

I

Boom. Lassie from the slums winds up in a castle. Ain't that a right old fairy tale? If I didn't know any better, I'd have done up my dreadlocks, worn a tiara, and called myself princess. Nah, screw that Disney malarkey. I'm just loving the Isle of Skye right now. This must be what being on holiday feels like. Though how would I know? Seeing as I've never done nothing posh like that.

Frances Cockburn wouldn't let me bring my fox, River, along. Her being a boss lady type, with a big ol' stick up her arse, who doesn't want me working in Scottish magic. She said no pets allowed on this particular jaunt, or some such jazz. It's a proper downer, but hey ho . . .

In terms of the day job, it's nose to the grindstone, 'cause I've been seconded to what we call the Hamster Squad. They're the admin gophers where I work. We're helping organize the Society of Sceptical Enquirers' biennial conference at Dunvegan Castle. That's real, important work right there. And it means little ol' me is mixing with the great and good of Scottish magic. But being me, I've also nabbed myself a wee ghostalking side hustle in Skye's village of Dunvegan, just for while we're here. The Society don't pay me nothing for my

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labouring, so I have to be creative. Inshallah, they'll turn my unpaid internship into a proper apprenticeship any day now. I flunked my last test on a technicality, so all I have to do is to take it again and I'm in, baby. But right now, the island's sea air smells like crisp banknotes to me, and I'm sat in a cottage with a couple in dire need of my skills.

'So, this here lassie be a real magician? We dinnae need none of that,' says the husband, Brodie Budge, all gruff like, tossing peat into the stove.

'I'm a registered ghostalker,' I correct him. Impersonating a real magician's a big offence.

'Still our shillings you want, right enough.' He sounds proper annoyed, but I can tell he's actually masking shame. Poverty does that to you. Better to lash out than admit you're hard up.

I give his partner Ellie a look. She's a wee mouse. Narrow face, long snout, hunched shoulders like she could disappear into that hole in the skirting board. Brodie's kinda the same, but more extreme 'cause he's got actual whiskers poking out round his cheeks. They're that kind of couple who've blended till they resemble each other. It's there in their body language and facial expressions, and a weird tic of flinching at random moments. Too much sorrow's written in their eyes too.

'I've been saving from the cleaning jobs I've been doing,' Ellie says, barely audibly. 'It's got tae be done.'

'If my boat hadnae sunk, I'd be good for it,' Brodie replies, softening.

'Ah ken. You survived. That's all that matters, love.'

‘I’m useless. Nae jobs to be had anywhere on this goddamned island.’

‘Dinnae be silly.’ Ellie reaches out and strokes his arm. ‘We’ll be alright.’

Folks out here lost everything during the Big Yin. A massive storm that was. The Hebrides were devastated and so was a huge slice of the west coast of Scotland. Fishermen like Brodie Budge lost their livelihoods as Mother Nature devoured their boats. There’ve even been news reports of debris from broken-up vessels washing up on beaches in Florida. Broke the camel’s back, that did. It was always lean times in the fishing trade anyway, with the way fish stocks were decimated round about the time of the Catastrophe when everything went to shit. Since then, people have been leaving the island of Skye like it was the nineteenth century all over again.

Still, Ellie asked me here to help them, so it is what it is. *Be a pro, Ropa, just like them suit and tie folks.*

Her and him live in this old shepherd’s cottage on the outskirts of the village. The whitewashed walls could do with some DIY. Walking in, I was also worried the slate would fall off the roof on top of my head. The room we’re in now is pretty glum, with the windows boarded up, and a solar lamp illuminating ‘cause the power’s gone again. Springs in the sofa poke my behind. Could do with some reupholstering – I’m sure these date from before them two were sprogs. There’s wires dangling out of a broken socket in the wall too. It’s definitely seen better days, but I still don’t see how this pair could afford a pad like this. Reckon one of them must have inherited it.

There's a pink teddy bear underneath the coffee table.

I can smell damp in the air and glance at the black mould painting *Guernica* on the walls. An almighty draught's blowing in from somewhere, cancelling out the fire's warmth.

'Morag said you could help us,' Ellie says with an air of desperation. Good ol' Morag. She's a good egg, my favourite of the staff at the castle, and has had my back since we got there. Her and me have been lounging in downtimes blethering about the myths and legends woven into the fabric of Skye. Half the time I don't know if she's spinning yarns or she believes these tales to be true.

'Sometimes it's best to leave things the way they are,' Brodie complains.

'I cannae sleep nights on account o' that awful racket. Then I have tae get oot each morning and work mysel tae the bone while you're moping and wallowing. I cannae take it anymore, Brodie. It's got tae stop, you hear?'

Ellie breaks away from him and storms off to the far side of the room, keeping her back to us. Brodies clenches his jaw and stays schtum. I'm beginning to regret taking on this gig. Dramarama. *Keep it pro, Ropa*, I tell myself. When emotions flare, I must be the grown-up in the room. Good thing is, I've got tons of practice dealing with my little sister's wild moods.

'How long's this been going on? The haunting?' I ask to bring them back firmly to the matter at hand.

'Couple of months,' Brodie replies.

'A year and some,' Ellie contradicts. 'Started a few weeks after Ava died. Christ, do yous even remember her?' she snaps at Brodie.

‘What kind of twisted question is that? She was my daughter too. My own flesh and bone.’

‘How often does it happen?’ I say quickly. I need them to stop bickering and stick to the facts.

‘Used tae be odd times. Once or twice a week, maybe. Now it’s every single night. I wake up tae hear the sound of my dead bairn wailing. And all I can think about is how I used tae hold her in my arms and rock her tae sleep at night.’

‘Both of you hear these sounds?’ I ask.

‘Aye. I’ve entered the nursery many times and seen the cot bed rocking back and forth all by itself,’ says Brodie. ‘But it’s nothing tae be afeard of. Ava’s soul is just here with us. Cannae you see that?’

‘Jesus Christ. Listen to yourself. It’s got tae stop,’ says Ellie.

Morag, who lined up this gig for me, didn’t tell me the couple weren’t in alignment. But I’ve seen it all. Not everyone who has a resident poltergeist wants it gone. There’s people who hold onto the souls of the dearly departed, not wanting to let go. My grandmother told me that kind of situation’s none too salubrious. Grief and growth go hand in scythe. Eventually, you do have to let go. Try telling that to those who’ve loved and lost, though. But I also know that the souls of babies don’t linger unless they’re held by force, by strong emotions. The well of sorrow’s a tough place to tread water in. But in the murky waters after loss, there are those spirits who aren’t in the light and who may try to move in. That’s when shit gets real dark. First, I have to work out which of these is going on here.

A piercing wail comes from upstairs, making Ellie jump.

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I feel a cold shiver run down my spine. It's horrible. A cry that sounds like torture. Nails on a blackboard. A wave of revulsion washes over me. I feel like throwing up but I'm not the sort to waste my tea like that. Ellie yells out and covers her ears, shutting her eyes tight as tears stream down her cheeks. But it's given me my answer.

I grab my backpack and unzip it pronto, pulling out my mbira. The metal keys shine, reflecting the candlelight, 'cause I gave it a good polish earlier. Even oiled the wooden keyboard too, so it looks real swank. I'm headed for the stairs when Brodie blocks my path.

'I cannae let you do this. That's my bairn you're wanting tae kill all over again. I cannae lose her twice, lassie.'

'That's not your daughter, pal,' I respond. The revulsion I feel tells me all I need to know. You don't think these things, your gut tells you in plain Shona and Scots.

'I ken the sound of her voice. Used tae wake me up many nights, changing nappies, feeding her, holding her till she slept in mine arms.' He holds out his hands, imploring. 'She's come back home.' Brodie tears his shirt off and shows bite marks around his nipples. The flesh there is purple-black with bruising. 'I've been breastfeeding ma baby like a father should.'

Fuck me.

I shake my head and administer the pill without sugar coating. His child had moved on long ago.

'The souls of babies don't linger here like those of adults can. Not even in the everyThere, just beyond our plane, whose sharp claws clasp tightly to our own world. In very rare cases

indeed they can be held back by another soul known to them. Only usually by a father or a mother. But you're both here, so this isn't the case. Your daughter ascended to the realm of the purest, a place of light and love where babies go. She isn't here anymore.'

'How can you be sure?'

'And how did you know how to find shoals of cod in the barren sea? It's my job to know,' I reply.

The wailing upstairs intensifies. A mix of hunger and anger, known to parents everywhere as the signal their baby is demanding to be fed. Even I feel its awful pull. The way it makes you want to go up to it and serve it. Soothe it. But listen closely and you'll hear something sinister in the notes, a timbre not quite right, the undertone of the damned. Once you hear it, you can't unpick it from the rest of the cries. It's what me and Ellie hear, but not this oaf.

'Listen, Brodie Budge, really listen to it,' I say.

My grandmother taught me the 'Song of Clarity' before I turned ten and I strum it now on the keys of my mbira. Softly and quietly, beneath the loud cries. It's not meant to overwhelm the noise. Instead, I insert the notes like a wedge between the blank spaces within the cries. Prising them apart gently. Stretching the sound out, bit by bit. Brodie freezes in shock, his face going blank. I keep playing those ancient notes passed down across generations. And as I do, with each passing moment, the gaps between the cries grow wider. Then in those spaces emerges something else, the scary sound of the choirs of the damned. Heavy metal. It's deafening. No baby cries like that.

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'Breast milk. Feed me sweet blood. Hungry,' it demands.

When Brodie's chin hits the floor, I stop playing and push him out of my way, heading up the stairs to the nursery. Ellie timidly follows, a few steps behind.

On the landing up top, I feel as if I've been plunged underwater.

Icy cold.

It's hard to breathe.

But I press on against the pressure front trying to push me back.

The cries grow louder and angrier with each step I take. The sound swells up and surrounds me like a stirred-up swarm of demon babies. It comes from under my feet. Behind me. Presses down from above. I feel it pound my insides like a heavy bassline. It freaks me out, like nothing I've ever encountered.

'It's nae been this bad before,' Ellie says, voice quivering.

I stay calm. Tell myself to focus. Then I hold out my right hand, muttering an incantation invoking the Anemoi, those Greek wind gods, to send an airwave, the shape of my palm, slamming into the door of the nursery, bursting it wide open. From within comes the sound of an angered hornets' nest as I stride inside.

'That's enough,' I say with Authority. This is MY realm. Earth belongs not to the spirits but to us beings of flesh.

A dark figure glowers from the white crib bed in the corner. The music box dangling above it cranks up and begins to play a distorted electronic lullaby. The carousel wheels within it house a menagerie of brightly coloured toy animals. Round

and round they go. Faster and faster. The wheel breaks and shoots off, forcing me to duck so it misses and hits the wall, spraying plastic toys everywhere. Holograms of green stars dance around the room. The weight of this dark energy is abominable. I'm overwhelmed by revulsion and loathing.

The spectre in the crib comes to the bars and holds them, its large yellow eyes staring defiantly out. It looks far more simian than human. Feels ancient and terrible.

'Breast milk. Feed me sweet blood. Hungry . . .'

'You are not supposed to be here.' I strum my mbira once more.

'And you look delicious. Let me feast on you, my sweet,' it says.

'The only thing you'll be feasting on is my boot up your backside.'

I play Musekiwa Chingodza's 'Kutema Musasa' furiously and drive it back against the wall to show my Authority. I must stamp this down quickly, as I do with all spirits who've come over to us from the other side. And I won't allow it to challenge me again. Gran warned me before I set off for Skye that this isle is littered with restless souls from bygone eras, desperately clinging onto the world of the living. There's been much suffering, destruction and death here, and many are angry they didn't have the lives they felt they should have had. This is clearly one of them.

'Don't hurt baby,' it pleads, pinned back by the vibrations of my melody.

Normally, I would bargain, but not today. I have no sympathy for evil spirits that torment grieving parents. Gran

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taught me that 'cause they've been gone for so long, they no longer feel anything except for the most extreme of emotions. They feed on fear and misery and become ever more malevolent along the way. It's like losing your sense of taste until the only thing you can feel are the hottest chillies 'cause they, at least, set off the pain receptors on your lips. That's better than nothing. Hauntings like this happen to satisfy the spirit's grotesque craving.

'Be on your way, never to return to this plane, nor have dealings with the living for ever more. Do this or I'll cast you out to the Other Place,' I say.

'Bargain with baby, please,' it replies.

'There'll be no bargain, no compromise. You will obey.'

'Obey baby must. Baby curses you,' it says, retreating further into the corner. Its yellow eyes fix on mine with menace.

'Off with you!'

I hammer my mbira's keys and drive the spirit through the wall, out into the darkness where it belongs. It desperately tries to grip onto this reality, but my power is too great. I've cut it off from the tether that held it to this world, so now it falls into the void.

By and by, the pressure recedes. Lightness returns, like a storm's lifted. I survey the nursery this ghost has desecrated. Brodie and Ellie had taken the little they had in this world and tried to make something magical for Ava. But they lost her in that very crib to something banally termed Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. SIDS sounds like a mate's name or something. It doesn't tell you what exactly happened to your

baby. You're just supposed to accept it as something scientific, even though it's a diagnosis that belongs more to quackery than anything. I take in the feature wall with cartoonish giraffes bounding west, the toys scattered about the floor, a soft baby blanket. The absence of one who'd been loved beyond all else has sucked the life out of this place. And into that vacuum stepped the spirit I've just vanquished.

It makes me feel mighty low. A real sadness that rips my heart apart.

Ellie snuffles behind me.

'Is it over?' she asks.

'You're free of it now and for ever more,' I reply. 'Gather up these toys and pack them away. Dismantle the crib and set it in storage. Paint these walls something neutral. Grieve. Then move on.' I say the words I think my grandmother would speak at a time like this. Giant boots to fill but I've got fair-sized trotters.

Ellie rushes up to me, grabs my hand and presses money into it. Just another day in the office for me, but I can't not feel this mother's pain. A year of this will have taken its toll on her nerves. Her hands are rough from labouring. Tears fill her eyes, and she trembles.

'You're going to be alright. You are strong,' I tell her. Words have great power. Through them we create reality.

She nods and I break away to pack my mbira, leaving her knelt before the empty crib, weeping silently. I know I should say something more to her, but I won't be here for the next steps. She'll have to find something within herself. Brodie's in the doorway and I signal for him to join his partner. He's

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ashen and shaking. The spirit had been messing with them both for a while. Now he's lost whatever diabolical hope it dangled.

'I dinnae ken what came over me.' His voice is filled with shame.

'Make sure Ellie's okay,' I say.

'Thank you, Ropa Moyo.'

I walk down the stairs alone, leaving them to face the five steps of grief together; the scab's been opened up again. I make for the door but before I go, I stop at the telephone table, and place the money Ellie gave me onto it. They need it more than I do – I know where I'll be getting mine.

II

There's neither dawn nor dusk on the Isle of Skye in autumn. Pale light from behind grey clouds is a mere punctuation mark in the lengthening sequence of nights. You lose your bearings. Not just in the sense of the hours marking the day, but your place in history altogether.

I'm an Edinburgher through and through. Wake me up blindfolded in Granton and I'll tell you the hour from the scent of the air. This is my first time ever outside the city proper. Like, not for a day trip, but actually spending time outside Edinburgh. Scary. I'm used to the rhythms of the city, the bustle and tussling that comes with it. Out here, everything's too quiet for my liking.

Where *is* everyone?

Something uncanny happens to you here.

When you arrive, your mind's racing, doing ninety miles an hour. And then at some point, click: it goes calm. A weight you didn't even know you were carrying's eased off your shoulders. Bless Buddha. Wish my gran and sis were here with me. I think they'd like it. River too, my vulpine compadre. The great outdoors would do her good. It sucks to be away from them but I'm corporate now, innit?

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My boots squelch as I approach the castle, having got into the grounds via one of the lesser-used entrances. Wet toes. Rains all the time out here, and when it's not, the ground bleeds water all day long. There's the smell of rotting things, mulch and compost, with fallen leaves and twigs carpeting the ground. The Isle of Skye's an old man badly in need of a dash of talc.

'Ropa, where have you been?' Cockburn asks, all brusque.

'I've been going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it,' I reply.

'I already told you, this is not a holiday. You are here to work. Try not to forget that. This shoddy behaviour will reflect on your internship evaluation.'

Frances Cockburn's a prick and she don't like me none. Great thing is, the feeling's mutual. But, unfortunately for me, I've been seconded to her chain gang to prep up for the conference being hosted on the island. Normally, I'm working direct under Sir Ian Callander, Scotland's answer to Mandrake the Magician, or otherwise known as the Secretary of the Society and Scotland's Discoverer General. Alas, I was shunted here as an extra pair of hands since the investigatory work I normally do for the General Discoveries Directorate ain't much needed here of all places. I thought it'd be a chilled gig but, man, was I wrong. Spent days lugging furniture about till my back was sore. Whatever happened to job descriptions and all that malarkey? Oh, that's right, trade unions were banned after the Catastrophe. No more bargaining, collective or otherwise; now you gotta do what the boss man tells you to do and haud yer wheesht.

‘Oh, there you are, Ropa. I need your help in the big tent,’ Carrie says, one of the Hamster Squad, toddling over with an almighty stack of boxes so high she can barely see where she’s going. ‘Give us a hand already.’

‘Go on,’ Cockburn says. ‘You need to keep a close eye on this one, Carrie. No slacking. The guests will be here soon, and everything should be ready.’

‘I’m on it.’

I grab a box and am amazed Carrie was lugging these solo down from the castle. So heavy. We make our way slowly down towards the jetty ‘cause the road’s all slippery. There’s an old sign about boat cruises for seal watching on one side of the road. Dunvegan Castle looms above us, perched upon a rock, masked by smirr that’s been going all morning. The light drizzle’s fine until it catches your eyelashes, half blinding you. Waves crash into the rock, spraying more water into the air. I’m losing my grip, half slipping and sliding, by the time we make it to the big tent opposite the Laundry Cottage on the grounds where some guests will be staying.

‘I see Cockburn’s busting your nuts again,’ Carrie says.

‘We were just teabagging.’

‘Language, please! The Society of Scrotum Enquirers expects its young ladies to be prim and proper,’ she says with a laugh. ‘No, seriously, we all get hell off Cockburn. Comes with the job. Tip from me to you, newbie, study your dossier and you might just survive this with your hymen intact.’

I groan. The dossier is this thick file with the photos and details of all the top magic practitioners attending the confer-

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ence. Sure, lanyards are a thing, and all the attendees will be displaying their names, but Cockburn insists the Hamster Squad, plus me, study everyone in the file. This is just so that in the morning you don't offer Earl Grey to Doctor Norwell who prefers lapsang souchong, which we happen to have 'procured specially' for him. We, the said Hamster Squad plus me, are here to cater to their every need. We have to anticipate, etc. So, I've had to learn tons of stuff, like where all the bathrooms are, and touristy information about nearby attractions in case anyone wants to go on an excursion. To sound knowledgeable about places I've not even been to see. We'll make reservations at the top restaurants on the island if any of the VIPs want to go. In addition, we also have to know the programming by heart. It's a lot to take in for a first-timer like me. Carrie and the others have done this a couple of times already – they're the young magicians who do the Society's admin at HQ in Edinburgh.

'Don't look so glum, Ropa. This is a great opportunity. Where else do you get to see so many leading magicians in one place?'

'—'

'A couple of years ago, we had a lad called Felix Erskine working with us. He caught the attention of *the* Craig Shoemaster, and now he's landed a gig making a mint in Glasgow. Can you imagine working for Shoemaster and Sons? That's why every fledgling magician wants to start at the Society. It plugs you in with all the big players in Scottish magic. You couldn't pay for those sorts of contacts . . . Put that box over there. No, behind the table. Abdul still hasn't

set up the sound system. The first guests arrive tonight and we're behind schedule.'

We've put in a week of work setting this place up. Doesn't feel like that was enough time, even with the help of the castle's own staff. It's a mad rush to the finish line now. Carrie told me it used to be easier when the castle had more of its own staff, but cutbacks . . .

She snaps her fingers in my face.

'Wake up, Ropa. Unstack those chairs and arrange them in rows,' Carrie orders. 'Where's your head at today?'

I'm a bit zombified after my late-night excursion banishing evil spirits.

'Dead yesterdays and unborn tomorrows. Why fret about it, if today be sweet, my darlings?'

quotes a man at the entrance to the tent. 'I think she needs a nice hot cuppa to set her straight. It's too early, even for me,' he continues.

He's short, portly and balding. To compensate for this follicular challenge, he wears a luxuriant moustache, greyed to match the goatee on his chin. He has piercing eyes, filled with mirth and mischief, and the bushiest eyebrows I've ever seen. The suit he has on is a big middle finger to the grey, gloomy weather, and our staid Society, looking like someone's poured a few packets of Skittles on it with its multicoloured polka dots. A matching tie and black shirt only serve to highlight the vivid colours. Muddy white loafers on his feet complete the look. I'd thought everyone here would be crusty and conservative, but not this guy.

'Hi, Esfandiar. You being here must mean the big boss is back?' Carrie says.

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‘Does it?’ he replies with a laugh. ‘I made my own way. He left me for his young intern! The scandal.’

Carrie laughs and cups her mouth, while giving me a wee side glance. I’m not in on this joke – I’ve never seen this bloke in my life.

‘Are you going to help us or just stand there?’

‘I’m not cut out for menial tasks, little dove. My hands are far too soft and my constitution too delicate. But today, and only today, I must steel myself, summon up the courage of the ancients, and see that Ropa Moyo here is dressed in the finest Callander tartan.’

‘What’s this about and who are you?’ I ask.

‘If you’d bothered to read the bloody dossier then you’d have known Esfandiar Soltani here is Sir Ian Callander’s husband,’ says Carrie with mock outrage.

‘And since you’re his apprentice, you are to wear his colours,’ he says, smiling widely. ‘Never mind the damned dossier, I am but a footnote in the great man’s entry.’

‘You’ll get your own full-page spread one day,’ Carrie says.

‘Unlikely, since I’m a third-rate practitioner, if I can be considered one at all. My parents forced me into magic, but I prefer other, more wholesome, pursuits. Still, I must make an appearance at these things, if only for form’s sake. Oh, Ropa, you’ll soon learn it gets dreadfully boring at events like this. I sincerely hope these dour magicians haven’t rubbed off on you yet. Carrie, find someone else to do your hewing and drawing, I am borrowing Ropa for a bit.’

Fancy that – my gaffer’s got a spouse, dour as he is. Chalk and cheese. I almost smile but wear my poker face instead.

Carrie tuts and pretends to make a fuss but I'm grateful for the escape. My fingers are freezing, and I was dreading the labouring today. Let's see what get-up this guy has in mind for me and then maybe I can sneak off for a nap after.

'Come straight back here when you're done,' Carrie says, seemingly reading my thoughts. Busted.

I follow Esfandiar Soltani out the tent and back onto the road, veering over the bridge above the burn, past the lavatories, onto a path through the woods. Some of the trees were broken during the Big Yin and trunks lie on the ground, roots sticking up. A voice whispers in the woods, tenderly talking to the plants, and I realize it's only Murdo the gardener in his overalls. Strange fellow, that one. He shrinks away from touch, won't shake no one's hand, but he's nice enough so long as you don't push him.

My poor toes get wet again. I'm not sure Esfandiar fares any better in those loafers he has on, not that he seems to care. He carries an air of leisure about him, one arm behind his back. The gentleman flaneur. You could easily picture him strolling down a promenade in Paris or browsing the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. He has a dreamish air. Head stuck somewhere in the clouds, feet barely touching the ground.

'So, what are you doing at the conference if you're not into these events?' I try to strike up conversation. Cosying up to the boss's better half can't hurt.

Esfandiar is startled. He frowns like I've offended him.

'*My friend, let's not think of tomorrow, but let's enjoy this fleeting moment of life,*' he replies, somewhat cryptically. 'Omar Khayyám,' he adds for clarification. 'The universe was

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composed in verse and remained so until man discovered maths and now all colour is gone, only ones and zeroes remain. How's your grandmother?'

'Fine, last I checked. You know her?' I'm proper surprised now.

'She's dear to me. But we've long since lost touch. Last I heard she was in seclusion, away from the problems of society. I'd love to share a glass of sherry and watch the sunset with her again one day . . . But enough of old people's woes. You must be bored.' There's sadness aplenty in his voice.

'No, I—'

'Go on, in you get. We don't have all day, darling. Well, we do, but you have work to do, and I'd much rather be idle, thank you very much.'

We enter through a wooden gate leading to the Keeper's Cottage, which is just a short walk from the castle. It's fenced off, separate, though still on part of the castle grounds which extend across the tarred road and beyond. Used to be that this place was the home of the grounds-keeper who looked after the castle, or something like that. It's in good nick and Callander's staying here for the duration of the conference. Haven't seen much of him since we arrived, though. He picked me up in his Bentley and packed me off on the electric minibus, along with Cockburn and the Hamster Squad. I spent most of the journey here sat by the window, watching the Highlands go by. Didn't see too many cows or sheep or crop for all that. It was a wasteland filled with forlorn folk wandering the fringes of the motorways, like the Highland Clearances were taking place

all over again. The black blight's bitten into the woodlands too, affecting pines and firs. Kills everything it touches, like the countryside's rotting away, and there's naught no one can do. It was a lot grimmer than I expected. Give me the city any day.

'Enjoy the calm before this place gets mad, Ropa,' Esfandiar says ruefully. 'Too many young hopefuls, sharks really, elbowing through, hoping to score a connection that'll kick-start their magical career or take it to the next level. It's overwhelming. The schmoozing and canoodling, arse-licking and backstabbing. Welcome to the world of conference. Be on your toes, lassie, or someone's sure to step on them . . . Apart from that, it's all rather boring, as I said.'

'Thanks for the tip.'

'My husband is very fond of you, you know?'

'Not like he's ever shown it.'

'Oh, Ian's a fuddy. But that's hardly his fault. You'll see tomorrow. This place brings out the troglodyte in all of us. Magic does that.'

'You say that, but you're still a magician,' I point out.

'I've got the qualifications, I'm ashamed to admit. But I haven't cast a spell in over two decades. I can barely tell you the difference between a Promethean lustre and Zeusean levin nowadays. I pass my time as a man of leisure in this life filled with the most incredible cares. Poetry is more my speed. Give me wine and verse, and my worries disappear. Before you ask, there's no money to be made in poetry. That's why I made sure to marry well.'

'So you married Sir Callander for his money?'

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‘It’s Sir Ian, dear girl, and no, I married him because he has an ear for poetry and helps to fine-tune my own doggerel. He knows everything from his Homer to his Hafez, Rabbie Burns all the way to Rumi, Ferdowsi and Jackie Kay. And you must promise not to tell anyone else this: he is especially partial to crude limericks once you’ve got a dram of Craigellachie down his throat.’

I find it impossible to imagine my mentor having fun, let alone reciting vulgar poetry.

‘I’ve never heard of anyone getting shacked up for love of verse.’

‘Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes . . . Though that’s not a very good model, is it? Ours is a more enduring partnership. Right, let’s get you spruced up and looking the part,’ Esfandiar says. ‘I love the orange dreadlocks by the way. They’re so autumnal. Reminds me of a beautiful poem, “Your Orange Hair in the Void of the World” by Paul Eluard. But you’re going for anime, aren’t you? Isn’t that what we young people are into these days?’ He laughs at his own joke.

Esfandiar is only in his fifties, which must be young for a wizard, I guess.

The Keeper’s Cottage is slightly secluded, surrounded by hedge and mature pines. A few remain standing after the Big Yin. I can see why Callander gets this pad when he stays. It affords him some privacy away from the conference activities at the castle. However, the interior is disappointingly modern. Bright laminate flooring and flat-pack furniture, not the antiques you’d want in such a place. The walls are painted a light grey and it’s clean but definitely lacks oomph.

Still, it's better than the digs me and the Hamster Squad are staying in.

Esfandiar leaves the room and returns in a jiffy with a leather travel case.

'Let me see what we have here. I hope I got your size right. Ian was useless when I asked him. It's bloody hard to pick something out when all you've got to go on is hand gestures to say she's about this tall and a waist this wide. He was right about one thing, though, you're skin and bone, not an ounce of fat on you.' He pats his pot belly to make the point. 'You can have some of my lard if you wish.'

Then he hands me a kilted skirt, blouse and tonnag.

'I ain't wearing that,' I say.

'I wouldn't like to either, but we're all stuck with it this week, I'm afraid, darling. You and me both, if that's any consolation. Huff and puff if you will, but there's simply no getting around this. We're with the Secretary, therefore we're required to wear his clan tartan.'

'I'll freeze my tits off in that. And where am I supposed to store my catapult and ammo if I ain't got no pockets?'

'Hand me the tonnag. I'll give you this three-quarter length coat instead. It's got all the pockets a girl could ever want or need. I know this because it belonged to your grandmother and she was very partial to it, but she forgot it after a soiree on our estate long before you were born. Oh, and you're supposed to wear this pin too.'

I can't find an excuse, so I take the gear he's handed me and head to the bathroom to change. Yahweh, that massive tub! I wish I could soak in it for a bit. Beats queuing up early

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in the morning for the one bathroom I share with the Squad. It's alright though. We're holed up inside the castle proper, which is something, has to be said. And since I don't get paid for my work, I mean to pull off a heist. That'll be my remuneration. Fair's fair and all that. I simply have to find something no one will miss. A girl's got to get paid, after all.