open and close were in a need of oiling. They creaked when they moved. No matter where in the castle grounds the Jarl was he could hear the creak of the door. It was a subtle sound if you were far away, but distinctive. If anything goes into or out of the dungeon at Violaceous Hall, the Jarl knows about it. He seems to react less from an ability to hear the door, than to an instinct about it.

Ruairi was brought straight to the dungeon at Violaceous Hall. The Jarl was out hunting at the edge of a meadow near to the castle and was immediately able to say to his hunting partners 'The Boy King of Denmark has arrived.'

Silas Scathe Lands on Yondersaay

‘Scathe arrived on the island easily enough now, to tell you the truth,’ Rarelief continued as Granny and Dani dried themselves. ‘He had been invited after all. He had took with him a small following of a few men.’

‘He found the place handily. He had directions, so he got here with no fuss or trouble. Mr. Scathe had conducted in-depth research into the island and its history, and he’d read all the literature available and listened to all the theories that were being batted about. He had even consulted with Brother Brian the Devout and Handy with Numbers, and Brother Brian, believing Mr. Scathe to be a friend and close colleague of the King’s, was very forthcoming, so he was. Brother B gave him detailed maps and told him all he knew. In fact, he told him more than what he knew; he embellished wildly and played up his closeness with King Dudo as much as he could. If you’d listened to Brother Brian, you’d a thought he and Dudo had been inseparable for years, the closest of friends and most intimate of buddies that ever lived. You would think that Brother Brian knew all there was to know – all of the secrets of the island, and of King Dudo.

‘In point of fact, a course, what Brother Brian knew was very little and only a small amount. His and Dudo’s friendship had not blossomed in the way Brother Brian had hoped; he remained for all of his days on the periphery of King Dudo’s circle of friends, never once being the recipient of a Forearm Smash.

‘No one would know this if they only spoke to Brother Brian. The way he name-dropped the King would convince anyone living that they were as close as you like. Mr. Scathe was just such an anyone living.

‘It was only when Scathe set foot on Yondersaay and wandered about a wee bit that he realised his odious error. Hadn’t the conniving upstart Scathe himself been outsmarted good and proper by King Dudo, with the very kind help of the King of Groenland. Not to forget Swan White Queen Ursula, who had conducted another hissy fit before Scathe left, right under yer man’s nose. She was a born actress, that one. She threw vases, stamped on flowers, tore

down tapestries, ripped important-looking documents, and screamed and shouted until Mr. Scathe had left the castle in Denmark. He did not look back to see the glint in Ursula's eyes nor the fading despair in Dudo's.

'But here on the island, walking along the main promenade, wondering how to announce himself as the new King of Yondersaay, he started to realise something was amiss. The villagers mostly ignored him. He finally stopped an old man, who looked very like the King of Groenland, now that Scathe thought about it, and asked him where the Valhalla Treasure was buried. The old man, who had a small bird perched on his shoulder, a raven, asked him to repeat the question, a bit louder this time. When Scathe did so, the old man laughed and walked away.

'Mr. Scathe ran up the promenade after him, and turned him by the shoulder to face him once more.

"Old man, I have asked you where the Valhalla Treasure is, and I demand an answer."

"You will never find it," the old man said with a glint in his eye, "and no one here will tell you where it is or how to find it."

'I bet it was Odin,' Dani said.

'You'd be right to think that, small girl, for indeed the old man was none other than Odin himself,' Rarelief said.

'Mr. Scathe was about to declare himself, was about to announce his ownership of the island and everything on it, when the old man straightened himself up and looked Mr. Scathe in the eye. To Mr. Scathe he seemed in that instant of straightening to lose about twenty years. His wrinkles flattened out, his eyes took on a deeper hue of blue, he looked bigger and stronger and younger now than he had two minutes previously. Mr. Scathe was beginning to feel uneasy.

"You made a deal with King Dudo, is that correct?"

“Yes, that is exactly right; I am now literally the Lord and Master of Yondersaay!” Mr. Scathe said and pulled himself up to his full height and tried to look as imposing and Lordly and Masterly as possible.

“You are no such thing!” said the old man. “You asked to be invited onto Yondersaay and to be allowed to make a claim on it.”

“Yes, therefore I am literally Lord and Mas—”

“Again, Mr. Scathe. You are no such thing,” the old man said.

“How do you know my name?”

“I know all there is to know. And I can tell you that you are Lord and Master only of yourself, you are nothing to Yondersaay. You are here and that is all. There are only two ways to become Lord and Master of Yondersaay.” And here Odin told Scathe what I had told Dudo many years before.

‘Mr. Scathe was dumbfounded, he was devastated. He swore and cursed and lost himself in such a rage that it would have put Ursula’s make-believe tantrum firmly in second place. He turned to leave the old man, who had bent back down to his walking stick and was readying himself to continue his walk up the promenade. The old man’s appearance returned at a stroke to what it previously was – his eyes lost some of their lustre, his back gnarled itself into a stoop once more, and wrinkles deepened around his eyes.

‘Scathe took a stride in the direction of his boat in the harbour when the old man spoke softly under his breath.

“You may not return to Denmark or to any of the King’s lands for the entirety of your life, Mr. Scathe. King Dudo fulfilled his part of the bargain. You are here on Yondersaay as a direct result of his invitation, and you have the right to attempt to claim the island as yours. That the conditions are not favourable to such an outcome is by the bye. You must uphold your part of the agreement.”

‘The old man was right and correct. If Scathe left the island now he would never make it back again; Scathe was betting the invitation was good for one use only. And it was true, ya

know, he had nowhere else to go. Silas Scathe halted in his tracks, best not to be too hasty. He walked off a little way and sat on a rock by the shore to have a think.

‘In the hindsight of it all, a course, Odin should have kept his mouth shut. He was gloating a bit you see, rubbing it in. The unfortunate outcome of this, however, was that he delayed Scathe’s departure from the island. He gave yer man reason to pause and to think. Odin realised his mistake, but he realised it too late. Still, he would not panic yet; Scathe would probably get up from his seat on the rock, gather his men and take to the seas in no time at all. There was nothing here for him in Yondersaay. Odin tried not to think that there was nothing for him anywhere else either.

‘But the sad truth was Scathe had nothing to lose by staying here, and potentially everything to gain.

‘Scathe sat on the rock thinking until late into the night, long after the sun’s hovering descent and the night-time owls began their hunt. When he finally got himself up out of his think, Mr. Silas Scathe had a new plan.

‘And it was a long term plan.’

The Long Term Plan

‘During the first few hours of Silas Scathe’s second day on Yondersaay the Islanders, who had only pretended to ignore him, noticed a subtle shift in his behaviour. Gone was the swaggering self-confidence, the sharpness of his tone, the arrogance. In its place there seemed to be a serenity, as though Silas Scathe had reconciled himself to the fact that he was not Lord of Yondersaay and wouldn’t never be. Another thought piled itself on the others this new impression over the next few days, and that was that Mr. Scathe could not go home. He was stuck here, good and proper.

‘Over the days and weeks that followed after, he and his men went about the island in a quiet way. They were polite and friendly with everyone they came across. Didn’t they build a little group of dwelling places on the outskirts of the settlement, close enough to the action to know what was going on, far enough away so as not to be seen to be sticking their noses in. His was the largest, naturally.

‘Scathe was nice to everyone. Charming. He made himself useful when possible and was generally pleasant and unobtrusive. And he made sure his men were nice to everyone, pleasant.

‘He stayed just like that, on the outside surface, for a long time. Weeks went by, and then months frittered away. Without much ado hadn’t a couple a years passed and wasn’t Mr. Scathe still on the island. He was known to everyone, and although he had been regarded with a lot of suspicion at first, people had, if truth be told, started to forget what it was he had done to Dudo. They lost track of the fact that this was the fella who had tried to swindle the island from their King. He was not exactly popular, now, don’t get me wrong, but he was put up with. He was ingratiating himself, he was insinuating himself into the island, and he did it well enough. He did it slowly and calmly and politely, and after a few years went by, it had to be admitted, he did it successfully.

‘Up to a point.

‘The truth was he was not really fooling anyone. Although the Islanders mostly ignored him and allowed him to go about his daily business, and they did to a certain extent forget just how despicable he had been to Dudo, they still felt towards him a healthy amount of distrust.

‘Scathe was an outsider, an incomer, and he always would be. He would never be able to charm and manipulate anyone here, the way he had done in Denmark. He would never find out the secrets of the island from the Islanders. Scathe knew this. The Islanders knew this. The people on the island didn’t feel the need to run Scathe out of town; their secrets were safe from him. The general thrust of the feelings on the matter about town were that the fella, ignored and defeated, would eventually give up and move away.

‘It was known to the villagers that he spent his nights wandering the island searching for the treasure. This did worried no one. He dug hundreds of holes all around the island by moonlight and filled them back in again before morning. He thought no one knew what he was up to. But everyone knew, it did not worry anyone. He would not find anything.

‘It took Scathe a while to notice that the puffins and the trees and the sands and the rocks were alive and could talk to him, and it took him longer still to realise that he ought to be trying to make friends with them. The Islanders were so confident that Scathe was no threat to them or to the island that it didn’t occur a hate to anyone to warn the animals and the trees, and the sands and the waters.

The Animals and the Trees. The Sands and the Waters

‘Four years passed with Scathe passing the days in as friendly and as useful a manner as he could. The nights he spent wandering the island, exploring caves and coves, digging holes and filling them in again. And becoming friendly with all of the non-human life on the island.

‘Scathe, after a great extent a trouble, and a goodly amount a finagling, infiltrated a flock of younger puffins. He did this by staging a tarantulafish attack on the flock and arriving just in time to pummel the fish with the end of an old oar. The young puffins were so grateful to be saved none of them thought to wonder why this man, whom they’d seen trying to get close many times before, suddenly appeared at the edge of their cliff, miles up the steep side of Mouth Violaceous, with a sawn-off oar.

‘Scathe was particularly happy when he was in the company of a flighty little hatchling called Fluff. The poor young puffin, in a moment of friendliness, let it slip that the treasure was not on the Beach of Bewilderment. Fluff was boasting to Scathe, who pretended not to be convinced, about how clever the Yondersaay puffins were, even the baby ones.

“‘It’s true,” Fluff said, “the gulls try to catch us when we’re small and eat us up but we’re much too clever for them. We hear them coming, or catch sight of them and fly like the wind.”

““Yes, that is very smart,” Scathe conceded, “but I’m sure no puffin was ever considered smart enough to have been taken into Odin’s confidence. I bet Odin never confided in a puffin,” he said arching an evil eye-brow and waiting.

““Oh, no, no, no. Yes, yes, yes. For it was the puffins and the puffins alone who alerted Lord Odin to the folly of burying his treasure beneath the sands of the Beach of Bewilderment.”

““Is that so?”

““It is so. And the reason for that, which was figured out, not by Odin, nor by the sands on the beach itself, but, indeed, only by the puffins, the cleverest birds on the island. Was, the reason was, this: the tarantulafish are thieving scavengers. If there was ever anything shiny to be found on or under the sands of the beach, they would dig it up from underneath the ground.

They would take it out to sea and use it to line their burrows,” Fluff said through his bright orange beak, while waddling about on his bright orange webbed feet.

“I see,” Scathe said. “Yes, young Fluff, you have convinced me, the puffins are without doubt literally the smartest birds on the island.”

‘Fluff nodded his beak back and forward and strutted about a bit. He flapped his wee black wings over his stocky wee white body. He was delighted with himself. Scathe wasn’t slow about establishing that this was the full extent of the information to be gotten out of the puffins. He made the steep climb to their cliff-top home less and less and less.

‘Scathe took up this fake-friendly policy all over the island. He found it difficult, however, to make friends in other places in the same way that he had done so with the wee puffins. It is quite a task to make yourself useful to a stream of water, you know, or to rescue a rock from anything. He tried all that came to him, but after a lot of thinking, not much came to him.

‘Eventually Scathe came across a clinically depressed boulder and decided he would be a shoulder for him to cry on, a friendly ear.

‘He discovered that the rock in question, Eric flat-top, just liked to be listened to. He had terrible Daddy issues and although Scathe couldn’t bring about a reconciliation between father rock and son rock - the father having been eroded into sand by the waters of the River Gargle decades ago - he could in some ways become the father little Eric never had. Scathe praised the rock’s appearance and told him how grand he looked on the bank of the river, and how powerful. He told him he was proud of his ability to stand fast and remain firm even when dogs lifted their legs to him. And how he admired his ability to provide shade for those wishing to rest, propped up against him.

‘Scathe went on like this with the boulder even though for many months the rock spoke only of himself and the insecurities he felt as a result of his overbearing Daddy. After asserting many fine things about the rock, Scathe finally hit upon the compliment that he hoped would be the one to get him the information he wanted.

“You are literally the best and most solid and imposing rock I have ever seen,” Scathe said to him. “I am positively certain that any man would trust you and confide in you. Any man, any man at all.”

“Do you think so?” the rock asked.

“I’m certain,” Scathe replied, “I’m sure even Odin himself, if he ever passed by here, would have wanted to bury his treasure under you, or near where by so that you could protect it.”

“Well, he did, as a matter of fact,” the boulder began.

Scathe went white, maybe this was it! Barely drawing breath, Scathe waited for Eric flat-top to continue. “He did? He buried the treasure here, in your care?” Scathe encouraged.

“No, he didn’t,” Eric said. “But he did want to. He spent many an hour evaluating this spot or that. But in the end...”

“Yes, in the end...” Scathe said.

“In the end he decided against it,” Eric said.

Scathe was deflated. “And where did he go instead?” he asked.

“That I could not tell you, for he did not tell me. He did not tell anyone here. I can just tell you that the treasure is not buried within my sight lines. Or, if it is, then it was all buried without me noticing. And I think that hardly likely.”

“You do? Why?” Scathe asked.

“It is unlikely, isn’t it?” the boulder said, looking like he was about to start sobbing. “You yourself said I was the bravest, proudest and most respected rock along this river bank, how could the bravest, proudest, and most respected rock fail to notice a huge haul of treasure being buried right beneath his nose?”

“Of course, of course,” Scathe said, “Inconceivable!” But deep down, Scathe didn’t think it inconceivable, merely unlikely. So although Scathe considered it probable the treasure was not buried under the water, or on the banks of the river, or behind the waterfall, and

although he came by there less and less often, he didn't stop going completely. He still carried out the odd evening digging session. Because, you know, you just never know.

'Scathe figured out all on his own the unlikelihood of the treasure being within one of the caves on Mount Violaceous. And happily it was in the most painful of manners that this certainty dawned on him,' Rarelief said, grinning the widest grin possible on a face made of bark.

'Late one night, well after dark, wasn't Scathe digging holes in one of the cave-tunnels beneath the mountain. He thought he heard a rumbling sound. He paused in his digging and looked up. He sniffed. He could hear something *and* he could smell something - an ashy type of smell. Scathe put both the sound and the smell out of his head and returned to his digging, but the smell and the sound both kept on coming at him. He stopped once more to look up and think about what could be happening when he saw a bright light in the volcano end of the tunnel. Now he was digging in the dead of night. He had lit a small torch in the tunnel so he could make out where he was digging, so this light, the light that was now coming towards him was startling to say the very least of it. It was blindingly bright. It was also warm, no, not warm, *hot*.

'Scathe was overcome with a sudden realisation. He dropped his shovel and turned and ran to the exit of the cave. He ran as fast as he could, not stopping to pick up his torch or any of his digging materials. The volcano was erupting. It was shooting pent up fiery hot bolts of lava out from the belly of the mountain through the cave-tunnels to the night beyond.

'Scathe was very fast. He ran at a glacial pace that would have broken many land speed records had anyone been timing him. He was not fast enough. A flicker of burning hot lava caught him right on the backside as he jumped out of the cave and tumbled down the side of the mountain. He landed in a heap of rubble at the bottom of a particularly rocky hill which covered him in at least a hundred scratches and bruises. And he had a burned arse. He limped home; covering his bare backside, for the lava had burned away the back of his clothing.

Luckily for him it was night-time and no one could see him. Happily for us, he was in a lot of pain.

‘He got back to his dwelling place and laid himself face down on his bed while one of his men applied a cooling salve. His bum was so burned and he was in so much pain that he had to keep in that position, face down on his bed, for many a week, until his backside healed up and he could put on clothes and go outside again.

‘Laid up like this, Scathe had plenty of time to have another think. By a process of elimination, he thought it likely that the treasure was not buried in the caves, nor in or near the River Gargle, nor on the Beach of Bewilderment. It *could* be buried in the Crimson Forest. But he couldn’t be one hundred percent sure. He couldn’t be sure, for example, that the treasure wasn’t buried *near* the River Gargle, or in the hillocks *behind* the Beach of Bewilderment, or buried deep underground in one of the caves of Mount Violaceous out of reach of the burning lava. So he couldn’t stop looking in those places, not altogether.

‘But from that moment on Silas Scathe devoted the majority of his treasure-finding attention in and around the Crimson Forest.

‘There was a problem, however. Or to be more precise and specific, there were thousands of problems. There were so many trees all around here that it was nigh on impossible to search efficiently. It was going to take *years* of night time digging to find the treasure. And that’s only if it was even in the forest at all. He still had to spend the odd night checking out other parts of the island, for the sake a completeness, and just to be sure.

‘He eventually hit on a plan. Unfortunately, it was the trees themselves that aided Scathe in their undoing.

‘Scathe, rather than starting in straight away on a digging schedule in the Crimson Forest, decided to bide his time. A better way than blasting in with a shovel and an axe might present itself. He started taking long leisurely strolls in the forest – he got used to the haunting. He picnicked there. He began talking to the trees, telling them how powerful and beautiful and

strong they were. He tried to befriend some of them in the way he had befriended the puffins and Eric Flat-top.

‘It wasn’t long before he realised it was not the trees but the shrubberies who were the real chatterboxes. They were all quite lively, and some of them were positively giddy. They talked and talked. They talked so much that it would be a hard task indeed to keep them quiet *if* Scathe had wanted to keep them quiet. In fact, Scathe wanted nothing more than to have a thousand shrubberies shooting their mouths off all hours of the night, telling him everything he needed and wanted to know.

‘Scathe cursed himself for not starting his search here. He had wasted months, years even, on the mountain and on the beach and by the river. The shrubberies told him a lot about the island. Some of what he learned was not new to him, he had heard it from his puffin friends and his boulder friends. Or had picked it up from overhead banter in the settlement. But he did not let on, he pretended that all he heard was new information and that it was all very interesting.

‘Eventually, he started to hear things he hadn’t heard before. Scathe had known, of course, that there was treasure on the island, but in point of fact he didn’t know what the treasure consisted of. He just assumed it was a great and wondrous haul of the most beautiful and valuable jewels and weaponries the Viking world had ever seen. And a course he was right, but not wholly right.

‘The shrubberies were able to talk in detail about some of the most fantastical and sought after components of the treasury. They were able to tell him about the Tome of Tiuz, The Sword of Lapis Lazuli, and all the rest of Odin’s gifts. Of course they were able to tell him about the Violaceous Amethyst.

‘Apart from information about the treasure, they also told him about some of the traditions of the island, and of all the other properties and powers Odin had bestowed upon it.

‘For instance, it wasn’t long before he discovered, and this was a big surprise for him, that the Gifts of Odin were not buried with the rest of the treasure. They had living purposes

and would not be buried until the Lord and Master of the island no longer had a use for them, or until it was certain that the final battle in Valhalla was about to begin.

‘Scathe desperately tried to find out more about these items, their secrets and properties. And, a course, wasn’t he simply dying to find out where on the island they could be. The shrubberies knew the whereabouts of only one of the Gifts of Odin. The only one the shrubberies knew of was the Black Heart, or as it’s now known, The Black Heart of The Dragon’s Eye which had the ability to alter time.

‘They knew where that was. It was the eye of cycloptic Dragon.

“‘There’s a dragon?’” Scathe asked.

“‘Yes, have you not seen it?’” the shrubberies asked.

“‘No!’” Scathe said.

“‘You surely must have.’”

“‘I am sure I would have noticed a dragon. How can one miss a *dragon!*’”

“‘It usually sits on a plinth at the top of the harbour,’” said a little shrubbery from the back.

“‘In the harbour? There’s a dragon in the harbour? Literally? In this harbour, here in Yondersaay? Are you certain? A *dragon?*’” Scathe was stunned.

“‘Yes, it’s the dragon that King Dudo gifted to Jarl Olaf the Barelegged and Balding on Top upon his wedding to Queen Ursula,’” the first shrubbery said.

“‘Oh, that dragon!’” Scathe groaned.

“‘You know the one we mean?’” asked the little shrubbery.

“‘I know the one you mean,’” Scathe said.

“‘Well, it’s eye is the Black Heart’” the larger shrubbery continued.

“‘And em, how does it work, if one were to use it?’” Scathe asked.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Dani said, ‘there’s a dragon in this story, really, a dragon?’

‘Yes, you’ll have seen it of course,’ said Rarelief.

‘Nuh-uh, I’ve never in my life seen a dragon, I thought they didn’t exist,’ Dani said.

‘You can’t be serious, you’ve never seen a dragon?’ Rarelied asked. Dani shook her head. ‘Well how did you get here then?’ Rarelied asked.

‘How do you mean, how did we get here?’ Dani asked.

‘Didn’t you get here on a dragon?’ Rarelied wanted to know.

‘No,’ Dani said, ‘we came on the early Yonder Air flight, in a Yonder Air plane.’

‘So you didn’t come by boat then?’ Rarelied said.

‘No,’ Granny and Dani said together.

‘Wait a minute,’ Dani said.

‘Yes?’ said Rarelied.

‘Is a dragon a type of boat?’ asked Dani.

‘Well of course, what else?’ said Rarelied.

‘Ah, I see,’ said Dani, ‘you mean *that* dragon. The one on the plinth in the harbour.’

‘What else could I possibly have meant?’ Rarelied asked. ‘You didn’t think I meant a massive big ginormous animal that flies about on wings and breathes out fire? Did you?’ and Rarelied burst out laughing.

‘No! Of course not,’ Dani mumbled. ‘I knew you didn’t mean that. Obviously. I just didn’t know you meant the longship that’s on the plinth in the harbour. Why do they call the old Viking longships dragons?’

‘It’s all down to the head figure carved in the prow. It’s shaped like a dragon’s head,’ Rarelied said.

‘So it is,’ Dani said. ‘I remember now. And the one in the harbour only has one eye.’

‘And is it still there?’ Granny asked.

‘Is what still where?’ asked Rarelied.

‘The Black Heart of the Dragon’s Eye. Is it still the dragon’s eye?’

‘Well, yes, I think so,’ Rarelied said, ‘you haven’t been to a funeral lately, have you?’

Granny thought for a bit. ‘No, not for many many years,’ she said.

‘And all your old friends are still lively as ever even though they’ve been alive for over a hundred years?’ Rarelief asked.

‘Well yes,’ Granny said, ‘but I thought that was because of our modest diets of only seven meals a day, and our habit of taking exercise in the form of a ten minute stroll along the promenade of an evening.’

Rarelief burst into laughter again.

‘The Black Heart of the Dragon’s Eye has an effect on time, how it is perceived and how it is utilised,’ he said. ‘No one except for Odin of course knows all of its uses. It’s mostly used to heal wounds quickly, or to stave off death, which is why people rarely die here. Scathe found two more uses for it. That we know of.’

‘The first has to do with why the Islanders are Vikings one day of the year and only one day of the year. And the second has to do with my friends and family – all the trees of Crimson Forest.’

University of Cape Town

All the Trees

‘Silas Scathe had decided the easiest and quickest and bestest way to hunt for treasure in the Crimson Forest was to get rid of the trees. All the trees. But he couldn’t fell them, the Islanders would notice and there was no way they’d put up with that nonsense. He would have to create a diversion so that no one noticed what was going on, and then he would have to get rid of all of the trees all at once, and be nowhere near it afterwards so he couldn’t be blamed.

‘He devised his plan and settled on a day.

‘The plan was this: Scathe would utilise the powers of the Black Heart of the Dragon’s Eye to make all the villagers believe they were behaving normally in their normal Viking way all day on this day, the way they normally do every day. And then, when the sun came up on the very next day, twenty four hours later, what would happen is this: they would forget everything, absolutely everything. Every tiny, minute and little thing, that had happened and that they had done as soon as the sun broke upon the next day, would be lost to them, never to be remembered ever again.

‘The day Silas chose as the day for this to happen, was Christmas Eve. Everything was all set up and prepared and ready. Except for one thing. In order to move thousands and thousands of trees on one day, even with the help of the Black Heart which would speed up the task no end, the job still really, on balance, all things considered, would go a lot more smoothly if the trees agreed to the move. It’s not an easy task uprooting a hundred foot high, hundred year old, hundred inch wide Oak whose roots are clinging desperately to the earth. Much better to have them ready and willing and happy to help.

‘Scathe came into the Crimson Forest the night before Christmas Eve to talk to the trees. He used the shrubberies to help him, to vouch for him and tell the trees what a decent fella in all fairness, he was. He told the trees he had an offer for them. He told them he had found the Black Heart and had mastered its transformational powers. He could not show it to them because he could not move it. He said it was embedded deep within the belly of Volcano Mount Violaceous.

‘He, Mr. Silas Scathe, with the new found powers bestowed upon him by the Black Heart would grant each and every tree the ability to walk.

“‘I, Mr. Silas Scathe, of Denmark,” he said, “will grant each and every one of you majestic specimens the ability to walk.”

‘We were all taken aback. Could he really do this? Would he really do this? Why would he do it for us? We had not been very overly friendly with him, in fact, most of us hadn’t stopped trying to haunt him.

“‘With your permission,” he said to us, “I will grant every one of you this most useful of powers. I will do that for you, because I have literally come to love the island I now call my home. I have been here many years and hope to stay here with you in friendship and harmony, forever.”

‘Scathe said that though he had come to love the entire island and all life on it, it was especially in the Forest with its pretty flowers, its friendly shrubberies and its powerfully majestic oaks and elms where he felt most at one with the place. He was more than a little annoyed, however, at the way the trees were outrageously mistreated. He felt we weren’t accorded, by the Islanders, the respect we deserved. We were not appreciated as by rights we should be.

‘Scathe was outraged by this, by all accounts.

“‘I am outraged by this inequality,” he said, “outraged! And with your permission. I will stand for this oppression no longer!” He paused for effect. The trees grumbled agreement. Why should the humans be able to walk and not the trees?

‘Scathe went on. “I will change your lives, your destiny, your very nature. But I can only do it tomorrow, and I can’t do it here, because although I have mastered the powers of the thingummy, I can’t move it, it’s embedded in the mountain, so I’ll just move you all, one by one, instead. Ok?”

‘The trees talked amongst themselves for a bit, they sent their leaves twittering to and fro in quiet whispers so that Scathe could not hear their conversation.

““What do we have to lose?” we asked ourselves, “If he can’t give us the ability to walk, which let’s face it is something we’d all sort of like, then we’ll just come back here, no harm done.”

‘The deliberations took a long time. All the oaks and elms and other trees talked and discussed and argued all through the night. In the end, just as the sun was rising on that first Christmas Eve, we trees gave our consent and agreed to be moved by Scathe’s men so that we could be given the ability to walk.

‘Scathe’s men, operating under his leadership and doing what he would do, were quite picky about the details. They did an inventory of all the trees first, took our names, wrote down our dimensions and so forth so as to better order all us trees into groups to make our removal less of a hardship.

‘It was nearly mid-morning before the inventory-making men made their way over to my side of the forest. I was very excited about being able to walk, I can tell you, we all were. Every one of us was as accommodating as could be. Every one of us except muggins here,’ and Rarelfief pointed a skinny branch at himself.

‘When Scathe’s man, Harofith the Officious, came by with his clip-board I stood to attention ready to answer all his questions. And it was on the first question that I went wrong, or got confused. Either way, something happened.

‘Sometimes when I think back on it I feel meself hearing Odin’s voice whispering into me leaves, or I can feel the touch of the claws of one a his aul ravens on me branches. I don’t remember being aware of it at the time so it wouldn’t be a huge stretch to say that there’s a chance I’m imagining things, but I feel, deep within me sap, that Odin was there with me, the whole time, helping me when I answered that first question.

‘Harofith stopped before me and looked up. He poised his pen over his clipboard and said:

““Name?”

‘Now this is an easy question. What is your name? Look,’ and Rarelief turned to Dani, ‘what is your name?’

‘Daniela Miller,’ Dani said.

‘See? Easy,’ Rarelief said. ‘But on that day I did not say, to the officious man with the clip-board “Rarelief the Splendiferous”, I did not even say “Rarelief”, or even “Liefie”, which is what my dear father still calls me, or would if he was here beside me. No. What I said was:

“Freakylief the Diseased.”

Granny and Dani gasped.

‘Harofith stepped back from me immediately and turned up his nose. He wrote on his pad while saying aloud, “Freakylief the *Diseased*”. He took a step back and didn’t ask any more questions. I saw him underlining ‘Diseased’ again and again.

“No wait!” I cried out, “it’s not really Freakylief the Diseased, not any more, it’s Rarelief the Splendiferous!”

“Of course it is,” Harofith called back over his shoulder, ‘I’m sure you’re perfectly well and not at all diseased!’ But that was it, he was gone, I’d lost my chance. I wouldn’t be uprooted and carried up the mountain like the rest a me pals. I wouldn’t be having Scathe do the magicky thing with the Black Heart of the Dragon’s Eye on me. I wouldn’t never be gifted the ability to walk.

‘I hung me branches and I wept.

“Never mind, Rarelief,” me Mother and me friends said to me. “We will talk to Scathe when we get there, we will tell them there’s been a mistake, and they will come back for you. We won’t forget you; we’ll make them come back for you.”

Dani stroked one of Rarelief’s branches as he spoke, just talking about it seemed to bring some of the sadness back for him.

‘But they didn’t come back for me,’ he said quietly.

‘And they didn’t learn how to walk either. They were duped. We all were. By old Scathe the Scalded Arse.

‘We will get our own back, one day, and we’re in no rush about it. We have all the time in the world.’

‘What about Dizzie and Dozie? Why are they still here,’ Granny asked.

‘Ah,’ said Rarelief, ‘they had been uprooted and were being carried out of the forest and up the side of the mountain, the same way all the other trees had been from the dawn of the day until dusk. But Dizzie and Dozie being the practical-jokers that they are kept fooling around and messing. If they weren’t firing acorns at the men carrying them, they were pretending to be travelsick, and puking up sap all over everyone. Or they were playing dead and flopping heavily down in front and behind and were impossible to carry. In the end the men transporting them had it up to here, brought them right back, and dumped them over there, beside me. And here all three of us have been ever since.

‘And I’m very glad about that. They are a bit juvenile but they’ve been great pals over the centuries. Isn’t that right lads?’ Rarelief shouted over at them.

Dizzie and Dozie smiled back. Dozie started giggling, ‘Stop it, stop it,’ as a family of squirrels ran up his bark, ‘they tickle.’

‘As I’m sure you’ve realised, Scathe made a little mistake when he was manipulating the Dragon’s Eye. He thought he knew how to control it but he didn’t really, not completely. He wasn’t quite precise enough in his instructions and so the Islanders turn into Vikings just the way they were back then not just on that particular Christmas Eve, but *every* Christmas Eve. It wasn’t just that one time. It happens every year.

‘Scathe only realised his mistake the next year, on Christmas morning, when none of his men could remember a single thing that had happened the year before. Scathe was about to go and fix the error when he had a thought. Maybe this was a good thing. Maybe he could use his little mistake, his momentary lack of precision when he laid out his instructions, to his advantage.

‘The next thing on Scathe’s wish list was to teach the Volcano a lesson. He decided he would use the Christmas Eve changing, and the Christmas day forgetting for this very purpose. And he has found another purpose every year since. It was the best wee mistake he ever made.

‘When it came to Volcano Mount Violaceous, he stopped at nothing until he plugged it up with a glacier that was dragged down from the northern seas. How he achieved that little feat is a story for another day. I have no doubt that right now the pair a ya are as eager as can be to head back out in search of the Boy King,’ Rarelief said.

‘Ruairi,’ Dani corrected him.

‘Oh yes,’ Rarelief said, ‘sorry, Small Brother, Ruairi King of Nowhere.’

‘Nope,’ Dani said, ‘just Ruairi. Plain old Ruairi Miller.’

University of Cape Town

The Dungeon

Ruairi was surprised by the speed and agility of Hamish Sinclair. Hamish ran with him under his arm, swapping over only once or twice, all the way from Yondersaay village, across the Crimson Forest, through the River Gargle, along the Beach of Bewilderment and up the side of Mount Violaceous.

‘I’ll leave you in here until I can get the Jarl to come down and have a look at you. He’ll know what I’m to do.’

‘Where am I?’ Ruairi asked.

‘You’re in the dungeon,’ Hamish said, ‘is that not obvious?’

‘In the dungeon? Of a castle? On Yondersaay?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Yes, you are in the dungeon of Violaceous Hall,’ Hamish said.

‘So, I’m a prisoner then,’ Ruairi said.

‘No. Yes. In truth I don’t know,’ Hamish said, ‘but I daren’t bring you upstairs in case you were to be running off. And I need to go find the Jarl, and there’s nowhere else to put you. So, I reckon I’ll be leaving you in here, safe and sound, for five minutes and then it’ll all be figured out, I’m sure. Make yourself at home,’ he said.

‘Ok,’ said Ruairi looking around.

‘It’s not so bad, really,’ Hamish said as he headed for the doors.

‘Not so bad!’ Ruairi said, ‘It’s stinking and damp and really really cold. Can I go to the loo?’

‘The what?’

‘The loo, the toilet,’ Ruairi said.

‘There’s a bucket in the corner,’ and Hamish pointed into the dark recesses of the dingy cave.

‘You’re sure I can’t just have a quick trip to the bathroom?’ Ruairi gave what he hoped was a winning smile.

‘That is the bathroom,’ Hamish said, already at the door.

‘The bucket in the corner?’ Ruairi said. ‘You’re alright, I’ll hold it in.’

‘I’ll be back in haste.’ Hamish pulled the massive doors of the dungeons of Violaceous Hall creakily shut and he was gone. It took a while for Ruairi’s eyes to adjust to the darkness, but even before he could see properly, he was at the door trying to prize it open.

It was no use. He went to where the door was attached to the wall to see if he could loosen the hinges, but they were massive and soldered in place. He took his cell phone out of his pocket to call home. The battery was full but there was no signal. He walked around the cave holding the phone up trying to get a signal when he heard a voice behind him.

‘Is that you?’

Ruairi spun around.

‘Is that who?’ Ruairi said.

‘It’s Ruairi isn’t it, Granny Miller’s great great great great grandson?’ said the voice.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ Ruairi said, cautiously walking deeper into the cave to where the voice was coming from. In the far reaches of the dungeon, chained to the floor, sat a man Ruairi knew very well.

‘Mr Lerwick!’ Ruairi said running to see if he could help him out of his chains. ‘You don’t look so well, how long have you been here?’

‘Many a year, many a year,’ Mr. Lerwick said softly.

‘How come no one’s come to break you out by now? How come no one’s even noticed? We went to visit you yesterday in your shop and everyone we talked to said they hadn’t seen you in a day or two. No one said you’d been gone for *years*,’ Ruairi said, struggling with the filthy chains at Eoin Lerwick’s ankles and wrists.

‘They’ll all have had their memories manipulated by that atrocious Scathe,’ he said.

‘Mr. Scathe?’

‘Yes,’ Eoin Lerwick said, ‘he’s been looking for you and he’ll be here shortly, so quick let me tell you a few things about him before he comes.’

Ruairi took the Swiss army knife that Dani insisted he carry out of his pocket and tried all of the attachments one by one on the locks on Eoin Lerwick's chains, as Eoin spoke.

'I believe you have something of mine in your pocket,' Eoin said to Ruairi.

'I don't think so,' Ruairi said, emptying his pockets onto the ground in front of the old man. Granny had made sure to stuff his pockets full of things to eat and drink. Ruairi stuck a straw into a juice box and let Eoin drink while he sorted out everything he had on him. As he sorted, he placed mince pies, and mini-quiches and roast beef sandwiches behind Eoin's back within reach of his hands.

'In case they come back,' Ruairi said. 'There's lots of food here, you should be able to get to it when there's no one looking.'

'Thank you Ruairi,' Eoin said.

'I don't see anything else,' Ruairi said, lining up coins and pens and bits of paper and fluff.

'There it is,' Eoin said, 'the clear stone, under the post-it note. You found it on the Beach of Bewilderment last night, is that not true?'

'Yes it is. How did you know?' Ruairi asked.

'Thought and Memory left it there for you and your sister to find,' Eoin said. 'It's the Violaceous Amethyst.'

Ruairi picked up the rock. 'I don't believe it. This is the Violaceous Amethyst? I expected it to look more, I don't know, more jewel-like. This looks like a lump of glass. But now that you mention it, I could have sworn last night, when it was very dark and hard to see things, that it looked a bit purply.'

'Its anonymity is part of its power. It can turn purple when it needs to, and last night it needed you to find it,' Eoin said.

'Wow,' Ruairi said.

‘I needed you to find it, or it to find you, so that this morning when everyone else on the island woke up thinking they were Vikings, you and your family would be safe from that intoxication.

‘Memory watched over you all night until the sun came up. She tells me she wasn’t able to keep you all together now matter how hard she tried. She tells me that one member of your family went out just as the sun was rising,’ Eoin said.

‘Mummy,’ Ruairi said. ‘She’s a Viking.’

‘Actually, she isn’t really a Viking; she only thinks she’s one.’

‘But how did you do all that, Mr. Lerwick? How could you get Thought and Memory to do those things while they’re out there and you’re in here?’

‘I have a confession to make,’ Eoin said.

‘You do? Are you guilty of whatever it is they have locked you up in here for?’ Ruairi said.

‘I am,’ Eoin said.

Ruairi was not convinced, ‘what exactly did you do?’

‘It’s not what I did, it’s who I am,’ Eoin said.

‘You’re the greengrocer who has a thing for Granny Miller,’ Ruairi said and Eoin laughed.

‘Yes, yes, I suppose I am the greengrocer who has a thing for Mrs. Miller. But that’s not all. I am also the guardian of all of Yondersaay, the keeper of the treasures and the souls of the bravest Vikings awaiting their final battle in Valhalla.’

‘You’re Odin!’ Ruairi said.

‘Guilty,’ Odin said.

Ruairi paused and had a look at him. He was not quite sure what to say. ‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said finally. ‘Do I bow? Or kneel? I’m not quite sure,’ Ruairi said.

Odin laughed, ‘you do no such thing, Ruairi, and the pleasure is mine. Thought and Memory are small elements of my being. They can exist apart from my body, but they are an

intrinsic part of me. It helps me to resist complete capture - I am in here, but they roam free out there, carrying out my will insofar as I have the strength to facilitate it. It took nearly my last dregs of energy, Ruairi, to help them help you these past few days.'

'The past few days?' Ruairi asked. 'But everything kicked off this morning.'

'Ah, yes, but I had to get you here first. Did Granny Miller tell you why she decided to come to Yondersaay for Christmas at the last minute?'

'No,' Ruairi said.

'Let's just say I sent her some messages,' Odin said.

'Messages?' Ruairi asked. 'What kind of messages?'

'I'll let her be the one to tell you that. Now Ruairi, listen, I fear our captors will come back to you very soon. Scathe is going to threaten to sacrifice you. He will have the support of all of his men and most of the Islanders. They believe you are the Red King, the Boy King of Denmark prophesied to return upon the waves after an absence of more than a hundred years to take control of the throne once more. You will have to be very brave from now until the end of the day.'

'They're going to sacrifice me?' Ruairi said.

'They're going to *threaten* to sacrifice you. They may even try it a couple of times. But it will not happen. I will do my best not to let that happen. But you must use all the cleverness you have to Run Away when you can. They may do very cruel things to you. You must keep strong, you must stay brave. And whenever you can, you must Run Away.'

'I am delighted to have the Violaceous Amethyst back in my possession. It will go a long way to removing the spells that Scathe has heaped on me. They have kept me so weak for so long.'

'However, I have not regained my full strength. The Violaceous Amethyst can protect me from manipulation and intoxication, but it cannot restore me to what I once was, nor anything near it. I have a lot of work to do before that can happen, and I'll need a lot of help from my friends.'

‘That should not worry you, Ruairi, I have hundreds of years of experience. I know all the secrets of the island, many Scathe has never even dreamed of. So, together, and with the help of your sister and Granny Miller, who are on the way here to look for you, you will be safe. We will keep you safe.

‘I can hear them coming so just one more thing. We only have to survive until Dawn tomorrow. At dawn tomorrow everything goes back to normal. The villagers will stop believing they are Vikings, and Scathe will have no control over them. The animals and birds, the Beach of Bewilderment, the River Gargle, they’ll all go back to the way they usually are. So stay strong, stay brave, and stay alive, until daybreak tomorrow.

‘Go on my boy; go to the front of the dungeon. It wouldn’t do to let them know we have spoken, they might get suspicious. They mustn’t know I have the Violaceous Amethyst and am no longer bound by Scathe’s spells.’

Ruairi returned to the front of the dungeon near the heavy doors and was there only a few seconds when voices could be heard outside. Footsteps got louder and louder on the flagstones.

‘I will pretend to be asleep,’ Odin said.

‘Here, take this,’ Ruairi said running back to the old man who was still in chains on the floor. He placed the Swiss army knife in Odin’s hand. ‘I’m sure one of the attachments will open the locks, keep trying.’ Ruairi kicked away all of the debris from his pockets that was left on the ground in front of Odin. He put his cell phone deep inside his clothing. He ran back to the front of the cave and sat down just as the doors opened.

Hamish entered the dungeon and approached Ruairi. There was another man with him. Ruairi recognised him as one of the geologist brothers Henry and Lloyd Turbot, from out at Faraway Farm. Close behind was the other brother.

‘Come with me,’ Henry said, or maybe it was Lloyd.

Ruairi glanced back at Odin as he left the dungeon of Violaceous Hall. The old man looked terrible. He had clearly not shaved in a very long time, his beard was long and a dirty

white. He had probably not bathed in just as long a period. The old man, thin and frail, slouched on the floor in his chains, pretending to be asleep. When Henry, Lloyd, and Hamish weren't looking, Odin raised his head, gave a wide grin to Ruairi, and a big wink. He dropped his head just as quickly and continued pretending to be asleep. Ruairi, who was starting to get very anxious now, because Hamish did not seem like he was about to tell him he had made a terrible mistake, was greatly cheered by this.

Ruairi was pushed roughly through the large dungeon doors towards the staircase.

University of Cape Town

The Boy King meets the Jarl

Hamish and the Faraway brothers ascended the spiral stone staircase. Hamish was first, filling the space with his broad body. The brothers came behind, in step with each other, thin and grey as whippets. Ruairi was in the middle. They had to stop every now and then because Hamish's shoulders kept getting lodged on the narrow turns. In the end the butcher rotated sideways and sidestepped up, taking it one slow step at a time.

Henry, or maybe Lloyd, had bound Ruairi's wrists behind his back. This made Ruairi very anxious.

'I can't believe you forgot what you were to remember about him,' the brothers were saying to Hamish. 'Seriously, Hjorvarth the Big-Boned and Space between the Ears, sometimes we wonder about you.'

Hamish, or Hjorvarth, grunted. 'I can't be expected to remember every little thing!'

'Geez, wait 'til the Jarl hears about this,' one Faraway brother said to the other. Hamish stopped dead on the stairs and turned around. He gave a menacing snarl exposing fat yellowing teeth to the men coming up behind him.

Henry and Lloyd laughed nervously. 'We are joking of course, Hjorvarth, we wouldn't dream of telling the Jarl. This will be our little secret.'

Hamish growled a little growl. His shoulders taut with aggression, he turned sideways again and continued up the stairs. At the top he stood aside to reveal to Ruairi a most magnificent hallway. Filled with light and grandly decorated, Ruairi had never seen anything like it.

Seeing how Ruairi was awed by his surroundings, Henry or Lloyd took the opportunity to cow him even more.

'I am Asgrim Finehair the Artistic and this is my brother Isdrab Greylock the Scientific. You are already acquainted with Hjorvarth the Big Boned and Space Between the Ears,' and here Asgrim motioned to Hamish.

And you, we have reason to believe have come to Yondersaay to plunder her buried treasures.

‘No, no, I don’t know where you picked that up, but I’m really not. I’ve just come on my Christmas holidays, with my Granny. For a holiday, not to, um, plunder.’

‘What do you take us for? Fools?’ Asgrim asked. Ruairi said nothing. ‘How dare you!’ Asgrim said. ‘Your impudence is abhorrent. Look here at my sword of iron and gold,’ and Asgrim unsheathed a sword and put the point of it right under Ruairi’s nose so he could look at it. ‘What you see along the centre of the blade, from the steely tip that could shred your skin from your bones, right down to the hilt of aged form, is a channel. A blood channel. Were I to plunge my sharpened blade deep into your chest cavity, here,’ and Asgrim moved the point of the blade down wards and let it rest on Ruairi’s chest. Ruairi froze to the spot, trying not to shake. ‘Its entrance,’ Asgrim continued, ‘would not be hindered by an overflowing of your bloody innards. Instead they would be cast outwards and would flow easily down this channel and away, onto the floor. You would perish in an instant. And your blood, as I just said, would be all over the floor.’

Asgrim was winding down when a horn was heard by all. It was coming from outside the front of the castle.

‘That is Jarl Scathe, our Lord and Master, returning from his morning activities. He will outline what is in store for you,’ Asgrim’s brother Isdrab said.

With that, the main gates of the castle, fifty feet high and twenty feet across, crashed open. And in stepped Jarl Silas Scathe. He was clearly going for a grand effect of awe. Actually, the doors were so massive and he was so crooked and weedy that it made him look rather small. No one in the hallway would ever tell Jarl Scathe this of course. The three men bowed down in front of the Jarl as he approached. Ruairi watched as Jarl Scathe strode as majestically as he could towards him.

‘So,’ Scathe said in a voice he considered booming, ‘we finally meet, Boy King of Denmark.’

Scathe looked piercingly at Ruairi. Ruairi glanced behind him to see if the Jarl was perhaps addressing someone else. He wasn't, he was looking straight at Ruairi.

'Me?' Ruairi asked.

Scathe nodded.

'Em, I think there has been a mistake,' Ruairi said.

'You do?' Scathe asked.

'I do. Yes,' Ruairi said.

'What mistake would that be?' Scathed asked.

'I am not a King—'

'Yes you are,' Scathe interjected.

'—and I've never been to Denmark,' Ruairi said.

'Immaterial,' Scathe said, swatting the air beside him in a limp gesture of nonchalance.

'What is your name, Boy King?' he asked and started to walk around Ruairi as they spoke, looking him up and down.

'Ruairi, Ruairi Miller.'

Asgrim the Artistic leaned forward and whispered in Scathe's ear.

'Ah,' Scathe said. 'Ruairi. Do you know what your name means?'

'Yes. I mean, NO!' Ruairi said.

'I think you do,' said Scathe playfully.

'It's my Mother's grandfather's name, that's why it's my name, not for any other reason,' Ruairi said.

Scathe came up behind Ruairi and put his mouth to Ruairi's ear. Ruairi did not like the smell that wafted his way, part herbal toothpaste, part cheap cologne. '*And what does it mean?*'

Scathe asked into Ruairi's ear.

Ruairi hesitated. Scathe waited patiently.

‘It means Red King,’ Ruairi said finally. Hamish and the brothers gasped. Scathe clapped his hands together and walked back in front of Ruairi and looked triumphantly at the men. All three smiled at their Jarl.

‘So it’s really him. Your time has really come,’ Asgrim said.

Scathe was looking delighted with himself, ‘I do believe so,’ he said. ‘We shall follow all of the prescribed protocols to make one hundred and ten percent sure.’

‘One hundred percent,’ Isdrab the scientific murmured.

‘Sorry?’ Scathe said.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ Isdrab said, shifting on his feet and avoiding eye contact. Scathe turned around and glared at him.

‘We shall perform all of the recommended tests and then...’ he said spinning back around to Ruairi, ‘once we have established your lineage beyond a hair’s breadth of doubt I shall take my sword of death,’ and here Scathe unsheathed a long and pointy sword and pointed it at Ruairi’s face. ‘Look here at my sword of iron and gold. What you see along the centre of the blade—’

Asgrim coughed. Scathe glanced at him and Asgrim opened his eyes wide and shook his head a little. He moved toward the Jarl, the Jarl moved back a bit to confer with him. They turned their backs on Ruairi and the other two men.

‘Did you do my blood-channel speech?’ Scathe whispered to Asgrim. Asgrim hung his head. ‘Why did you do my blood-channel speech? I always do the blood-channel speech!’

‘I apologise, my Liege, I lost the run of myself in the excitement of having him here after all these years. I’m terribly sorry,’ Asgrim explained.

‘I’m feeling somewhat undermined Asgrim, I have to tell you,’ Scathe said. ‘He’s supposed to be terrified of *me*, what do you suggest I do now?’

Asgrim pondered a moment, and then said brightly, ‘you could do your plundering speech.’

‘You mean, “I’ll take to the waves and no man shall equal my doggedness in war”?’

Scathe said, considering this.

Asgrim nodded vigorously, ‘it is a wonderful speech, my Lord.’

‘No,’ Scathe said, after a moment. ‘It’s not personal enough to him to really instil fear, it’s more a rallying rhetorical than a terror instiller. I need a terror instiller.’

‘Mmm,’ Asgrim said, agreeing. They both thought for a moment. ‘Ooh, ooh,’ Asgrim said, ‘I always liked the “using your bones for cooking with” speech.’

‘Really? You like that one. You’re sure?’ Scathe asked.

‘Oh definitely!’ Asgrim said, nodding vigorously again.

‘Ok, I’ll go with that one,’ Scathe said and spun around to face Ruairi once again. Isdrab and Hamish had both been leaning forward and listening intently to Scathe and Asgrim’s conversation. They both stood back straight and looked around at the floor and the ceiling to disguise the fact that they had been listening in.

‘You are in my command and in my control. You are literally at my mercy. Indeed I am a most merciful ruler. However,’ and Scathe narrowed his eyes and lowered his gaze to meet Ruairi’s, ‘if you are impertinent to me, I shall not hesitate to extract the bones from your body, one by one, while you are still alive and screaming in an unending agony. I shall use the torn out bones and I shall cook them in front of you, with you awake and watching, in a cauldron, and I shall feed them to my hounds. Is that understood?’

Ruairi went pale. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Good,’ Scathe said. ‘We shall perform all of the recommended tests and then, once we have established your lineage beyond a hair’s breadth of doubt—,’

Isdrab whispered to his brother, ‘he already said that bit.’

‘He knows,’ Isdrab let go of Ruairi came to stand beside Asgrim, and whispered to him. ‘A judicious use of repetition is one of the most important tools of terror-instilling oratory. He lent me the book: *How to terrify friends and cower people.*’

Scathe, pretending not to hear the whispering, cleared his throat and continued, ‘—once we have established your lineage beyond a hair’s breadth of doubt you shall be sacrificed to the Viking Gods at The Great Yuletide Sacrificial Festival tonight at sundown. And I shall finally become Lord and Master, literally, once and for all, Lord and Master of all of Yondersaay.’

Scathe paused for effect. Hamish and the brothers bowed before him. One of the brothers started to clap but stopped immediately when no one else joined in. Ruairi was getting very worried now.

‘When you say sacrificed...?’ Ruairi said.

‘Yes?’ Scathe asked, raising an eyebrow.

‘What do you mean, exactly?’ Ruairi asked.

‘You know, sacrificed. We donate the gifts of your body to the Gods in a gesture of thanks,’ Scathe said.

Ruairi looked blankly at Scathe.

‘You’re not getting it,’ Scathe said. Ruairi shook his head.

‘We kill you,’ Scathe said.

Ruairi acted instantly, impulsively. His entire being sprung into action, he lifted his left foot and brought his heel down sharp into the soft part on the top of Hamish’s foot. Hamish shouted out and bent double in pain. The brothers who had wandered closer to the Jarl while he was giving his speeches no longer had hold of Ruairi. He turned and ran as fast as he could away from the men.

Scathe sighed and motioned for the brothers to bring him back.

The brothers caught up with him easily enough, they were fast. Besides, all the doors to the great hall were bolted shut. And Ruairi couldn’t open them because his hands were still tied behind his back.

The brothers, tall and thin though they were, were also impressively strong. They each took Ruairi under an arm and carried him back in front of the Jarl.

‘Can I kill him now?’ Hamish asked Scathe quietly. Scathe shook his head.

‘Torture him a little?’ Hamish said. Scathe ignored Hamish.

Scathe was amused by this ineffectual attempt to escape. Trying not to show his amusement, trying always to look terrifying, he gave Ruairi a menacing smile.

‘Take him away and perform the ritual testing to establish that his is the blue blood of the Red King of Denmark!’ And Scathe turned on his heel and strode to the end of the hall. The massive wooden doors at the far end of the grand room opened at the Jarl’s approach and he disappeared deep into the recesses of the castle.

University of Cape Town

Pedigree

The testing began before noon and upon its completion, a lab coat wearing Isdrab the Scientific took Ruairi outside.

Ruairi was led through the castle, all the way to the back. The back doors were all made of glass. They curved inwards and led out to an expansive terrace and an incredible vista beyond. Ruairi walked through and was truly impressed by the beauty of what he saw.

The Jarl's back yard was in fact the mouth of Volcano Mount Violaceous. The uppermost crags of the mountain stretched skywards around a frozen pool of ice – the plugging glacier. Between the ice and the stretching crags was the most striking garden. No, not a garden. A forest. Ruairi, who was always the first to notice that there were no trees to be seen on Yondersaay when the family arrived at the airport, and only two or three sprinkled about the Crimson Forest, could not believe what he was seeing now. For, all along the sides of the pool of ice, lining the inner edges of the peaks of Mount Violaceous, were thousands and thousands of trees. And not just any trees, but magnificent, majestic, towering trees, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them.

The sun, high in the sky now, broke upon the remaining winter leaves and splayed their colour all across this most spectacular of courtyards. Ruairi watched flocks of birds dance up to the sky and return en masse to the shelter of the forest. He had not been aware of it before, but an absence of trees had meant an absence of the sounds that go along with trees: the bird song, the animal noises, the creaking and groaning of branches and twigs in the wintry breeze. The sun's afternoon light refracted within the solid layers of ice and became a carpet of icy blues and whites which spread forward to where Ruairi now stood, hands bound, guarded on all sides, on the back patio of Violaceous Hall.

'Wow,' Ruairi said.

'I know, right?' Scathe said, appearing as if from no-where.

Ruairi turned around to face Scathe. The Jarl was no longer in hunting attire but was adorned in robes of thick furs and velvets. Ruairi wondered if Scathe had a crown hidden somewhere that he was just dying to put on.

Scathe turned to Isdrab the Scientific. 'Your results please, my good man.'

'Your Lordship,' Isdrab began, 'it appears highly probable that the boy is in some way connected to a family that may or may not be linked to the throne of Denmark and therefore of Yondersaay.'

Scathe nodded along with Isdrab as he spoke, but looked a bit confused at the end of the verdict. 'So he is the Boy King of Denmark?'

'Well,' Isdrab began.

'Well?' Scathe asked.

'The results do point to that conclusion,' Isdrab smiled, 'but they are not verifiable.' He stopped smiling.

'Not verifiable?' Scathe asked.

'We conducted the prescribed tests and are pleased with the results,' Isdrab said smiling brightly again. 'However,' he said, no longer smiling, 'we've had to throw the whole lot out.'

'Because they're not verifiable?' Scathe said.

'Precisely,' Isdrab said.

'You'd better have a good explanation for this failure. You've been testing for hours now and it'll be sundown before you know it, and I have to organize the pyre construction, the How build, the longship burning and I have to make sure the sacrificial rites are performed in the right way...' Scathe began.

'There was no control group,' Isdrab interjected.

'No control group?' Scathe said.

'No. I'm afraid not,' Isdrab said, 'and without a control group, it's not verifiable. We had to throw it all out.'

Scathe turned on his heel and shouted into the castle, 'BRING ME THE ORACLE!'

Footsteps approached from inside, and within seconds Asgrim the Artistic and Hamish Hjorvarth the Big-Boned were standing in front of Scathe. A handful of other men came running up behind to offer assistance. They were all eerily alike. Ruairi recognised them as the five twins who work at the airport.

‘Em, sir?’ Isdrab the Scientific said.

‘Yes?’ Scathe snapped.

‘The Oracle? Really?’ Isdrab said approaching Scathe.

‘Yes, why not?’ Scathe asked.

‘Sorry to be a stickler my Lord,’ Isdrab said, ‘but do you really have faith in a person who lives in a hovel, talks in rhyming couplets, is physically incapable of giving a yes/no answer, and makes decisions based on how the bile-infested innards of a torn-apart rat splat on a rock?’

‘Yes,’ Scathe said.

‘Her results are not verifiable,’ Isdrab said. ‘She moves bloody guts—’

‘—Entrails,’ Asgrim interjected, leaning forward.

‘—Sorry, entrails,’ Isdrab continued. ‘She moves bloody entrails about with her fingers and reads messages from the Gods in them. It’s not very scientific. It’s not verifiable. And I’ve never once seen her wash her hands afterwards.’

‘You’re kidding!’ Asgrim said. ‘She always hands out sandwiches to the gathered hordes. Eeew. and I usually eat them!’

‘Very tasty sandwiches,’ Hamish Hjorvarth said.

‘That’s true,’ Asgrim conceded.

‘Besides,’ Isdrab said ignoring the sandwich conversation, ‘her methods have been discredited so many times, no one really takes her seriously.’

‘Let me guess,’ Scathe said, ‘they’re not verifiable?’

‘Precisely,’ Isdrab said, ‘and the medicines she sells at the market have been proven to work no better than placebo.’

Scathe thought for a mere second and said, 'let's see what she says and *then* we'll decide whether or not we believe in her divining authority.'

'Good plan sir,' Asgrim said.

'I don't think that's very fair, sir,' Isdrab said.

'I like it!' Hamish said.

'But... but...' Isdrab said with his hand in the air like he wanted to ask a question.

'Yes, very good plan, your Jarlship,' one of the five twins said, grinning.

'Ok, then it's settled,' Scathe pronounced. 'Isdrab, you are dismissed.' And Scathe turned back to his other men and roared 'BRING ME THE ORACLE!'

'BRING HIM THE ORACLE!' Asgrim shouted.

'BRING HIM THE ORACLE!' Hamish shouted.

'BRING HIM THE ORACLE!' the men around about shouted.

Nobody moved.

'Well, go on then!' Scathe said, and the grinning twin shuffled off.

'I always have to do everything,' he muttered to himself as he wandered back through the great hall and out the front gates.

Greenbottle Blue

Dry now and over the trauma of having been spat at by a whirlpool, Dani and Granny took note of all of Rarelief's advice, thanked him profusely, promised to say hi to his Mother should they see her, and set off after Hamish and Ruairi as quickly as they could. But half way across the Beach of Bewilderment they were forced to stop their trek.

'They look green to me,' Dani said to Granny.

'They're clearly blue,' Granny said.

'Green,' Dani said.

Granny stopped dead, turned, and shouted at Dani, 'BLUE!'

'GREEN!' Dani shouted back.

'Okay they're a greeny-blue,' Granny said.

'NO! They're a bluey-green,' Dani said.

'I think we're getting off the point a bit here. Is it really that important?' Granny asked motioning to what was approaching.

'Green,' Dani said.

'Ok ok, they're not blue they're greenbottle blue,' Granny said.

'That just means blue,' Dani said. 'You're trying to win by pretending you're giving in. Why not bluebottle green?'

'Because there's no such thing as bluebottle green,' Granny explained, getting agitated again, 'and greenbottle blue is an established and very recognisable colour!'

'So you say!' Dani snapped.

'Rarelief warned us about this,' Granny said.

'About what?' Dani asked.

'He said we'd get bewildered, on the Beach of Bewilderment, and that we must take care or we'd lose focus,' Granny said.

‘He did?’ Dani asked, looking confused. ‘I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything. How long have we been here?’

‘Look,’ Granny said.

‘What?’ Dani asked.

‘We’ve been arguing about what colour they are and all the while they’ve been getting closer and closer,’ Granny said.

While Granny and Dani had been standing in the middle of the beach, bewildered, arguing with each other about whether the creatures which had slowly but solidly emerged from the water lapping up on the beach, were in fact green or blue, the creatures, the Yondersaay Tarantulafish, had slowly and quietly, unfettered and unencumbered, crawled closer.

And closer.

And closer.

‘We’ve just been standing here arguing about whether they’re green or they’re blue, when we should have been running for the hills!’ Granny said.

‘And now that they’re right beside us, Granny,’ Dani said, ‘I absolutely see what you mean; they are definitely a bluey shade of greenbottle blue.’

‘With rusty legs,’ Granny added.

‘Hairy rusty legs,’ Dani corrected.

‘And bright orange under-bellies,’ Granny said.

‘Their faces are black though,’ Dani noted.

‘Very black,’ Granny said.

Granny and Dani moved closer together. ‘Can they kill you?’ Dani asked.

‘Well,’ Granny hesitated.

‘Well?’ Dani turned and faced her great great great grandmother.

‘Their bites are pretty nasty, I’ve heard, poisonous,’ Granny said. ‘And they have fangs. But before they even get close enough to bite you they can sting you with the barbed

hairs full of venom that they flick off their bellies with their back legs like poison arrows,' Granny said.

'Poison! Venom! And is it lethal?' Dani was getting very worried now.

'It won't kill you outright no,' Granny explained, 'but its effect can be medically significant. And when you're down on the ground writhing in agony they wrap you up in their silk, bring you back to their burrows and eat you with those things on their faces.'

Dani's voice came out in a high-pitched shriek, 'writhing in agony! Eat you! MEDICALLY SIGNIFICANT! What the *hell* does MEDICALLY SIGNIFICANT mean?'

'I think it means we should get the hell out of here,' Granny said.

'At last we agree on something!' said Dani.

But Granny and Dani were completely surrounded. Some of the Tarantulafish were already lifting their back legs to pluck poisonous hairs from their bellies, ready to flick them. All the while the massive spider-fish, as big as Mummy's little mauve hire car, kept inching closer and closer.

And closer.

Finally alert now and no longer in the thralls of the bewildering beach, Granny and Dani could hear a sickening clicking noise coming from the faces of the Tarantulafish. It was hard to tell but the creatures appeared to be smiling. The man-eating, venom-flicking, poison-fanged tarantulafish were getting ready to feast on an old woman in her good maroon coat and her good maroon hat with the puffin feathers, and a young red-haired girl in puffy winter clothes.

The wooing of Marionith Swan White.

‘Put me down, Brokk the Chiselled and Kind of Heart,’ Mummy said. ‘I have not assented, I have not said yes to marrying you. You have further wooing to do.’

‘But you will, you will assent, Marionith the Swan White,’ he said. ‘And by the way, you’re beautiful when you’re angry.’

‘I mean it Brokk, I know you’re intent on this wooing business but you are coming on a little strong. It’s very kind of you to tell me I’m beautiful, but the compliment loses a lot of its impact if you are imprisoning me against my will. Now please, put me down.’

‘Are you sure you want me to let you down?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘And you won’t run off again?’

‘I won’t run off again, I promise,’ Mummy said.

‘You’ll let me woo you?’

‘I’ll let you *try* to woo me,’ Mummy said.

Just as Brokk was loosening his grip on Mummy, they heard a voice shouting at them.

‘Hey you! Let her go!’

‘Another one?’ Mummy groaned.

Brokk looked around at the approaching man and then back to Mummy, ‘I’m sorry Marionith, I can’t really let you go now he’s told me to, I’ll look weak.’

‘I’m the only one here; Aldis has gone to fetch more mead. And I certainly do not think you weak, Brokk the Chiselled and Kind of Heart, you really can let me down now,’ Mummy said.

‘All the same,’ if you don’t mind, Brokk said, ‘I’ll keep hold of you for just a few minutes more, who knows who heard him shouting like that. It really will not look good for me if I let you down now.’

Mummy sighed and rolled her eyes. ‘Men!’

‘Who is this dripping person anyway?’

‘I have no idea,’ Mummy said.

The man striding up the embankment from the shore was a very tired looking very wet looking man who was not wearing Viking clothes.

‘What has come over all of you? Why are you dressed like this? Lewis, why are you manhandling my wife? Really, I expected more from you,’ he said, and at this Daddy looked Lewis Mac Avinney, the baker, up and down. ‘Or should I say, I expected less of you.’

Brokk and Marionith looked at each other, puzzled. They did not move.

Daddy waited for a minute and then said again, ‘Go on, let go of her!’

Brokk took a step towards Daddy. A big man, Brokk growled fiercely at Daddy, who instinctively took a step back.

‘Are you ok Marion?’ Daddy asked trying not to look petrified.

‘Marionith,’ Mummy said.

‘Marionith, then,’ Daddy said.

‘I was until you showed up,’ Mummy said.

‘Oh, you were, were you!’ Daddy said.

‘Yes. He’s wooing me, but he was about to let me go until you ordered him to. Now he can’t without losing face.’ Daddy looked at Brokk, who shrugged.

‘What are you talking about Marion? Come on, get down,’ Daddy said. Brokk and Marionith did not move a muscle.

‘Ok, enough!’ Daddy said starting to shout. ‘I’ve had enough of this fancy dress or whatever it is you’re up to Marion. Come on now,’ Daddy said firmly. ‘Stop messing around and get out of the arms of the naked cowboy here and let’s go and get a coffee.’ Nobody moved. ‘I’ve had a long night. I’m exhausted, I’m hungry, and I’m wet – I had to wade to shore from a boat. I’m really not in the mood for this!’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you,’ Mummy said. ‘Sorry.’

‘Look, if this is about the fight we had before you left with the children, I’ve already apologised for that. And I’ve come all the way here. That should be enough for you, you should stop punishing me now.’

‘It’s not about that,’ Mummy said.

‘It’s not?’ Daddy asked.

‘No, of course not. I don’t know you, I’ve never seen you before, how could it be about... whatever you just said?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! What are you talking about, Marion? Really, what’s going on here?’ Daddy said.

Mummy and Brokk didn’t say anything. ‘I don’t have to take this nonsense!’ Daddy said and stormed off. He glanced back to see if Mummy had relented and was following him. She was not. She was still in Brokk’s arms. Brokk was stroking Mummy’s hair. And Mummy was letting him.

That was it for Daddy; he stormed straight back up to the two of them and grabbed at Brokk. His intention was to pull Brokk’s arm away so that Mummy would be released. But Brokk’s arm didn’t budge an inch. Daddy tried harder; he put both his hands around Brokk’s forearm and pulled. Nothing. Daddy, trying to get leverage, walked up Brokk’s leg to his knee and pulled hard. He was all the way off the ground, trying to pull back Brokk’s arm. He was nearly horizontal, but it didn’t work. Red in the face, Daddy climbed down.

He spoke to Mummy again as if none of that had happened. ‘If it’s not that, then what’s stopping you?’

‘Even if I were to agree to go for a stroll with you, whoever you are, I can’t. Brokk still has a pretty firm hold on me, as you can see, and he’s not going to let me go just because you say so.’

‘Right,’ Daddy said and backed up a few feet. He ran at Brokk and barged into him with his shoulder. Brokk barely raised an eyebrow as Daddy glanced off his muscles and fell

backwards onto the ground. Daddy tried that one more time with the same effect. 'Well then,' he said mid run, 'what can I do?'

'You can go away,' Mummy said.

'I'm not going away,' Daddy said standing up again and crossing his arms.

'Or you can meet him in combat,' Mummy replied.

'Meet him in com—WHAT!' Daddy said.

'You know, hand to hand or with battle-axes, whatever the two of you decide between you,' Mummy explained.

'I vote battle-axes,' Brokk said.

'I do love a good battle-axe fight, don't you?' Mummy said.

'I'm NOT going into combat with him!' Daddy said.

'Oh!' Brokk and Marionith said together.

'Not much of a catch, is he Marionith?' Brokk said to Mummy, 'refusing combat in such a cowardly way.'

'I know!' Mummy said, 'and for a minute there, I sort of thought he was quite attractive, you know in a limp, dripping sort of way,'

'Please, stop talking about me as though I'm not here. Look at him,' Daddy said, and Brokk and Marion both looked Brokk up and down, nodded and smiled, 'and look at me.' They turned and looked at Daddy, and shook their heads.

'It would be murder,' Daddy said, 'I have no chance against him.'

'I would heave him verily in two, there is not much doubting it,' Brokk said.

'It would be murder, as he says, there would be heaving and in-two-ing, and I really don't want to be responsible for a respected member of the Yondersaay community going down for the rest of his life. It wouldn't be fair on him,' Daddy said.

'Going down?' Mummy asked.

'To Prison,' Daddy explained.

'Oh, he wouldn't go to prison,' Mummy said.

‘He wouldn’t?’

‘Of course not, you challenged him. I saw you. He’d be hailed a hero,’ Mummy said.

‘Not much of a hero, let’s be honest,’ Brokk put in. ‘He doesn’t seem to be the most threatening of adversaries.’ Brokk turned to Daddy. ‘No offence.’

‘None taken,’ Daddy said.

‘We’re just saying,’ Brokk said.

‘In fact,’ Mummy said, ‘I couldn’t really get out of marrying him after the heaving in two.’

‘You would be so impressed by my manliness,’ Brokk said puffing out his chest.

Mummy ignored him. ‘It would be bad form on my part. You know, he goes to all this trouble with the wooing and the combat and the heaving, and I reject him anyway? I’d get a reputation as impossible to please. It would be very bad form.’

‘But if I walk away,’ Daddy said, ‘then it looks like I’ve given in, so you’re very unlikely to allow me to, um, woo you.’

‘It wouldn’t look so great,’ Mummy said, ‘I mean, why would I marry a coward?’

So,’ Daddy said, ‘if I go away, he’ll let you down but he’ll be able to woo you and I won’t and you’ll probably marry him. And if I don’t go away, he’ll kill me, and you’ll definitely marry him?’

‘That’s about right,’ Mummy said.

‘So you see my dilemma?’ Daddy said.

‘Not really,’ Mummy said.

‘What’s not to get?’ Daddy asked.

‘I still don’t really get why you’re bothered,’ Mummy said, ‘for a start, who are you? What are you doing here? And, honestly, why are you so interested in me all of a sudden?’

Daddy said nothing for a moment.

‘You’re my wife,’ he said finally.

Mummy said, ‘you say I’m your wife, I say I’ve never seen you before. Leaving that aside for the moment, because, frankly, that isn’t going to cut it for me. And even if it were true, that is not a reason. Why are you really here? What is your reason?’

Daddy took a moment to think about what Mummy had just asked him. He looked into Mummy’s eyes and saw no recognition. He was about to speak when he saw that Brokk was looking at him as intently as the woman in his arms.

‘Perhaps I could have a word with you?’ Daddy said to Mummy.

‘Ok,’ Mummy said.

Nobody moved.

‘In private,’ Daddy said.

Marionith looked at Brokk; they both shrugged and said, ‘ok.’ Brokk held Mummy out towards Daddy and turned his head away from them, ‘go ahead,’ he said.

‘This is the best you can do?’ Daddy asked Brokk.

‘fraid so,’ Brokk said.

‘No chance you’ll let me take her over—’ Brokk was already shaking his head.

‘I’ll count to myself,’ Brokk said. ‘I won’t listen in, I promise. Well not much, anyway. I shall count up in prime numbers.’

‘Ok, fine,’ Daddy said. ‘You can do that?’

‘Sure, it’s not hard,’ Brokk said and started counting quietly to himself. ‘two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen—’

Alone at last, after a fashion, Daddy thought hard about what he wanted to say to Mummy. Mummy waited patiently. Daddy strode up and down, thinking. He came back to Mummy, looked into her face and said to her, ‘I don’t know if this is a game you are playing with me. I don’t know if you are trying to punish me for being so unavailable lately. Or if you really genuinely don’t know who I am.

‘But it doesn’t really matter. The truth is that we live as though we don’t know each other anymore. It is true that I haven’t really seen *you* for a long time, and I haven’t let you see

me. I promised all those years ago when we took each other in marriage, that I would show you every day how much you mean to me. Instead, I have let you slip further away from me every day. Our lives are increasingly lived in parallel, and that has to change.

‘The first time I saw you all those years ago I saw something I had never seen before, I saw something remarkable and unique. And when I look at you know I can see that that thing that makes you *you* is still there, it hasn’t gone changed or faded.

‘The first time I saw you I knew instantly you were my Heart’s True Love and I did everything I could then to show you what you meant to me.

‘I feel love for you every day. When I see you with our children, when you smile at me the way you do, when talk to me about what’s been on your mind, when you’re just sitting with me. Every day I know that what I saw that first time, is something I will always see when I look at you.

‘I have not kept my promise, I have not shown you every day that the reason I live, the reason I love, is you,’ and Daddy stood back and took off his coat. ‘I will do what you ask,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’ Mummy asked.

‘I will fight Mr. Muscle here,’ Daddy said.

‘You will?’ Mummy asked. ‘Are you certain? You wouldn’t just rather go away while you still can?’

‘I’m certain,’ Daddy said.

Brokk was whispering to himself, ‘four hundred and one, four hundred and nine.’

‘Lewis, I mean Brokk,’ Daddy said. Brokk stopped counting to himself. ‘I wish to invite, or rather, re-invite, because I think I inadvertently did it earlier, you into combat for the hand of Marion,’ Daddy said.

‘Marionith,’ Brokk said.

‘Marionith, whatever,’ Daddy said.

‘No,’ Brokk said. ‘Marionith Swan White!’

‘There’s going to be a combat, ooh, I LOVE a good combat.’ Everyone turned around to see Aldis the Irregular returning with jugs of mead. ‘Hand to hand or battle-axes? Please say battle-axes.’

The Oracle Pronounces

The sun was already beginning its evening turn towards the West, the sky was darkening, day was coming to a close.

The Islanders paused in their celebrations at the harbour when news spread that the boy king of Denmark was on Yondersaay. This was big news; they wanted to see for themselves. Besides, Yondersaanians loved a good entrail-examination ceremony as much as the next man. Not wanting to postpone the festivities and celebrations that had started on shore, they brought a great variety of things to eat and drink with them and were now back in full swing on the courtyard at the back of Violaceous Hall. A pig was roasting on a spit. Chickens were running around awaiting slaughter and plucking. A trestle table had been erected near the site of the Oracle's upcoming performance, and a bountiful array of foodstuffs was on display. The men and women drank goblets of mead while they sang songs, danced on the ice, and generally had a good time.

The crowd hushed after a while as the Oracle approached the platform that had been erected for the occasion near the edge of the ice. In her ceremonial garbs, she looked quite imposing. The fact that she mumbled constantly to herself only added to her mystique. The intermittent picking of things off her scalp, and flicking of them, not so much. The Islanders settled down onto benches and chairs that had been brought out from the castle and placed all along the terrace.

The crowd hushed as the back doors of the castle were flung open and Silas Scathe emerged. The effect was somehow diminished by the fact that the doors were made of glass and Silas could, in the minutes beforehand, be plainly seen by everyone checking his appearance in various mirrors and sending someone off to find a pomade that was frantically applied to some stray hairs. The crowd, however, had been well coached by the Jarl's men. They oooed and aaahhed as the Jarl approached.

The Jarl was wearing the same flouncy robes as earlier, but had added jewels and other adornments. He sauntered to a great golden throne, which had been placed square in the middle of the platform. He turned himself around dramatically to face the crowds, allowing his robes to billow out around him as he did so. And slowly, regally, he sat down.

Almost immediately, he stood up again. ‘Welcome, good people of Yondersaay,’ the Jarl said to the crowd, ‘we have an added reason to celebrate our annual feast today. You are all aware of course of the legend of The Boy King of Denmark – that one day this evil and arrogant young sovereign will come to the island and will plunder and pillage and take Odin’s treasure as his own—’

A stooped old man at the front put up his hand. ‘That’s not the version I’m familiar with, your Jarlship,’ the old man said in a surprisingly loud voice, ‘I was under the impression he was supposed to be a rather decent sort—’ The old man was cut short. Two men in full combat gear had appeared, lightning quick, one on either side of him. The one on the left pressed a blade, obscured from view, into the old man’s side. The one on the right glared menacingly at him.

The Jarl stopped and looked at the old man. ‘Are you sure? Is that really what you remember?’

‘Em, no, now that I think about it, no. Evil and arrogant, that’s what he’s supposed to be like,’ the old man said sheepishly.

‘Indeed!’ the Jarl continued. ‘As we all know, the island has been bereft of Odin’s benevolent presence this many a year. It is my firm belief that once we sacrifice the Boy King tonight on our pyre in the harbour, the Gods will be appeased and Odin will return to us.’

The Jarl looked into the crowd. They loved a good sacrifice, he knew that, but he wanted to make very sure they were all on his side.

‘But don’t take my word for it. This afternoon we welcome Yondersaay’s most revered inhabitant, the amanuensis of the Gods, the interpreter of Divine Will, the ONE, the ONLY...ORACLE, ladies and gentlemen. Yes, it’s Yondersaay’s own Oracle!’ and here the

Jarl lifted the Oracle's right arm into the air and paraded her around the stage so that all gathered could get a look at her. The crowds got to their feet and cheered.

'The Oracle!' they cheered, 'the Oracle, Yah Yah Yah.' And the crowd, roused up now, stamped their feet on their benches in appreciation, and drank heartily from their mead.

The Jarl continued, 'our sacred Oracle will perform the ancient rites. She will commune with the Viking Gods and they will tell her two things,' and here the Jarl stood majestically and raised his robed arms slowly as he spoke.

'One: Is the Boy we have captured the true Red King, the one and only Boy King of Denmark?'

Scathe's voice rose to a crescendo. 'And two: will sacrificing him return our beloved Odin to our midst?'

The crowd erupted once more into whoops and cheers.

'And now,' the Jarl said more softly, dropping his arms, signalling the crowd to hush for a further pronouncement, 'I present to you, the copper-haired, silver-eyed boy of the legends. Prepped and ready for testing, the suspected Boy King of Denmark!'

And the crowd went wild.

Ruairi was dragged roughly out of Violaceous Hall by Asgrim and Isdrab. Hamish Hjorvarth was close behind. Ruairi had been prepared for the ceremony and was wearing flowing purple robes, much too big for him. Luckily his own clothes were all still intact underneath. He had a simple golden crown atop his head.

He was forced to sit on a stool at the foot of the great throne on the platform, well below the Jarl on his raised throne. Ruairi noticed later that the Jarl's feet didn't even reach the ground.

'We are here to perform the identification rites on this boy,' the Jarl said when Ruairi was seated. 'He claims he is not the Boy King of Denmark. But we shall find out for sure right now. If he is the Boy King of Denmark, we shall offer him to Odin, who has deserted us these

many years. We shall offer him up and hope that that will satisfy the great God and he will return to us.'

'Odin?' Ruairi looked up at Scathe, 'I'm pretty sure he's in the dungeon. I'd be willing to bet that Mr. Eoin Lerwick is Odin and you have him shackled up downstairs.'

'What?' There were murmurs from the crowd. 'Eoin who?' The stooped old man at the front looked right and left to the two henchmen guarding him, 'I didn't say anything,' he said to them. They looked at a loss as to what to do. The murmurs were spreading within the crowd. They looked to Scathe for guidance.

A young woman at the back stood up. 'What did he say?'

'He's in the dddggggg' Ruairi said as Hamish came up behind him and put a massive hand over his mouth.

'Impudent liar! Trying to blind us!' Scathe said over the crowds.

'What did he say?' the woman asked. 'The acoustics aren't so great at the back here.'

'It's irrelevant!' Scathe asserted. 'Odin has deserted us and it's all *his* fault. He has not performed his duties as our King, and Odin has vanished. You have jeopardised our final battle in Valhalla. Your death shall ensure Odin's return and Yondersaay will open its arms to the Lord of all the Vikings. We shall be set on our course again, my fellow Yondersaanians, and our final battle and our final glory.'

The crowd seemed divided. There were cheers from some quarters, murmurs from others. The Jarl, sensing the mood was changing, motioned the Oracle, a certain crowd-pleaser, forward.

The Oracle stepped up to the front of the stage. The crowd applauded. She went straight into her routine. First off she made a big show with a stick type thing with feathers on the end, mumbling away to herself the entire time. She motioned for a large flat rock to be placed in front of her and placed lots of implements in a line beside it. The implements included stones and bones of various shapes and sizes. Presently she motioned for a big bucket to be brought to the stage. The Oracle ceremoniously lowered the top of the bucket so that the

gathered masses could see what was inside. It was a big bucket of bloody guts. To save time, so she could get right to the crowd-pleasing part of the show, Yondersaay's own Oracle had pre-sacrificed a goat, four rats, and a hedgehog ahead of time.

The Oracle reached deep into the bucket. She lifted the immersed arm high above her head. It was bloody to her elbow and in her hands she clutched an oozing mixture of innards. She splattered the entrails all across the flat surface of the rock and bent to examine them.

She looked up at the crowd. And back at the entrails. She fishugled them about a bit. And looked up at the heavens.

She lowered her head to the crowd and all those in the front rows could see that she was now in a trance. The coloured bits of her eyes were gone. All they could see were white eyeballs, blind. All the while, the Oracle mumbled incoherently to herself.

The crowd was silent. The Islanders leaned forward as much as they could to see as much as they could see.

At last the Oracle let out a monstrous wail. 'Eeeeahaaaaaa!' she shouted. The crowd jumped back as one, startled out of their senses.

'Copper hair, eyes of an aged grey

'The sign of the Red King, boy King

'Am I to say?

'Yes I am, I have an inkling

'To sacrifice tonight on the Yuletide fire,' the Oracle pronounced in a clear voice, still apparently in a trance,

'The Boy King bound and tied on the pyre.

'Denmark the Red.

'For Odin to return may he be dead.'

And with that final pronouncement, the Oracle collapsed exhausted onto the stage.

‘What does that even mean?’ Ruairi said. ‘It doesn’t mean anything! It doesn’t mean I am the boy K—!’ Hamish came forward and put a massive hand over Ruairi’s mouth again, muffling his last words.

‘That is clear enough for me!’ Scathe announced to the crowd. ‘The Boy King of Denmark will be sacrificed to the Viking Gods on the pyre in the harbour at sundown!’

The crowd lifted to its feet and roared a cheer so great that the benches reverberated from the noise. The Oracle was helped to her feet. She stepped forward and took a bow.

‘Prepare the Boy King for his sacrifice,’ Scathe announced to the men. ‘We will follow the ancient recipe.’

The Oracle leaned in and said something to Scathe. ‘The great Oracle needs help to prepare. Isdrab, get your lab coat; you’re back in business.’

‘Good people of Yondersaay,’ Scathe turned to the gathered Islanders, ‘let us repair to the harbour for the Great Sacrificial Festival. Prepare the Dragon for burning, prepare the pyre for lighting, and the How for The Offering. And let us commence our festivities!’

‘If there’s going to be a break, can I meet someone in combat now?’ Hamish said to the Jarl as the crowd started to disperse. ‘You did say I could meet someone in combat if we had the time. I’m sure I could find someone to fight with,’ and Hamish walked straight into a man who happened to be walking close by.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ the man said, and sidestepped away from Hamish. ‘I do apologise.’

‘I’ll tear you limb from limb,’ Hamish snarled at him. The man shrieked and ran away. ‘No, come back,’ Hamish called out after him, ‘I’ll give you a chance, I really will. Won’t you fight with me? Please? I’ll go easy on you, I promise.’

But the man had scarpered. When Hamish had turned back to the Jarl, he was deep in conversation with the Oracle who was mumbling and picking at her scalp again.

Dani's Backpack

'I know what to do,' Dani said over her shoulder to Granny Miller, who was standing back-to-back with her as the circle of greenbottle blue tarantulafish tightened and came closer around them.

'You do?' Granny said. 'I'm listening.'

'I have my backpack. I'm sure there'll be something in there to help us. Maybe if I shine a torch in their eyes they'll be frightened, or if I swing the rope round and round it will keep them back for a while. Or we could try to set them alight with my matches or lighter. And if that doesn't work, well I have my Swiss army knife. They'd have to be pretty close for that to do any damage. Oh, I know, I have my ipod, I can play some really loud music, that might frighten them,' Dani said as she swung her backpack down from her shoulders and opened it up.

'All sterling ideas my dear Dani. However...?' Granny said.

Dani looked into her backpack and could not believe what she saw. She lowered her bag, stood up straight, and turned to face Granny. Granny didn't move. Dani turned to face Granny so she could look her in the face. But Granny sensed Dani coming and quickly turned around in a circle to keep her back to Dani.

Dani grabbed her great great great great Grandmother by the elbow and yanked her around to face her.

'Kindly explain!' Dani said to Granny as she shoved her open backpack under Granny Miller's nose.

Granny looked into the backpack.

'Please tell me my ipod and my rope and my torch and my Swiss army knife and all my other things are underneath all of this,' Dani said as she lifted out handfuls of mince pies and sandwiches and sausage rolls.

'There wasn't enough space for everything,' Granny said, 'so I made room for the essentials.'

‘Kindly tell me what is essential about mini-quiches!’ Dani said, her voice starting to get high-pitched again. ‘You have enough food in here to last us a week, where did you put everything else?’

‘In the cupboard under the stairs. I thought they would be safe there.’

Dani, furious, grabbed a handful of food, wound her arm around and around and around like an Olympic shot putter and flung a massive handful of food as far away from her as she could possibly manage. ‘What good are they to anyone under the stairs!’

As soon as Dani took the swing, she noticed a massive, vicious looking tarantulafish react. It was very close to her. It snarled and snapped the things on its face. It swung back on its back legs and leapt straight at Dani.

Dani jumped in terror out of the way. Granny reached out and caught Dani in her arms. They both stood there with their eyes tight shut thinking this was it, this was the end.

‘Bloody mini quiches,’ Dani said.

After the initial shock of the leaping tarantulafish, Granny and Dani opened their eyes. The tarantulafish that had leaped by them was circling the small pile of food that Dani had just flung. It was snarling and snapping its face. But it wasn’t snarling and snapping at Dani or at Granny. It was snarling and snapping at another, even bigger, bluer, tarantulafish that was also circling the pile of food.

‘They’re getting ready to fight each other for the food!’ Dani said.

‘Quick,’ Granny said reaching deep into Dani’s backpack, ‘throw more!’ And Granny threw handfuls of sausage rolls into the circle of tarantulafish. Dani did the same and in less than a minute, all the tarantulafish were busy eating roast beef sandwiches and black pudding rolls, or fighting each other over them.

Dani and Granny, as quickly and as quietly as humanly possibly, tiptoed between clumps of tarantulafish. As soon as they were a foot or two clear they took to their heels and sprinted as fast as their legs would carry them up the rest of the beach, over the dunes and into the clearing at the bottom of Volcano Mount Violaceous.

‘I think one of them is following us,’ Granny said, as she looked back over her shoulder. She was right; one of them was scrambling after them across the beach, clacking the black bits in his face. It was nimble and fast.

‘Quick, in here,’ Dani said as she dove into a cave opening behind a large shrubbery.

Granny dove in after her, ‘let’s hope they don’t have good eyesight,’ Granny said. Dani and Granny sat as quietly as they could in the mouth of the cave. They didn’t move a muscle. They were hardly even breathing. They saw the tarantulafish’s legs before they saw its head, creeping quickly but silently over the top of the sand dune. It crept forward and slowed to a crawl, reaching one leg languidly out, resting it down, before reaching out another slim leg. Its movements were purposeful and elegant, and very very slow. The tarantulafish cast about in all directions, lowering its head slowly and dreamily raising it up again.

‘What if it can follow our scent?’ Dani whispered to Granny.

‘We’ll just have to hope it can’t, Dani,’ Granny said. ‘But let’s get ready to fight it just in case.’ And Granny reached into the backpack for handfuls of the hardest food she could find. ‘I put some of Mummy’s burnt scones in, in case we were desperately hungry. They might be good weapons.’

‘Let me get this straight, you took out all of my stuff, everything that we could possibly need if we happened to be in danger, and you filled up the back pack, not only with enough food for an army, but extra food, burnt food, that no one would ever want to eat. Just in case?’

‘Well, you never know,’ Granny said. ‘Anyway, look, he seems to be going off in a different direction.’

‘He seems to be following a scent.’ Dani gasped, and watched as the tarantulafish effortlessly picked up speed again. ‘Maybe he’s picked up Hamish’s scent.’

‘And Hamish has Ruairi!’ Granny said.

‘Should we follow it to see if it leads us to Ruairi?’ Dani said to Granny.

‘What, and hope it doesn’t notice it’s being tailed?’ Granny asked. ‘I don’t think that’s a great idea, do you?’

‘Do you have a better one?’

Granny thought for a minute and then said, ‘why don’t we give it a head-start, watch where it’s going, try to figure out where Hamish took Ruairi, and see if we can find another way to get there, without the tarantulafish noticing?’

‘That is a good idea Granny, but I don’t see how we’ll be able to follow the tarantulafish up the side of a mountain without it noticing. Look,’ Dani said and pointed. The tarantulafish was picking its way over the boulders and rocks at the base of the volcano and was beginning a climb up the mountain.

‘It’s going up the mountain!’ Granny said. ‘In that case, I have an even better idea. When Eoin Lerwick and I were little we used to spend a lot of time in these caves. If I think about it for a minute, I’m sure I can remember which one of the caves leads to the top of the volcano. If we don’t get lost we might even get there first. In fact, if I’m not mistaken,’ Granny said turning around and squinting into the cave, ‘I think this is the cave right here.’

‘Are you sure though Granny?’ Dani said. ‘Because we don’t have time to make mistakes. Rarelief said that Ruairi would be sacrificed at sundown. That must be only a few hours away.’

‘I’m sure,’ Granny said, ‘I remember that it’s the right one, but also, I have often seen the firemen doing their drills on this spot. They practice blocking up this tunnel at least once a year. This is the right tunnel. It will lead us all the way to the top of the mountain. Come on, let’s go.’ Granny walked forwards into the cave.

‘You know,’ Dani said, ‘my rope would have come in very handy around about now. We could have tied one end to the shrubbery and unrolled it as we walked. That way we could always find our way back, we wouldn’t get lost.’ Dani thought for a minute, ‘I suppose we could drop bits of food every few minutes,’ she said.

‘Not on your life,’ Granny said. ‘Haven’t you ever heard of Hansel and Gretl? That would be a total waste. Besides, what if another tarantulafish made its way up here and started

following the food trail? We'd be leading him right to us, and in a tunnel this narrow we'd have no escape.'

'Fair point,' Dani said. 'Ok, let's grab handfuls of these little flowers then, from the entrance to the cave, and drop one every bit of the way. They're unlikely to get eaten.'

'That just might work,' Granny said. 'Ok, stuff as many as you can into your pockets and let's go.'

University of Cape Town

The Fight to the Death of Brokk the Chiselled and Kind of Heart and Daddy the Limp
and Dripping.

‘Are you ready?’ Alice Cogle, known on this day as Aldis the Irregular, shouted to the two men standing on opposite sides of the clearing. Brokk had oiled himself up in preparation for the fight, and had fastened a chest plate over his leather clothing, and was wearing a helmet on his head. Clearly he had done this before.

Brokk was pacing up and down grumbling and growling to himself, getting himself mentally prepared for battle. He was swinging his battle-axe in the air and catching it every time without even looking at it.

Daddy had changed into Brokk’s spare set of Viking clothes. They were more than a little big for him. Brokk’s friend Thrand had lent Daddy a chest plate and a helmet but Daddy was not wearing the helmet. When he first put it on it came right down over his eyes. On balance he decided it would be safer to have no head protection but to have the ability to see what was going on. His borrowed battle-axe was resting on the ground beside him. He was not pacing up and down grumbling and growling to himself.

Aldis, the referee, and Mummy, the woovee, sat on a boulder half way between the two men. The combat would take place around them.

A small crowd had gathered to watch the fight. The Islanders loved a good fight. A man was taking bets. He wasn’t taking bets on who would win, as no one was backing Daddy the Limp and Dripping. Nor were they betting on how quickly Brokk would win. No one would bet on Daddy lasting more than the time it took Brokk to stride across the field of play and heave him in two. And no one would bet on that being more than fifteen seconds. The bets were mostly related to the amount of blood and guts that would spew from Daddy’s gaping wounds, the trajectory of the spewing blood and guts, and the volume and quantity of Daddy’s screeches.

Some people bet on Daddy running away and Brokk having to run after him for a few seconds, before bringing him back to the clearing, heaving him in two and spewing blood and guts from the gaping wounds.

Aldis was warming up the crowd with a brief summary of Brokk's combat record. Daddy was getting more and more nervous. The crowd was looking at Brokk, who was now performing poses and doing his pre-combat routine.

'It's really going to happen, Marion,' Daddy said. 'If this is all a big joke, I get it, it's hilarious, but I think now is the time for you let everyone know so we can all go home, in one piece.'

'It's not a joke,' Mummy said.

'Ok, well, if it's not a joke, that's fine, it's a lesson. You're teaching me a lesson and yes indeed, I get it, lesson learned. Time to pull the plug now Marion. I've behaved badly, I'm very sorry, I won't do it again,' he said.

'It's not a lesson either. But really, you don't have to do this, you can walk away at any moment,' Mummy said.

'Well, not any moment,' Aldis said. 'As soon as I call one, two, three, engage, he's pretty much stuck, there's no getting out of it then. Once I say 'engage,' it's to the death.'

'Right,' Mummy said. 'So you yourself can stop the combat, yourself, on your own, if you just surrender, accept defeat and humiliation, and walk away.'

Daddy started humming to himself. 'I can't do that,' he said, and paced up and down still humming.

'What is that song?' Mummy turned and asked Daddy.

'What song?' Daddy said.

'The song you are humming,' Mummy said.

'Was I humming? I had no idea,' Daddy said, thinking a moment. 'Oh, wait, I do know, it's the song my Mother used to sing to me when I was a little boy. I still find it calming

in times of great stress and emotional upheaval, and also in times when I firmly believe I am about to die a horrible and gory death.’

‘I know this song,’ Mummy said.

‘Of course you do,’ Daddy said.

‘How do you know I know this song?’ Mummy asked.

‘I know you know this song because I used to sing it to you. I sang it to you on the morning after our wedding day when I woke up knowing I had married the most exquisite creature that ever existed. I sang it to you in the hospital when we were waiting for Dani and then Ruairi to be born. And you sing it to our children when they are unhappy or unwell.’

‘It’s so familiar,’ Mummy said.

‘But the first time I sang this song to you was on the first night we met, when I walked you home. Are you remembering Marion?’ Daddy asked. ‘When you looked into my eyes that first night I saw what I never thought I would ever see.’

‘What did you see?’ Mummy asked.

‘I saw Love. I saw that you were my Heart’s True Love,’ Daddy said.

Aldis shouted, ‘One.... Two... Three... ENGAGE!’

‘Oliver?’ Mummy said and got down from the boulder in the middle of the clearing. Daddy’s heart nearly exploded, and for the first time in a long time he realised he had not lost his wife.

Mummy and Daddy ran to each other. Daddy picked Mummy up and held her tight to his chest. Marionith Swan White looked at Daddy the Limp and Dripping, and for the first time that day, for the first time in a long time, she saw her heart reflected in his eyes. She flung her arms around Daddy, her Heart’s True Love, and kissed her husband.

At that very second, Brokk the Chiselled and Kind of Heart, battle-axe in the air, helmet firmly down over his head, charged forward with a blood-freezing cry of war and ran straight for the spot that Daddy had just that second vacated.

Brokk collided, not with Daddy the Limp and Dripping, but with the rolled up plate-glass window of a tiny blue three-door car that just at that moment was being carried by a squad of Vikings towards the harbour of Yondersaay village. Out cold and stuck in the window, Brokk was carried along with the car and flung onto the sands of the shore.

Aldis the Irregular

Aldis the Irregular ran after the little blue car with an unconscious Brokk the Chiselled and Kind of Heart sticking out of it, but the Vikings carrying it were too fast for her and they lost her somewhere between the clearing and the fork in the road beyond the little hill. She cast left towards the mountain and right towards the harbour but didn't catch sight of them again.

Aldis decided she would go back to the clearing and ask Marionith what she should do. But when she got there, her friend had vanished. She forgot all about Brokk and went looking for Marionith instead.

Not finding Marionith on the shore or in the harbour, she wandered around looking for her. Aldis decided to walk back into the village to look there, but she was distracted by two low-flying birds. Two black low-flying birds. Two ravens. The ravens swooped around Alice and then flew off a bit. She followed them, they swooped near her again and then flew off another bit. Aldis followed them again, and they swooped near her and away from her yet again. Aldis kept following them. She followed them all the way up Mount Violaceous to the where the Oracle had just emerged from her trance.

When Aldis got to the clearing at the top of the mountain, she did not find her friend Marionith Swan White. Instead, she caught sight of a young copper haired, grey-eyed boy sitting in the middle of some very scary men with his hands tied behind his back.

The Tome of Tiuz

Scathe sat in his throne on the platform. Ruairi was still sitting on his little stool at Scathe's feet. The crowd was dispersing. Most people were wending their way to the harbour in anticipation of the Great Sacrificial Yuletide Festival that would begin there at sundown. The Islanders were thrilled that an actual real live sacrifice would happen at the festival this year.

Some of the villagers hung back, chatting and drinking in groups. A queue had formed in front of the Oracle and her bucket of guts. She had already pre-sacrificed the goat, the four rats, and the hedgehog, and there were plenty of entrails left over, so she was performing predictions and making pronouncements for some of the villagers. For a fee, naturally. She was also distributing medicines and leftover sandwiches.

There were plenty of people milling about, but Scathe and the Boy King were no longer the centre of attention.

Scathe spread his robes out beyond the armrests of his throne and addressed Ruairi.

'I take it you are not too happy about your imminent sacrifice and certain death?' he said.

Ruairi turned around and looked up at Scathe. 'I've been happier,' he said.

'I have an alternative arrangement I'd like to discuss with you,' Scathe said, turning a big smile on Ruairi. 'We may be able to avoid your death.'

'I'm listening,' Ruairi said.

'As you are most likely aware, my key aim is to attain the treasures that are buried on the island. It would be nice to be the Lord and Master of all of Yondersaay, but that is literally at most a secondary goal. I have been on this godforsaken rock for more years than I care to remember, and I am one hundred and ten percent certain—'

'One hundred percent,' Isdrab the Scientific whispered to himself.

'—that as soon as I find the treasure, I will want nothing more than to leave this place and never come back. So,' he said, 'if you, King Ruairi, were to renounce the throne of your

own free-will, and for good measure tell me where the treasure is, I would be agreeable to letting you go.'

'Without killing me,' Ruairi said.

'Naturally,' Scathe said. Ruairi looked at Scathe's hands to make sure he wasn't crossing any fingers.

'But I'm not a King,' Ruairi said, 'and I don't know where the treasure is.'

'Ok then,' Scathe said, 'have it your way. We'll continue with the sacrifice.'

'Wait a minute,' Ruairi said. 'I'm remembering. I *do* know where the treasure is, and would you believe it, I *am* the Boy King of Denmark.'

Scathe relaxed back into his chair and smiled. 'I knew it!' he said. 'So you'll renounce the throne and tell me where the treasure is?'

'Sure,' Ruairi said.

'It's a deal then?' Scathe said.

'Absolutely,' Ruairi said.

'Oh goodie,' Scathe said with an evil twist of his lips. He turned to the Faraway brothers. 'Isdrab come here. There is a particular spell buried in the Tome of Tiuz that allows us to break the family line of the House of Denmark and end it with this boy here.'

'Without killing me?' Ruairi put in.

'Absolutely,' Scathe said.

'Just checking,' Ruairi said.

'That was our agreement,' Scathe said.

'Just making sure,' Ruairi said.

'Isdrab, prepare the potion! You there,' Scathe said, turning to the one of the five twins who was closest to him, 'carry the implements!'

'Me? Again? Sweet mother of—' the fifth twin mumbled to himself as he followed Isdrab.

They came back in a matter of minutes, Isdrab dressed in his lab coat carrying a giant and very dusty looking book. The twin was straining under the weight of the implements Isdrab had strapped to his back and hung on his shoulders.

‘Bring me the Oracle!’ Scathe shouted.

‘Do we really need her, my Liege?’ Isdrab asked. ‘I really can manage this on my own.’

‘Yes, bring her,’ Scathe said, not even looking at Isdrab.

Isdrab laid out all of his implements onto a little fold out table that he had taken from one of the bags strapped to the twin. He and the Oracle set about mixing the potion.

Once it was prepared, Scathe ceremoniously descended the platform and took the bubbling, smoking pot of liquid in his hands.

He splashed it on Ruairi’s face without any warning. Ruairi sneezed.

‘I hereby sever all of your blood ties to the line of the House of Denmark,’ Scathe pronounced. He placed the Tome in front of Ruairi.

‘You have to recite that bit there,’ Scathe said, pointing at a little poem in the dusty Tome of Tiuz. ‘You have to demonstrate that you are entering into this severing willingly and of your own free will for it to work.’

Ruairi looked at the book and recited what was written.

‘I of blood blue and true

‘Do turn it red instead

‘I of lineage royal and regal

‘Do denounce my heritage and make it legal,’

Scathe splashed some more of the potion on Ruairi just as he was finishing. Some of it got in Ruairi’s mouth.

‘That’s *disgusting!*’ Ruairi said, ‘What on earth have you put in that stuff?’

Isdrab opened his mouth to list the ingredients, but Scathe swatted the question away and addressed Ruairi directly.

‘Ok, that’s the first bit done, you are no longer tied to the Royal House of Denmark, you are no longer the boy King of Denmark you are just the, um, boy. And you cease to be the Red King, you are just, well, you are just ginger,’ he said.

‘I don’t feel any different,’ Ruairi said.

‘Good!’ Scathe said. ‘Now that the part A has been dispensed with, tell me, where is the treasure buried?’

‘The treasure is buried, um, it’s in, well, it’s, let me see now,’ Ruairi said.

‘I’ll kill you if you don’t tell me,’ Scathe said, quick as a flash.

‘I remember now,’ Ruairi said. ‘It’s buried under the third boulder from the right as the crow flies, on the river bed of the River Gargle, starting out two paces from the whirlpool but on the other side of the bridge.’

‘On the right or the left?’ Scathe asked.

‘The Left,’ Ruairi answered without a pause.

‘On which side of the river?’ Scathe asked before Ruairi had even finished speaking.

‘No it’s in the river,’ Ruairi said.

‘I understand that,’ Scathe shot back, ‘but the third boulder from the right as you’re coming from the north side of the river or the south?’

‘The um, south,’ Ruairi said.

‘So facing the mountain?’ Scathe said.

‘Right!’ Ruairi said.

‘Sorry,’ Scathe said, ‘right, it’s on the left on the south side, or wrong it’s on the right on the north side? I’m getting confused.’

‘You were right the first time, the first thing you said,’ Ruairi said.

‘So,’ Scathe clarified, ‘it’s on the left on the south side as you’re facing the mountain.’

‘Exactly!’ Ruairi said, smiling.

‘Wonderful!’ Scathe said.

‘So I can go now,’ Ruairi said.

‘No, of course not,’ Scathe said.

‘But you said I could go,’ Ruairi said.

Scathe creased over laughing to himself. He stood up, threw his arms out, and laughed loudly and heartily with all of his body.

‘I’m going to kill you anyway,’ he said. ‘Because on this day I am the mighty Jarl of all of Yondersaay and I can do whatever the hell I want. And I want nothing more than to see you beg and plead and cry like a little baby before I extinguish your life like a, like a, you know, like something extinguishing an extinguished thing. I will literally sacrifice you for the fun of it, simply because I can. And your line will be well and truly ended, and nothing, literally nothing, can stop me. Wah hahahahahaha,’ Scathe laughed the evil laugh he’d been practicing.

‘And then, the treasure in my possession, the island of Yondersaay indisputably mine at last, I will return to piracy like a fish to the sea, I will literally unleash my superior combat skills upon the worlds, I shall show no mercy and my mighty power will reach no limits—’

‘Ahem,’ Isdrab said, and quickly approached the Jarl and whispered in his ear. They whispered together for a minute, Isdrab’s face going from not smiling to smiling to not smiling again. Scathe gesticulated wildly while Isdrab spoke.

‘There seems to have been a little bit of a hiccup,’ Isdrab said quietly into Scathe’s ear. ‘The spell you cast from the Tome of Tiuz did not quite work. The theory is that we made an error when we doubled the quantities stated in the recipe to make double sure it worked. The witch hazel, apparently, is the problem.’

‘And pray tell me, how is the witch hazel a problem?’ Scathe said. ‘I’m all ears.’

‘Well, someone,’ Isdrab said, glancing accusingly at the Oracle who was looking around her and whistling, ‘thought that two times a half a teaspoon was a quarter of a teaspoon, and of course that’s not correct at all. Two times half a—’

‘I know how much two times half a teaspoon is,’ Scathe put in impatiently, ‘it’s...’ and he paused.

‘A teaspoon,’ Isdrab said.

‘I know that, I *know that!*’ Scathe said. ‘What are you doing about it?’

‘We’re brewing up a new batch with the correct quantities right now,’ Isdrab the Scientific said, ‘and well, if it’s not too much bother, we’ll have to do the wee ceremony just one more time.’

‘But it doesn’t matter,’ Scathe said, ‘the copper haired boy has already told me where the treasure is.’

‘I think it best to make double sure in these cases, sir, you never know. You have come very close many times before only to be disappointed,’ Isdrab said. ‘There might be some side-effect to this whole spell thing that we don’t know about, or there might be some detail that we’re overlooking. And that might prevent you from getting at the treasure even though you’ve claimed the land. We’re so close, my Liege, I’d feel a lot better if we just did the ceremony quickly once more. It’ll only take a minute. Just in case.’

Scathe sighed and said, ‘Ok, fine, we’ll do it one more time.’ Scathe made a flamboyant turn, his robes flaring up behind him. He faced Ruairi with a big smile on his face.

‘We have to do the silly magic thingy again just one more time, bear with us, won’t take a minute,’ Scathe said to Ruairi.

‘But,’ Ruairi said.

‘But what?’ Scathe said, not making eye contact.

‘But you just said you were going to kill me anyway,’ Ruairi said.

‘Nonsense,’ Scathe said, half turning away from Ruairi.

‘You DID!’ Ruairi said, ‘you said I am the mighty Lord Jarl blahde blahde I will show no mercy, fish to the sea, Wahahahahaha and then you said I was for the chop!’

‘I was joking,’ Scathe said.

‘Didn’t sound like you were joking,’ Ruairi said.

‘I won’t kill you,’ Scathe said. ‘I promise.’

‘That’s what you said last time,’ Ruairi said. ‘I must be honest, I’m not entirely sure I believe you.’

‘Please?’ Scathe said.

‘Well since you asked so nicely,’ Ruairi said.

‘Really?’ Scathe said.

‘NO! Of course not!’ Ruairi said. ‘Look what’s that?’ And Ruairi gestured up at the sky to a pair of circling ravens who seemed first to be fighting viciously with each other, and then to be swan diving towards the ice at great speed. Scathe and his men were fully absorbed by the sight of bloodthirsty kamikaze ravens and started taking bets on which of the birds would splatter beak first into the ground.

University of Cape Town

Aldis on the Mountain

Alice Cogle who, even as the Viking Aldis the Irregular, did not like to see cruelty of any kind, belly-crawled across the ice from the viewing benches to the back of the platform when the men were distracted by the circling and nose-diving ravens. She crept up behind Ruairi when no one was looking and untied his hands and feet. Now, with Scathe and his men distracted, both of them quietly leapt off the stage and crouched down low behind the platform. They got ready to run across the ice to freedom.

A large shadow fell on them where they crouched. They slowly turned around and looked up to see a massive, strong, and very angry looking Hamish Hjorvarth bearing down on them. Ruairi and Alice stood up. Upright, Alice and Hamish stood face to face, inches apart.

And something happened.

They looked into each other's eyes and found that they could not stop looking. Alice smiled coyly at Hamish. Hamish raised a hand and waved at Alice, and, astounding Ruairi, he smiled too. Alice and Hamish stood looking and looking and looking at each other. Hamish's entire being softened in an instant.

'Excuse me, excuse me,' Ruairi said eventually, squeezing between the two of them. He was about to leg it across the ice but stopped for the briefest second to look at Alice and at Hamish and back to Alice again, to try to figure out what exactly had just happened.

He couldn't figure it out but didn't fancy hanging around any longer. 'Thank you,' he whispered, and broke into a run. He ran as fast as he could, and did not stop until he'd reached the edge of the forest on the other side of the courtyard.

He was about to reach safety when Scathe glanced back and saw that Ruairi was not in his place on the podium.

Meanwhile the birds righted themselves and flew away.

Right or Left

‘Which way do we go? Right or left?’ Dani looked back into the tunnel and asked Granny who was coming up behind her. They had crawled a long way in the dark and were slowing with fatigue.

‘I can’t remember, let me sit and think for a minute,’ Granny said, breathing heavily. She took a steak and kidney pie out of her sock and took a bite out of it. She stared first at the fork in the cave tunnel that went right and then at the fork in the tunnel that went left.

‘Left!’ Granny said finally, handing half the steak and kidney pie to Dani.

‘Left, are you sure?’ Dani said.

Granny didn’t look sure, but she stood up and confidently said, ‘yes, left!’

Dani led the way again, taking the left fork in the cave, remembering to drop a little pink or violet or lemon or pale blue flower behind her every few moments.

‘There’s light, up ahead,’ Dani said. ‘You were right Granny; we’ve reached the end of the tunnel.’

‘Well done Dani, my dear, well done for leading us so excellently,’ Granny said. ‘Nearly there now, nearly there.’

Dani rounded a sharp bend in the tunnel. After spending so long in the darkness of the tunnel, she was instantly blinded by a sharp blast of sunlight. She groped her way forward and pushed out, feeling the icy twirl of the winter’s breeze.

Granny squeezed out next to her. Both felt relieved at having made it all the way through the mountain.

Then they heard a voice say, ‘Well lookie here! I do believe we literally have another ace in the hole. No, wait a minute. *Two* aces in the hole!’

Granny and Dani recognised Scathe’s voice at once and immediately made to dart back down underground. They were too late; the Faraway brothers grabbed them and pulled them all the way out of the tunnel.

Scathe clapped his hands together, threw his head back and emitted a loud cackling laugh.

‘Is that your evil laugh sir?’ Hamish Hjorvarth asked him quietly.

‘Yes,’ Scathe whispered to Hamish. ‘Is it good?’

‘Chilling, sir!’ Hamish said.

‘Wonderful,’ Scathe said, throwing back his head and cackling again. Scathe then turned to the other side of the courtyard and shouted, ‘If you do not come back here this instant, I will literally chop this girl and this woman into a thousand pieces and throw them off the cliff into the sea.’

‘Can I do some chopping? I haven’t done any chopping all day,’ Hamish put in quietly from the back.

Ruairi stopped in his tracks. He was close to the edge of the mountain, mere inches from the escape route Odin had told him about while they were together in the dungeon. He turned and looked back and was horrified to see Dani and Granny struggling against the smug looking Faraway brothers. He turned back to the gathering on the terrace. He was stricken and terrified for his sister and his great great great grandmother. He took a step towards the crowd but stopped short when he caught his big sister’s eye. She was mouthing something but he couldn’t quite make out what. He stopped and looked at her. She was pointing to the strips of reflective material that their mother had sewn onto the hems and sleeves of her winter coat and he instantly knew what she meant.

‘Mummy! What would Mummy tell us to do?’ And then Ruairi knew exactly what Dani was mouthing to him. She was thinking, and mouthing, and urging him, to ‘*Run Away!*’

He understood. He knew that that was what he absolutely should do. Scathe was not to be trusted; he had just proven that. Ruairi would be absolutely no use to Dani and Granny Miller if he was tied up and imprisoned with them, or worse, sacrificed at sundown.

Running away was the right thing to do, no doubt about it. He could go get help, he could try to find Mummy and get her to do something, he could try to rescue them himself even.

But Ruairi stood where he was, unable to leave. Every thought in his head screamed at him to Run Away. His mother had drilled safety and security lessons into him since birth. Odin had told him to be brave, Dani was signalling right now, right this minute, that the best thing for him to do was to Run Away.

But every instinct in his body kept him there, every muscle seemed to be pulling him back. He wanted to believe that Scathe would let his sister and his great great great great grandmother go if only he would come back across the ice. And he did not want to leave them with him.

This was the hardest decision Ruairi had ever had to make. And he couldn't make it quickly. He couldn't decide what to do. And so he stood on the edge of the ice in the crater at the top of Volcano Mount Violaceous.

He caught his big sister's eye again. Dani smiled at him, it was so good to see her. She stuck out her tongue at her brother and Ruairi beamed back at her. He would have laughed but he was afraid he might cry instead.

Ruairi made a decision. He stuck his tongue out at his sister, gave Granny Miller a big smile, looked at Scathe and made a salute over his head. He turned his back on them, walked purposefully towards the edge of the mountain. He jumped off the edge and was gone.

'Well, that was unexpected!' Scathe said.

'What do we do now sir?' Asgrim asked. 'We can't really perform the sacrifice if there's no one to sacrifice.'

'Wait! Let's give him a minute. I'm sure he'll be back in a minute,' Scathe said and they all sat down and waited. 'Any minute now,' Scathe said.

Tumble weed rolled by on the ice beside the Vikings. Crickets could be heard starting up their evening chorus nearby. The old man from the front bench leaned to the even older woman sitting next to him and said, 'I didn't know crickets could survive this far north.'

'I don't think he's coming back, my Liege,' Hamish said in a low voice.

‘That’s a bit of a blow,’ Scathe said. ‘Ok then, take the two of them to the dungeon until I figure out what’s to be done.’ Scathe turned to two of the five twins and said ‘you two, after the Boy King!’

The two twins ran across the ice, slipping a bit, falling a lot, after Ruairi.

‘It’s always bloody me,’ one of them muttered. ‘Hey you there, do this, you there, do that. I mean my name is *not* that hard to remember. And where’s the law against saying please! I ask you.’

‘You’re not worried about them being in the same place as, you know, the other prisoner?’ Asgrim asked the Jarl.

‘The old man is so out of it he doesn’t even know who he is,’ Scathe said, ‘and so there is literally no chance they’ll have the remotest clue that the stinking, emaciated, blubbering, drooling idiot in chains is Odin, Father of all of the Viking Gods.’

‘If you’re sure...’ Isdrab said.

‘Are you questioning me?’ Scathe said to Isdrab

‘Yes,’ Isdrab said. Scathe turned on him and gave him an injurious look. ‘I mean, no, no, I wouldn’t *dream* of it,’ Isdrab corrected.

‘I would literally eat your spleen for breakfast if you crossed me,’ Scathe said.

‘I have no doubt. I beg your forgiveness, my Lord,’ Isdrab said.

‘With a spoon,’ Scathe said.

‘I’ll take them down right away your Jarlship,’ Isdrab said and scurried off with his brother and their two prisoners.

‘The unfathomable impudence of indentured staff!’ Scathe said and strode away.

The dungeon

‘It’s in the corner,’ Hamish said to Dani as he was backing out of the dungeon behind Isdrab and Asgrim.

‘That’s the *loo*? You’re sure we can’t come upstairs for a minute? We promise not to escape,’ Dani said, crossing her fingers behind her back.

‘What is it with you royals and your weak bladders?’ Hamish said, and the doors squeaked closed behind him.

‘Well, it was worth a try,’ Dani said to Granny when the bolts were slammed shut on the other side of the dungeon doors, the key was turned in the lock, and the footsteps had retreated up the steps.

‘Yes it was. Pity it didn’t work,’ Granny said, looking around her. Granny and Dani heard a noise coming from the back of the cave. They took a cautious few steps towards the noise and saw a filthy old man lying on the floor, bound in chains.

It took a minute for Granny’s eyes to become accustomed to the dim light in the cave. When she recognised the old man at once as her childhood friend Eoin Lerwick, she ran to him.

‘Eoin, Eoin, can you hear me, are you ok?’ Granny asked, near to tears.

‘Are they gone?’ he whispered weakly.

Granny turned around to make sure. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘we’re alone.’

‘Oh well in that case,’ the man said more loudly and stood up. He changed right before their eyes. Suddenly, the frail, filthy old man on the floor, as he stood up straight, became a little stronger looking, and a little cleaner looking, and a little younger looking. He didn’t look exactly strong, or clean, or young, but he looked a lot better than he had a minute earlier. He smiled broadly, took Granny Miller in his arms and squeezed her tight in a big hug.

Granny and Dani were both speechless, for the first time all day. Granny desperately reached around in her clothing for something to snack on.

‘I’m fine now,’ Eoin said. ‘I’ve been trapped here for many many years. Silas Scathe altered everyone’s memory so no one knows how long I’ve been gone. Most people think they saw me a day or two ago but can’t remember for sure.’

‘That’s exactly right,’ Granny Miller said. ‘We went to look for you yesterday and when you weren’t there I tried to remember when last I’d seen you, and I couldn’t. I couldn’t picture any time I’d seen you in many many years. And at the same time, I couldn’t remember not seeing you.’

‘It was quite a clever trick he played,’ Eoin said.

‘That evil, scheming old...’ Dani said.

‘Scathe discovered very early on that I was Odin,’ Eoin continued.

‘I’m sorry, what now?’ Dani said. ‘For a second there it sounded like you said you were Odin. You mean Eoin, right?’

Odin smiled at Dani.

Dani’s jaw dropped. ‘You’re Odin?’ she said.

‘Scathe devised plan after plan,’ Odin continued, ‘to strip me of my powers and hold me prisoner. He kept failing, but finally he located some of my most prized treasures, those that aren’t buried in the secret treasury. It took him centuries to locate and master them, but finally he hit upon a plan that worked.’

‘He’s looking for the treasure you see, that’s what gets him up in the morning. He could not force me to tell him where it was or how to get it. So, he kept me locked up here. He is a very patient man. He decided to wait until I gave in and told him my secrets, or until he could find the treasure himself.’

‘Then and only then would he allow himself the pleasure of killing me. He’s afraid to kill me now in case he needs me later.’

‘But you don’t seem that weak,’ Dani said. ‘How could he keep you here that long against your will?’

Odin showed them a glowing purple stone, 'Ruairi brought this to me this morning. Up until that moment, I was crippled and powerless. My powers haven't been restored, by any means, but the strength of Scathe's spells is weakening. I'll tell you all about it later, we don't have time to go into it now, but Scathe was able to use my own treasures and my own powers against me for just a few moments one Christmas Eve. He captured me, placed weakening spells and charms on me, and locked me up here. And I've been here ever since. Now I've been released from the spells, I can begin to recover my strength, and my powers.

'I had my ravens Thought and Memory leave this stone in your path last night trusting one of you would come across it. It is the Violaceous Amethyst. It protected you from the intoxication of the Christmas Eve changings. That is why you, and you alone, are not Vikings today. Ruairi didn't know what it was of course, it can hide itself in plain sight. Look,' and the Violaceous Amethyst turned changed in Odin's hand, as they looked. One minute it was a stunning purple, and the next it was clear, like glass.

'It becomes a hue of Violaceous,' Odin said, as it turned purple once more, 'when close to the source of its power, the embers of the volcano beneath the mountain. By bringing it here to me, Ruairi has freed me after all these years. It has made most of Scathe's spells against me ineffectual at last.'

'So can we get out of here?' Dani said.

Odin looked at Granny and at Dani and smiled once again. 'Yes, we can,' he said. 'I heard you just now, you know, wondering whether to go right or left.'

'You did?' Granny and Dani asked together.

'Yes,' Odin said, 'if you'd gone right you would have come to a dead end, but the dead end would have been a thin layer of rock, look,' and Odin went to the back of the cave and put his hand on the wall. 'I called out but you didn't hear me. I will need your help, but we should be able to break through this part of the wall into the tunnel.'

The wall was indeed very thin at that spot and the three of them were able to create a hole big enough to crawl through.

‘Go first, I’m right behind you, don’t stop,’ Odin said.

‘Where are you going?’ Dani asked.

‘I have something to take care of first, but I’m right behind you,’ Odin said. ‘I’ll meet you in the village. Be careful, Scathe is certain to have lots of guards patrolling the island.’

Dani and Granny went back down the tunnel following the little flowers they had dropped on the way up. They went all the way down the slope to the cave across the dune from the Beach of Bewilderment. Odin went the other way, taking the left that Granny and Dani had taken a short while earlier.

The way down was much faster than the way up. Dani and Granny made it in double time. The flowers that Dani and Granny had dropped led them easily to the shrubbery at the mouth of the cave just beyond the beach. Finally they emerged into the dimming light of late afternoon and stood up, delighted to be free.

‘Seize them!’ Scathe said as the five twins rushed forwards and grabbed Dani and Granny.

‘Bring them back to the dungeon. You there! Block up the hole will you,’ Scathe said to the one of the five twins who was trying to hide behind one of his brothers. The twin looked away and tried to pretend he hadn’t heard. When he turned back everyone was looking at him.

‘You there,’ Scathe said again and pointed at the twin. He then swooped his arm around and pointed into the tunnel.

‘Bloody typical, me *again!*’ he muttered to himself. ‘Yes sir?’ he said to Scathe.

‘Go back in there and fetch the old man,’ Scathe said to him. ‘He’s so dodderly and weak he’s probably only half way down by now.’

The fifth twin got down on all fours and edged himself into the tunnel.

‘It’s quite interesting,’ Scathe said, turning to look at Granny and Dani but addressing his men, ‘that they would charge to their own freedom and leave a poor old man to struggle on his own. So selfish.’

‘He was slowing us down,’ Dani said.

‘The unfathomable mystery of selfish royalty,’ Scathe said.

Ruairi the Brave

Ruairi scrambled down the side of Volcano Mount Violaceous. There was a narrow path that wound its way around the side of the cliffs on the steep side and led safely down to the main road and to the village. Ruairi ran down the path, making sure to kick up a lot of dust and to leave as many tracks as he could in the little patches of melting snow. After about a hundred yards, he turned back, and carefully walked back up beside the path, stepping on brush and rocks and leaving the snow alone. He hid behind a boulder and caught his breath.

Two of the airport twins came sliding down the side of the hill while Ruairi watched. They looked around, spotted the cloud of dust on the path, and Ruairi's footprints in the snow on the path. They bolted down the path, certain they were in hot pursuit of the escaped prisoner.

Ruairi sat and took stock. He started walking down the mountain, in the opposite direction. That side of the mountain was not as steep as the way the twins had gone; it cambered gently downwards. There was no path however, so Ruairi's progress was much slower than he would have liked. While he was trekking down the mountain, Ruairi took his cell phone out of his pocket and looked at it. There was plenty of battery power left, he had charged it over night. The signal was also very strong. He dialled his Mother's number first and hoped she would answer and that he'd be able to get through to her even though she was a Viking now. But the phone just rang and rang.

He tried his Father next but it went straight to voicemail. He thought it likely that Daddy was in the air trying to get to Yondersaay for Christmas day and had switched his phone off. It didn't even occur to him that it had gotten wet and died when Daddy waded to shore from an illegal Japanese tarantulafish hunting vessel that morning.

Ruairi rang Dani's number but he got a network connection error. He tried again. Same thing. This gave Ruairi hope. He knew Dani's phone was fully charged; they had charged their phones together over night. And he knew there was good coverage on the island.

So she must be in the dungeon, then. There was no network coverage in the dungeon. Dani and Granny must still be alive, and in the dungeon.

Ruairi changed his course immediately. He stopped heading down the mountain. Instead, he wound his way around, back to the front entrance of Violaceous Hall.

Ruairi reached the front entrance of Violaceous Hall in very good time considering the precariousness of climbing around the rocky cliff of a volcanic mountain, but he didn't go straight in. He crouched down and watched the entrance and tried to come up with other options.

He couldn't think of any other options. He didn't know who he could find who would help him. Everyone on the island thought that they were a Viking and that he was their sworn enemy. It was unlikely the police or the fire service had non-Vikings staffing their phones, so it would do no good to call them.

He thought about going down the mountain to find Mummy, persuade her she was not a Viking, bring her back up here, break in, and save Granny and Dani. But he might not be able to find Mummy, or convince her, or bring her back here in time. Scathe might have killed them by then.

So he thought the only thing for it was to break in when no one was looking, distract the guards and free them.

The Break In

There was a lot of activity at the front entrance to Violaceous Hall. Scathe seemed to have quite a large staff, and there were lots of messengers and delivery people coming and going. Everyone seemed to be preparing for the Great Sacrificial Yuletide Festival. Lots of food was being carried out of the castle in the direction of the harbour. Some men came out lugging spare chairs and benches and took these down the path as well.

Ruairi was conspicuously dressed so decided not to try to blend in with the crowd. Instead, he waited for the right moment. Three men came out of the castle carrying a large table and headed down the path towards the village. The great doors of Violaceous Hall were swinging closed behind them. No one was coming up the path, no one was going into the castle, and no one else seemed to be coming out. Just before the doors slammed shut, Ruairi darted forward and squeezed himself through.

He had already been inside the great hall and knew his way around. He also knew that there were giant statues of Viking Gods on either side of the great doors and dotted around the hall. He slid behind one as soon as he entered the hall and hid himself from view. There were very few people around now, although he could hear footsteps and voices deeper inside the castle.

Ruairi took a deep breath, steeled himself, and when he was sure no one was looking, he ran all the way across the Great Hall as quickly and as quietly as he could and ducked down the dungeon stairs.

Ruairi padded silently down the stairs, he was glad his shoes had rubber soles. As he neared the bottom of the staircase, he slowed and listened. There didn't seem to be anyone there, there wasn't a sound. He paused on the lowest step and peered out of the stairwell. He could see the dungeon door. There was nobody guarding it. He waited a few minutes to make sure there were no figures hiding in the shadows. When he was sure he was alone, he crept towards the dungeon door. There was a very heavy bolt slung across it. Ruairi couldn't lift it,

but eventually he managed to lever one end up and slide it off the brackets onto the floor. He stood it up and propped it against the wall.

There was a large lock in the middle of the door and Ruairi did not know how he was going to manage to pick it. He didn't have his penknife anymore, he'd left it inside the dungeon with Odin. He looked around for something to work with, a stick or a poker or something like that. He was about to head back up the stairs to look for something to help him in the great hall, when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, dangling from a thick string, a few feet away from the door, a very large, very rusty key.

Ruairi got the key down from its hook and tried it in the lock. It turned. Ruairi pushed the dungeon doors open, careful to go slowly to avoid creaking. He immediately saw Dani standing a few feet away from him. Granny was with her. He beamed at them, but they did not smile back.

'Ruairi, RUN!' Dani shouted. But it was too late. Scathe and the Faraway brothers emerged from the shadows behind Dani. Ruairi turned to run but Hamish Hjordvarth loomed large in the doorway and blocked his path. Hamish put his enormous hand on Ruairi's shoulder and held him tight.

The Great Sacrificial Yuletide Festival

All the Islanders on Yondersaay gathered in the harbour in anticipation of the Great Sacrificial Yuletide Festival. Excitement had been building all day, and at last everything was ready. The Islanders had been cooking and organising dances, skits, and other amusements since the morning. The festivities were finally about to begin.

The dimming light and the approaching evening lent a relaxed and casual atmosphere to the celebrations. Groups of Vikings sped about lighting hundreds of torches and sticking them into the sand to illuminate the gathering. Others took Roasted animals off their spits to carve and dress the meat. Bubbling cauldrons of stews and soups were stirred, and yet more mead was carted to the shore. People sang and danced and all were in very high spirits.

A little blue car a little way off along the shore was burning brightly and some Vikings were dancing around it. Children were roasting marshmallows in the flames. The alarm, no longer piercing or a cause for concern gave a final whinny and fizzled to silence.

The pyre, piled high, was ready to be set alight; a longship was resting atop it, awaiting ceremonial torching. The dragon's head at the prow rose haughtily into the air and bore a ferocious gaze down on the assembling Vikings. The deck bowed out from the dragon's neck and tightened into a tail at the stern. The main feature aboard the longship was its towering mast. Littered about the foot of the mast was a tidy pile of kindling.

Tied securely to the mast, but attempting to get away nonetheless, were a brave copper-haired boy, a defiant blue-eyed girl, and a resistant great great great grandmother.

Scathe approached the podium that had been erected beside the pyre. He had a lit torch in his hand.

'Good evening, Yondersaanians!' Scathe shouted above the din of the revelling crowd. The Islanders approached the podium and cheered.

'And welcome to Yondersaay's Annual Great Sacrificial Yuletide Festival!' The crowd cheered again. 'This year,' Scathe said, 'we have a real live genuine sacrifice to look forward to as part of the festivities. With your help, wonderful Yondersaanians, I, Jarl Silas Scathe, at last,

after many years of non-stop devotion to the cause, have finally captured the insidious, the evil, the conniving, Boy King of Denmark!’

The crowd whooped and cheered.

‘He and his accomplices,’ and the Jarl waved his lit torch backwards in the direction of the prisoners tied to the mast of the longship, ‘will be sacrificed by the final rays of the sun, here on our very own pyre, in a longship created today for the occasion.

‘Once the charred remains of these loathsome creatures have been thrown to the waves, and swallowed by the sea, I predict that our God King, Odin himself, will finally be returned to us.’

The crowd went wild, they whooped and cheered and flung each other around in a wild dance. Dani, Ruairi, and Granny Miller were at least heartened to hear that they had a few more minutes left to effect an escape. The sun was setting but probably wouldn’t fully set for at least another twenty minutes or so, maybe more. They struggled with the ropes at their hands, chests, and feet.

‘Ruairi, do you have your penknife? I think I can reach into your pocket from here,’ Dani said.

‘No, I gave it to Odin in the dungeon. I thought he could get his chains off with it,’ Ruairi said.

‘He did,’ Granny said. ‘When we were thrown in the dungeon his chains were off.’

‘Do you know where your penknife is, Dani?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Yes, Ruairi, as a matter of fact, I do,’ Dani said. ‘Right at this very moment, my penknife is in a pile with lots of other useful bits of equipment, in the cupboard under the stairs in Gargle View Cottage.’

‘That’s a stupid place for it Dani,’ Ruairi said. He was about to give out to her but he glanced around the mast and saw her giving the evil eye to Granny. Granny was a little red in the face. So Ruairi decided to drop it.

‘Ok, well, never mind that,’ Ruairi said. ‘Where is Odin now?’

‘Last we saw of him he was going the opposite way to us in the tunnel that led through the mountain from the dungeon to the beach,’ Dani said.

‘Why was he doing that?’ Ruairi asked.

‘He didn’t tell us why, Ruairi,’ Granny said, ‘but Odin will have his reasons. He may not even know we’re in trouble. We said we’d meet him in the village.’

‘Well, he’d better figure it out soon,’ Dani mumbled, looking towards the sun getting ever lower behind the mountain.

‘And now,’ Scathe shouted out to the crowd from his podium, ‘let the Great Sacrificial Yuletide Festival begin.’

‘Hey!’ Dani called out, ‘you said we’d be sacrificed by the final rays of the sun, the *final rays of the sun!* There are plenty rays of the sun left, we’re nowhere near the final ones yet.’

‘Silence, impudent traitress! When I said *the final rays of the sun*, I meant *whenever the hell I feel like it*. And I feel like it now,’ Scathe said. As he spoke Ruairi noticed he was looking in their direction, but he wasn’t looking at them. He was looking past them. Ruairi turned his head around as far as he could and out of the corner of his eye, he could dimly make out, a long way off, two black shadows swooping down the side of the mountain towards the shore. He elbowed Granny and Dani. They also looked back towards the mountain.

‘Thought and Memory,’ Granny whispered. ‘Odin’s coming!’

Granny turned to face Scathe. She looked him in the eye. She saw him try to project an air of supremely confident arrogance. Behind the bravado, she caught a flicker of apprehension.

‘He’s coming to rescue us,’ Granny said, and Dani and Ruairi knew it to be true. They turned back to see how Scathe was taking the imminent arrival of Odin’s ravens, but they didn’t see Scathe, all they saw was his quick turn and thrust, as, with all his might, he flung his lit torch right at them on the deck of the longship. The torch landed with a thump less than three feet from the mast and rolled towards them. It finally came to a stop mere inches from the

kindling. The flame didn't go out. Neither, however, did it threaten to light the kindling that was all around the mast of the boat, at the feet of the prisoners.

Dani and Ruairi let out a big sigh of relief. 'Phew!' Ruairi said.

'What happens now? Will someone have to climb in here and move it to the bottom of the mast?'

Granny did not answer. Dani and Ruairi looked at her. When they saw her face, the relief they had felt moments earlier drained away. Granny was not looking at the lit torch, mere inches away from them on the deck of the boat. She was not looking at the nearing Ravens, nor even at Silas Scathe. Granny was looking out over the side of the longship towards the celebrating Yondersaanians, her life-long friends and acquaintances, who were approaching the longship in even lines, singing and dancing a looping dance. Hundreds of them.

They each held a lit torch.

The villagers seemed to know exactly what to do. They sang a song of defiance and war while approaching and retreating in turn, dancing forward, skipping back, spinning each other around.

At the end of the first chorus, a line of Vikings surged forwards from the back line, their torches held high in the air, singing at full volume and with a fervour to terrify any enemy, 'Up HellyAa, Up HellyAa, I'm a Viking, the sea's the place for me. Up HellyAa.' They stopped abruptly at the edge of the pyre and, as one, threw their lit torches forwards onto the longship.

'I don't like this dance,' Dani said.

'I used to love it as a child,' Granny said. 'Of course, nobody was ever burned alive when *we* did it.'

Most of the torches glanced off the side of the boat and landed on the pyre, which took light very easily. One or two made it to the deck of the longship and burned softly there. One landed on the kindling close to Ruairi's feet. He stamped and kicked at the torch and the kindling around it until the flame went out.

He turned his attention back to the villagers who were beginning the second verse of their song. A new wave of Vikings was storming forwards from the back line, ready to hurl their torches at the enemies tied to the mast of the longship.

Just as they were about to fling, a stooped old man, back gnarled and twisted, head bent towards the ground, shuffled to the front of the group. He picked his way slowly through the crowd with the aid of a large bejewelled staff. He climbed onto the pyre and stood amid the rising flames. The villagers stopped in their tracks as soon as they saw the old man approach and watched his progress.

There was something very familiar about him, about the way he carried himself, and about his staff. The old man straightened himself, rose to his full height, and raised his arms. Two ravens came to rest on his shoulders.

That was all it took. The villagers instantly got down on their knees. The Islanders, every last one of them, recognised the old man on the pyre amid the rising flames as their long lost, now-returned, Viking God Odin. The crowd was awed and a silence fell upon the gathering.

‘Odin has returned!’ Scathe announced, raising his robed arms to the skies. Before Odin had a chance to speak, he clambered quickly to where Odin was and spoke softly in his ear. All the while, Scathe smiled and nodded, not letting the Islanders know that he was anything other than overjoyed at the return of the God of all the Vikings.

‘There is nothing you can do old man,’ Scathe said quietly to Odin, so that only the God could hear. ‘I know you are weak, and you know I am strong. There is nothing, literally nothing stopping me from taking these people away,’ and Scathe cast a glance back at the prisoners on the mast, ‘and killing them privately. Indeed, there’s nothing to stop me from simply waiting until tomorrow. You will have no one to help you then, because no one will remember who you are, or who they are. Not even them.’

‘You may appear strong, but I know you are not. I can tell that you have not regained your powers. My dear Odin, you must accept defeat. Have your party, bask in the adoration of

your subjects, but know that these people,' and he nodded towards the Millers once more, 'are finished. I will come back first thing in the morning and finish them myself.'

'That won't be necessary,' Odin said.

'Is that a fact?' Scathe said scornfully.

'I will make a deal with you, Mr. Scathe,' Odin continued. 'I know what you want and I am finally prepared to let you have it.'

'You are going to let me become Lord and Master of all of Yondersaay?'

'No,' Odin said and began to make his way off the pyre. Scathe was very happy to follow, the flames had spread around them and were quite hot. The Millers were still trying to free themselves from the mast of the longship. The villagers at least had stopped their torch-throwing dance and instead had begun cheering Odin in loud whoops and were dancing and singing with great jollity all around. 'I don't have the power to do that, there are two ways and two ways alone you can become Lord and Master of all of Yondersaay. You know that,' Odin continued. 'Besides, I don't believe that's what you really want.'

'In truth, it is not,' Scathe said, smiling and bowing to any Islanders that happened to pass close by.

'It is my belief that you cannot wait to leave Yondersaay,' Odin said. 'All that is stopping you is the treasure. My treasure. You want the treasure and once you have it in your possession, you'll leave and never come back. Correct me if I am mistaken.'

'You are very perceptive, old man. That is exactly what I want. I want nothing more than to get off this godforsaken rock. And the treasure of course,' Scathe said.

'I will take you to the treasure,' Odin said. And here Scathe stopped and looked him directly in the face, watching for signs of trickery. 'I will show you how to retrieve it,' Odin said. 'I shall allow you to retrieve it and to leave the island with it. In return, you must release your prisoners, and you must leave the island and never return.'

'These three must mean quite a lot to you,' Scathe said.

‘Yes, they do,’ Odin said. ‘They are Yondersaanians and it is my duty to protect all who are of this island.’

‘I agree to your trade,’ Scathe said. ‘The treasure for the prisoners, and my departure. Take me to the treasures now. Isdrab, Asgrim, remove the prisoners from the longship. They are coming with us.’

The Faraway Farm brothers scrambled expertly up the side of the longship and released the Millers from the mast. They helped them off the longship and bound their hands once more.

‘What about this lot?’ Scathe asked, motioning to the villagers.

Odin turned to the Yondersaanians and addressed them. ‘My fellow Vikings, I am delighted to have come home to you on the night of our annual festivities. I shall return forthwith to celebrate this night with you. Resume your dancing, commence your feasting, the night has barely begun. Enjoy it to the fullest.’

The Yondersaanians went back to their singing torch-throwing dance and the festivities began in earnest.

While they were thus occupied, Odin led Scathe, the Millers, Hamish, the Faraway brothers and some more of Scathe’s men up the hill and through the centre of the village.

At the brow of the hill, the little group turned off towards the Crimson Forest. Odin stopped and looked back towards the harbour. Everyone in the small group paused to follow Odin’s gaze. From that vantage point, they could see that the majestic dragon-headed longship was fully ablaze atop the pyre in the harbour. In the glow of the flames, and by the light of the myriad torches in the sands of the shore, the small party at the top of the village could clearly make out the Viking inhabitants of Yondersaay, the enchanted island in the middle of the north most seas, enjoying the night of their lives.

The party turned away from the harbour and kept on. Odin stopped walking when he reached the taut old oak in the hollow of the Crimson Forest.

‘Hello old friend,’ Odin said to the tree.

‘Welcome back, your Godship. I hope yill be telling me ya won’t be staying away so long ever again,’ Rarelief said to Odin. ‘And hello again, you two,’ he said to Dani and Granny Miller.

‘I hope so, Rarelief,’ Odin said.

‘The treasure is not here, Odin,’ Scathe said. ‘I hate to interrupt this touching little reunion, but the treasure is literally *not here!* And you will not convince me that it is. I have searched this forest inch by inch a hundred times over. I have certainly looked under this tree. The treasure is not here.’

‘The treasure is here, Mr. Scathe,’ Odin said. ‘You were just never permitted to attain it before.’

‘If you are so confident, you won’t mind if I have my men dig while we stand here. You can prove it to me,’ Scathe said.

‘That will not work,’ Odin said. ‘The owner of each part of the treasure, should he have need of it before the final battle in Valhalla, may remove it from its burying place. But he must do it in a very particular way. The owner need not be the man who placed the treasure in its hiding place. Another man could claim it as his own. But whosoever removes the treasure from the earth, must do so himself. Therefore, Mr. Scathe, you must dig out the treasure yourself, you cannot ask another to do it for you.’

‘You there, give me your spade!’ Scathe said to one of the airport twins.

Odin shook his head. ‘That will not be adequate,’ he said. ‘The owner of the treasure, to release it from its underground haven, must have as his tools, the battle-axe of a warrior, one that has seen battle and bloodshed, and a spade of wooden making.’

‘So I must go away and get these and come back?’ Scathe sounded sceptical.

‘Yes,’ Odin said simply.

‘What kind of a bumbling idiotic fool do you take me for? Not on your life am I falling for that,’ Scathe said. ‘You’ll move the treasure when I’m gone. Or you’ll make me forget where it is. I’ve raked through this entire area a hundred times before and have never even seen

the treasure, never mind touched or retrieved any. How do I know you told me the truth about the implements, or that you won't move the treasure, or the tree?'

Odin turned to Scathe and said with a resignation that convinced all who heard him of his truthfulness, 'I swear an oath upon the souls of all the Viking men awaiting their final battle in Valhalla that I have told you the truth about the location of the treasure and how to retrieve it.'

'Don't do it, Odin,' Ruairi said quietly.

'I swear an oath upon the souls of all the Viking men awaiting their final battle in Valhalla,' Odin continued, 'that I will not disturb the treasure or the tree in any manner, nor will I have either of them moved or disturbed in any way by another.'

'I swear an oath upon the souls of all the Viking men awaiting their final battle in Valhalla that I will not alter your memory of these events,' and Odin paused and looked at the gathered men.

'In fact, Mr. Scathe, I will assist you in your recollections.' And at this Odin lifted the hem of Scathe's purple robes and tore a long stretch of material from around the bottom.

'I will wrap this purple ribbon around this tree so there can be no forgetting. I will tie it tightly so it cannot float away. I will let it flutter gently in the breeze while it serves as a reminder to you. Are you satisfied?' Odin said.

Scathe looked into Odin's face and saw no reason to doubt him. Scathe did not like the old man; he did not respect or admire him. But he did trust him. He did believe he could take him at his word. 'I am satisfied,' he said at last.

'So you will let these people go?' Odin said.

'I will,' Scathe said. 'Men, take the prisoners back to the harbour. Be careful to keep them there in full view until dawn breaks over the waves. Keep them safe, do not harm them, allow them to partake of nourishment. But do not, under any circumstances, release them before the sun rises.'

Asgrim and Isdrab turned to the Millers and pushed them. They motioned them back up the hill towards the village.

Scathe turned to face Odin and said to Hamish, 'seize him.'

Hamish came forward and grabbed Odin by the shoulders. The rest of Scathe's men surrounded Odin.

'No!' Ruairi called out, as he was being led towards the village. 'You made a deal!'

'I made a deal for your lives, Boy King, not for his,' Scathe said without even looking at him.

Dani, Ruairi and Granny struggled against the brothers as they were dragged away from the forest. It was no use, they were borne forcefully on, there was no way to come to Odin's aid.

Odin turned to the Millers and said, 'grieve not, it is the correct time, I am prepared for this. Go and be safe, and think not that I suffer.'

'It does not matter,' Scathe said. 'The sun is about to set, the new day is mere hours away, and when the sun rises all that has happened today will have disappeared from their memories. I am the only one who will remember. The only one. And I will savour this moment for the rest of my days.'

Granny Miller, Dani and Ruairi, reached the brow of the hill which turns into the high street. They stopped and looked back at the dimming forest. The Faraway brothers allowed them this moment, there was nothing they could do from here. The final rays of the setting sun allowed the Millers a view of Silas Scathe forcing Odin onto his knees. They watched as Scathe stood above him. Scathe spoke to him but what he said could not be heard.

Thought and Memory clung helplessly close to Odin while Jarl Silas Scathe took his sword from underneath his ceremonial robes and plunged its long blade deep into Odin's side.

Ruairi noticed that Hamish Hjorvarth, who had been seeking violent combat all day, who had been itching to fight, had turned his head away at the final moment. He did not look back again.

Odin's lifeless body fell forward onto the earth in front of Rarelief the Splendiferous. The oak cried a pitiful roar as he shed a blanket of radiant purple leaves onto the ground about his old Master and his dying ravens.

Scathe motioned to his men. They carried Odin's body out of the forest towards the mouth of the River Gargle. No one spoke.

Silas Scathe the Victorious walked through the dank bed of the Crimson Forest towards the castle built deep into the cold rock of Volcano Mount Violaceous. As the sky went black on this particular Christmas Eve on Yondersaay.

University of Cape Town

Home

Granny, Dani, and Ruairi Miller finally made it home, exhausted, in the early hours of Christmas morning. They had been released as the sun started to rise, and they stepped across the threshold of Gargle View Cottage just as the rays of the morning sun announced the new day to the village. They took off their coats, boots, hats, and gloves and hung them all up on the hooks in the hallway.

‘Let me have a look at it,’ Granny Miller said to Dani and took in her hand the pendant that could now be clearly seen hanging around Daniela’s neck.

‘You would never know,’ Dani said, ‘never in a million years, that this is the Violaceous Amethyst the legends speak of.’

‘Where did you get that?’ Ruairi asked.

‘Odin gave it to me before we left the dungeon, so that we wouldn’t be intoxicated by any spells of Scathe’s,’ Dani said.

‘And so we would be able to remember everything that happened to us, everything Scathe did,’ Granny said.

‘I’m not sure I want to remember what he did,’ Ruairi said.

‘Don’t say that, Ruairi. We have to remember so that he doesn’t get away with it,’ Granny said.

‘I suppose so,’ Ruairi said.

‘What’s that noise?’ Dani said and walked into the living room. Ruairi and Granny followed close behind and they were all delighted to see Mummy and Daddy waking from sleep. They were cuddled up together under what looked like a large sheepskin waistcoat.

Mummy and Daddy had gone home after the combat with Brokk and found Dani’s note from that morning. They had spent most of the day in Gargle View Cottage waiting for their children to come home. Worried about them, they had taken turns to venture out among the revelling Vikings and look for them. They had failed to find any sign of them all day. Mummy

and Daddy were overwhelmed with relief when they saw Dani and Ruairi finally walk in the door. Mummy started to cry as she hugged and kissed her children.

‘We’ve been so worried,’ Daddy said.

Dani and Ruairi hugged their parents, happy to find them both safe at home. Ruairi noticed that Mummy and Daddy were still wearing their Viking clothes.

‘Peellleeease, cover UP! My eyes! My eyes!’ he said, walking about with one hand over his eyes and the other out in front like a blind man. Dani giggled as Ruairi walked into a door. Mummy laughed through her tears. And then she blushed. She put an arm around Granny Miller as she led her family to the warmth of the Gargle View Cottage living room.

University of Cape Town

An ordinary every day Christmas morning

Early morning sunlight penetrated blinds and curtains and brought one islander after another out of their strange dreams of burning longships and yuletide sacrifices. Smells of frying bacon, sausages, and black and white pudding woke the rest.

It was a clear Christmas morning, bright and cold. A fresh smattering of snow concealed the final shreds of evidence that the day before had been anything other than an ordinary every day Christmas Eve.

The draper, as he did every Christmas morning, left his house early to collect his Mother from the far side of the island. Still half asleep, he had a splitting headache. The pain in his head surprised him no end; he had no idea what had caused it. To anyone else on the island over the age of eighteen, for that is the legal drinking age on Yondersaay, the headache would have been instantly recognisable as The Mother of All Hangovers. The draper being a teetotaler however was someone who had never knowingly swallowed a drop of alcohol, and was therefore utterly unfamiliar with the effects of over consumption. Or so he believed.

Thinking he might perhaps have developed a brain tumour overnight, he approached his car with care. There were other symptoms, he was thirsty, he smelled rank, he was hoarse - from all the drunken singing he would never remember - and he appeared to have spilled an entire kebab and chips down his front.

He took out his car keys as he walked down his garden path, before he reached his garden gate, as he normally did. He stopped a foot from the curb and leaned forward to put the key, as he normally did, in the lock of the driver's door. Usually at this point, his key would meet resistance in the form of a car lock and the draper would stop leaning forward. However, on this particular Christmas morning, there was no resistance. Because there was no car. The draper leaned further and further forward, all the time thinking only about his headache and the furry taste in his mouth, until his centre of gravity tipped irrevocably and he found himself falling flat, right-hand out, full on his face in the middle of Yondersaay high street.

He did not remember, of course, that the day before he had lifted his car over his head, with the help of a fair few of his Viking friends, had hauled it to the harbour and set it alight on the shore.

Hamish Sinclair, the butcher, woke up and went straight to his kitchen. Hamish was hungry. His kitchen, still shuttered, was quite dim. He stood in the light of the refrigerator and scratched his head. He couldn't understand what it was he was seeing. He closed the fridge and stood back. He opened it again. He hadn't been mistaken. His fridge was full of vegetables. Full of them. And fruit. They were bursting out of it. Hamish, still not fully awake, and more than a little confused, let the door swing open and he stood there looking, trying to figure it out.

As he stood there, a slender arm came from behind him, reached in and took out two oranges, an apple, a carrot, and something green that Hamish did not recognise.

Hamish turned to look at the person who had the arm.

'Smoothie?' Alice Cogle said, and smiled.

Hamish shrieked like schoolboy and recoiled in fright. And then he just stood there, staring. Alice moved to the kitchen counter and started preparing breakfast. She was wearing Hamish's shirt.

'Not yet,' he said eventually, looking her up and down. He came over and scooped her up in his arms. He kicked the fridge door closed, and Alice Cogle screeched and giggled as Hamish Sinclair, who believes real men eat only meat, and the occasional Cadbury's crème egg, kissed Alice Cogle, who believes meat, all meat, is murder, on the neck and carried her squirming and giggling into his bedroom.

'Hello! Hello! HELLO!!!' the fifth twin said when he woke up on Christmas morning. 'Is anybody there?' He looked all about him and could not for the life of him figure out how he had gotten himself here. The fifth twin was in a very dark cave-like tunnel. He didn't know it, but he was under Volcano Mount Violaceous, half way between the Beach of Bewilderment and

the top of the volcano. He looked around him, but it was very hard to see. Once his eyes were accustomed to the dim light he spotted a tiny blue flower a few feet down the slope from him. He crawled down and looked at it. A little bit further on was a tiny yellow flower, and beyond that was a teensy little lilac flower. The twin, on all fours, crawled down the hill and followed the colourful little flowers all the way into the light.

Finally, he made it clear of the tunnel into the bright Christmas morning. ‘How am I going to explain this at home?’ he said as he looked himself up and down and saw that he was dressed in what looked like girls’ strappy sandals, a leather mini-skirt, and a tasselled and fringed string vest.

University of Cape Town

The Millers

Dani and Ruairi could not stop talking to each other and to their parents. Dani told them all about Rarelief and the Tarantulafish and the whirlpool spitting them out. Ruairi told them about the Oracle handling bloody guts and then handing out sandwiches. Mummy could remember everything she had said and done as a Viking but was as shocked and surprised as her children were at what had happened to her on Christmas Eve. They were all talking loudly and animatedly, laughing at this or that. They were preparing the house for Christmas as they did so, finalising the decorating, arranging presents under the tree, getting the food ready. It was turning into a very nice Christmas morning indeed.

Granny Miller, try as she might, was not feeling the Christmas spirit. She listened and laughed here and there as her great great great great grandchildren re-enacted their adventures for their parents. But she did not feel up to talking herself. Granny Miller tried her best not to think of the boy she knew, the boy she had grown up with. She tried her hardest not to dwell on memories of her dear friend Eoin Lerwick who, it turns out was also Odin, the King of all the Viking Gods. Granny Miller knew he had made his sacrifice willingly, she knew he had fulfilled his purpose and could die peacefully. But she couldn't help herself. Eoin Lerwick entered Granny Miller's thoughts the same way he had entered her heart, irrevocably and without her even noticing. And he would remain in her heart for every day of her final years. She was deeply saddened by the fact that Odin was gone. She would miss him. And she would forever hold a little ball of anger in her for the treacherous Silas Scathe. If he should ever cross her path again...

Granny did her best to keep her profound sadness from the rest of her family. She knew how much they loved her and how hard they were trying to cheer her up on this Christmas morning. She smiled outwardly, and helped with the preparations. But when no one was looking, Granny moved away from the others and sat alone in the window that looked out onto the village. From the window seat, she idly watched her friends and neighbours go about their

Christmas morning business. It was clear they hadn't so much of an inkling about what had happened the day before.

'You miss Mr. Lerwick, don't you,' Dani had appeared beside Granny. Granny, forgetting to try to hide her sadness, looked into her face. She nodded. 'I do,' Granny Miller said. 'There is no doubting that it was his time, and that he went willingly. But his loss leaves an ache in my chest that I fear will linger for a long time.' Dani sat beside Granny and hugged her.

Ruairi came up beside Granny and Dani and stood behind them. 'Look Granny,' he said pointing into the sky, 'it's Thought and Memory!'

Dani and Granny jumped to their feet. It was true. Thought and Memory were fluttering in synchronised patterns all over the northern sky.

'They are part of Odin,' Dani said.

'They can't survive without him,' Ruairi said.

Granny Miller clutched her chest and felt the ache that had been building there disintegrate and disappear.

'He's alive,' she said. 'Odin's alive!'

Mr. Scathe

Silas Scathe woke up early on a crisp, clear Christmas morning. He was alone in his castle. All his men and all the Islanders had returned home to their families, their habitual lives. He could not be their Jarl for another year. The spell of Christmas Eve was broken.

Usually on Christmas morning this would make Scathe's stomach turn over a little, the realisation that it was all done with, all over for three hundred and sixty four more days. Usually on Christmas morning, he would have breakfast and go back to the village, blend in, and begin his nightly search for the buried treasure of Yondersaay all over again.

Usually, on Christmas morning. But not today. Because on this particular Christmas morning Scathe had bounded out of bed as cheery and optimistic as it was possible for him to be. Today was different. He, Silas Scathe, had single-handedly, indeed single-mindedly, defeated that despicable old fool Odin and had forced him to surrender his treasure. To him. Silas Scathe. The one and only. The Victorious!

Scathe took his espresso on the terrace. It was a beautiful morning. Something was different but Scathe couldn't put his finger on what exactly had changed. The sun was bright, if not warm, and the ice gave off a subtle purple hue. Scathe sipped his coffee, had a croissant, and went inside to get dressed in his ordinary everyday non-Viking clothes.

When he was ready to leave, he turned off all the lights and locked all the doors. He remembered to empty and unplug the fridge. As he was carrying out his chores Scathe was getting more and more excited thinking about the treasure that was finally his after all these years.

He gathered up his battle-axe and his spade, remembering that Odin had said they were crucial. How could he have been so foolish all these hundreds of years? How could he not have realised that the ancient Skalder's poems, which sang of using the battle-axes of warriors and spades of wooden construction in the uncovering of the earth's greatest treasures, applied to Odin's great haul?

Scathe closed the heavy front doors and took one last look at Violaceous Hall as he descended the mountain. He was singing to himself as he walked, not really looking around him. He was swinging his battle-axe, chopping the heads off flowers and shrubberies as he went, no longer pretending to be gentle and kind. He could not hear their cries of pain or protest anyway, it was no longer Christmas Eve; they no longer had a voice. Nor would they for another whole year.

And he'd be long gone by then.

Scathe decided to stroll along the Beach of Bewilderment one last time and to approach his treasure trove from the River Gargle. He ascended the dunes and crossed the bridge between the whirlpool and the waterfall. He sauntered up to where he remembered The Tree to be. The Tree he now knew as Rarelief the Splendiferous. The Tree with the purple leaves and the purple ribbon tied around it. The Tree with the treasure buried beneath.

Scathe approached the entrance to the Crimson Forest. The birds were very loud here today. Usually there was only such voluminous and various birdsong in his back garden. Where all the trees were. It struck him as a little odd.

He cast his mind back, before the sauntering and the strolling and the one last look and the locking up... He did not remember hearing birdsong when he drank his espresso or ate his croissant or cleared out and unplugged the fridge. He could not remember hearing it at all that morning. And when he had glanced out over his icy courtyard, he had seen the purple glint off the ground, and the peaks of the mountain, but something was wrong, something he hadn't quite been able to put his finger on.

Scathe stopped and looked ahead of him. He looked into the Crimson Forest.

His battle-axe dropped heavily to the ground and his spade fell beside it.

There in front of Silas Scathe was not one oak, but thousands of oaks. Not two elms but thousands of them. The forest was replete. It was living and thriving. All of his trees were there, right back where they had first been all those hundreds of years ago. Every tree that he

had had his men uproot and transport to his private courtyard in the topmost part of Volcano Mount Violaceous, was back, here, in The Crimson Forest.

All around were trees, encroaching onto the banks of the River Gargle, sidling halfway up the mountain, creeping forwards towards the village and backwards over the dunes to the sea. Densely packed; thousands and thousands of them.

Scathe dropped to his knees, flung back his head and opened his mouth. The scream that emanated from him came from such a deep and black place that it affected every single person on the island no matter where they were. Babies shivered, grown men wept.

It was so piercing and so pained that every single bird in the forest took flight in terror. Every last forest creature ran for cover.

The sound that emerged from the deepest, blackest place within Scathe came from him at the very moment, the very second he realised that something else was wrong.

Tied tightly so it could not float away, fluttering in the early morning breeze, one for every oak, every elm, every single visible tree in Yondersaay's Crimson Forest, was a purple ribbon. A purple ribbon on every tree. Literally.

THE END