

ALEXANDER
ARMSTRONG

EVENFALL
THE GOLDEN LINNET



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Farshore



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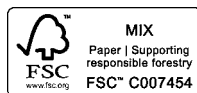
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*To my amazing father, Angus,
who has filled our lives with stories*

A.A.

Green Grow the Rushes, O

English folk song, origins unknown

I'll sing you twelve, O

Green grow the rushes, O

What are your twelve, O?

Twelve for the twelve apostles,

Eleven for the eleven who went to heaven,

Ten for the Ten Commandments,

Nine for the nine bright shiners,

Eight for the April rainers,

Seven for the seven stars in the sky,

Six for the six proud walkers,

Five for the symbols at your door,

Four for the gospel-makers,

Three, three, the rivals,

Two, two, the lily-white boys,

Clothed all in green, O.

One is one, and all alone,

And ever more shall be so.





PROLOGUE

Where do I begin this story? Well, it began centuries ago. But I suppose my story began at home in Langley Terrace a couple of nights before my thirteenth birthday. At my bedroom window.

That's where I seem to have spent most of my childhood, at least since Mum's accident. Even without her, it felt like the safest place, to sit, to recharge, with my back to my tiny bedroom and my forehead pressed to the cold glass.

We would sit there together and watch the storms flashing lightning down over Durham. My heart would pound, and we'd open the window to feel the rain on our faces and she'd laugh and put her hand on my chest and say, 'Feel that, Sam? All that energy? All that power?'

After she was gone, I'd still sit there on the chest of drawers in front of the window, sliding my feet down into the gap between the chest and the wall, and resting them on the radiator. There was even a hole in the plasterboard for my toes to poke through. It was so comfortable just sitting there. Watching. Hidden by a house, and safe as one too.

If it was chilly (and it was always chilly – that radiator never worked), I'd wrap myself in the duvet like a Viking warrior in a cape and let the cold glass and the warm bedding pull me in opposite

directions. I used to pretend it pulled open my mind, showing me things that nobody else could see. I thought if I stared out at the world for long enough, I'd find the answers to everything. I didn't find any answers, just a gnawing certainty that something was coming for me. Something huge. The world outside was giving me signs.

I know it sounds strange, but I started to think I had strange and special powers.

There was only one power that I craved, though, and that was the power to make Dad better.

Langley Terrace looked out on to a stretch of dual carriageway. You could see it clearly from my bedroom window. I loved that road. It felt like an irresistible torrent of life. It could be a piece of music in a thousand parts for some of the day, and then at night it would become a steady conversation between guards watching over my domain while I slept. Full of inflections and gear changes, wisdom and balance, it spoke a language I understood.

The road brought people and stories into the city and took others out again. Good stories and bad. Like when the snow came, it was the cars driving in from the moors that brought the first news of it with their white roofs and bonnets. And if anything serious happened I'd know before anyone else because of the sirens. I could feel the pulse of them in the air, before their noise, their flashing lights.

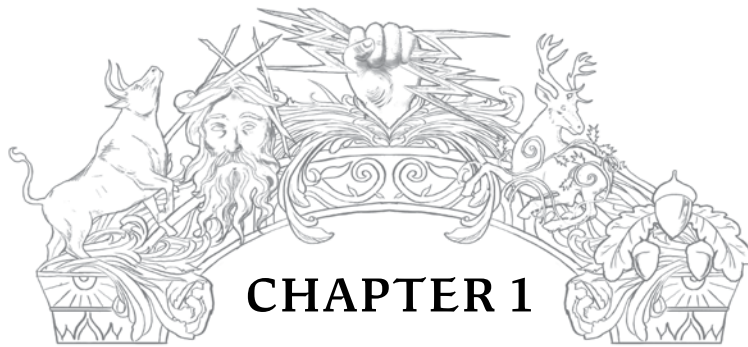
The big stories always broke on the road. But the road brought other things too. Useful things like an umbrella or a hoodie, blown up and over the railing and into our little front porch. I'd find them all

waiting on our doorstep. I even found a lottery scratch card once. It wasn't a winning ticket, but that hardly mattered.

Among its other treasures, I suppose it was the road that brought us Ken Girling.

It brought the package too. But that comes later.

This is my story of how everything changed, a tale they now tell far and wide.



CHAPTER 1

New York

'I KNOW WHO IT IS,' said the young man's voice on the telephone. No 'good evening', no 'sorry for waking you up'.

'Who?' replied the older man.

'It's who I always said it was.'

There was a long pause.

'You're certain he's *the* Tempest? *La Tempesta*, as the ancient parchments describe?'

The young man sounded sulky. 'I thought you'd be pleased.'

'I *am* pleased, darling boy.' A rasping cough. 'Just not convinced you've got the right person.'

The young man snorted. 'Your people have been watching him for seven years, Pup-a-Loola, but it's me he's trusted at last. *He's given me the chalice!*'

The old man drew breath to speak, but convulsed again with a spasm of coughing.

'He's the key to Bellasis!' his son continued, more gently.

'And he's mine. Which means we can finally enter the Tempest

stronghold, their palace of riches, and loot it for all it's worth.'

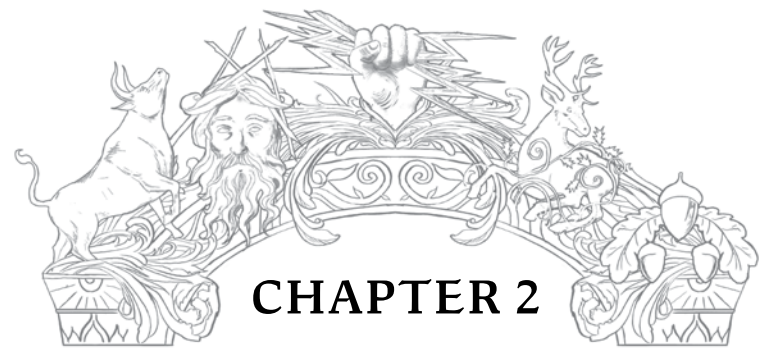
'The *óthr*,' croaked his father.

'The *óthr*!' the young man agreed. 'It's all there waiting for you. Timely, wouldn't you say? The state you're in.'

'Georgie, I'm not—'

Georgie spoke over the old man. 'The Tempest told me the magic is so strong that at the right time, in the right place, the *óthr* can heal a person with one drop, bring storms, unlock unspeakable power . . .' His voice dropped to an urgent whisper. 'And finally, *finally* the Elver have made their move. It's all your satellite technology, Puppy-Loo!' He laughed, the sound high and gleeful. It brought a smile to the old man's voice.

'Well done, Georgie.' He drew a painful breath. 'Keep the Tempest safe. We'll need him fit and well for our ceremony.'



CHAPTER 2

Cambridge

NATHANIEL rested his zither on top of the small amplifier at his feet and picked up the thermal cup from under his camping stool. It wasn't exactly raining but there was a heavy mist that shone in the darkness as it sank past the street lights, and the cobbles of King's Parade in front of him gleamed. The cup was cold as a stone, and the tea inside shockingly hot. He swallowed it quickly and felt it creeping around his insides. He picked up the zither again, its lead making a brief, hot crackle in the amp as it adjusted, then he quietly tuned the strings.

Without looking up, he became aware of a looming presence as he started the next tune. When he raised his eyes a few bars in, not one but five people were standing in a loose semicircle in front of him. He left a chord hanging eerily in the air as he looked at each of them in turn.

'Oh,' he said, his skin prickling with awareness as he noticed how huge each of them was. And the way these men stood, poised as if they were ready for anything – a whispered word,

a lashing fist, a lethal blade. 'Are you ...'

He stopped himself. If they were who he thought they were, they wouldn't answer. What was it he had to do? Oh yes.

He strummed another chord, and lifted his voice just above a whisper in the tune he'd been taught since before he could speak:

*'I'll sing you six, O
Green grow the rushes, O
What is your six, O?'*

He waited, feeling a little stupid, but before the zither had hummed back into silence, all of them, not entirely in tune, sang:

'Six for the six proud walkers ...'

Nathaniel flattened his hand on the zither in shock and the chord was silenced instantly.

'You're the Elver,' he said. Though he'd been trained his whole life for this moment, he'd never thought it would actually happen.

'It's time,' said one of the taller, broader figures in front of him. 'The Tempest comes of age. He needs us.'

All Nathaniel's training suddenly felt completely inadequate as he stood up. He gestured to his kit. 'And what about all this?'

'I give you my word,' said the tall man, 'that if we get

through this alive, I will personally buy you another –' he nodded towards the instrument resting on the man's amp – 'whatever that is.'

'Zither.'

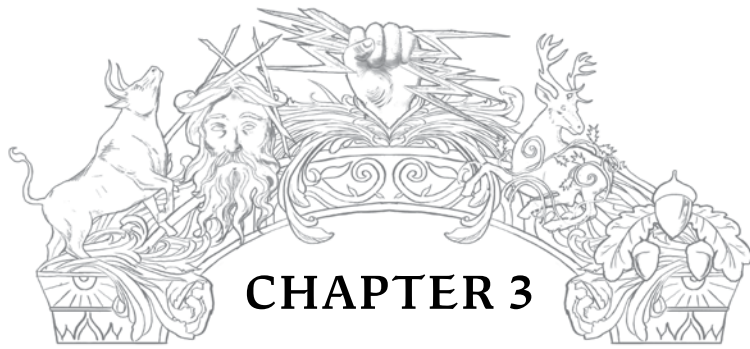
'Zither. Yes. Now we march. We go on foot cross-country, no cameras on us, fast as we can. Two hundred miles to the point of retrieval. Fit enough?' The tall man looked Nathaniel up and down, frowning at his baggy trousers.

Nathaniel flexed his toes awkwardly in his fashionable boots. 'The retrieval's in Bellasis, then? Is that where we're headed?'

The big guy frowned. 'All knowledge of the whereabouts of Bellasis was lost in the decimation of the Tempest family. You should know this. We retrieve the seal. Then we protect the Tempest. The boy is thirteen in two days.' His eyes glanced up, across, back down, checking no doubt for CCTV cameras, spies listening, enemies waiting. 'He does not know who he is.' The big guy tapped the toe of Nathaniel's boot with his stick. 'And he is already being hunted.'

'You coming, *proud walker*?', mocked the big guy's right-hand man. 'Or you going to abandon your destiny and stay here twiddling your strings while the world falls apart?'

Nathaniel reluctantly left his amp and zither on the pavement. The Elver had called, and so he answered. Now the six of them were together, the Order of the Evening's strongest soldiers walked briskly down St Mary's Passage and evaporated into the night.



CHAPTER 3

Durham

‘GO-HOME-KEN-GO-HOME-KEN-GO-HOME-KEN-GO-HOME-KEN,’ Sam whispered to his bedroom window as the storm raged outside.

He was one of life’s stayers, Ken Girling: a saucepan of eternally bubbling conversational porridge. He worked at the university, where Sam’s dad officially still taught, and would amble over several times a week to install himself in both halves of the sofa downstairs and munch his way through whatever biscuits were in the cupboard. Short of actually turning the lights off and going to bed, there were very few ways of dislodging Ken once he’d settled.

And this week, Ken had come over every single night. Sam regretted calling him last Friday. But there had been another of those scary moments, with his dad, Jake, getting all hot and frantic, talking too fast for Sam to understand. He’d thought it was already Sam’s birthday.

Sam felt a shiver just thinking about it. Getting home from school to find Dad downstairs in the hall, pulling all the coats and

hats and gloves off Mum’s old desk at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Sam!’ he said as Sam had pushed the door open against all the stuff on the floor. ‘Syour birthday! Gotta get you the-the-s-s-special s-signet . . . Your mum said. Your m-mum, she—’

‘Dad!’ Sam shut the door against the last of the winter chill. ‘It’s not my birthday. My birthday’s next week. Sunday. Where are your tablets?’

‘Y-you need it now. Y-your m-mum said.’ His hands were trembling so much that he dropped a key to the floor. ‘She said . . .’

Sam bent and picked up the key. ‘She said what?’ he asked quietly.

His father never spoke about Sam’s mother. It made him too sad. That was probably why her desk had been locked up and shoved out in the hall and buried like this. And here was this moment hanging between them, something from the past here in the now, and Sam was terrified it would slip away.

He held the key out to his father, but Jake pointed to the keyhole on the lid that had shut up the old-fashioned writing desk these last seven years.

‘O-o-open it-t-t,’ said his dad, his teeth chattering.

Sam slung his left arm round his father, holding him close. ‘It’s okay, Dad. It’s okay.’ He placed the key in the lock, turned it and carefully pulled the lid down.

Whoa.

Inside was a mess of papers, books, newspaper cuttings

from ancient papers, one that looked ready to crumble to dust, shouting something about REFUGE FROM THE—. He saw drawings his mother had done, scribbled on to folded sheets, crumpled scraps, even curling Post-it notes stuck to the little shelves and drawers within the desk with notes and captions in pen, pencil, charcoal.

It felt as if the words scribbled there whispered into Sam's head. *Bellasis is OUR refuge . . . runs rich with gold . . . our stories . . . hide beneath the trees . . . beware the greedy . . .*

'Sw'killed h-h-her,' said his dad, shaking even harder, and his breath hitched in a sob.

'No, Dad,' said Sam, swallowing. 'It was just a stupid accident.'

His imagination flashed with a kaleidoscope of images, as it always did on thunderous nights of bad dreams: a flash of light, screech of tyres, a twisted tree with strange, reaching branches, so dark against that bright blue sky.

'Just an accident,' said Sam again.

'Nonononono . . .' said his dad, turning to grip Sam by both arms surprisingly hard. 'NononoNO!'

'Come on, Dad,' said Sam, so close to hearing more of his mum, but nothing was worth his dad being this upset.

'Upstairs. We need to find your pills.'

'Nonononono . . .' groaned his father, 'In the desk. P-please. Env-v-l – orange. F-f-find vlope, p-please. H-h-hurry bef—'

'Orange envelope?' said Sam. 'Please, Dad. Calm down.'

'N-now. Birthday. Nownownow—'

'Okay, okay, Dad!' Sam pushed the papers in the desk aside – and there it was. A tatty orange envelope with something rattling inside. He opened it and pulled out a necklace bearing a gold pendant.

Outside the storm had rumbled impossibly close and a thunderbolt threw bright flashes through the window of the hall door. It lit up the pendant, to reveal a hand holding four jagged lines of lightning etched on its golden face.

By the time Sam had got his dad upstairs and found his pills, the rain was hammering down so hard he could hardly hear his own voice.

'Mum's necklace,' he said, sitting on his dad's bed and staring at the pendant. 'She wanted me to have it?'

'S-signet. F-f-for your birthday. Th-th-thirteenth.' His dad sank back into the pillows, his hand finding Sam's and squeezing.

Sam squeezed back, his heart suddenly thundering. Then he clasped the necklace round his neck. It was warm on his skin, and he felt a lifting of joy inside him, a prickle behind his sternum, a popping in his ears. And though all he wanted to do was run to his room, fling the window wide and lean out into the rain like he always had with his mum, he did as he should, giving his dad his medication, settling him back in his pillows and calling Ken with an update.



The storm had raged all week, but, even so, Ken had been round every day to check on things.

He was all right, Ken, but Friday was fish-and-chips night with Dad. An immovable feast as far as Sam was concerned, even with the storm this bad.

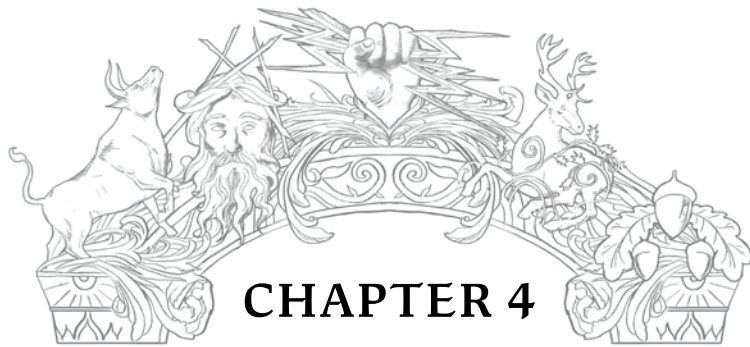
Normally Sam would be down at the chippy by now, standing in the queue. If he was honest, he liked that part almost as much as the fish and chips themselves. The banter was more salty and vinegary than anything they served up, and Sam loved feeling like he was now one of the gang. There would always be a handful of regulars there, as well as one or two blow-ins from the Three Wheat Heads over the road. But there was something about the start of the weekend that made them all fellow travellers, a giddiness that swept everyone up in its clutches.

Sam would watch them all trot off with their hot parcels under their arms and imagine all the different stories their Friday nights would tell. And then he would walk home feeling three metres tall. He and his dad would sit side by side at the small, rickety trestle against the wall, the tall table salt with its cockatoo beak standing greasily between them amid a mountain of white wrappings. And for twenty minutes it

would be like everything was normal, Sam jumping up and running around as he choked down thick chips as hot as magma, fanning his mouth and making his father laugh. Then they'd sprawl on the sofa, full and happy. Maybe Sam would lean on his dad's chest and talk about his day and his dad would stroke his hair distractedly.

Sam's dad wasn't well now. Since Mum had died, there were days when he couldn't even get out of bed; he'd just curl up in a ball and leave the curtains drawn. Other days it would seem like the sun had come out again and he was back to his usual self. But it never lasted. It was like watching a spider trapped in a bath; however high it might climb, it always ended up back by the plughole. And nowadays, thanks to his depression and a chest infection that never seemed to go away, he always seemed to be by the plughole.

Sam's mum had died in a car crash when he was just five years old. Sam had seen the school counsellor about his dad – and about his mum – but she'd just said that 'everyone comes to terms with loss in their own way'. She'd kept asking Sam how *he* was feeling, and every time he said he was fine, she'd put her head on one side and say, 'Mmmm,' in a way that drove him up the wall. Sam avoided her now. It had been over seven years since his mum had died. He couldn't have her back, he knew that. But what he really wanted was his dad back. More than anything in the world.



CHAPTER 4

SAM'S dad, Jake, was a born listener with his open face and kind, hazel eyes, and it was a trait of which Ken took ruthless advantage. Even now, the relentless patter of Ken's monologue filtered up from the floor below like the buzz of a fat winter fly banging into lampshades. But as Sam listened, the noise petered out and an unsettling – most un-Ken-like – silence replaced it. Ken hadn't left, Sam would have heard the door, which could only mean Ken was waiting for him.

Sam dug out his trainers, pulled on a hoodie and jumped down the stairs in three easy leaps. You could go pretty much everywhere in their tiny, mid-terrace house in three easy leaps. It had pebbledash on its front, long-broken central and a perpetual smell of mould.

Sam's dad was gazing from his chair into the cold grey bars of the electric fire in the hearth with a dreamy half-smile on his face. And there, sure enough, humming away to himself in his anorak with his hands behind his back, stood Ken Girling, studying one of the pictures on the wall like a critic in a gallery. Ken wasn't exactly podgy, but there was something about the

way he held himself that made his tummy stick out and his head sink necklessly into his shoulders. Under a lank fringe, he wore large glasses that gave him a dissatisfied look. Every now and then he'd take them off to give them a wipe, and he'd look like a totally different person. He had an occasional nervous tic where his eyes blinked independently – one then the other, over and again very fast – almost as if his vision was flickering in very bright light, but today he seemed relaxed and happy.

'Aha!' he said cheerily. 'Off to the chippy no doubt, Sam?'

'Yeah,' said Sam, glancing anxiously at his dad.

'Who's this?' asked Ken, pointing at the picture he'd been looking at. 'And where are they? It looks familiar.'

'My mum and her brother Jimmy,' said Sam. 'At some pub, I think.' He turned away from his mother's laughing face. 'Dad, I'm doing the chippy run. Won't be long.'

'Why don't I walk with you?' said Ken. It was a clumsy but effective ambush. Sam shrugged and the pair of them stepped out into the gathering mischief of Durham as it slid into its weekend, the rain finally easing into drizzle.

Langley Terrace was essentially just a very broad pavement, with a railing at its edge, then a near-three-metre drop down to another, parallel pavement which ran alongside the dual carriageway. At one end of the terrace was a bed warehouse called *Beds Beds Beds*; at the other was what advertised itself as a joke shop, although as far as Sam knew it hadn't ever been open for so much as a single hour. In its window, propped up

on bricks, were the perishing rubber masks of various long-forgotten celebrities, some vampire teeth, a bottle of fake blood and a real dead spider, its hairy legs drawn up so that in death it looked its most poised and vicious.

As Sam and Ken approached the joke shop, its mean little side door opened and the owner was pulled out by a large Alsatian on a tight shiny chain. He was an angry-looking man with a heavy brow and Light Infantry tattoos. He swore at the rain while he triple locked the door, then headed over to the railing where he bumped a cigarette out of a soft packet and sparked up before looking straight at Sam. There was a strange glimmer in his eye that seemed to demand a response. Sam's response was to look abruptly away.

'Oof,' Ken half whispered as they walked carefully down the slippery steps to the main road. 'That's a face only a mother could love.' He cleared his throat. 'So, your mother has a brother called Jimmy. Do you have any other family that I don't know about, Sam?'

It was such a Ken thing to say. Utterly random yet lightly tinged with accusation. Sam could feel himself reddening as if he'd done something terribly wrong. He shrugged.

'No family friends, even? I mean . . .'

It seemed Ken had arrived at the point of this conversation with such little preamble it had taken even him by surprise. Sam looked at his feet and shook his head.

'It's just . . . I was telling your dad there's a new head of

housing at the university. And he's appointed a new committee. They're busy reviewing all the college allocations,' continued Ken carefully. 'And that's important, Sam, in terms of your home.'

Sam's appetite was instantly gone. Ken didn't need to explain what he was talking about. One of the university colleges owned number 13 Langley Terrace, and Sam's dad rented it from them for next to nothing.

'Your dad hasn't worked at the university for seven years,' said Ken gently. 'I can't claim teaching privileges for him if he doesn't teach.'

'But his book?' Sam found a voice to defend his father. 'I thought they were happy as long as he was writing.' He was vaguely aware that this was the response his dad gave whenever the subject of work came up.

'You can take a year out to write, maybe two,' said Ken, taking his hands out of his anorak pockets, 'but *seven*?' There was that nervous tic in his eyes again, blink, blink, left then right, then left again.

Sam started to feel sick. 'They know about Mum, right? They know she's dead? And we've been . . . left?'

Ken's hands moved together in a delicate gesture of reassurance, strangely at odds with his usual bumbling, clumsy self. 'Of course they do. And they're very fond of your father. But . . . well . . .'

Sam bit his lip hard, feeling the sharp tang of blood in his

mouth. He'd tortured himself with this thought over the years: his dad's health being officially noted and the two of them being slung out of their home.

He took a careful breath, feeling an urgent yearning to be out in the trees, soft earth beneath his feet, rushing water instead of rushing cars . . .

'What you *need* to do, though,' Ken was saying, 'is have everything packed up and ready to go. If I find a new place for you both, we might have to move quickly. And I mean *very* quickly.'

From deep within his panic, Sam had a strong and sudden urge to pack a bag and run away with his dad. Get as far from Langley Terrace as possible. As soon as Dad got better, he promised himself, they'd run for the woods.

'Which brings me,' said Ken, with an indulgent smile, 'to the other thing I wanted to talk about. Sunday is the second of April.' He lifted his chin to peer through the bottom of his glasses with mock gravity. 'Which is a certain someone's birthday! How do you fancy going to Oakeshott Theme Park on Sunday? Celebrate you becoming a teenager?'

Sam snapped out of his little trance. He couldn't remember when he'd last had a day out.

'I'll drive us down in the Prius,' said Ken. 'We'll have to leave early, mind. A five-thirty start should do it. Then we'd get at least half a day there. Be back here for tea.'

Sam searched for words. 'Ken, that's . . . amazing. But what about Dad?'

'I'll get someone to come and look out for him. Shouldn't be a problem as long as we're not late back.'

Sam pulled on the chain round his neck and put the pendant between his lips. Mouthing it anxiously, he watched the traffic flowing past them, in and out of Durham. There was that fizzing again at the top of his breastbone, at the point where his breath had caught a moment ago. But instead of just hovering like before, it grew and grew until it was pressing against his larynx. He suddenly felt an urgent need to burst out laughing or be sick – neither ideal in the circumstances.

'Thanks,' he said, dropping the pendant on to his chest again and grinning up at Ken. 'That would be . . . Well, it would be amazing.'

Ken pulled his glasses up to his forehead and leaned in to squint at Sam's necklace. 'Oh my,' he said. 'That's new, Sam.'

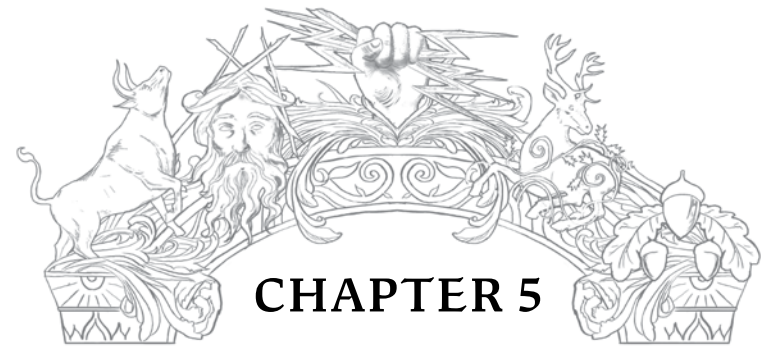
Sam glanced down. 'Yeah. Early birthday present.'

There was a long, contented dog yawn from somewhere so close at hand that it made Sam jump. He looked up and saw a thick cloud of smoke billowing out just above their heads from his neighbour's cigarette.

'Thanks, Ken,' said Sam again. 'Chippy's this way. See you Sunday.'

Ken said his goodbyes and shuffled off, leaving Sam to hurry to the fish and-chip shop. Thunder rumbled overhead. Another storm was rolling in. An involuntary burst of

laughter exploded from Sam like a sneeze, clearing something inside and filling his head with colours and vivid memories, not all of which he could swear he'd seen before.



The North York Moors

WHAT a bizarre sight they must've been, the six of them striding out like the devil was at their backs. And the pace never relented, not once, through tussocks, bogs or briars. No one was in proper walking gear, Nathaniel had noticed. Apart from Mr Prendergast with his gnarled stick and leather satchel, no one even carried anything.

None of the men were small, Nathaniel included, but Mr Prendergast was a mountain of a man with a broad forehead, long hair worn in a ponytail and impatient words. He often communicated with just grunts and succinct movements of his head and he walked at great speed with that very big stick.

'I'll need your numbers,' he'd said to Nathaniel as soon as they had got out of Cambridge.

Since his earliest childhood, Nathaniel had been taught to keep his Elver numbers emblazoned on his memory. In those days he'd no idea what any of it meant. He didn't have much

more of a clue these days. But here he was, carrying out his duty.

‘Five, seven,’ Nathaniel had said quietly.

Mr Prendergast added a five and a seven to his notebook. Then he solemnly consulted a set of ancient maps he was carrying, plotting the careful logistics of their route north. Nathaniel would have done it on Google Maps, personally, but mobiles were forbidden. Mr Prendergast had been quite particular on that point.

On they went, to retrieve the seal.

They walked north along a hotchpotch of forgotten drovers’ paths, byways and pilgrims’ routes of centuries long past, most of the time through woodland, with the track sometimes just a gap between bramble patches. There was a rota and every two hours a different pair was on guard duty, one ahead, one behind, watching out for anything they thought peculiar. Nathaniel thought the whole thing was peculiar, but he kept schtum.

Every few hours, their route took them past a natural spring where they’d stop to drink. It was good stuff, that water. Just a glug or two put a real bounce back into Nathaniel’s stride.

By mid-morning they reached a deserted barnyard. A hearty late breakfast had been put out for them, and in the neighbouring shed, four camp beds had been set up with four blankets, four pillows and – thoughtfully – four hot-water bottles. Mr Prendergast appointed the next two guards, who slipped outside to take up the watch.

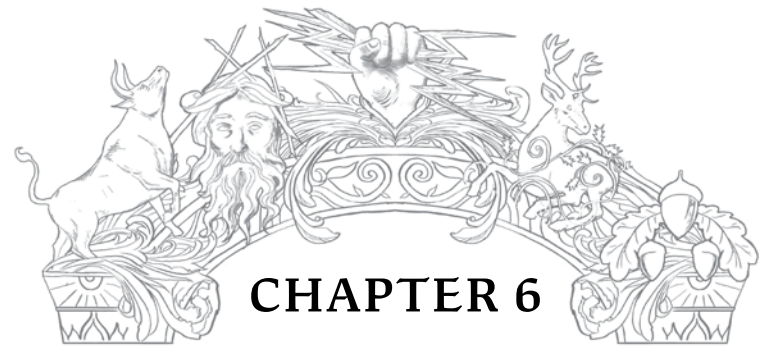
Nathaniel took himself off behind a hedge to answer a call of nature. He was desperately hoping someone might have handed his zither and things in to the college porter at King’s. But what if they hadn’t? It was one of a kind, that zither. It had a bespoke electronic pick-up, fitted by his friend Graeme over one very long winter. If someone nicked it, it would be an expensive nightmare to replace, but how much opportunity would he get to play it? Nathaniel was beginning to get the unsettling feeling that there was distinctly more to this Elver lark than just locating the Tempest seal and remembering numbers. And suddenly the idea of protecting the Tempest . . . Well. It felt like a real thing that might take some time, not just a game for a weekend or so.

Even as he took out his mobile phone, he could hear Mr Prendergast’s paranoid words echoing in his memory: ‘I don’t care if they’re switched off, they could still compromise us.’ Nathaniel had pretended not to hear that bit. He *had* kept his firmly switched off – but he’d brought it with him just in case. Out here in the middle of nowhere, where no one could hear it, it wasn’t going to do any harm if he tapped in for a few seconds.

He looked around to make sure no one was anywhere near – he even made sure it was on *silent* – then he switched it on. It took a long time to find any reception. He typed a brief message for Graeme to go and get his stuff and pressed send. Then he turned the mobile off – good as gold – and hid it again in his inside pocket.



In the small back room of a roadside shack in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, a computer hacker known as Lami366 was woken by a quiet ping from her desktop.



New York

EVEN though he was dying, the old man felt terrific as he stared into the expensive face of his watch. It didn't only tell him the time; it told him his place. Geographically as well as socially. Official time of today's sunrise in New York City was 6.29 a.m., but this high up, in the penthouse of the vast building, he would see the sun breaking the hazy surface of the Atlantic when it was still 6.28. His morning would get a head start over everybody else's.

Just as he languorously opened his eyes for the first sunbeam dancing through the vapours, a soft Irish voice called: 'Master, I'm so sorry to disturb you, but your son insists on seeing you. He wasn't taking no for an answer. And Cyrus Breytenbach has been trying to reach you both urgently.'

The man turned his head a furious ninety degrees. 'Cyrus can wait. Bring my son here,' he growled.

The young staff member put her right hand on her heart

and bowed from the waist. Round her right wrist was a delicate grey tattoo of a rope, beautifully shaded and textured so that it appeared almost lifelike.

The man turned back to the window where the sun was a shimmering coin, fully up now. He'd missed its first rays.

'Pa-pa! Pa-pa! Pa-pa!' sang a voice like a cuckoo from far off.

A man in his thirties strutted in on bare feet. He was almost as tall as the older man, with eyes of an impossible blue. His father's ill humour crumpled at this perfection: the smoothness of his son's tanned face, the casual knockout radiance of his aura.

'Georgie!' he said warmly as his son embraced him. 'You're up early.'

Georgie ruffled his father's silver hair. 'News to report, Pups. The six have gathered.'

'Are you sure?'

'Oh yeah,' said Georgie. 'The busker was last. Left his little harp thing and his teeny-tiny stool. Yeah, they've gone all right. Poof!' He opened his palm and blew, as if scattering dandelion seeds to the wind.

'I think I'm going to follow your advice,' said his father. 'Let's get rid of the kid. Probably why Cyrus has been calling?'

Georgie nodded with terrific condescension. 'Should've done it years ago.'

The man felt a twinge of his earlier gut pain. 'But you have got to follow the Elver. I'm warning you, it's damn near

impossible. They leave a trail like smoke; if you're a minute behind them, it will have blown to the four winds. They'll be heading up to the north-east of England.'

'Durham. Where our Tempest is.'

'Exactly.' The man nodded. 'So, get everyone on it. All eyes.'

'What're you planning?' asked Georgie.

The man smiled and briefly forgot about the strange pain in his stomach. 'This is our once-in-a-century chance to seize the source of the Tempest's power. A place of streams of gold, untold treasure, magnificent caverns hidden below ground for millennia. There is nowhere on earth like Bellasis. Bellasis means the *óthr*. And the *óthr* means power.'

Georgie laughed. 'Oooh! The magical underground palace and its golden miracle juice? You really buy it don't you, Puppy-o-La?'

'If the *óthr* is just a legend,' the old man replied, his smile evaporating, 'then why do those six go to such lengths to protect it? With the Elver on the move now, it's all the proof we've ever needed. When we find it, my darling boy, and we get Bellasis and the *óthr*, then we inherit everything. The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself!'

'Fan-dabby-dozy,' said Georgie.

The pain was nagging again. The old man blocked out the fear that tickled in the far reaches of his mind whenever he

remembered how little time he had left. The *óthr* would heal him – if they could find it before it was too late.

And *then* he could bend the world to his will.

‘G, do you feel like going back to Durham?’ he said. ‘I could do with you on the ground. I think it’s happening and things are moving fast. Bellasis is coming.’