

# ***Standing on the Threshold***

*Magnus Lind is a man who has suffered his fair share of unwelcome separations in his life. First, his wife more or less goes up in smoke, and no one can ever explain to him what happened to her (well, his daughter could, but she has no intention of ever doing so). Then his daughter, Alex, disappears as inexplicably (for details, read **A Rip in the Veil**), and Magnus is left reeling – with loss and incomprehension. All that is left to him is his grandson, Isaac, which is why having the boy vanish into thin air before his eyes almost kills him (for details, see **Like Chaff in the Wind**). Fortunately, Isaac is returned to him, and now, seven years after Alex disappearance, life is settling into some sort of normality. Which is when the headaches appear...*

### **Edinburgh, August 2009**

“Offa?”

Magnus started awake, an uncomfortable dryness in his mouth.

“Are you alright?” Isaac’s dark eyes hovered inches from his face. Magnus squished his eyes together repeatedly to bring Isaac’s face into focus.

“Of course I am, I’m just a bit tired.” He tried out a smile.

Isaac sat back on his haunches and studied Magnus. “You don’t look alright.”

Magnus struggled to sit and swung his legs over the side of the lounge. He was feeling rather strange, he admitted to himself; all these sudden attacks of weariness, and a constant headache. And the dreams, these damn vivid dreams of Alex, dreams in which he was convinced she was here with him – or he there, with her.

“What are you doing here?” Magnus asked Isaac. “Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

Isaac sat down on the grass. “We don’t start until next week.” He tugged at a dandelion and dismembered it in silence. “I want to paint,” he added, sneaking a look at his Offa. Magnus ruffled the short hair and jerked his head in the direction of the house.

“Go on then, and you know you don’t really have to ask, right?”

Isaac was up on his feet in an instant. “Are you coming too?”

“In a moment, I’ll just sit here a while first.” He watched the boy dart off and with a sigh he laid back down. Just a little nap, he told himself, just a few minutes more of quiet and peace. And then he’d call Eva and whinge a bit, enough to have her laugh at him and tell him not to be such a weakling.

He closed his eyes. Seven years and more, since Alex had disappeared from his life, ten years since he last saw his wife. So many days, months, years of gnawing grief. He choked. God how he missed them – both of them. He opened his eyes and lay staring up at the sky, following a picture perfect fluffy cloud as it drifted towards the west. There was an insistent throbbing behind his left temple, the headache spreading in concentric circles through his brain. Forget the nap – he needed to hear Eva’s reassuring voice. He got to his feet, shook his head to clear it of the throbbing, and made for the house.

"I'm not ancient! I'm not even sixty-three." Magnus stirred his coffee with more force than necessary

"A matter of weeks," Eva snapped back down the phone line. "All I'm saying is that at your age you should be a bit careful, Magnus. You haven't been feeling well for months, have you, so will you please get your arse off the chair and phone your GP?"

"Don't have one," Magnus grumbled.

"Oh yes you do! It's just that you've never been."

Magnus sighed and made a face at the phone, already regretting the moment of weakness that had made him call Eva, down in London for a girl's weekend.

"Magnus," Eva wheedled, "will you please do this? For me?"

"Huh, that's emotional blackmail. But fine, I'll call and set up an appointment." He on purpose omitted to say when.

Isaac came down a couple of hours later with a dreamy look in his eyes that made Magnus smile. His extremely talented grandson would lose himself entirely in his painting, and only the sudden realisation that he was hungry would bring him back to the here and now.

"So," Magnus teased, setting a plate of pasta on the table. "What was it today? Oranges? Blues and greens?" He shuddered inwardly; sometimes Isaac's creations were disconcertingly similar to Mercedes' paintings, small swirling squares of pitching seas that somehow had you leaning eagerly towards it to try and see the fish that must surely swim in those inviting waters.

"I'm doing something different." Isaac refused to elucidate, looking very secretive. "I'll show you once it's done," he said, before digging into his food.

Magnus wasn't hungry; he shoved the plate away and sat thinking of Mercedes, his long gone wife. Ten years ago since she disappeared, and even if Magnus had no doubts about Mercedes being permanently gone, he still had no idea how, imagining that it had been far more painful and mindboggling than he could really understand.

Her whole existence was an impossibility, starting out as a Jewish girl in far gone medieval Spain, and ending in a deserted farmhouse in Italy – or at least he assumed it had all ended there. He had no idea how old she had been, or in how many different times she'd lived in her desperate attempts to paint herself back home, home to Seville and her waiting husband and son. Magnus shifted uncomfortably on his chair; sometimes he wished he believed in God so that he could offer up a prayer for her soul. To do so as a confirmed and vociferous atheist seemed so hypocritical it made him blush.

"It's Mama's birthday today," Isaac said suddenly.

"I know." Alex would be thirty-three today. Thirty-three and very much alive in his mind, however dead she must reasonably be by now. "How do you know?" In general, Alex was a taboo subject at the John and Diane household, mainly because Diane insisted on living a normal life, whatever that was, and mothers who disappeared into time holes definitely didn't fall into that category. Nor did little boys that fell after and were returned, Magnus thought, especially not through small magic paintings... A tremor rippled through

him, and he couldn't help it, he had to place his hand on Isaac's back and feel the reassuring solidness of him.

"I just do." Isaac patterned the table with his fingers in a gesture so evocative of his grandmother, Mercedes, that Magnus felt his heart twist together. Isaac exhaled loudly and stretched for the cookie tin. "Diane said I had to be home by five, will you drive me?"

"Do you think about it often?" Magnus asked on their way down towards the sea. "You know, when you fell through the painting and all that."

Isaac turned his dark eyes in his direction and shook his head. "Not really. But I wonder if they're alright."

"Of course they are," Magnus said, although he had absolutely no idea.

"Diane says it doesn't really matter one way or the other," Isaac blurted, "as they're all dead by now anyway."

Sometimes Diane was an incredibly insensitive person, Magnus thought grimly. And jealous; she hadn't liked it one bit when Isaac came back full of stories from that other life in a far gone place. It was Diane that had insisted that they must stop talking about Isaac's little expedition through time, glaring accusingly at Magnus whenever the subject anyway cropped up.

"I suppose they are." Magnus sighed – very, very dead.

That evening Magnus sat in his empty house and around him danced the shades of Mercedes and Alex in a spinning merry-go-round. Sometimes it drove him crazy, this not knowing anything at all about Alex' life. He just had some pathetic scraps of information; married to a Matthew Graham, living in the 1660's down in Ayrshire and that was it. He drained his whisky and sat back, closing his eyes against a sudden spike in pain.

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"Really? That bad?" Magnus said three weeks later, watching Diane close down her computer. He was somewhat shaken by her bald descriptions of the life his Alex might be living, belatedly regretting ever asking her to do the research.

"That bad." Diane nodded. "Religious persecution was the name of the game all through the seventeenth century. People left Scotland – and England – in droves."

"I know, I know. I just thought..." He smiled ruefully. Diane sat back on her chair and crossed her legs.

"Charles the second had a major axe to grind with the Puritan movements," Diane said, "and even if he promised leniency in the Declaration of Breda, he had no reason to tolerate any religion that might imperil his hold on the crown. The Covenanters were a stubborn bunch the lot of them, loudly refusing to recognise the king as head of Church."

"All Scots are stubborn," Magnus muttered.

"Well," Diane sighed, "let's hope this Matthew person had the sense to keep a low profile."

"Mmm," Magnus agreed. "And if he didn't?"

"If he didn't, well then he risked fines, deportation or even hanging." Diane shrugged and sniffed pointedly. "Aren't they done yet?" Magnus laughed and walked over to the oven to inspect his cinnamon buns.

"Any minute, now, do you want tea or coffee?"

Once Diane had left, he sat in the kitchen and helped himself to yet another bun. It grew in his mouth, and halfway through he spat it out, cradling his head in his hands. Some kind of bug, he reassured himself, ever since Eva and he got back from Spain, he'd been feeling queasy. He drank a couple of glasses of water, swallowed down a pill or two and went up to see what Isaac might be up to in the studio, bearing with him a plate loaded with buns and a glass of milk.

At the doorway he stopped, watching his engrossed grandson. Hunched over the table, Isaac was drawing, muttering in a low voice. On the easel stood a midsize canvas, and after squinting at it for some time Magnus' realised it was his rosebush, the one just outside the kitchen door. The flowers were painted as blurs of creamy pink, streaked with red, and Magnus could swear one of the top-heavy branches actually swayed, showering the painted stone flags with dew.

"Holy Matilda," he whispered, and then recalled he was wearing his new bifocals. He shoved them down his nose and peered at the painting; much better, no moving branches, no sudden sparkles of drops flying through the air. "That's quite good," he said, and Isaac jumped. He swivelled to frown critically at his painting.

"I'm not sure, I can't get the greens right."

"Perfectionist." Magnus set down the plate. Isaac shone up, bit into a bun. Magnus sat down on a stool beside him.

"What is it you're drawing?" Magnus asked, pulling the sketchpad towards him. Isaac's hand came down with the speed of a striking cobra.

"Nothing." He retrieved his pad and took it with him, stuffing it into a drawer before returning to the table.

"Why so secretive?" Magnus said. "Is it a new masterpiece?"

Isaac shrugged, lowering his long lashes over his dark eyes. "I'm just trying... but I don't seem to get it right." He nabbed yet another bun and ate his way through it in determined silence, making Magnus smile indulgently.

"If you don't want to talk about it, I'm not going to push."

Isaac relaxed. "I'll show you when I'm done."

A couple of hours later, John showed up to retrieve his son. "Did he behave?" he asked, shaking his head at the offered buns.

"He's almost ten. Of course he behaved." Magnus stood up, wincing at a flash of pain across his forehead.

"What?" John looked at him with a worried expression. "Another headache?"

Magnus nodded. "It's the bloody glasses, I get seasick using them."

"Oh dear," John laughed, "age happens to all of us."

“Not if you die young,” Magnus retorted acidly. He stumbled, steadying himself against the table. John gave him a concerned look. “I’m okay,” Magnus snapped.

John rolled his eyes and raised his hands, for an instant looking just like Isaac did, which was strange, given that Isaac wasn’t John’s biological son.

“What?” John asked.

Magnus shook his head. “It’s just... for a moment there you looked just like Isaac.”

“Oh,” John said. “To me he looks mostly like Mercedes.”

“Yeah,” Magnus said with a little smile.

“I have to rush,” John said, “is he in the studio?”

“Where else?”

Magnus stood in the door and waved them off before retiring to the sitting room. He collapsed in his arm chair and closed his eyes. Maybe he should go to bed instead, he thought fuzzily, but he didn’t have the energy required to do so.

“Good day?” Eva asked as she came through the door. Magnus inclined his head gingerly. His eyesight was coming and going. “Magnus?” He barely heard her, but turned blindly in the direction of her voice. “Oh, honey!” Eva lead him to sit in the sofa. He gritted his teeth not to throw up, closing his eyes to stop his world from somersaulting sickeningly around him. Mercedes; he saw Mercedes, and she seemed to be beckoning to him and Magnus had a flash of panic. He was going to die and she was there to take him with her. No, not yet, he pleaded, so much to do... Isaac, and Eva and even John.

“This time I’m taking you there myself,” Eva told him sternly next morning. She scanned his face and leaned in to kiss his cheek.

“But I told you,” Magnus protested, “they found nothing wrong.”

“Huh,” Eva said, fixing him with a very penetrating look. “And I suppose you were very forthcoming about it all, weren’t you?”

Magnus squirmed before stretching to his full length. He was feeling perfectly fine this morning, and he eyed Eva with a hopeful look that made her smile as she settled back in bed. Magnus snuggled up close and fondled his way down her body, making small appreciative comments that had Eva blushing and laughing in turn.

“See?” he said, taking her hand to place it on his sex. “There’s nothing wrong with me. At least nothing serious.” She ran her fingers over him, fisted her hand round him and grinned at his responding little sound.

“Typically male,” she teased, “as long as your cock’s still standing, everything is well with the world.” He laid her down on her back and slid himself inside, using his elbows to keep his weight off her.

“Well you have to admit there’s some truth to that. What could possibly be wrong with a man with an erection like mine?”

“Braggart,” she muttered.

“You don’t mean that,” he whispered into her hair.

“No,” she whispered back, “it’s a very, very nice erection.”



## Edinburgh, December 2009

"You've lost quite a lot of weight," John said encouragingly to Magnus, "so surely you can treat yourself to a piece of pie"

Magnus shook his head at the offered dish. "I'll stick to my coffee."

"What, no pie?" Diane looked at Magnus suspiciously. "You love my pie." A quick look flashed between Magnus and Eva, and Diane felt her mental radar go into red alert. "What's the matter?" she asked, one hand grasping Magnus firmly by the forearm. He shifted restlessly in his chair.

"I'm just a bit under the weather," Magnus said, "an off day, that's all."

"You don't have off days," John put in, "never in all the years I've known you have you had an off day."

"Everyone's entitled to some of those. So today I'm having one." He gave them both an irritated glare and went back to his coffee.

"Right; what's going on?" Diane moved the candles out of the way and sank her eyes into Magnus, and when he refused to say anything, she shifted her gaze to Eva instead. Eva shrugged helplessly, indicating that she couldn't really tell them, could she?

"What do the kids want for Christmas?" Magnus said.

"Don't change the subject! Besides, you already know – you've even bought their presents. You told me so, last week." Diane moved over to crouch down by Magnus. "Please, Magnus? You're scaring me." She caressed his cheek. The blond hair was still thick, even if liberally streaked with grey, but his normally bright blue eyes looked very tired, sunk into his face.

"Me too," John said. Magnus looked from one to the other, exhaled loudly and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I have a tumour in my head," he said bleakly. "I didn't want to tell you. Not now, this close to Christmas." Eva laid an arm over his shoulders but he shrugged it off, shaking his head. "So," he went on breezily, "now that I've told you, can we pretend I haven't?"

"Of course we can't!" Diane exploded. She wasn't going to cry, she admonished herself sternly, not cry now. John took her hand and gripped it hard, and when she threw him a look she could see he was struggling not to cry as well. "Is it malignant?" Diane asked in a more normal tone, aware that the children had turned towards them.

"We don't know," Eva replied, "not until they operate."

"Operate?" Isaac was suddenly by Magnus side. "Operate on you?"

"I knew this would happen," Magnus muttered, "now look what you've done." He turned to face his grandson. "Yes, Isaac. They have to operate my head." He ran a hand through his abundant hair and sighed. "They'll cut it all off, making me look like an overage skinhead."

Isaac giggled. "With army boots?"

Magnus rolled his eyes and promised that no, he wasn't going to start wearing army boots or even get himself a tattoo. He grew serious and took Isaac's hand.

"I'll be alright, but I guess I'll be pretty sick for some time." He tilted his head at the boy. "Will you come and visit me?"

Diane frowned but John caught her eyes and indicated she should hold her tongue – this was not her business, this was between Magnus and Isaac.

"Yeah," Isaac assured his Offa and wound his arms around Magnus neck.

"Will you die?" Isaac asked Magnus some days later.

"Everyone dies, Isaac," Magnus replied calmly. But not yet, he screamed inside, not now when he was still in relatively good shape and had looked forward to years and years of retirement to do all the things he had been putting off.

"I don't want you to," Isaac said in a small voice.

"Me neither." Magnus set down the empty mixing bowl between them and in silence they used their fingers to scrape off the remaining chocolate icing.

"I'll be alright," Magnus said, attempting a smile.

Isaac nodded, unconvinced. "Sure."

## Edinburgh, July 2010

Isaac tiptoed into the room, clutching a parcel. Magnus regarded him from under his lashes, feeling like a dried out husk, with not a gram of excess flesh on him. It was an effort just to raise his head from the pillow, but at least the doctors were quietly hopeful, saying that the operation had gone well, and the subsequent chemo seemed to have done its job.

“The third time in six months,” Magnus had grumbled when Eva drove him to the hospital two weeks ago, but now he was back home, with strict instructions to rest and eat so as to regain his strength. “Eat what?” Magnus had asked hopefully.

“Anything,” the doctor had replied, smiling slightly, “at least to begin with.”

“The problem with that,” Magnus had confided to John, “is that I have no appetite. Bloody waste.”

Isaac shuffled on the spot and cleared his throat. Magnus opened one eye and smiled at his grandson’s silent inspection.

“Do I look dead? Because I sure feel dead.”

Isaac smiled back and shook his head. “I don’t think dead people talk. And they don’t fart.”

“Fart? I don’t fart.”

Isaac sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose. “Farts, many farts. Here,” he went on extending the parcel in his arms, “it’s for you.” Magnus sat up gingerly and Isaac placed the package on his knees and retreated to stand by the wall, his eyes hanging off his Offa’s hands.

“It just takes one knot,” Magnus teased, “not twenty.”

“I’m no good at knots,” Isaac grumbled.

“I can see that,” Magnus laughed weakly.

Once he had managed to undo the wrapping, Magnus sat in dumbfounded silence, staring down at the picture in his lap. He didn’t need to ask to know that he was looking at Hillview, as it had been that summer when Isaac was there. Everywhere his eyes went they were drawn to a detail, a suggestion of life, and he found himself expecting to see the casement window open and a hand appear to shake out a quilt, or hear the door to the kitchen creak ajar. He had never seen anything like it – except for Mercedes’ portrait of Hector Olivares – and he swallowed heavily.

“How do you do this, Isaac? How do you make it spring from the canvas so vibrant, so full of concealed life?”

Isaac leaned over his shoulder and put a finger on one of the windows. “I paint what’s hidden; I know that in there Aunt Joan is sewing, and there” his finger moved to the kitchen door, “Sarah is probably feeding Marc.” His nail scraped lightly over the large tree that overhung the house. “Just beyond, Mama is out walking, and at any moment Matthew will come from the stable and want his dinner.”

Magnus squinted, his heart fluttering when he saw something light dash from behind the tree, a vague shade stride towards the kitchen and then stop and wait, and suddenly

there were two hazy figures walking hand in hand in the direction of the open door. He didn't quite know what to do; the canvas in his hands scared him witless, because reasonably it was impossible to paint something like this. At the same time, he just wanted to drown in it, to sit here in his bed and peek into the life of his lost daughter like some kind of voyeur. His big hands squeezed down hard on the simple wooden frame.

"Promise me one thing, Isaac Lind," he said hoarsely looking at his grandson. "Swear to me that you will never, ever do anything else but paint."

Isaac flushed with pleasure. "You like it?"

"Like it?" Magnus laughed and shook his head. "I've never seen anything like it. I had no idea one could paint like this." He sat back against the pillows and stared at Isaac.

"You're a bloody genius."

Isaac went a bright red. "I don't know about that, I just paint what I see."

"Okay, you're not a genius. You just have something severely wrong with your eyesight." Both of them laughed, avoiding each other's eyes.

Magnus was mesmerised; all through that afternoon he sat in his bed and saw the life of his Alex take shape. A small girl flashed by on her way to what he supposed was the stable, Matthew stooped to help the nameless blond boy stand after he had taken a spill on the cobbles. He actually heard Alex singing, saw her nurse a new child, her hands like butterflies on the lace covered little head.

Magnus hid his face in his arms; hallucinations, Magnus Lind, indications that all was not well in his head. As in response, a headache bloomed painfully just behind his left brow. Besides, it was impossible to paint like this, and the fact that Isaac had created this...this... oh God, this piece of magic, made Magnus guts tighten into uncomfortable knots. And still he couldn't stop staring at the picture. Alex laughing at something Matthew said, the way she stood to meet him, her eyes shifting into a blue so full of promise it made Magnus blush. Or Matthew, standing silent in the shade of a tree, his eyes never leaving his wife. Marc, his arms held wide, swooping round his younger siblings before coming to an abrupt stop. Marc, running back towards his mother, gesticulating wildly, and the whole family was moving towards the house, their worried eyes scanning the horizon he couldn't see.

Magnus sat back against the headrest and closed his eyes, sliding the picture in under his sheets. No more; not today. For the first time in several years he was aware of a feeling of apprehension as he thought of Alex. Blurred images of soldiers, of an angry Matthew trying to fight himself free of rough hands, made him swallow loudly. How was Alex to survive in her new surroundings if her man was taken from her?

"Keep her safe," he whispered to whatever deity was available to listen. "Don't let her die." He half sobbed at the absolute idiocy of that request. She was dead; how could she not be? "Not that young," he amended, "not for very many years more."

## Edinburgh, January 2011

"Are you sure?" Diane kissed Magnus on his cheek.

Magnus smiled. "I'll manage, and if nothing else Isaac will help me."

"Hmm," Diane eyed her daughters. "You behave, the both of you," she said, receiving very hurt looks in return.

"We always do," Olivia said, with Alice nodding that yes, they always did. Magnus suppressed a smile. Diane's twin daughters had enough energy to power a midsize town, and unfortunately very little of that energy was directed at behaving.

"John will be back around nine," Diane said as she rushed for the door. Magnus nodded and made for the sofa, coughing discreetly into his sleeve.

"I made you some coffee," Isaac said.

"You did?" Matthew sank down with a small grunt. "That was nice of you." He stretched his long legs and wiggled his toes experimentally. His headaches were back, but so far he had chosen not to say anything, and he wondered if perhaps this was causing the increasingly more detailed images he saw when he studied Isaac's little picture. Magnus sipped at the coffee and twisted his head to look at the small pencilled drawing that was lying on the table. Oh my God!

"Isaac?" he held the paper carefully between his thumb and forefinger. "What is this?" Isaac snatched at the paper but Magnus evaded his hands. "What?"

"I'm just testing," Isaac mumbled, "and so far they don't seem to work."

"Holy Matilda," Magnus groaned, "is this what I think it is?" He knew it was, there was no other explanation for the miniature maelstrom that decorated the paper he was holding. A hereditary gift... Magnus groaned inside. Mercedes came from a line of magically talented people – witches, if one was to be precise. Not that Magnus really believed in witches – after all, he was a scientist – but it was difficult to deny their existence after having experienced one in the flesh, so to say. "Is it?" he demanded.

Isaac nodded. "It's a time tunnel, or it's supposed to be. You know, like the ones Mercedes painted." He grabbed at the paper and scrunched it together with irritation. "I can't make them work."

"But why? Why do you want to paint something that dangerous? Look what happened to you!" Sucked into one of Mercedes' paintings some years back, Isaac had looked so grim when he described his fall through time that Magnus could only conclude the experience was beyond harrowing.

Isaac opened his eyes very wide. "It's for you Offa. I thought that maybe you'd like to go and see her, once more..." He bit his lip and looked away. "...before you die."

"I'm not going to die," Magnus said grimly.

"How do you know?" Isaac replied with surprising sharpness. He dropped his eyes to the table. "You're not well, are you? I can see your head hurts."

"No," Magnus admitted, "I suppose I'm not. But I'm not about to die, not yet." The boy just nodded and came over to sit beside him.

## Edinburgh, May 2011

He was sick and tired of being stuck in hospital. If he saw one more nurse approaching him with a syringe, Magnus feared he might actually kick at her. He said as much to John, who shrugged and patted him on the leg. That made Magnus want to kick him – he wasn't some sort of restive horse that needed soothing, was he? He hated the pity he saw in John's face, he hated how Diane had morphed into a chirpy motivational consultant, and most of all he hated the look of dread in Eva's eyes.

"I want to go back to Hillview," Magnus said, "I want to see if we can find them among the gravestones." He sighed and looked out of the window at the dull grey sky. Bloody rain! Two weeks more or less nonstop...

"Why?" John said. "You've been there once. There won't be more to see this time, will there?"

Magnus didn't really know how to explain; at least not without showing John Isaac's painting of Hillview and that was something he didn't want to do. Partly because he was convinced that if John saw it, he would take the picture away from him, partly because maybe John wouldn't see what he saw in it and that would confirm he was living in a world increasingly defined by hallucinations.

"I keep on dreaming of her," he said, "I see her and her children, and I would just like to know..."

"If they're dead?" John asked brutally.

Magnus glowered at him. "I know they're dead! But more along the lines if they lived long, happy lives."

"Just because someone lives a long life it doesn't follow that it was happy." John sounded irritated.

"True enough," Magnus said.

"And what if you find they all died of the plague or something in 1669?" John went on. "Is that something you really want to know?"

Magnus shook his head dejectedly. No, he definitely didn't. "I never looked last time I was there, it sort of got to me, to wander around among those sad little tombstones and know that in all probability one of them would have Alex' name on it."

"You're not going to Hillview. Not now, not later. And you," John turned to frown at Isaac, "you're going to promise here and now that you won't help your Offa go there."

Isaac squirmed under John's stern eyes but finally nodded, once.

Magnus waited until John left the room before twisting his head to look properly at Isaac.

"How's your painting going?"

Isaac hitched his shoulders. It was all very much black and orange, he explained, with the odd dash of white or red.

"I didn't mean that," Magnus said, "I was talking about your other little experiments."

Isaac made a face. "I try and I try, but they just don't come out right."

“Well I suppose it would be difficult, not the easiest of subjects, is it? Time is rather elusive.” Magnus patted his grandson fondly on his arm. “Leave it be, Isaac. You can’t paint your way through time, it’s impossible.”

“Mercedes could.” Isaac scrunched up his brow, staring off through the rain spattered window. “I just have to paint what I saw, that’s all that she did. She painted the colours of time.”

“So time is only blue and green?” Magnus teased, very uncomfortable with this whole discussion. What little hair he had left on his scalp was bristling with instinctive fear; it was impossible to paint portals through time and yet Mercedes had done so repeatedly. A witch, his wife was a witch, and now his grandson... *Herre Gud*, Magnus Lind thought, and for the first time since his confirmation at the age of fifteen, he actually recited a prayer, a heartfelt plea that God keep his grandson safe.

“Mostly,” Isaac said, “but there’s white and red, even some black and ... yellow! Yes, that’s it, yellow!” He beamed at Magnus. “That’s what I’ve been missing,”

Magnus levered himself into a more upright position and looked his grandson firmly in the eyes.

“Be careful, Isaac. No falling through time, alright?”

Isaac made a dismissive sound. “Of course not, once was quite enough. And it’s not for me, is it? It’s for you, Offa.”

“Hi,” Eva’s voice startled Magnus, and he blinked repeatedly in an effort to clear his brain.

“Good nap?” she asked, drawing up a chair to sit beside him.

“No,” he replied tersely, “awful actually.” All of him hurt. His mouth was the texture of sandpaper, his tongue was half numb, and every time he swallowed, he felt a burning acidic sensation along the back of his throat. He hated the bed, the inane colour of the walls, how his bum ached whenever he shifted in the bed, and the constant bloody ringing in his head.

“They’ll send you home on Friday,” Eva said.

“I can’t wait,” he muttered. “Let’s hope I’m still alive by then.”

Eva muffled what sounded like a sob, and Magnus took her hand.

“Sorry,” he said gruffly, “it’s just...” He turned to face the window and half closed his eyes. Alex... he wanted Alex and Mercedes, but he couldn’t exactly tell Eva that. “Bad day,” he said, “I feel so bloody old.”

### **Edinburgh, July 2011**

“I did it!” Isaac sounded triumphant, and handed two small paintings to Magnus. Two canvases the size of a pocket book filled with entrancing swirls of colour. Magnus inspected them closely, and to his surprise he felt his insides begin to heave, while his brain whirled with vertigo. Generally he had been unaffected by Mercedes’ paintings, but these two...

“Are they for me?” he asked, handling them with some reluctance.

Isaac nodded eagerly. “One to go and one to come back with.”

“Like a return ticket,” Magnus said and reclined back against the pillow on his deck chair. It was an agreeably warm summer day, and the whole garden was perfumed by the scent of his roses and lavender bushes. His garden was at present rather unkempt, but Magnus didn’t have the energy to prune and dig and generally potter about as he used to. But then as Eva said consolingly, one or two years of wild uninhibited growth was not a major issue – Magnus would tame it back into shape once he felt strong enough. If he ever felt strong enough ...

“No more.” Magnus locked eyes with his grandson. Isaac pretended not to understand, but Magnus wagged a finger at him. “Oh, no you don’t. No more, Isaac. Promise me you’ll not try to paint something like these again. Ever.”

“Ever?” Isaac sounded doubtful. He mumbled something about having enjoyed the challenge, and now that he knew how to do it, maybe he could—

“Ever,” Magnus repeated firmly, “it’s too dangerous. What if one of your sisters were to fall into one of them? Imagine Olivia ending up somewhere totally different, all alone.”

Isaac mulled this over, chewing at his cheek. “I promise,” he said with a sigh, caressing one of the canvases with his finger.

“Cross your heart?”

Isaac tried to avert his eyes but finally nodded sullenly. “Cross my heart.”

“Good.” Magnus extended his hand to Isaac. “Pull me up, will you? And then we’ll go inside and see if we can find some ice-cream.”

“Homemade?”

Magnus eyed him with amusement. “You’re awfully spoiled, Isaac Lind. But yes, as it happens homemade.”

Later that afternoon, Magnus went into the studio and opened the windows wide to let in some fresh air into the turpentine heavy room. Isaac was extremely organised in his painting, surprisingly so for a boy not yet twelve; brushes stood stacked in different tins according to size, canvases and papers were pushed into orderly piles on the large work table, and the paints were carefully laid out in a huge semicircle. Magnus sank down to sit on a paint-spattered stool. Mercedes old cardigan still hung off its hook, and even now, twelve years since she last used it, it still smelled of her, of citrus fruits and spices, of rose-petals and bergamot. Magnus sighed; he missed Mercedes, and he hated the constant throbbing behind his temples.

“No major improvement,” the doctor had told him earlier today. “But on the other hand it hasn’t grown either.”

“And that’s good, right?” Eva had said hopefully. The new doctor had assured them that yes it was, but Magnus wasn’t entirely convinced. A tumour the size of a meatball in your head could never be a good thing, no matter how little it grew. Except for his recurring headaches, he did feel much better, and this morning he had even been able to show Eva how much better he was, making her laugh when he got out of bed and bowed afterwards, insisting that she applaud. But the headaches... He shook himself and turned back towards the easel, placing the painting Isaac had made of Hillview on it.

He looked at it for a long time and then lifted it off, standing it against the wall with the back side out. He picked up one of the small blue squares Isaac had given him today and propped it up, twisting his head this way and that as he tried to follow the brushstrokes. His body cramped in alarm, his mouth filled with bile, and before his eyes swam long garish snakes of blue and green.

“Bloody unbelievable,” he muttered and let it join the Hillview picture by the wall, bending down to retrieve the last little painting, the return ticket. He didn’t intend to; there was just something there in the midst of all that blue and green, and he narrowed his eyes to try and see what it was, that little blob of seductive light, and to his immense surprise he couldn’t pull his eyes away from it, his heart thundering as he recognised his daughter, standing all by herself in a shaft of light. Vaguely he registered that the door opened and shut downstairs, he heard John call his name, but he couldn’t reply, all his senses trapped in the whirlwind of light and colour that emanated from the painting. He stumbled, sending one of the jars of turpentine crashing to the floor.

There was a searing pain in his head, razor-sharp edges digging into his brain, and he was falling, and all around him time was tumbling like a maddened combination lock, teeth opening and snapping shut. Children; he could hear the high fluting voice of children, and out of the corner of his eye he saw a girl flash by him, green eyes wide with curiosity, dark hair bouncing untidily around her head. The ground was approaching with horrifying speed, and then there was something around his legs, a firm hold on his belt pulling him backwards and it hurt, Jesus how it hurt, and for a second he was convinced his eyes would pop out with the pressure. He collapsed into a heap with John’s arms hard around him.

“Why?” Magnus rasped, his chest heaving. “Why did you pull me back?” He coughed, his mouth filling with the taste of blood. His vision was dominated by multicoloured shimmering bubbles, floating counter-clockwise. Almost there... he had seen the room around him fade away, seen moors and fields rush up to meet him.

“I couldn’t let you go,” John said, “please don’t make me lose you as well.”

Magnus laughed and sat up bit by bit. “Lose me? I’m going to be dead within the year anyway.” He spat into a paper napkin, noting disinterestedly that he was bleeding from his mouth – and his nose.

“You don’t know that, and for Isaac’s sake Magnus, please ... He’s only eleven, and he needs you.” John stood up, grabbed a palette knife and slashed the small painting to shreds. He was trembling all over, his skin acquiring a sickly hue that reminded Magnus of raw scallops. “Where did you find it? I thought we had destroyed all of Mercedes’ damned time windows!”

“Apparently not.” Magnus kept his eyes firmly averted from the other two canvases. “Help me up, will you? I think I need a whisky. Or make that two whiskies.” On the way down, Magnus realised that for the first time in months there was no headache – none at all.

“It is quite extraordinary,” the doctor said, “and I must admit I can’t really explain what has happened. It’s as if the tumour has shrivelled into nonexistence. Absolutely unbelievable, a miracle!”

Magnus sat back in his chair, stunned. The doctor kept on talking, a long detailed description of what his brain looked like now, but he wasn’t really listening. He was trying to assimilate the fact that he wasn’t going to die – at least not any time soon.

“Good news!” Eva beamed through her tears, making Magnus grip her hand even harder.

“Yes,” he said, “very good news.”

The young doctor adjusted her glasses and looked at him. “Let’s just hope it stays this way.”

When they got back home Magnus complained about being tired, and Eva commanded him to go and lie down while she made dinner.

“Alone?” he asked in a disappointed voice. Eva laughed and kissed him on his cheek.

“Start by taking a nap and then we’ll see.”

Magnus squeezed her backside, made her promise that she would be up shortly and made his way up the stairs. It was gone! Well, for now it was gone, but from the expression in the doctor’s eyes he had no doubts that it would come back – some day it would. He tiptoed into the study and extracted the little picture from its hiding place, running a light finger over the swirling blues. When the picture began to hum he closed his eyes and returned it to its keeping place by touch alone.

His bedroom was agreeably cool, and Magnus stretched out on his back, pillowing his head on his arms. Somehow the tumour had been affected by his little excursion into time, he was sure of it. The immediate disappearance of the headache and the constant nausea, how he suddenly brimmed with energy after months of listlessness... and now the doctor had confirmed it, so astounded by this turn of events that she had even called it a miracle.

He rolled over onto his side and gazed at absolutely nothing on his white wall. He yawned and moulded the pillow into a more comfortable shape, pulling up his legs towards his chest. He’d had but a glimpse of his daughter, standing with her face upturned towards him, but he was sure that if John hadn’t stopped him, he would have landed at her feet. It woke a longing in him, one he quickly submerged, because his life was here, with Eva and Isaac and John and all the rest of them. And yet... he smiled, wondering if Alex would be surprised to see him come strolling down the lane to Hillview.

“Idiot,” he said out loud, “of course she would be.”

“What?” Eva’s voice came floating from the doorway.

“Nothing,” Magnus said, rolling over to face her, “nothing at all.” He opened his arms and scooted back to make room for her. “Come here, I don’t think I want to take a nap.”

“So it’s just gone?” Isaac sounded incredulous.

Magnus nodded and hugged him again. “For now at least. According to the doctor it’s very gone, zapped to ashes, somehow.”

Isaac did something he generally didn't do very often now that he was almost twelve, he wrapped his arms hard around his Offa, hid his nose against his chest and cried.

"Hey," Magnus said, "I'm okay, Isaac. I told you, didn't I? Right from the beginning I told you I'd be alright."

"But you didn't believe it," Isaac sobbed, "you were just saying that for my sake."

"I had to," Magnus told him, "and I was lying just as much for my sake as for yours."

Isaac sat up, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"Isaac!" Magnus said. "Use a paper napkin or something. Now you've got snot all over your shirt."

"So?" Isaac looked at Magnus for a long time. "Don't lie to me next time, promise me you'll always tell me the truth, even when it's bad."

"Promise," Magnus said.

"Cross your heart?"

Magnus nodded and drew a cross over his chest with his fingers.

That same evening, Magnus was alone in the house. Eva was off to some concert or other, and after a nice meal complemented by an excellent wine, Magnus was standing in the long passage that led from the front door to the kitchen, surrounded by photos of Alex, from the day she was born to one golden summer day a couple of weeks before she disappeared. Twenty-six years documented on his walls, and it seemed to have whizzed by in minutes. He stopped before his own particular favourite and rested his forefinger lightly on the glass.

"*Min lilla flicka,*" he sighed, "my little girl..."