

Henry Frey versus the Dark Santa

Prologue 1

Santa Claus is an elf. His name is Klasodin. He lives in the city of Alvahame with his race of elves, the Aesir. You'll never find Alvahame - however hard you look. It's hidden in the elven realm in the Arctic, accessed only by those who possess Madjik, and protected by a shield of ice that surrounds it like a dome.

At the very centre of Alvahame is Iddrassil, the Great Tree. It stands at over half a mile high and houses the school and the centre of Klasodin's gift making and delivery operation. Buried among its roots is the ValdFyurring, the Epicentre of the Aesir's Madjik. Every form of Madjik needs an Epicentre – that is where the Madjik comes from. The ValdFyurring connects Klasodin and the Aesir to the wider world and to humankind, storing everything the Aesir know about humans and identical versions of every gift Klasodin has ever given.

When Klasodin first started delivering presents to children, he discovered that having a human child as a helper made his Madjik stronger. Since then he has always had one. The ValdFyurring would pick out the Valdiri - five children with strong faith in Santa Claus and an Affinity for Madjik. Then Klasodin would choose himself a helper, who would be known as Glondir – the title given to every official human helper.

Christmas was coming, but Alvahame was in trouble. Klasodin was under attack. Omnitec, a powerful company set on world domination, saw him as their main competitor in the toy market and would resort to any means to get rid of him. The Morivari, led by Morikend their king, were another race of elves living in the Arctic and were mortal enemies of the Aesir. There was also a traitor among the Aesir working against Klasodin from inside Alvahame, who called himself Grimmir.

As Aesir Madjik started to fail and gifts went missing, it was time for Klasodin to bring in a new human helper. The ValdFyurring picked out five Valdiri, but four of them died in one night, leaving an orphaned boy from London called Henry Frey. But after a troubled couple of years, Henry was losing his faith in Santa Claus. Alvahame had just brought in the Black List and Henry would be on it.

Klasodin made Henry his new human helper and brought him to Alvahame. Henry stayed with Klasodin in his home and went to school in Iddrassil. He made friends with Ellodine, an elf in his class who helped him settle in and discover the possibilities of Madjik.

More gifts vanished from the ValdFyurring, then Klasodin disappeared. Henry and Ellodine set off on a dangerous adventure over the snow to find him and with the help of their friends, they managed to save Christmas and Alvahame.

But Grimnir was still on the loose. Omnitec survived. And the Morivari weren't about to make peace with their mortal enemies.

Still, lessons had been learned. The Aesir of Alvahame resolved never to make the same mistakes again and Klasodin decided to adopt a different approach.

The trouble was his enemies were working just as hard at finding new ways to destroy him and ruin Christmas once and for all.

Prologue 2

It was a Saturday in mid-November. Crowds of children were already gathered at the port of a small seaside town in the Netherlands. They'd been singing songs about Sinterklaas for an hour before the steamboat appeared on the water and everyone started cheering. The steamboat pulled up and out came Santa Claus riding his white horse. He was greeted by the mayor of the town, who gave Sinterklaas his official welcome. It happened every year.

Santa Claus rode his white horse to the centre of town, led by a festive street parade, cheered on by crowds of enthusiastic children and parents. His helpers threw sweets to bystanders lining the streets and led them in Christmas songs.

The same Sinterklaas was seen on his white horse in five different towns in Holland - and in Antwerp in Belgium. Every person who had seen him found themselves saying it was the best Arrival of Santa Claus ever. The man playing Sinterklaas was different. There was something special about him. Something magical.

The Thanksgiving Day parade in New York was the busiest, the most special and most magical anyone could remember. There was something about the Santa Claus that Macy's had hired this year. The kids all said he had to be the real one. None of the grownups found the words to argue.

Families all over the Netherlands opened their presents on St Nicholas, December 5th, with children and adults saying they were sure they had seen the same Sinterklaas on his white horse riding over the rooftops, delivering their presents himself.

A little German town in the mountains had a tradition of its own. It was said Santa Claus began delivering presents right there – after a little girl saw a man on a flying horse in the night sky over her house and opened her bedroom window to leave them some food. In return he left her a present. Then word began to spread. Now every year, Santa Claus rode his sleigh

through the streets of the town during the Santa Claus Festival, leaving presents on every open windowsill.

No one knew where this year's Santa Claus had come from. It wasn't the usual guy. His reindeer was different as well. But they all agreed he was the best they'd ever seen. All the children were sure he was the real Santa Claus – the man seen riding his flying horse over the rooftops centuries ago.

Soon toy shops and department stores over Great Britain were filled with crowds chatting enthusiastically about the special Santa Claus that had appeared this year and engaged with all the kids in a way no one had before.

No one noticed it was the same Santa Claus appearing in the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States, Germany and Britain, taking the name of Sinterklaas, Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Weihnachtsmann or Pere Noel, depending on where he was – or that he didn't really look like they expected Santa Claus to look. He was tall, more lean and angular with prominent cheekbones. He wasn't particularly jolly either. But he knew every child by name. He understood what they wanted and what they really needed. In return, they loved him.

The fact he wasn't even human escaped them completely.

His reindeer wasn't even a real reindeer. He was a horse – the same horse seen flying over German rooftops centuries ago.

If the crowds had really looked, they'd have seen the same people lingering just out of sight in every country - watching closely, analysing every onlooker as a potential threat - as if this Santa Claus' safety was the most important thing in the world.

Of course, they weren't human either.

Madjik has a way of not being seen.

With Christmas just days away, Klasodin began to look back on a successful season. He was closer to humankind than he had been in a long time. Belief in him was stronger, which meant his Madjik was stronger too. It was going to be a great Christmas, he was sure of it.

At least that was what he told himself.

Prologue 3

Fanghame was a prison buried deep underground, carved out of the rock. It was impossible to break out once you were imprisoned there and finding it at all was almost as difficult - even if you knew roughly where it was.

Locating and breaking into Fanghame prison had taken Morikend a lot longer than he would ever admit. But he had managed it eventually – and without his enemies in Alvahame having any idea what he was up to.

He made his way inside, along a narrow corridor squeezed between two walls of black rock and down some stairs that spiralled into the depths of the Earth.

It was pitch black. Morikend was used to moving around in the darkness, but the dark Madjik coming off the walls was unsettling. He couldn't place it or where it had come from. It wasn't Svaramar, his own dark Madjik, and it didn't belong to anyone else he knew of either. Despite the time and effort Morikend and his elves had put into finding and breaking into Fanghame, he couldn't wait to get out of there.

The walls opened out into a fork – a corridor leading to his left or more stairs disappearing further down. Morikend strode left along the corridor, hoping those he was searching for were there. He found seven cells, but none of the occupants were of any interest to him.

Three more staircases took him to three more corridors, each with seven cells. But none of them held who he was looking for.

More stairs and a fifth corridor.

A familiar face peered through the bars. Bayne the half-elf had been imprisoned in Fanghame since just before Christmas nearly a year ago. The tops of his ears were bleeding. Morikend's eyes homed in on the sharp piece of rock that Bayne had used to cut off the pointy parts. But Bayne always did that. What unnerved Morikend was the way Fanghame

prison had changed the half-elf and former Gaard. His face had turned pale grey. His eyes were the same charcoal colour as the walls – as if the strange Madjik in them had leached into Bayne during his time there.

Morikend braced himself for the effort that was to come. It took longer than usual for the power to build up inside him. The dark Morivar Madjik known as Svaramar flared from his hand like a black flame. He hurled it at the bars.

The bars snapped like twigs.

Morikend stepped back, taken by surprise. It was too easy.

“That wasn’t just me, was it?” he said. “That was him.”

“He’s become a part of this place,” Bayne replied. “And it’s part of him. If they’d known what they were doing, they would have never left him here.”

Bayne stepped over the bars and they made their way to the stairs.

“How far?” Morikend asked, a sense of dread crawling through his insides.

“To the bottom,” came the reply.

Four more flights of stairs took them down to the ninth level – where there was just one cell. Even now they were more used to the pitch black, it still took Morikend’s eyes a few seconds to pick out the cell’s occupant. After all the effort he’d gone to, Morikend expected him to be waiting, clinging to the bars and desperate to leave.

But he wasn’t.

A dark figure crouched in the far corner of the cell, his palms pressed to the walls – as if he hadn’t noticed Morikend was there.

Morikend scowled and watched impatiently.

“Did you do it?” a voice like grinding rocks came from the corner of the cell.

“Of course I did,” Morikend replied, trying to sound as casual as he usually did. “It’s been there for months and they have no idea.”

The figure crouching in the corner didn't move.

Morikend gazed through the bars in silence. They had never met before – they had stayed in touch by passing messages through the rock – a system Morikend had devised himself. It was difficult to know how dangerous his new ally really was. But it felt like the one in the prison cell held all the power – and Morikend hated it.

“You know how long it took to find you here?” he said, the boredom getting the better of him already.

“Taking the time to dig here was worth it,” the figure replied. “Spending so long in this prison was a gift.” He stood up, straightening himself to his full height. “I wield a power greater than I imagined. I am ready.”

Chapter One

Central London was eerily quiet. Regent Street looked like a bright white sheet curving between two grand terraces as Henry Frey trudged down it, his boots crunching in the deep snow. The rest of his foster family were marching on ahead of him. It had taken them ages to get there, but they were too excited to care. Henry wasn't excited at all – but he didn't let the others know that. No point spoiling it for them.

It was a week until Christmas. London had been freezing cold and covered in deep snow since late November. Pretty much everything had ground to a halt. A few underground lines were running limited services, but there were no buses. Most shops, theatres and restaurants were shut. So instead of being crowded with shoppers, lights and noise, London was like a snow-covered ghost town.

But SuperToys was open. It was the largest toy store in London now. Henry and his foster family were going there to meet Santa Claus like they did last year.

Archie, Emily, Tabitha and Oliver disappeared inside and their foster mother Mrs Mcready followed them in. Rosie went in next and Henry was last. He stamped the snow off his boots on the step, then stepped inside the store and the warmth hit him. He looked around him and felt an overwhelming surge of disappointment. A year ago, the queue had been longer and the store a lot busier.

He joined the back of the queue with Rosie and puffed out his cheeks. They were lining up to meet Santa Claus. Not the real one, but still. He should have been more excited.

He knew the real Santa Claus - his name was Klasodin. He'd been to Alvahame, the city where Klasodin lived. He'd stayed there and gone to school with elves his age. He'd made friends. He'd helped Klasodin save Christmas. He thought they were friends too.

He rolled up his coat sleeve and examined his Hafskod, the gold band with the silver watch face around his wrist. It looked like a watch. To anyone else, it was. But it connected him to the ValdFyurring, the Epicentre of Madjik in Alvahame. It was how he communicated with Klasodin and his friends in Alvahame.

But things had changed. Henry hadn't heard from anyone in Alvahame in months. He'd tried sending messages, but he'd never received a reply.

He'd been shut out. They were all ignoring him and he had no friends in Alvahame anymore. They had found someone else to be Glondir, Klasodin's official human helper. They'd dropped the last kid easily enough. Now they wanted someone better - a kid who hadn't been on the Black List and done all the things he'd done.

Tabitha appeared by his side and started playing with the Hafskod. She was fascinated by "Henry's special watch" – he didn't know why. But it didn't bother him. She'd never work out what it really was and he didn't need it anymore.

After his big adventure, none of his foster family had noticed anything different about him. He was spending a lot more time with them and actually enjoying himself. But there was a whole part of his life that they knew nothing about. Sometimes, it felt like he was pretending and didn't really belong there either.

The queue shrank until Henry had a clear view of the stage decked out in red carpet and fake snow, the chair spray-painted gold to look like a throne and the man in the Santa suit sitting on it, listening intently to the little boy sitting on his lap. There were two elves – young women with red makeup, bright green outfits and plastic pointy ears. Two other people lingered close by – a man and a woman in dark suits. They looked like security. But who would attack Santa Claus?

Henry could think of a few people who'd love to attack Santa Claus and destroy him, but that only applied to the real one.

Klasodin's enemies were still out there somewhere. Grimmir had disappeared. Omnitec, the massive company that sold toys and gadgets while secretly dealing weapons on the side had taken a hit, but they were still one of three multinationals vying for the biggest share of the world's toy market. Morikend and his race of elves, the Morivari, would try again to destroy Klasodin. Maybe they already had. Henry hadn't heard or seen anything of them. But he had nothing to do with Alvahame anymore.

Henry's gaze settled on the man in the red suit. There was something familiar about him – he just couldn't work out what it was.

Klasodin wasn't fat and jolly like Santa Claus was supposed to be. The longer Henry watched the man in the Santa suit, it looked like he wasn't either. The thick red coat made him look fatter than he really was. There was no bursting into random bouts of laughter and no "ho ho ho". But the fake Santa was listening intently - like every word coming out of the boy's mouth was the most important thing anyone had ever said.

The man and woman in the dark suits lingered. They never stood right next to the man in the Santa suit or each other, but they were never more than a few metres away either. Henry could tell they were trying to listen to every word the man in the Santa suit spoke, but they darted glances around them as if they expected an attack any second. They were on edge.

Soon it was Archie's turn. He was four years old – and the youngest. They had all agreed back at home that it should be youngest first.

"Hello, Archie," the man in the Santa suit said. He had a deep, warm voice.

Archie chatted to him like an old friend.

Henry frowned. No one had been round to ask what their names were.

The man listened with the same enthusiasm to everything Archie said. His hands were positioned around Archie like a protective wall – as if any attacker would have to go through him first.

Just what Klasodin would do.

The man in the Santa suit set Archie down and Tabitha climbed on.

“Hello, Tabitha.”

It was like she’d known him all her life.

By the time Emily and Oliver had taken their turns, Henry was sure he knew the man in the Santa suit from somewhere. He just couldn’t work out how or where.

Mrs Mcready asked Rosie if she wanted to go up. Rosie shook her head. She was twelve now, a year younger than Henry.

Mrs Mcready turned to him.

“Henry?”

“No thanks.”

“Shame,” she said. “The invitation included all of you.”

She pulled a card from her coat pocket and showed him. It was an invitation from Santa Claus addressed to Archie, Tabitha, Emily, Oliver, Rosie and Henry.

“We’re too old,” Rosie shrugged.

“Do they do that?” Henry said. “Send invitations to people?”

Mrs Mcready shrugged.

But Henry knew they didn’t. No one else had been carrying an invitation. He looked about him, wondering who would go to such lengths to get them into a central London toy store.

His eyes met the man in the Santa suit, who gazed back at him. They darted to the man and woman standing close by.

All three of them looked right at him – as if they knew him.

Then something happened.

The man’s face changed. It became older and leaner. He was bigger and taller than Henry had realised before. The beard was real. The coat was not a costume.

Henry was looking at Klasodin himself.

The man and the woman weren't wearing dark suits anymore. The man was suddenly a lot taller - too tall for a human being. He had pointed ears, long golden-brown hair, prominent cheekbones and an iron jaw. His thick green cloak covered a brown breastplate. There was a gold shield on his left forearm and a sword belted to his waist. His name was Rodin. He was an elf. Henry knew Rodin pretty well. They had fought Alvahame's enemies together. He couldn't believe he hadn't recognised him until now.

The woman was an elf as well. Her name was Amira. And now Henry had seen through the disguise, she was exactly as he remembered her. She was beautiful – ivory skin and long jet-black hair. She wore black leather trousers and her dark green cloak with its silver fur lining. After Rodin, she was one of Alvahame's most feared warriors. Henry had seen her in action – she was as deadly with a bow and arrow as she was with a sword.

Henry stared open-mouthed at the three elves. He didn't know what they were doing in London or why they hadn't told him they were coming.

One of the fake elves drew a cordon across the stage and announced that Santa was done for the day. Klasodin got up and slipped through the crowd. Rodin and Amira disappeared after him.

Henry backed away. He crept around the side of the shop, heading for the back where the elves had gone. He pushed through a crowd of people and edged past some kids playing computer games – in time to see Klasodin, Rodin and Amira slip through a door in the back.

Henry ran. He wrenched open the door and tore down a corridor. He pushed through another door, which opened out into an open snow-covered yard.

He stopped dead.

The yard was empty. The snow was undisturbed.

They were gone – without leaving so much as a footprint. Klasodin, Rodin and Amira had snuck into London and run off without even talking to him.

Henry trudged back into the shop. His friends had abandoned him. He had done something to annoy them and now they wanted nothing to do with him.

He knew Mrs Mcready didn't have much money. With so many shops closing because of the snow, she was struggling to buy presents and turkey for Christmas dinner. Now there wouldn't be much from Klasodin either.

Christmas was going to be a disaster.

Chapter Two

SuperToys was enormous. Set over seven floors, it was stocked with every toy a child could imagine. And Archie, Tabitha and Emily wanted to look at all of them.

It wasn't as spectacular as the Creation Department in Alvahame, Henry decided, and none of the designs were as advanced, but he was actually enjoying himself, traipsing along after the three youngest children, examining everything they showed him. They were so excited. It made Henry excited too.

Even Rosie looked like she was having fun. She was with Oliver, trying on superhero helmets and capes and firing pretend weapons. Mrs Mcready had positioned herself between the two groups. She had a smile on her face as well.

It struck Henry how happy they all were - happier than they'd been in a while. He wondered why that was.

He remembered the headaches he'd been having. The horrible dreams that filled every night's sleep, which made his head feel even worse. Standing in the middle of a loud, busy toy store, his head felt light and clear - like it was just a memory.

But he wasn't the only one. Archie was sleeping badly. Tabitha had one horrible nightmare after another. Emily and Oliver complained of bad headaches. Rosie didn't say much, but she was quieter and paler than usual. Even Mrs Mcready had been moving about the house like there was a heavy weight resting on her shoulders.

No sign of any of that now.

Suddenly Henry didn't want to go home.

Then he remembered his roof, which he could climb out to from his bedroom window. He hadn't been out on it much recently - he'd spent more time with the others instead. He wondered if he'd feel better up there.

Oliver and Rosie moved onto the computer games and raced each other in front of a large screen showing two snowboards flying down a snow-covered mountain.

Henry wondered how fast Forodin could make them go. Forodin was an elf Henry's age and he was the best at anything to do with speed. He'd taught Henry to snowboard on a more complex game than the one Oliver and Rosie were playing.

Henry remembered flying over the snow on his own elven snowboard with Ellodine beside him. Of all the elves of Alvahame he hadn't heard from, she hurt the most. She'd been his best friend from the start. They'd been on an adventure together. No one loved Christmas more than her. She could look at any wrapped present and tell you what it was. When they flew around the Sleigh Room together, she identified every single one. He thought they would be friends forever.

Not anymore.

He followed the others up to the top floor.

A big security guard brushed past him and took the escalator down. The guy was a foot taller than any other adult Henry had seen in the store. Henry watched him disappear from view. Something about the guard set him on edge. He wandered a few metres away, keeping Archie and the others in his line of sight.

Two more security guards emerged from a door in the far corner. They were just as big as the first one. A fourth guard appeared and gave instructions to the other two. He wore black trousers, a white shirt and a navy hat. His dark hair was tied back in a ponytail. There were scars on the tops of his ears.

Henry froze. He darted behind some shelves to hide.

Even with the uniform and the hat, Henry could recognise him anywhere. He wasn't a security guard at all. He was Bayne the half-elf who had killed Henry's parents and tried very hard to kill Henry as well. The men with him weren't security guards either. They were

members of the Gaardreng, the band of mercenaries led by Bayne – paid by Omnitec to murder and sabotage on their behalf and take down their competitors. Last Christmas, Omnitec’s main competition was Santa Claus. Alvahame survived, but Omnitec and Grimmir were still out there.

Now Bayne was back, which meant Omnitec were at it again. They weren’t the biggest company anymore. They were in a fight with two others. One of them was SuperToys.

The two fake guards strode past Henry’s hiding place like they were on a mission and disappeared down the escalator.

Henry peered around the shelves he was hiding behind. Bayne lingered by the door. He looked up to the ceiling and said something. A pair of sapphire blue eyes set in a charcoal-coloured face nodded, then disappeared. Bayne replaced the ceiling tile and slipped through the door.

Henry blinked. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

The face in the ceiling - he’d seen it before. Then he remembered watching Balnir and Raiodin play a holographic computer game in the Craft of Creation. In one version of the game they battled Nerivari – savage dark elves that lived deep, deep underground and were rarely seen on the surface. They had blue eyes and charcoal-coloured skin.

A Nerivar was hiding in the roof of SuperToys, taking orders from Bayne.

Henry looked down at his Hafskod. The rim of the watch face was covered in a thick blackness, which meant he was close to dark Madjik. He could use the Hafskod to send a message to Alvahame – and have Rodin and Amira back there in no time. They were two of Alvahame’s greatest warriors and loyal to Klasodin. Rodin was Head of the Craft of War. They had saved Henry’s life and helped him save Christmas.

But no one in Alvahame had responded to any of his messages in months. He doubted they would even look at one now. There was no point trying.

Henry glanced around him. His foster family were still there, enjoying themselves, unaware of the terrible danger they were in. He had to get them out.

Making sure Bayne hadn't reappeared, Henry wandered over to Mrs Mcready.

"I'm ready to go home," he said.

"Already?" she replied. "I thought you were having fun. I saw you."

"I know. But I've had enough."

"I don't want to go home," Emily complained.

The others chimed in. None of them wanted to go home. Henry didn't either. Just thinking about the headaches made him dread going back. But it was safer than where they were.

He marched towards the escalator.

"We can play in the snow," he said. "Or get hot chocolate somewhere. And you need to write your letters to Santa before you forget all the things you've just seen."

That did it. In less than five minutes, they were out of the store and back on a snow-covered Regent Street.

"Very clever," Mrs Mcready murmured. "Why were you so desperate to leave? That place is amazing."

"I was too hot," Henry shrugged. "I like it out here."

"It's freezing," she laughed. "I'm wearing a thick coat and seven layers underneath. I think we all are – apart from you. At least put your hat back on."

Henry did as she asked and put his hat on, but he didn't need it. He'd noticed he hadn't felt the cold as much since leaving Alvahame.

Now they were clear of SuperToys, he felt a wave of relief. Walking through the snow, seeing a white sheet ahead of him, feeling the icy cold on his face, everything was better again. Even though no one in Alvahame was speaking to him, he still had the elven

snowboard they'd given him. He'd been out on it every night since the snow had covered London. He was looking forward to going out on it again tonight.

Then his mind flashed back to SuperToys. He wondered what Bayne, Omnitec and the Nerivari were planning. They were going to ruin Christmas for someone.

"I'm cold," Oliver said gingerly, holding his gloved hands over his hat.

Henry took off his own hat and put it on Oliver's head - over the hat he was already wearing. He didn't need it.

"That's better," Oliver grinned. "Thanks, Henry."

"I'm fine," Henry reassured Mrs Mcready. "My ears are warm."

After stopping in a café for some hot chocolate, they made it home to their Victorian terrace in Blackheath as it was getting dark. The mood changed the instant they were all in through the front door. Suddenly everyone was quiet and miserable. Henry's head pounded and throbbed. He slumped on the sofa in the open kitchen/dining/living area in the basement. Tabitha sat next to him and began playing with his Hafskod. The rest picked a spot, sat there and said nothing.

The news report on the TV told how the snow was ruining Christmas. All forms of transport in and out of London had ground to a halt. Deliveries of food and presents were weeks behind. Many families wouldn't be getting together because the snow made travelling impossible. The TV showed children playing, throwing snowballs and sledging, then cut to more people looking miserable. Christmas was going to be ruined – thanks to the snow.

The TV made a strange noise. There was a pop and the screen went black.

"Great," Rosie muttered. "Now the TV's broken."

Mrs Mcready let out a sob. She ran to it and tried to get it working again. Then she gave up, buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

Henry and Rosie stared in stunned amazement. The younger kids ran to her and put their arms around her.

“It’s just a TV,” Rosie said warily.

“It was a present from an old friend,” Mrs Mcready said, forcing a smile. “It’s a shame it finally broke.”

“Everything keeps breaking,” Oliver added miserably. “Three of my best Christmas presents from last year don’t work anymore.”

“And some of mine,” Rosie said.

Henry had already seen two TV reports of Omnitech being flooded with demands for returns and refunds. Its share price had plummeted.

But the presents Rosie and Oliver were talking about weren’t from Omnitech – they were from Santa Claus – from Klasodin. And Klasodin’s presents never broke.

All Henry wanted to do was get out in the snow again – where his head was clear and nothing was going wrong. Everything seemed better when he was sliding over the snow on his snowboard. But he couldn’t stop thinking about Bayne and what he would do to the toy store when no one was there to protect it.

Then Henry realised there was no one to protect it - except him.

Chapter Three

Henry waited until everyone had gone to bed before putting on a dark coat and trousers over the elven clothes Klasodin's wife Merrodine had given him in Alvahame, which would give him much more protection against the cold. His snowboard sat on his back without needing to be held there. He slung his stringless elven bow over his shoulder and a gold Madjik string materialised across his chest to hold it in place. Then he climbed out onto the roof and held out his hand. The snowboard flew off his back and slapped into his palm. He dropped it on the snow-covered roof. It expanded to the size he preferred and he jumped on.

There was no need to push off. For an elven snowboard, sliding horizontally or upwards was as easy as shooting downhill.

Henry set off over the stretch of roofs connecting the row of Victorian terraces and picked up speed. The snowboard shot at the edge of the last roof and took off. He flew over the street below and landed on the opposite roof, then slid along the line of roofs, sailed over a narrow road and dropped down to a row of smaller terraced houses. He followed his usual route, took a couple of turns where one building met another, slid down a metal spiral staircase and shot out onto the street.

On a normal snowboard, he'd have plummeted to his death any number of times, but on an elven snowboard all kinds of things were possible.

After travelling down a few more streets, he flew over a hedge into Greenwich Park. He crouched low, tore down the slope, zipped through the park and shot out the other end. He slid through the grand white buildings of Greenwich College, leapt over the barrier at the end and landed on the River Thames - which was frozen solid.

Henry veered left on the ice and slid west along the Thames, picking up speed as it wove through East London past Canary Wharf and under Tower Bridge.

He let out a laugh. He'd never gone further than Greenwich Park and he hadn't travelled so fast since leaving Alvahame. There was nothing like flying over snow or ice. And seeing London in a way he never had before just made it better.

After flying under the Millennium Bridge, he leapt up onto the dock at Embankment, jumped the railing and slid towards the West End. In no time he was speeding up Regent Street, following the curved terrace of tall, grand buildings, closing in on SuperToys.

His eyes picked out a dark shape in the night sky sailing over the rooftops. He slid into the doorway of the nearest building, peered out and watched the dark shape turn and descend towards him. It approached from north of Oxford Circus, landed on the snow-covered Regent Street and skidded to a stop outside SuperToys, sending snow spraying everywhere.

It was a sleigh drawn by eight reindeer. A tall figure in a heavy hooded cloak let go of the reins and vaulted out of the sleigh.

Henry was about to set off and catch up with him. He opened his mouth to shout and tell Klasodin he was there – when he stopped.

The figure looked like Klasodin. But it wasn't him.

Henry glanced down at his Hafskod. Thick blackness clung to the edges - as it had when he spotted Bayne and a Nerivar in the toy store earlier. But now there were dark grey splotches scattered over the watch face. They looked like mould. Henry had never seen them before. He had no idea what they were.

The cloaked figure disappeared inside SuperToys.

Henry slid closer, hiding in the shadow of the buildings.

The sleigh was much bigger than Klasodin's. It was black and had a strange, curved design with rounded edges and circular blades sticking out of the sides. What had appeared to be reindeer in the dark were eight charcoal-coloured beasts that looked like they had been carved from rock – with clusters of dark spikes and blades on their heads instead of antlers.

Henry edged past them on his snowboard, staying as far away from them as he could.

Their heads turned to follow him. Eight pairs of eyes that burned bright red like molten lava watched him slide past.

The nearest one opened its mouth – revealing long, jagged teeth. It sucked the air in, filling its lungs – and breathed out a burst of roaring flames.

Chapter Four

Henry ducked the blazing fire burning through the air at him and slid out of the way. He could feel the heat on his face as the flames blew past him.

The toy store's front doors swung open.

Henry crouched on his snowboard and hid behind the sleigh.

Faint light slithered over the snow across the street. Five dark figures trudged out of the store carrying massive piles of boxes, which they dumped in the back of the sleigh, then disappeared back inside.

Henry shot over the snow to the store front and peered through the nearest window. More men carried boxes of toys and gadgets down the escalator and left them near the door. They disappeared back upstairs and the same five men carried them to the black sleigh.

No one else was watching or standing guard.

Henry waited until the five men carried out their next load, then slid into the store. He jumped off his snowboard, grabbed it, threw it on his back and darted behind some stocked shelves close to the door.

A loud, ear-piercing scream rang out, making Henry jump. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He shivered, suddenly feeling really cold.

A scraping sound rang out – like sharp metal on stone. It made Henry's skin crawl. He realised every other noise in the store had stopped. The men who had been moving the boxes stood like statues. Outside, the reindeer-like beasts froze and trembled with fear.

The tall hooded figure from the black sleigh appeared across the store and moved towards the front door. He stormed out onto the snow, then shouted and snarled at the waiting four-legged beasts. They lowered their heads. The light died in their eyes. The dark figure swept back inside and disappeared. The men went back to loading the sleigh.

A movement caught Henry's eye. He edged towards the back of the store and peered around the last set of shelves.

The same hooded figure crouched in the corner over a pile of boxed toys. A dark grey cloud rose from in front of him and plumed into the air. Henry recoiled with terror, thinking it was smoke.

But it wasn't smoke. The colour was wrong and it smelled more like damp rocks. It reminded Henry of exploring caves by the seaside on holiday.

The grey cloud darkened and grew, stretching its tendrils across the back of the store, clinging to every toy and every box it found – before surging inside them.

Henry backed away. He glanced down at his Hafskod. The grey spores and splotches had joined together and covered the watch face.

The dark figure disappeared in the grey cloud as it spread over the store, expanded up the escalators to the next floor and clung to the walls and the ceiling. Then the cloud stretched over one aisle after the next towards the front of the store and right at Henry.

Multiple pairs of feet pounded down the escalator. Charcoal-coloured figures with sapphire blue eyes loped through the store and out the front door. They had pointed ears and wisps of black hair plastered over the tops of their heads.

Nerivari. In London. Where they weren't supposed to be. Where they'd never been.

Henry retreated to the front of the store to see the Nerivari lingering in the snow, standing on shiny black snowboards. Each wore a thick grey band on its wrist, which looked like a dark Madjik version of the Hafskod Henry was wearing.

The men finished loading the sleigh and jumped in the back. More emerged from the upper floor and joined the others in the sleigh. The last was Bayne. He grabbed the reins. The black sleigh sped over the snow and took off. It flew into the night sky and disappeared.

The scraping sound rang out again, making Henry shiver.

The dark cloaked figure appeared on the snow outside, standing on a snowboard that looked like a giant black blade. Some of the Nerivari wobbled on theirs – and received an angry growl.

A dark light emanated from the Hafskods worn by the Nerivari. Each light expanded into a holographic map, which showed a couple of places marked with a red dot.

The dark figure set off, travelling north up Regent Street towards Oxford Circus. The Nerivari followed and disappeared from sight.

Henry stared after them. The Nerivari were being directed to a new location. Their night wasn't over.

The store around him darkened. He turned to see the dark grey cloud just a couple of metres away, stretching from floor to ceiling like a wall. It swelled towards him.

Henry darted to the door and tried the handle. It was locked.

The dark cloud closed in on him.

Henry shook the handle. He pounded on the door with his fist.

He was trapped.

Chapter Five

Henry stood with his back against the front door of the largest toy store in London, staring up at the wall of dark cloud looming over him.

The cloud closed in, shutting out the last of the light until it was pitch black and Henry couldn't see a thing. Then it surged at him – and touched his skin. He tried to brush it off, but it clung to his face and hands. It burned like acid. He screamed in pain.

Then he couldn't scream. A gasp burst out of his mouth. The darkness was draining the life out of him. His legs buckled. The door was taking his weight. He couldn't breathe. His mind flailed in different directions, searching for an answer.

All he could think of was the Hafskod. He squeezed his eyes tight shut and threw his left hand in front of his face. A bright flash of Madjik burst out of the Hafskod like a torch beam. He swung his arm left and right to beat the dark cloud away.

He opened his eyes. The Hafskod had blown the cloud back a couple of metres and stabbed some holes in it, but he couldn't hold it back for long.

He grabbed the bow slung over his shoulder and gripped it in his left hand. His right hand closed around the string and drew it back. A gold arrow materialised. He released. The arrow bulleted through the window. The glass shattered.

Henry slung the bow over his shoulder, climbed through the window, dropped down onto the snow outside and lay on his back, gasping for breath.

He scrambled to his feet and backed away, looking about him. Regent Street was silent. A few streetlights lining the grand avenue cast a dim yellowish light, enough to illuminate the pure white sheet carving a path between the tall terraced buildings on either side.

The black sleigh and the dark creatures leading it had left no tracks.

In the other direction, there was no trace of the Nerivari or the dark figure. The only clues that anyone had been there were the grey clouds filling every window, the broken pane and Henry's own footprints leading away from it.

His eyes picked out tiny fragments of glass lying in the snow, glittering in the dim golden light. They were outside the building, not in - telling anyone paying attention that the saboteur hadn't broken in that way.

In a split second he was back there, standing outside the burnt out remains of what had been his home.

He shook his head clear. The Nerivari and their leader had got away. He had to find them.

He looked down at the Hafskod.

"Come on. Help me," he muttered. "They're getting away."

A gold light beamed from the watch face – spotty from the dark spores and splotches that still covered half of it. A holographic map materialised in the air above the Hafskod. The yellow dot marked the spot on Regent Street where he was standing. The larger black mass moving west, then turning north, was the Nerivari.

Henry took a breath. The Hafskod was working. Maybe he should send a message to his friends in Alvahame to come and help him. If Christmas really was under attack, they would have to.

He scowled down at the watch face, then shoved the Hafskod back under his sleeve where he couldn't see it. No. It just proved that they'd never bothered reading his messages in the first place.

He held out his right hand and his snowboard slapped into his palm. He dropped it on the snow and jumped on it. He slid over his footprints to rub them out, then ducked down by the broken window, dug his hands deep in the snow and scooped out the bits of glass. He tossed the snow and glass in through the window.

Satisfied that was all he could do, Henry set off up Regent Street. He sped over the snow to Oxford Circus, leaned back a little, threw his weight onto his heels and carved through the snow into a left turn. He crouched and flew down Oxford Street, listening to the snowboard whistle over the fresh white snow, then veered right up a main road to follow the black mark on the Hafskod.

It left the road suddenly, heading east. Henry flew straight at the point the Nerivari had turned, steered left and leapt over the railing.

He plummeted downwards. It took him longer to land than he'd expected. The snowboard slowed in the air and he landed on ice – on a frozen canal.

It was much narrower than the river or any street he'd slid along before – and was lined by high walls that made the space seem even tighter. But Henry loved being on the ice. He flew over it, relying on his sharpened instincts and reactions to follow every turn as it took him north, away from central London.

He remembered racing up the ice tunnel to the top of Iddrassil, the Great Tree in the centre of Alvahame. His reactions and speed had improved in no time then. Flying down the canal heading north, he could tell it was still there.

A gleaming black shard embedded in the brick wall made him skid to a sudden halt. Henry didn't dare touch it, but he could guess what it was. One of the Nerivari had crashed and chipped their snowboard in the wall.

Leaving the shard behind, Henry sped on. After a sharp turn, his eyes caught movement on the ice ahead. He flattened himself against the wall.

Ahead, the Nerivari jumped off their snowboards, tossed them on their backs, grabbed the top of the wall and hauled themselves up onto the ground above.

Henry listened to them slide away, then set off. He flew at the spot where the Nerivari had climbed up, bent his knees and sprang. He sailed over the wall and landed on soft snow.

Ahead was a scattering of large industrial buildings. Henry ventured forward, staying low on his snowboard and hid behind the first one he came to. He peered around the corner, watched the Nerivari disappear behind the next one, then followed them.

The Nerivari slid over a wide expanse of snow to the biggest building on the plot – an enormous white warehouse, which was almost camouflaged in the snow. The large warehouse door slid open. The Nerivari disappeared inside and it slammed shut behind them.

That was when Henry saw the name on the warehouse wall – SuperToys.

He wondered if anything in SuperToys would work when the cloud cleared. The Gaardreng had stolen some things. It had to be a way of sabotaging what was left behind. And the first place they would come to in order to replace the ruined stock was the warehouse the Nerivari were in now. It was less than a week until Christmas. Once the contents of the warehouse were destroyed, it would be impossible to replace them.

Henry shot over to the door, eased it open and slipped inside.

Chapter Six

Henry shut the door behind him, tossed his snowboard on his back and crept left, staying close to the wall. He could see enough to know the place was enormous. It was divided by long rows of shelves filled with boxes of toys, games and gadgets. They were nearly tall enough to reach the ceiling and stretched from one end of the warehouse to the other. In the semi-darkness, they were long, massive silhouettes - misshapen walls with bits, bumps and strange shapes sticking out everywhere.

He caught sight of dark figures moving about at the far end of the warehouse and edged down the last alley between two shelves on the left, creeping close to the left-hand shelf structure, hoping the boxes jutting out would hide him if a Nerivar glanced in his direction.

A group of Nerivari were crouched on the floor, gathered around something he couldn't see. Then he caught sight of plumes of cloud rising into the air from the opposite side of the warehouse. He edged closer.

The Nerivari were digging, peeling sections of the stone floor away with their clawed hands, sending it flying in every direction. The grey cloud spread across the warehouse until Henry could hardly see them.

The ground trembled and shook. Boxes tumbled off shelves and crashed to the floor. Henry pressed his back against the ones next to him as more boxes rained down from the shelves above.

The Nerivari scattered.

A wind blew through the warehouse from the hole they had dug and blasted into Henry's face. It smelled of damp rock – like the cloud back in the toy store.

A flurry of small rocks sprayed out of the hole. They tumbled and bounced over the floor, smacked into the walls and skittered up the aisles between the shelves. A shower of them

blew past Henry. His shin took a hit. Another rock bounced off his knee. He clamped his mouth shut to stop himself yelping in pain and pressed himself back into the shelves behind him, pulling some boxes forward to shield him. He squeezed his eyes shut and hoped nothing else hit him.

The scraping sound Henry knew from SuperToys echoed around the warehouse, making his skin crawl. He shivered and opened his eyes.

The alley he was hiding in had boxes scattered everywhere and was lined with piles of rocks that went up to his ankles. A figure had emerged from the hole - the same dark figure Henry had seen in SuperToys.

The scraping sound grated in Henry's ears as the dark figure moved across the space at the far end. It stopped as the figure crouched by the end of the shelving unit on the opposite side of Henry's alley. Grey clouds plumed from the boxes in front of him. They thickened and filled the air, then spread slowly up the alley.

Henry backed away.

The dark figure and the Nerivari disappeared.

The place where the dark figure had been crouching burst into flames. Bright orange fire roared up the shelving unit. Its bright fingers stretched for the ceiling. Then the flames blew along the base up the alley. A lava coloured glow lit up the air above the shelves – the fire had already raged and spread to the far side of the warehouse.

The stack of shelves Henry was hiding against caught fire. He watched the flames climb to the top. Then the fire ripped over the floor straight at him.

Henry froze. He was back in his old home, surrounded by thick grey smoke.

He blinked and shook his head clear. He turned and ran.

Dark figures appeared ahead of him, blocking his way out. Angry blue eyes gleamed.

The Nerivari had found him.

Chapter Seven

The Nerivari brandished black bows. Shadows sharpened in the air to become the strings and when they pulled the strings back, black arrows materialised, all trained on Henry.

He backed away, hauling every large box off the shelves to act as a wall between him and the Nerivari.

They released. Black arrows bulleted through the air towards him.

He hit the floor behind the mess of boxes.

The arrows shot over his head and disappeared in the thickening smoke behind him.

He scrambled back on his elbows and knees.

More black arrows thudded and smashed into the boxes, sending them scattering over the floor. Three of them blew through the boxes and zipped at Henry's face.

He rolled out of the way and they streaked past him. He leapt to his feet and ran for a large heap of boxes a few metres behind him. He dived and rolled – as something bit into the back of his leg. He grimaced in pain and grabbed his bow.

Black arrows flashed past him.

He darted a glance around the boxes. The Nerivari were advancing. Two arrows shot at his face and he ducked out of the way.

He gripped the bow in his left hand. A gold string materialised in his right. He pulled it back and a glowing gold arrow appeared. He fired. It exploded on the ground in the middle of the Nerivari. They scattered. He pulled another arrow and fired as quickly as he could. It flew harmlessly over every Nerivar head. He drew a third bow. It gave off a dull glow – and missed completely. He pulled back the fourth bow – and felt the Madjik was gone. He released. It clattered to the ground a couple of metres away.

The Nerivari regrouped and bombarded him with arrows, getting closer as they advanced. The fire roared up behind him. The smoke clouded around him until he couldn't see the Nerivari. All he could hear was their arrows zipping past his ear and thudding into the shelving and boxes on the floor.

He could feel the heat of the fire in his back and his neck. The smoke thickened in front of his face so he could barely see more than a couple of metres.

Then the Nerivari's blue eyes beamed through the smoke. Their dark shapes materialised in the smoke, arrows drawn. They weren't going to miss from there.

Henry braced himself for death.

Icy cold air blew in from behind the Nerivari, making them stop in their tracks. A stream of gold arrows exploded into the dark elves, sending them crashing into the shelves and boxes. A snow storm blasted through the warehouse, hurling boxes everywhere, blowing away the smoke and the dark clouds. Snow flooded over the floor. Ice crackled and crawled over the shelves and the walls.

There was a violent flurry of cold air. Icy snow swept through the warehouse and plastered over Henry's face. It felt really good – like it was soothing a headache he'd had for ages.

The Nerivari picked themselves up off the floor looking about them, stunned, not knowing what to do. Then their burning blue eyes locked on Henry.

An arrow of ice thudded into the leg of one Nerivar. The ice spread over his body, freezing him into a snowman. Another ice arrow exploded from the chest of a second.

A dark shape flew over the snow. It smacked into three Nerivari and knocked them off their feet. A second dark shape smashed two more to the ground. The first dark shape flew towards Henry at lightning speed and skidded in the snow next to him. An arm grabbed him, planted him on the front of a snowboard and held him there.

They took off and flew away from the Nerivari. Shelves and boxes blurred past. They shot out of the warehouse into the fresh air and skidded to a halt thirty metres away, sending snow spraying everywhere.

The arm let him go. Henry collapsed to the ground and rolled onto his back in the snow, gasping for breath, watching smoke plume into the night air.

He was seeing his old home go up in flames from the street.

But a familiar figure stood over him and the flashback went away. It had been a few months and he'd grown in that time. He was lean, wiry and taller than any human thirteen-year-old Henry had ever seen. He had short dark hair, which made his pointed ears more pronounced. And he had the usual relaxed, almost indifferent expression he usually wore. At the speed Henry had just been rescued, it couldn't have been anyone else.

"You alright?" Forodin asked.

Henry nodded and eased himself up onto his elbows.

Behind Forodin were more of Henry's friends from Alvahame.

Rimida hurled snowballs at the Nerivari as they broke out of the warehouse. She flung them so quickly it was like machine gun fire - and she threw them so hard it was like being hit by a cannonball. She hit three Nerivari in the face and put them on their backs.

Zadira formed arrows of ice every time she drew back her bow - something Henry had never seen her do before. Then she waved her hand in the direction of the warehouse roof. A load of snow slid off the roof and dumped on a band of fleeing Nerivari, burying them.

Raiodin had grown as well. He wielded his sword like a trained warrior - deflecting flying arrows and flooring any Nerivari that tried taking him on.

Balnir stood a few metres back from the other three. He was firing arrows and throwing out instructions, which the others were trying to ignore.

The last of the Nerivari fled.

Zadira and Rimida turned their attention to the burning warehouse. Rimida hurled a volley of snowballs inside. Zadira made a sweeping gesture with both hands and a load of snow flooded into the warehouse. Soon the ice covered every wall and snow covered the floor. The fire was out.

A flurry of blonde hair appeared from nowhere and flew at Henry. A pair of arms wrapped around him, knocking him back on the snow.

“Kiss, kiss, kiss,” Forodin laughed.

Ellodine pulled away from Henry and shot a scowl at Forodin.

“Shut up, Forodin.” She looked at Henry, concern in her eyes. “Are you alright? You could have been killed.” She pulled open his coat without waiting to be asked and saw his elven clothing underneath. She breathed a sigh of relief. Then she glared at him. She gave him a slap on the arm. “Why did you go in there alone?” she scolded him. “You could have been killed.”

“I had to do something,” he protested.

“So send a message.” She held up the gold Hafskod on her wrist. Henry and the six elves all had one. “That’s what this is for.”

“What would be the point?” Henry retorted irritably. “You never reply anyway.”

“You never send anything to reply to.”

“Yeah I do. All the time.”

“Are they at it again already?” came Zadira’s voice. “Kiss, kiss, kiss.”

She had auburn hair and sharp green eyes. She grinned at Henry.

“That’s what I said,” Forodin sniggered.

Raiodin laughed and grinned at Ellodine from under his mop of blond hair.

“Shut up,” Ellodine snapped.

Forodin and Zadira helped Henry to his feet.

“How did you know I was here?” he asked.

“Our Hafskods went dark,” Rimida said. She had dark curly hair and wide eyes. “We knew it had to be you.

“What happened, Henry?” Balnir asked, his expression grave. He wasn’t as tall as the other two boys, but he was stocky and broad shouldered.

“They were Nerivari,” Raiodin said. “They never leave the elven realm. They hardly ever come above ground.”

Henry told them about the attack on SuperToys and following them to the warehouse.

“You saw Bayne and the Nerivari in the store?” Balnir said. “Just after Klasodin left?”

Henry nodded.

The elves looked at Henry, then at each other.

“Who was the other one?” Ellodine asked.

“I don’t know,” Henry replied. “The ground trembled and he made a load of rocks fly into the warehouse. I don’t know how he got here or where he went.”

“Nerivari are almost impossible to control,” Balnir frowned. “To bring them and humans into the same operation takes some doing.”

“They work for Omnitec,” Ellodine scowled. “They’re still trying to sell more Christmas presents than anyone else.”

“They’re not as big now,” Raiodin said. “So they’re taking down the competition.”

“And Grimmir’s still out there,” Zadira added. She looked at Henry. “That’s the only name any of us use now.”

“I don’t think it was Grimmir,” Henry frowned.

“You didn’t see his face,” Ellodine said.

“It was everything else about him,” Henry replied. “His build, the way he moved. I think he was taller. I heard him shout and growl. It didn’t sound like Grimmir.”

Zadira made a gesture with her hands.

Some snow blew over the surface towards them and a large black footprint reformed in the middle of them.

“We found it by the wall,” she explained. “It’s too big to be human.”

“If they can control the Nerivari, then there’s no way they’re human,” Balnir said, his expression grim. “This is an elf.”

Henry found himself staring at the footprint. His mind had gone blank.

Suddenly he was really tired. Fatigue flooded through his head, his arms and his legs. He felt really dizzy. He found himself sitting in the snow. He was sure he had been standing up a minute ago.

“Are you alright?” Ellodine said gently.

“Dunno.”

Ellodine shifted and knelt in front of him, taking his face in her hands. She brushed his face with her fingers, then tried to pat off the same dust that covered Henry’s clothes.

“Stupid,” she muttered. “I thought this was just smoke from the fire.” She grabbed his hands and brushed the smoke and dirt off them. “What is that?” she uttered.

The dark grey splotches Henry had seen on his Hafskod now covered his hands.

“Does my face look like that?” were the words that tumbled about in his brain, but never reached his mouth.

He didn’t have the energy to speak. He couldn’t sit up anymore. He lay back in the snow and closed his eyes.

Chapter Eight

Henry came to lying on his back in the snow, his head resting on Ellodine's lap. She held his hands and looked down at him, her face inches from his. Her brow was furrowed with concentration. A gold light burned in her eyes. The warmth surged down his arms, through his body to his legs and feet, then up through his neck and filled his head. She was healing him – as she'd done before. The others were watching him, kneeling or crouching in the snow around him.

Ellodine helped him up into a sitting position.

“You've been touched by dark Madjik,” she said. “Those grey clouds you kept seeing – they poisoned you when they touched you.” She looked at him and frowned. “But you should have been able to fight it off on your own. Your Madjik is really weak.”

“What happened to you, Henry?” Rimida asked, looking really worried.

“Nothing,” Henry shrugged.

“We're all way more powerful than we were last Christmas,” Raiodin said.

“I know,” Henry replied. “I can tell.”

“So why aren't you?” Zaira said pointedly.

“I don't know,” Henry answered. “You're all in Alvahame where the Madjik is. I'm here in London where it's just me.”

“No.” Ellodine shook her head. “This is bad. You shouldn't be like this.”

“It's like you don't believe in Klasodin anymore,” Rimida said.

Six pairs of eyes trained on Henry.

“More like he doesn't believe in me anymore,” Henry blurted.

He folded his arms and scowled down at the snow.

Five elves stared at him in horrified silence.

“What do you mean?” Forodin asked – still as calm as ever.

Henry felt a burst of anger.

“He ignored me in SuperToys. He’s been ignoring me for ages. All of you have. I haven’t heard from any of you in months.” It flooded out of him. His hands shook. He could hear a tremor in his voice, but there was no stopping now. “You never reply to my messages. I didn’t even know Klasodin was in London til I saw him just now. And that took long enough. I didn’t recognise him til right at the end because he, Rodin and Amira were hiding from me. I’m supposed to be Glondir, but I don’t know if I still am or if I’m ever going back to Alvahame. He’s chosen another one, hasn’t he?”

He glared around at them, daring them to have a go back.

The elves stared down at him, dumbstruck, then exchanged glances.

“We messaged you loads of times,” Ellodine said, her voice shaking, looking like she was going to cry.

“I messaged you loads of times too,” Henry muttered.

Silence.

“Henry,” Balnir said slowly. Henry could almost hear his mind churning over. “Send me a message now.”

“What? So you can ignore that one too?” Henry retorted.

“Just send me a message.”

Henry shrugged and looked down at his Hafskod.

“Balnir,” he spoke into it. “Here is another message for you to ignore.”

The words appeared as a green hologram hovering above the watch face as he said them. Then they disappeared.

Balnir watched his Hafskod, waiting.

Nothing.

He and Forodin looked at each other – like something was dawning on them.

“Alright,” Forodin said. “Let’s try this.” He looked down at his Hafskod. “Henry. It’s really good to see you again.”

The message disappeared into the Hafskod.

Henry waited. Nothing appeared on his.

Forodin spoke into his Hafskod again.

“Balnir. You missed with every arrow. You aimed at a Nerivar in the doorway and it hit the wall. You literally can’t hit a barn door, you useless moron.”

Zadira snorted with laughter.

Forodin’s message appeared as a green hologram over Balnir’s Hafskod.

“A Nerivar was coming right at me,” Balnir protested.

“You missed that one too,” Raiodin grinned.

“Maybe someone needs to spend less time giving orders,” Rimida said primly. “And more time practising.”

“I’m a general. It’s what I do,” Balnir insisted.

“Not yet you’re not,” she retorted.

Forodin frowned.

“So the messages haven’t been getting through – in either direction,” he thought out loud.

“You see,” Zadira told Henry. “You were trying to message us and we were trying to get hold of you. These things just don’t work.”

“They’re made with Alvahame Madjik,” Ellodine insisted. “Of course they work.”

“And yet they don’t,” Rimida returned.

“Our Madjik never fails,” Ellodine said. “They can’t not work.”

“It’s not just the Hafskods,” Henry said. “Some presents from last Christmas have been breaking as well.”

“That’s just Omnitec’s rubbish presents,” Ellodine insisted.

“No. It’s Klasodin’s as well,” Balnir replied. “We’ve all seen it happen.”

Ellodine looked like she’d been slapped in the face.

“We need to see Klasodin,” Rimida said. She looked shaken. Her arms were folded around her body like she was trying to hold herself together. “He’ll know what to do.”

“Where is he?” Henry asked.

“In London.”

“He’s still in London?” Henry exploded angrily. “Where?”

“Why don’t we take you there?” Forodin said in his unflappable way. “And you can take it out on him.” He hauled Henry to his feet. “Let’s see if you can still snowboard.”

Chapter Nine

The journey back into London was even quicker. With Forodin leading and the rest in a line in his slipstream, they were back on Regent Street in no time.

“Not bad, human,” Forodin grinned, jumping off his snowboard and catching it in his hand. “You’ve been practising.”

“Every night since the snow came,” Henry replied.

“That’s more like it.”

Five elves looked impressed. Ellodine was still watching Henry like she expected him to keel over any second.

The dark grey clouds had cleared from the windows of SuperToys. The pane Henry had broken before was like new – as if nothing had happened. Henry and the elves trudged inside the store to see the lights were on and no trace of cloud anywhere. Brightly-coloured boxes were arranged on the shelves. Toys and games were displayed in the middle of the floor. Henry looked around and let out a sigh of relief.

Ellodine gave a gasp of horror, ran to the nearest shelf on the right and began tearing open the boxes. Henry opened his mouth to tell her to stop – when he took a closer look at the toys on a central display. Something about them was wrong. There were grey streaks over some of them. Others looked like they were about to melt. He picked up the remote control for a toy red Ferrari, turned it on and pushed the “Forward” lever. Nothing happened. Then a thick dark grey sludge oozed out of the car and it melted to nothing.

All six elves were running around, examining toys and gadgets, tearing open boxes, then groaning in dismay or shouting in alarm. Forodin shot up the escalators looking like he’d seen a ghost. More shouts of horror came from him upstairs.

Henry gave a sigh of dismay and felt a swell of dark sadness. He'd forgotten how much Christmas meant to every elf in Alvahame – even someone like Forodin, who never seemed too concerned by anything. He followed his friends up the escalators, his legs and his heart weighing heavier with every floor as they found more and more destroyed toys and gifts. It was as bad as he'd expected - every single item in the store was ruined. Melted plastic. Melted insides. Fried circuit boards. Mangled bike frames.

Three elves were waiting for them on the top floor.

Klasodin, Rodin and Amira weren't disguised anymore. Klasodin only ever wore red to deliver presents or perform visits as Santa Claus, so he, like Rodin, was dressed in green and brown. Rodin paced, brandishing his sword, gripping the hilt so tightly his knuckles whitened. His gold elven bow was slung over his shoulder.

"Everything is ruined," Klasodin said, looking about him with a sigh. "With their warehouse destroyed and the city covered in snow, London's largest toy store will have to shut down until the weather clears."

"But we can still deliver presents," Ellodine said. "Christmas will be amazing."

Klasodin didn't respond.

"Thank you for trying, Henry," he said eventually. "It was very brave of you. There was nothing more you could have done."

Amira took him in her arms and hugged him tight, her dark hair piling on his head and the silver fur lining from her green coat pressing into his face. Then she took hold of his arms, bent down and looked him in the eye.

"Why didn't you tell us what you saw?" she said gently. "Why did you go in alone?"

Henry felt a burst of anger. He pulled away and scowled at her.

"Because you'd have just ignored me," he snapped. "Like you always do."

"The Hafskods don't work, remember," Zadira cut in.

“We haven’t been ignoring you,” Amira said, looking him in the eye.

“You did it today,” Henry exploded. “You came to London without telling me. You were in the same shop and you said nothing. You hid your faces til the end, then you ran off without saying a word.”

“We invited you and your foster family,” Klasodin replied.

“You didn’t know it was us when you first saw us?” Amira frowned.

“No,” Henry said. “Not until the end.”

Amira, Rodin and Klasodin exchanged glances.

“We used our Madjik to hide our identities,” Amira said. “It was supposed to work on humans, but it shouldn’t have worked on you.”

“Didn’t see you running over to say hello,” Henry grumbled.

“And we stayed apart from each other as well, remember?” she returned, her tone gentle. “The more spread apart we are, the harder it is to see the Madjik because there’s less of it concentrated in one place.”

“Doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell me you were in London. You landed on my roof last year. Not happening now, is it?”

“I didn’t know there was a problem with the Hafskods,” Rodin said, looking to Klasodin.

“There is,” Klasodin replied, his tone grave. “And we have been keeping our distance from our human friend.”

“I knew it,” Henry grated.

“We have?” Zadora questioned.

“We have?” the others chimed in.

Klasodin gave a nod. He held up his hands to quieten the questions being thrown at him.

“But not for the reasons you think,” the elf king said. “And here is not the place to go into them. Come with me.” He looked at Henry. “All of you.”

Chapter Ten

Klasodin led everyone to the back of the store, his staff in his hand. He gave it a flick – and stairs appeared in the wall where a bookcase had been. He disappeared up them. Ellodine and Rimida followed. Henry traipsed up the stairs after Raiodin – with Amira and Rodin behind him. Head down, he watched his boots trudge on one wooden stair after another – until there were no more stairs and he was standing on snow.

He looked up – to see Regent Street below and London lit up in the night. He was outside on a snow-covered roof, standing next to Klasodin's sleigh and the five reindeer leading it. At the front was Slepnir, Klasodin's eight-legged white horse, who could change into a reindeer at will. He aimed a familiar grunt in Henry's direction. The other four usually led Rodin's sleigh – for travelling and for war. Vega, the reindeer standing closest to Henry, gave him a playful kick. Henry let out a laugh and climbed into the sleigh.

He had to stand to see out, so he leaned over the side, resting on his arms as the sleigh took off and flew east over central London. It slowed as it passed the Tower of London and St. Katharine Docks, hovered over a group of old buildings overlooking the Thames from its north bank and started to descend.

Henry watched the roof of a medieval-looking building rise up towards him. Just when he thought they were going to land on it, the building, roof and the river were gone.

The sleigh was still sinking, descending into a tall circular structure made of row after row of silvery fir trees standing on wooden platforms that ran the entire circumference of the structure. It was wider at the top than at the bottom - each row was set a tree's width further in than the one above.

After what seemed like ages, the sleigh came to rest with a crunch on thick white snow. Everyone piled out. Henry climbed out last. He took a couple of steps forward and stood

there in the snow, lifting his head to look around him. It was like a really tall, circular stadium or theatre – and the trees were the spectators. Directly above him, the night sky was clear, filled with glittering stars. He watched it and let out a laugh.

“This place cuts out all the light pollution,” came Klasodin’s voice next to him. “I made sure of it. I knew I would miss the stars if I couldn’t see them.”

Henry glanced around him. Only Klasodin, Rodin and Amira were still there. The others had gone inside.

“What is this place?” he said. “How did we get in?”

“This is an elven realm,” Klasodin replied. “It works like the one in the Arctic, only it’s much smaller of course. Only those possessing Aesir Madjik may enter.”

“So no one can see us from overhead or parachute in here?”

“No. We’re as invisible as we are in the Arctic. And the only way to enter any higher storey of this building is to land down here first. Which you can’t do without being seen.”

An army of elves emerged from behind the trees – from the top of the structure to the bottom – all with bows drawn. Henry recognised red-haired Appodin, who gave him a wink from behind his bow. Then the Aesir warriors disappeared again.

“You can’t be too careful,” Klasodin said.

All Henry could think was how close the place was to where he lived, yet he’d never heard of it before.

Klasodin took a breath.

“You and I need to talk, don’t we?”

“If you don’t want to, don’t bother,” Henry answered.

“I’ve wanted to for a long time,” Klasodin said. “But what I want isn’t a priority. I’ve avoided any contact with you, because I believed it was the only way to keep you safe.”

“How?” Henry returned, pretty sure it was a lie.

“Some of the presents we delivered at Christmas no longer work.”

“I know.”

“Because it includes gifts I delivered to your home.”

“Ellodine said Alvahame-made presents never break.”

“They don’t,” Klasodin stated. “Which is why this has us very worried. Then your Hafskod stopped working. After that, your Madjik took a hit – as it was bound to.”

Henry looked up at Klasodin, his mind working through what he’d just heard.

“You knew my Hafskod wasn’t working,” he said. “And that I couldn’t contact anyone in Alvahame or hear from them.”

Klasodin nodded.

Henry opened his mouth to ask why, then thought for a second.

“You think you’re being sabotaged again, don’t you?” he said.

“I just didn’t know what the saboteur would do next,” Klasodin replied. “Now we have our answer. But I don’t know who it is or how they’re doing it.” Klasodin looked at Henry, a flat smile on his features. “And after last time, I couldn’t risk anything happening to you. I invited you to SuperToys because I wanted to see how you were. I had a sense that something was wrong before you arrived so I kept my distance.”

Henry stared down at the snow.

“I thought it was me. That you found another Glondir – because I wasn’t good enough.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Klasodin returned.

“Henry, you saved us last year,” Rodin said – with force. “There would be no Alvahame without you. And we need you now.”

“My Madjik’s almost gone,” Henry uttered. “I’m weak.”

“You’ve been on your own,” Amira replied.

“It still should be better,” Henry insisted, staring at the snow. “Ellodine said so. It’s because I’m not good enough anymore.”

“It was never about ability,” Klasodin told him, crouching down and looking him in the eye. “You have the Affinity for Madjik – that’s all you need. The Madjik chose you. Trust the Madjik. And it will come through for you.”

“We hoped that once the saboteur knew you’d been isolated from everyone in Alvahame, they would leave you alone,” Rodin said. “So far, they have.”

“Then you chased them down to the warehouse,” Klasodin said. “And blew that idea clean out of the water.”

“I couldn’t go home and do nothing,” Henry shrugged. He looked around at the three elves. “You think it’s Omnitec?”

“We don’t know,” Amira replied.

“Why are you in London?” Henry asked. “Shouldn’t you be in Alvahame, getting ready to deliver the presents?”

“I’m trying to learn my lesson from our previous adventure,” Klasodin smiled.

Henry looked at him blankly.

“What’s that?” he said.

“I can’t keep watching humanity from a distance,” the elf king replied. “I need to meet new people and be among them. That is what I’ve been doing and I can feel the difference already. More people believe in me, which makes our Madjik stronger as a result. Hopefully it’s gone some way to counteract whatever has been done to sabotage us.”

“The presents you deliver this year could break as well,” Henry said.

“I know,” Klasodin said. “We’ve tried everything. But there’s nothing more I can do in Alvahame until Christmas Eve, so I will keep going here.”

“You’ve been to other Christmas events, haven’t you?” Henry grinned. “Pretending to be a fake Santa Claus.”

“I’ve been all over the place,” Klasodin laughed. “Pretending to be a fake Santa Claus. And it’s been wonderful. I enjoyed meeting your family immensely.” He patted Henry on the back and shook his hand. “It is good to see you again, my young friend. I am sorry it’s had to be this way, but I have been looking in on you.”

Henry found himself smiling. It was hard to be angry with Klasodin for long.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said.

“You look like you’re doing well,” Klasodin said. “Could I go so far as to say that you’ve actually been happy?”

Henry gave a shrug.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” the King of Alvahame smiled. “Now come inside and see our London home.”

Chapter Eleven

Klasodin and Amira led Henry in through a door on the ground level while Rodin showed the reindeer into the stables opposite. The interior was all wood and surprisingly bright seeing as Henry had no idea where the light was coming from. The living area was a large open space that followed the curve of the building. It had a kitchen at one end, a long dining table and some seating areas. There was a Christmas tree in the middle that nearly touched the ceiling. The bedrooms and living quarters were on the upper floors.

“The Nerivari in London.” Klasodin paced the dining area, his face like thunder. “That has never happened before and it wouldn’t happen now without someone controlling them. All the Nerivari really care about is defending their territory. They’re very organised then. Apart from that they’re a shambles. A brutal, savage shambles.”

“They have a leader,” Zadira called from the kitchen. “And he’s not human.”

“Grimnir?” Rodin asked.

“No,” Henry said. “He wasn’t like any elf I’ve seen before.”

Zadira and the other young elves had all piled into the kitchen. Now they emerged with plates of food and everyone sat down to eat.

“If it’s not Grimnir, who is it?” Klasodin said, drinking some hot spiced wine, which he always seemed to have about somewhere.

“Omnitec brought in someone else,” Balnir suggested. “They’re going after the competition again.”

“Where are they working out of now?” Henry asked.

No one knew.

“I don’t want you hunting them down like last time,” Klasodin said, aiming it at Henry and every young elf around the table. “You were fortunate tonight, young Henry, that your friends were so close.”

“How did you get to me so quickly?” Henry asked.

“We were on our way already,” Forodin said with his mouth full. “We were coming to look in on you because we hadn’t heard from you in ages.”

“You were?” Henry was taken by surprise.

“Yeah. I was going to land on your roof and see if we could sneak in without the rest of your lot seeing.”

“That would have been cool,” Henry grinned.

“We’d have come before,” Balnir said seriously. “But we weren’t allowed to leave. They only let us out now because we said we’d meet Klasodin here.”

“You got into a fight the minute you landed,” Rodin returned.

“Which we won,” Raiodin replied. “And rescued Henry.”

“You were lucky,” Rodin said shortly. “The Nerivari I fought are nasty, brutal fighters. They’d sink their teeth into you and spit in your face while you plunged your sword through their stomach before they’d even think about running away.”

No one argued with him. Henry ate in silence, dreading the moment Rodin would get up to take him home, but instead, he and the young elves were shown to separate rooms on a corridor three floors from the top of the building. He sank onto the bed straightaway and closed his eyes, grateful to be going to bed without his usual headache.

He woke up about midday with no idea what time he’d gone to bed. It was the best he’d slept in ages. He opened his curtains and the bright sunlight streamed in. He had a view over London - he just had no idea how.

He found the others gathered around the large Christmas tree, watching the images shown on the giant gold baubles hanging from its branches. They showed empty shelves in shops, people fighting over the last items, fights and riots breaking out in the streets. News items showed the warehouse wreckage. Experts said they would never get replacements in on time. Reports blamed all the chaos on the snow. People stood in front of TV cameras saying Christmas was ruined. Presents wouldn't get there. The shops had no turkey. And they wouldn't see their family because no one could travel.

Klasodin waved an angry fist at the tree and the images disappeared. They sat down to breakfast, which became lunch. Everyone ate in silence.

"It didn't say anything about SuperToys," Henry said eventually.

"We replaced their stock early this morning," Klasodin replied. "No one will ever know about that. But they have no replacements and it set us back as well."

"What do we do now?" Ellodine asked.

"We do as planned," Rodin said. "Klasodin, Amira and I will carry out our scheduled visits. You will all go home. We will bring Henry to Alvahame with us for Christmas Eve."

Henry felt a swell of excitement at the thought of seeing Alvahame and being there for Christmas Eve. But he didn't want to leave his friends again. He wanted to help.

Voices raised around the table.

"Home?" Balnir groaned. "We just left. I'm so sick of that place."

There was a moment of silence as everyone looked at him.

"What is wrong with you?" Ellodine fired at him.

"That was bad," Rimida agreed. "Even for you."

"I've had a headache for months," Balnir protested. "I only realised how bad it was when I left and came here. Come on. I know it's not just me."

"I feel better," Raiodin agreed.

“Me too,” Forodin said.

“Everyone’s arguing all the time,” Rimida added. “It’s like they hate each other. It’s worse than last year.”

All the young elves apart from Ellodine agreed with her.

“It’s not that bad,” she argued.

“But you agree it’s bad,” Balnir cut in.

Ellodine scowled at him.

“There was an atmosphere when we left, but it wasn’t as serious as that,” Amira said.

“Yeah, well, now it’s worse.” Balnir leaned back and folded his arms.

“You’re still going back,” Rodin told him.

The young elves argued loudly for staying and hunting Omnitec, but Klasodin waved their arguments away. Once lunch was done, the six of them skulked away and were nowhere to be found, leaving Henry with Klasodin as Rodin and Amira readied the sleigh and reindeer.

Klasodin sat him down at the table and touched his long fingers to Henry’s Hafskod. Two flames danced and burned larger and hotter than Henry had ever seen before. He realised it was the first time he’d seen them in a long time.

“Trust the Madjik,” the King of Alvahame told him in a quiet voice. “You have nothing to prove. It chose you. Trust it and it will come through for you. When we get you back to Alvahame, we’ll have everything fixed in no time.”

Henry wasn’t so sure about that, but he nodded his agreement. Rodin shook his hand and Amira hugged him. Then he stood in the snow waving goodbye as the sleigh and reindeer with its three passengers rose into the air, shot off and disappeared. He stood there, feeling the icy cold air on his face and gazing up at the sky, thinking how much clearer his head had been since he’d left his London home.

It was strange that the elves were experiencing the same thing.

He really wished they didn't have to go home.

He wandered back inside and found them all waiting for him around the dining table.

"We're not going home," Forodin stated. "My headache cleared yesterday. And I'd rather hunt down Omnitec."

"How?" Henry said. "We don't have any clues or leads."

"We will," Zadira replied. "I can take care of that."

"Do you all get the headaches?" Henry asked.

Six elves nodded in unison.

"I've been getting them too," he said.

They all looked at him.

"How?" Balnir said.

"Maybe it's the Hafskods," Zadira suggested.

"I don't think so," Henry answered. "I don't get them all the time. Just when I'm at home. Like you."

They all looked at each other in silence. No one had any explanation for what was happening to them.

Chapter Twelve

Zadira led the others up to the top floor, through a trapdoor in the ceiling and out onto the roof. It was a platform covered in snow, three metres wide, which ran around the circumference of the structure. It was higher up than Henry expected and gave a view over London. The snow covering the city glistened in the afternoon sunlight.

But Zadira wasn't paying attention to the view. She took a step away and lifted her face to the sky. She raised her hand and moved her fingers – like she was letting the air flow between them. Henry knew what she was doing – he had seen it before – looking for traces of the fleeing Nerivari and the black sleigh that remained in the cold air.

“It's been too long hasn't it?” he asked.

“No one else has been up there apart from us and them,” she replied. “That makes it a lot easier. The traces are still there – they're just more subtle.” She pointed south and moved her hand slowly from right to left. “It flew south towards the English Channel.” She turned to Henry, her sharp green eyes gleaming. “You said it was a massive black sleigh?”

Henry nodded.

“Sounds about right,” she said. “And it was led by reindeer. Only they're not reindeer.” She shuddered. “They're something else. Something horrible.”

“They had red eyes,” Henry remembered. “One of them breathed fire at me.”

The elves stared at him open-mouthed.

“You never mentioned that before,” Balnir said. “Dark, fire-breathing reindeer.”

Zadira turned south again.

“A second smaller black sleigh flew past later,” she said. “There were humans in it. And Nerivari. And someone else. An elf – I think.” She frowned. “But it wasn't coming from the warehouse.” Her green eyes scanned the skyline. “It came from south of the Thames, circled

over the centre of London, then flew back over the Thames to the English Channel.” She pointed and looked at Henry. “It made a stop over there – where you live.”

An icy chill ran up Henry’s spine. He felt a surge of panic.

Forodin was first to the trapdoor. Henry followed the others down the stairs. They grabbed what they needed from their rooms, tore down to the snow-covered, circular courtyard, readied the reindeer and jumped in the sleigh.

With Forodin at the reins, the sleigh and reindeer rose into the air until Klasodin’s London’s home disappeared – like there was nothing there – leaving just the river and the buildings Henry had seen when they arrived.

Forodin landed the sleigh on Henry’s roof. Henry climbed down onto the balcony, prised open his bedroom window and clambered in. The others climbed in after him. He made his way down the stairs, checking every room, and ended up in the living/dining/kitchen in the basement. There was no sign of anyone.

“They should be here,” he panicked. “Where are they?”

“How do you let them know when you’re with us?” Balnir asked.

Henry thought for a second. He had no idea.

“Klasodin takes care of it,” he replied.

“Have they ever all left the house without you before?”

“I don’t know,” Henry shrugged. “They’re always here when I get back.”

“You didn’t ask?” Ellodine exploded.

“No.”

“How can you not know?” she grated. “You live with these people. You’re always here with them.”

“I live here,” Henry protested.

“You never bother with us anymore,” she uttered, folding her arms with a scowl.

“I tried. You didn’t answer.”

“Your Hafskod wasn’t working.”

“And no one bothered to do anything about it,” he returned. “You could have come here any time you wanted.”

“We weren’t allowed,” she snapped.

“Didn’t stop you last time,” he shot back.

“SHUT UP,” Balnir cut in. “You’re giving me a headache.” He bowed over, his hands clamped to his head. “It’s like your voices are stabbing me in the brain.”

“It’s what Ellodine’s voice always sounds like,” Raiodin said.

“Flying off the handle again,” Zadira muttered.

“Well, excuse me for caring,” Ellodine retorted.

“We don’t need elves who care,” Zadira snapped. “We have those already. We need elves who actually know what they’re doing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ellodine growled.

“Christmas is ruined – again,” Rimida blurted. “Why does this keep happening?”

“We should have kept the Black List,” Balnir said. “Now every annoying, stupid human kid gets a present. Why are we wasting our time on these people? What have they done for us? What thanks do we get?”

“What is wrong with you?” Ellodine snapped.

“He’s not the problem,” Rimida shouted, her face turning red.

Henry stared vacantly, his head throbbing. The shouting elves were drowned out by the thoughts spilling through his brain.

Christmas was going wrong again. It always happened when he was there. Why didn’t he know where his foster family were? Why was he always on his own? He had a massive secret no one in his family knew. He wasn’t really one of them, but he wasn’t an elf either. The

elves all blamed him for Christmas going wrong. They could have visited him any time they wanted. They just needed a Glondir. And for next year they would choose a better one. They were going to throw him away like they did the last kid.

His headache was getting worse.

Forodin stepped between the shouting elves, clutching his head in his hands. So far, he'd barely said a word.

"Everyone shut up," he uttered. "My head's killing me."

"Mine too," Balnir complained. "It's like being back in Alvahame."

"No one's asking you to go back," Ellodine retorted.

"Stop talking," Forodin cut in. He looked at Henry. "You too?"

Henry nodded. His voice reverberated in his head when he spoke so he decided it was best not to.

"This is like Alvahame," Raiodin said. "And it started when we came in here."

Six pair of eyes rested on Henry.

"Henry, your Hafskod's gone grey," Forodin said.

The same grey splotches Henry had seen before covered the Hafskod's watch face.

"Has it done that here before?" Balnir asked.

"I don't know," Henry frowned. "I don't think so. I only started seeing it in SuperToys."

"But you've had the headaches for weeks?" Forodin said.

Henry nodded.

"Since the start of December – I think," he replied.

"I've had mine since October," Balnir grated.

"And you've really only seen the grey on your Hafskod now?" Ellodine frowned.

"I never noticed it," Henry shrugged.

Zadira looked around her.

“There has to be something in here that’s causing it.” She studied Henry. “Try going upstairs. See if it gets better or worse.”

Henry climbed two flights of stairs and watched the grey spores shrink.

He ran back down to the basement and they grew until they covered the watch face.

“Move around the room,” Balnir suggested.

Henry kept moving, watching the greyness thicken and grow onto the gold wristband – until he was standing right by the Christmas tree.

“When did you put up your tree?” Forodin asked.

“First of December.”

“The same time you started getting the headaches?” Rimida said.

Henry stared at the Christmas tree in amazement. He moved the Hafskod around the tree – until it touched one bauble and recoiled violently.

Forodin darted forward, snatched it off the tree and dropped it off the floor. It was shiny and black – and teardrop shaped. It didn’t look like any of the others.

Raiodin stepped forward and stamped on the bauble. He gave a yelp of pain and hopped away, clutching his foot. The bauble was still intact.

A laugh erupted and echoed round the room.

The elves wheeled around and drew their weapons.

The laugh sounded again. A rasping, cackling laugh. The black bauble gleamed. A ray of bright light burst from it and emblazoned a bright patch of light on the wall. A dark figure materialised in the light, head covered by the hood of his heavy black cloak.

“Greetings, Glondir,” the figure said in a throaty growl. “Looks like you lost your family again. You should be more careful in future.”

Henry could feel the colour draining from his face.

“What have you done with them?” Balnir demanded.

“Keeping them somewhere safe,” the figure replied. “Stay out of my way and I will bring them back. Interfere and you will never see them again.”

“What are you going to do?” Rimida ventured.

“Destroy Christmas. Obliterate it so it can never return. Make it a horrible memory in the mind of every human.”

“Why?” Henry blurted. “Who are you?”

The figure gave a cruel laugh.

“I saw you in the toy store and in the warehouse – and I allowed you to live. Next time, I will show no mercy.

The figure vanished.

Henry sank into the chair behind him and held his head in his hands.

If he’d come home after the skirmish with the Nerivari, his family would still be there. Now Christmas was ruined and it was all his fault.

Chapter Thirteen

Henry stared at the floor.

“I left them alone again without any protection,” he uttered. “Why do I always let my family get hurt?”

He could hear the elves having a muttered conversation among themselves.

They weren't listening to him. They knew it was his fault. They were going to take his Hafskod away. If they asked, he would take it off and give it to them.

Then they were all standing and crouching around him. Ellodine pulled his hands away from his face and took hold of them. Her hands glowed. He could feel the Madjik surging back through him. He felt better in seconds.

“Your Madjik is weak,” she said.

“I know,” he sighed.

“It's not your fault, Henry,” Balnir told him.

“It is.”

“No. He isolated you from the rest of us, weakened your Madjik to neutralise you as a threat and cut you off at the knees.” Balnir's eyes lit up. “I bet this was his plan all along - to look his enemy in the eye and tell him he'd beaten him.” He gave Henry an apologetic smile. “You had no chance. He's poisoned Alvahame as well. I bet every present Klasodin delivers this Christmas will be ruined.”

“You can stop talking like you admire him,” Rimida said irritably.

“It's a clever plan,” Balnir shrugged. “He had to think all this through a long time in advance. How else could he have poisoned Alvahame?”

“Security's really tight,” Raiodin frowned. “No one gets in or out without the Craft of War knowing about it.”

“Klasodin checks the ValdFyurring all the time,” Ellodine said. “If it was sabotaged, he would have found it.”

“So how did he do it?” Balnir said.

Forodin pointed to the black bauble lying on the carpet.

“Who’d notice another bauble in Alvahame,” he said. “We have glittery, shiny stuff everywhere. He could have planted one like this ages ago. It would take longer to set in because of our Madjik, but it would eventually.”

“It affects one elf after another, getting stronger as we get weaker,” Rimida said.

“It probably poisoned our presents the same way,” Ellodine scowled.

She brandished her elven bow. A gold string materialised in her hand. She pulled it back and an arrow appeared. She aimed at the bauble on the floor and fired.

Henry braced himself.

There was a flash.

The bauble still lay there – with one tiny crack in it. Ellodine picked herself up off the floor with a murderous look on her face.

“Looks like it’s down to you, Glondir,” Forodin said.

“I can’t do it,” Henry protested. “That thing’s been draining my Madjik for weeks.”

“And now we’re here with you,” Ellodine told him. She looked him in the eye. “Trust the Madjik. You saw what it’s done for us in just a year.”

Henry climbed to his feet. His headache was already easing off. He and the six elves stood over the black bauble. His Hafskod glowed gold with Madjik. The grey splotches and spores disappeared from the watch face. He crouched on the floor and touched the Hafskod to the black bauble.

The bauble exploded.

Balnir let out a sigh of relief and sank back on the sofa.

Forodin sent a message to Rodin with his Hafskod.

“Now they just have to find whatever he’s hidden in Alvahame,” he said.

“Maybe we should go back and help with the search,” Rimida suggested. “There’s nothing more we can do here.”

“We need to find Henry’s family,” Raiodin said.

“You heard him,” Rimida insisted. “If we go looking for them, he’ll hurt them.”

“What if he’s lying and he hurts them anyway?” Balnir said.

“Finding the poison baubles won’t be enough to stop him now,” Henry thought out loud.

“We don’t know what he’s going to do next.”

“Maybe his work is done,” Rimida shrugged.

“No. He said stay out of his way,” Balnir replied. “He has plans. What he’s done so far isn’t enough to destroy Christmas completely.”

“So is he Omnitec or not?” Zadira asked.

“He has to be,” Raiodin said. “He has Bayne working with him. If he destroys Christmas, Omnitec come sailing in with a load of presents.”

No one had a better idea.

Henry needed to clear his head. He wandered up to his room, climbed onto the roof and lay on his back in the snow, staring up at the late afternoon sky. His head felt better already.

As if it was reacting to him, the Hafskod glowed and beamed out bright golden light. A holographic map of England and France appeared in front of him, showing a black dot and a gold dot moving over France together.

“What’s that?” came Ellodine’s voice.

She and the other elves sat in the snow on the roof with him and examined the map.

“This place is cool,” Raiodin grinned. “I can see why you like it here.”

“It’s tracking someone’s movements,” Balnir frowned. “Who do you think it is?”

“It won’t show just anyone,” Ellodine replied. “Klasodin said the Hafskod only follows the people it touches.”

“It destroyed the bauble,” Forodin said. “Would that be enough for it to track anyone wielding the same dark Madjik?”

“Then the black dot is who we saw downstairs.” Balnir jumped to his feet. “We can follow him and hunt him down.”

“So who’s the gold dot?” Ellodine frowned. “Who else has it touched?”

An idea hit Henry like a lightning bolt.

“Tabitha calls it my special watch. She plays with it all the time. What if it likes her enough to follow her?”

“The gold dot is moving with the black dot,” Zadira said. “It has to be them.”

“He wasn’t lying,” Rimida ventured. “He will give them back after.”

“But they’ll spend Christmas as his prisoners,” Henry sighed.

“And remember it every year,” Zadira added.

“Everyone else will look back to this year and remember how bad it was,” Ellodine said.

“They won’t want to bother with Christmas anymore.”

“Our city will be dead in two years,” Balnir said, his tone bleak.

They all looked at each other.

Rimida let out a sigh.

“Klasodin’s going to be furious,” she said. “Rodin’ll murder us in our beds.”

“We’d better win then.” Forodin got to his feet. “That should distract them for a bit.”

It was dark by the time they got themselves ready and fed the reindeer. Forodin took the reins and everyone else piled in the back. Henry watched over the side as the sleigh took off into the night and flew out of London, over the white Kent countryside and across the English

Channel to France. Forodin left the French coast behind, skirted around a few clusters of bright lights and flew over more snowy countryside.

Henry caught sight of the River Seine, a silvery grey ribbon winding its way through the white hills and fields. Then his eye was drawn to a dark shape sitting in the middle of a snow-covered field. It was a group of dark figures sitting on snowmobiles, watching the sleigh.

One of them wielded a large crossbow, squinted through the sights and aimed it up at the sleigh. There was a bright flash. A large black arrow shot up and exploded into the sleigh.

Henry tumbled around inside and smacked into the opposite wall. He clambered to his feet and peered over the side.

A second shadowy black arrow blew up at the sleigh and hit it hard.

The sleigh rocked and wobbled violently. Forodin struggled with the reins. The reindeer were panicking and fighting him. They were young and inexperienced. Rodin had taken the ones Henry knew with him.

Ellodine and Raiodin were the first to pull their bows. Bright gold arrows streaked down at the group on the ground. They exploded on the snow. The figures down below scattered and ran for cover. Henry pulled his bow and fired down at a smaller group to the right. Zadira shot arrows of ice down at another small cluster, sending snow billowing everywhere.

A third black arrow bulleted into the base of the sleigh. The force threw it upwards and spun it around in the air.

The sleigh plummeted to the ground.

Chapter Fourteen

Henry found himself lying on his back in the snow, the stars fizzing in his eyes. He felt dazed but the snow had given him a surprisingly soft landing considering how high he'd fallen from.

"Why does this keep happening to us?" came Raiodin's weak voice.

"We keep chasing after the bad guys instead of staying at home, messing around and waiting for Christmas like normal kids," Zadira groaned.

"Do you think this is just how life's going to be from now on?" Raiodin asked. "Getting shot out of a sleigh every year?"

"You know," Balnir said. "I asked Rodin. He said he jumped out of Klasodin's sleigh last year. But he's never been shot out of one."

"They tried," Henry said. "I was there."

"Still," Balnir continued. "Rodin's a hundred. I'm thirteen. Twice in two years. That's all I'm saying."

"One of the reindeers is injured," Forodin's voice sounded from somewhere close by.

A mournful groan came from one of the reindeer to confirm what he'd said.

Henry lifted his head.

Forodin lay on his stomach, trying to uncouple the injured reindeer and the one next to it from the two behind them.

Henry couldn't work out why Forodin was staying low. Then he saw Ellodine lying on her stomach facing the other direction. She had her elven bow in her hand.

"They're coming," she said in a low voice.

Henry's ears picked out a whistle somewhere out there in the darkness, then multiple pairs of feet crunching in the snow towards them. The people who had shot them down were coming to finish them off.

Behind Ellodine, Rimida was lying on her stomach, gathering a mound of snow next to her and making snowballs. In the hands of anyone else, they were a fun game. In Rimida's, they were a weapon. Zadira touched a hand to the surface of the snow and more of it flowed in front of Henry and his friends like a barrier. The mound next to Rimida rose higher.

"If we try to fly away they'll shoot us down again," Balnir said.

"We can't fly anyway," Forodin replied. "All we can do is send the sleigh home and let the Craft of Care heal the injury."

"Ellodine can heal it," Rimida suggested.

"No," Forodin replied. "These reindeer are shaking. They're not Vega or Gratall. We can't make them fly into danger."

He uncoupled the front two reindeer and steered them towards the side of the sleigh. One of them was limping badly. It leaned on its partner, who held it up willingly - to avoid collapsing in the snow and not being able to get up again.

"They're twenty metres away," Ellodine murmured. "We need a plan. Now."

Henry watched silhouetted figures creeping up on them from both sides. He pulled his bow and tried to manoeuvre himself so he could stay low and fire a load of arrows at the same time, but he couldn't find a position that worked. He scowled at the bow.

He felt Ellodine's hand on his arm.

"Trust the Madjik, Glondir," she smiled. "You'll be fine."

"I count ten of them," Zadira said.

Henry gazed down at his Hafskod. It occurred to him he'd never tried asking it for a different weapon. Now the others were with him, maybe it would work.

As if the Hafskod could read his mind, the elven bow glittered with gold Madjik. Then it shrank. More parts grew out of the bow shaft. Gold strings materialised. And two bolts ready to fire, sitting parallel, each 15 centimetres long. Most importantly of all, there was a trigger.

A small crossbow – similar to one he'd used before. Much more like it.

A sleek black shape shot out of the darkness. Henry ducked. A second dark arrow bulleted right past him. A volley of arrows and darts fired out of the night at Henry and his friends, making them all duck for cover.

Henry waited for a gap, reached his right hand up, aimed the crossbow and fired. Gold darts of pure Madjik exploded in the snow and lit up the night air. Two new darts materialised and he squeezed the trigger again.

Ellodine reeled off a volley of arrows.

Balnir and Raiodin pinned back the attackers coming from the other flank.

Behind them, Forodin heaved the injured reindeer into the back of the sleigh. Its partner jumped in and helped pull it over, then both reindeer were in and disappeared. Forodin told the two healthy reindeer at the front of the sleigh to set off and fly back to Alvahame. The sleigh slid over the snow, took off and disappeared in the night.

The elven arrows were holding back the attackers. At Balnir's signal, Rimida jumped to her feet and hurled snowball after snowball. She hit two attackers in the face, knocking them off their feet. The others dived for cover.

Zadira touched her hands to the snow. A massive snow flurry blew over the attackers. The ones hit by snowballs tried frantically to brush the frozen snow off their faces - but it stuck to their skin. Then it stretched over their heads and necks, down over their arms and torso. The snow blew over all ten attackers and buried them.

Forodin jumped on his snowboard. The others did the same. They slid over the snow, past the attackers, who they couldn't even see anymore.

Henry slid at the rear behind Ellodine as they picked up speed and flew over one field after another. They passed the place where they had first seen the attackers from the air. Henry could just make out the snowmobiles parked in the middle of the field. Zadira had seen them too. She crouched and brushed her fingers over the snow. It blew across the field and buried the snowmobiles until there was nothing to see but a mound of snow.

With Forodin leading, they shot over the snow-covered fields, leaping over hedges and walls. Then Henry's eyes picked out the long ribbon of ice stretching as far as he could see in either direction, glittering in the moonlight.

The River Seine.

Following the others, Henry hit a mound of snow, took off, flew over one last hedge and landed on the frozen river. He veered left after Forodin, following the Seine towards Paris.

They picked up speed and shot over the ice. Then the lights appeared ahead – on tall structures and buildings rising on the horizon.

Paris.

Henry let out a laugh of excitement.

They were going to slide right through it.

Chapter Fifteen

With Forodin and Balnir following the map on their own Hafskods and shooting along the Seine as quickly as they could, Henry slowed down. His first time in Paris couldn't be seeing it zoom past him in a dark blur. Ellodine eased off the pace as well and slid alongside him.

"Have you been here before?" she asked.

"No. The only times I've been abroad were coming to Alvahame and travelling in the sleigh with you."

"Me too," she said. She gave a broad smile and looked around her. "I've always wanted to come to Paris."

"Me too."

Like the Thames, the River Seine wove in and out and up and down, which meant getting to the centre of Paris took a lot longer than Henry was expecting. Not that Ellodine minded. Once they reached the outskirts, she began pointing out places she recognised.

"How do you know all this," he said.

"You know I love Human Studies," she replied. "I've seen all these places loads of times from Alvahame. It's better being here for real."

Paris was silent – as if they had the whole city to themselves. The only sound in Henry's ears was the base of his snowboard whistling over the ice. After a left turn, he caught his first glimpse of the Eiffel Tower up the river. He watched it disappear and reappear as they slid under one bridge after another. Then they sailed right past it and he stared at it open-mouthed. Ellodine was right – it was much better in real life.

Ellodine let out a contented sigh. She leaned back on her snowboard and swerved left across the river. She reached the bank, then threw her weight forward, arched away from the

bank and sailed over the ice towards the opposite bank. Henry laughed. He followed her and they both weaved left and right along the river.

“There’s the Arc de Triomphe,” she said in a dreamy voice, pointing with her left hand. “Place de la Concorde. Sacre Coeur is up there on the hill. Ooh, here’s the Louvre. And there’s Notre Dame.”

She swerved left and right over the ice, nearly hitting the land, then veering away just in time. Henry sped up, sailed past her, then curved the other way, crossing the river just in front of her. She let out a laugh and did the same thing back to him - sliding to the opposite bank and crossing over in front of him. She slowed and slid behind Henry as they swerved left and right, then they both leaned forward and carved a longer, gentler line to follow the curve of the river as it turned south.

Henry listened to Ellodine laughing and the sound of his snowboard sliding on the ice. He let out a contented sigh. He could feel his brain easing away from everything else and swimming in delirium. He remembered flying away from Alvahame over the snow with her a year ago. This was the closest he’d felt to it since. He looked over at Ellodine – and wondered if it would be as good if she wasn’t there.

She took hold of his hands and spun him round. Then they stopped and Henry nearly threw up. He was really dizzy but just about managed to stay on his feet and keep sliding.

Ellodine just laughed at him and weaved over the ice ahead of him.

A message in bright green letters flared up in front of his eyes – from Forodin:

“Get a move on.”

The holographic map in gold light beamed from the Hafskod. The gold dot a mile further up the Seine showed Forodin and the others speeding away. Further up the river, the black dot had grown into a black mass that surrounded the gold dot they had seen back in London.

Henry’s mind snapped back to reality. His heart beat harder. His London family was close.

Ellodine slowed to slide alongside him and spun her snowboard around to lead with her right foot and face him.

“They have a small army around them now.” She frowned. “How have we caught up to them already?”

They sped up and left Paris behind, following the frozen Seine as it carved through the French countryside, heading south towards the mountains of the Massif Central and the Alps, but the map showed it would never actually reach them. Soon the last of the light from the city was gone and they were sliding through darkness. Their Hafskods beamed out a dim golden glow like torches - just enough to light up the path of ice ahead, but low enough to avoid attracting any unwanted attention.

The Seine narrowed and the landscape rose gradually. The Hafskod showed the gold dot representing Forodin and the others had stopped a kilometre ahead, close to the peak. Further on, at the end of the Seine, the black mass lingered, waiting for a second larger black mass heading towards it from the west. The second black mass joined the first. Then they vanished.

Henry and Ellodine flew up the frozen river and found the others where the ice disappeared into the hill. Ahead of them was what looked like a thick screen of cloud mingled with the dark night air.

Henry stared at it open-mouthed. He knew what it was – he just couldn’t believe it was right there in front of him. The others had been stunned into silence as well.

“It’s an elven realm.” Raiodin clasped his hands behind his head like he didn’t know what to do with himself. “Here. In France.”

Chapter Sixteen

Henry and his friends stood on their snowboards gazing up at the screen of dark cloud, which went on forever in every direction.

“Has this always been here?” Henry said.

“Klasodin told me the only elven realms were way up north,” Ellodine frowned.

“What about the place in London?”

“That’s new,” she said. “It took some powerful Madjik to create it.” She looked up at the cloud. “Someone else made this.”

“It must have been Grimmir,” Raiodin said. “Getting help from whoever it was coming out of that dark bauble.”

“How long does it take to create an elven realm?” Rimida asked.

“A long time,” Ellodine replied. “The one in London took less than a year and that’s quick. You have to grow it and cultivate it.”

“And no one in Alvahame ever saw this?” Henry questioned.

“We weren’t looking,” Ellodine said – with an irritable edge to her voice.

“Well, we are now.” Raiodin’s jaw set. He drew his sword and set off on his snowboard.

“Let’s go.”

His Hafskod glowed. He disappeared into the cloud. Balnir and Forodin followed. Rimida, Zadira and Ellodine set off after them.

Henry watched six glowing Hafskods dim inside the cloud and disappear. He slid into the cloud and felt the moisture cling to his face. He couldn’t see or hear anything. Then he felt a change under his snowboard – as it slid from ice onto fresh snow.

The cloud disappeared and there was bright sunlight everywhere. It was blinding. Henry shielded his eyes and squinted, trying to adjust. He slid towards the six vague figures ahead of him.

Pure white snow stretched ahead of him, leading to a line of mountains further on. The air was icy cold. The sunlight beamed through the grey clouds covering the sky overhead.

The elves looked about them.

Zadira crouched on her snowboard and touched her fingertips to the snow.

“This didn’t fall with the snow that covered London,” she said. “It’s been lying here like this for over a year.” She pointed ahead of her. “There’s a path between those two mountains. That’s where they went.”

She looked around at the others, her green eyes gleaming. She swept her hand over the snow – and a blast of snow blew over all of them.

Henry coughed and spluttered and spat snow out of his mouth. They were all covered in a layer of snow from their hats to their boots – even Zadira. After all the excess snow was brushed away, their clothes, snowboards and weapons were white.

“There,” Zadira grinned, waving away their spluttering and complaining. “Now we’re camouflaged. They’ll never see us coming.”

“Just wish I hadn’t swallowed most of mine,” Raiodin complained.

They set off with Zadira leading the way, following the trail only she could find, which took them up a gentle slope towards a ridge between the two mountains.

They stopped on the ridge where the path peaked - to look down at the way they had come and the screen of cloud that had brought them there. Ahead, the snow-covered slope stretched down to the base of another mountain, which was part of a second line of mountains running parallel to the first.

“Where now?” Balnir said.

Zadira pointed to the foot of the mountain at the bottom of the slope.

“Down there.”

They set off again and flew over the snow. Henry slid after the others, listening to the sound of the snow under his board and watching the snowy landscape open out between the two rows of mountains. He couldn't believe there weren't any guards or signs of security. He'd expected anything belonging to Omnitec to be heavily guarded. It looked like there wasn't a single being anywhere apart from the seven of them.

A dark spot in the base of the mountain grew as they flew down towards it. At first Henry thought it was a patch of rock untouched by the snow. Then it looked more like a cave. But as Zadira led them to it, he saw it was the mouth of a tunnel leading under the mountain.

They skidded to a stop and peered inside. It was as tall as a house and just as wide. The walls, floor and ceiling were all made of ice. But there was no way of seeing where it came out – the tunnel turned a sharp bend after about fifty metres.

Raiodin ventured in. The others followed. Henry brought up the rear again, looking behind him to make sure no one was creeping up on them. Still no other signs of life. He slid along the tunnel behind Ellodine, veering left and taking a wide berth as the tunnel turned right. He darted another glance over his shoulder. No one was following them, but the nerves bubbled in his stomach. Something felt wrong.

They followed the tunnel for ages. It curved gradually to the left, getting darker and darker. But no one dared use a light. Zadira overtook Raiodin and led the way, feeling the path of the ice without having to see it. Henry focused on the silhouetted shape of Ellodine and stayed right behind her.

Then some light crept into the tunnel. It was just enough for Henry to see Ellodine's blonde hair waving in the breeze in front of them and make out Zadira at the front of the line. The tunnel turned a corner and light flooded in.

Zadira stopped as the tunnel opened out into a wider space. Henry slid up behind the others and gazed in amazement at the enormous expanse in front of them. He couldn't believe someone had managed to hide it in France.

"This doesn't look like somewhere a company would set up," Rimida said. "There's no factory here."

"Grimnir likes hiding in nature," Ellodine said. "This definitely looks like Omnitec's hidden lair to me."

"It's a frozen lake," Rimida argued.

"None of this happened naturally," Zadira said, her gaze sweeping the ice. "Omnitec are hiding here somewhere."

Chapter Seventeen

Henry and his friends looked out onto a massive frozen lake, bordered by sheer rocky cliffs that surrounded the lake like a wall. Beyond it, silhouetted mountains loomed in the distance, screened by a thin membrane of silvery cloud. Dotted over the lake were tower-like structures that rose out of the ice. Some looked like icebergs, some were strange, tall rocks that were wider and flat on top, penetrating the ice like stalactites. The others were made of stone with smooth sides and defined corners. Henry noticed some trees jutting out of the ice with tall, skinny trunks and bare, jagged branches on top. More trees stuck out of the rocky cliffs – their trunks horizontal, their bare spindly branches hanging over the ice. The whole place was silent. There were no other signs of life.

Then the large black sleigh emerged in the distance from behind a towering ice structure at the far end of the frozen lake close to the right-hand edge, led by the eight dark creatures Henry had seen on Regent Street. It disappeared behind another tower and didn't reappear.

Henry couldn't wait any longer. He took off, heading straight for where he'd seen the black sleigh. He could hear the others sliding after him.

"Steer left," came Balnir's voice.

"Why?"

"You can't just go straight for them," Balnir told him. "Stay in the middle and you'll be spotted from every tower on the lake - if anyone's up there. Keep to the edges."

Henry scowled. He knew Balnir was right. He veered left to the edge of the frozen lake and slid alongside the rocky cliff, watching one tower after another sail past.

Balnir pulled up alongside him, his elven bow in his hand. Henry knew it was to shield him if enemy warriors did jump out at them from somewhere, but it was still annoying – he couldn't see everything.

The closer they came to the towers, the bigger they were. They were like skyscrapers and tower blocks Henry had seen in London, only they were formed of stone, rock and ice. He wondered what was hidden inside them.

They slid on in silence, flying past the nearest tower to the left border of the lake. It was made of rock – as if it had been formed from the cliff face surrounding the ice.

Once they passed it, Henry caught sight of the tower the sleigh had disappeared behind. His heart pounded. They were getting closer.

“I don’t like this,” Rimida said suddenly. Henry could hear the nerves in her voice. “It’s too quiet. And I don’t have anything to throw.”

“We need better camouflage,” Zadira said. She ran her fingers over the ice. “It’s frozen solid. I can’t do anything.”

The whiteness dissolved from their clothes, boards and weapons. They all crouched low on their snowboards – making themselves as difficult to spot as they could.

They flew alongside the wall, passing towers and trees. Once they’d reached the far end, they kept following as it curved around to the right. Still no sign of the black sleigh. A tower set close to the wall obscured whatever was happening in the far corner.

They slid up to it and hid, hugging its walls, edging around to see what was behind it.

The black sleigh was parked outside the largest tower on the frozen lake, which reminded Henry of a castle in England. It had a battlement on the roof and was perfectly cylindrical, built from uniformly hewn yellow stone that could have come from the Cotswolds. Off the back of it to the left and right were walkways leading into tunnels carved into the cliffs. The walkways were supported by tall, elegant arches stretching up to them from under the ice.

A tall dark figure, head covered by the hood of a black cloak jumped out of the sleigh.

The same scraping sound Henry had heard in the warehouse in North London echoed off the ice and the rocky cliffs. His skin crawled – like last time. A chill surged up his spine.

The figure emerged from behind the sleigh, his right hand dragging something over the ice behind him. It was a sword with a black blade. The dark figure wore a thick black cloak that reached his knees. The hood hid his face. He ambled across the ice away from the sleigh, looking about him like he was sightseeing.

“Who is that?” Rimida breathed.

“I have no idea?” Ellodine whispered back. Her brow furrowed. “Klasodin told me lots of stories, but none about any elf that looks like him.”

Henry thought back to reading Klasodin’s memoirs – they contained no mention of anyone like the dark figure he was watching.

“What’s he doing?” Balnir murmured.

“He kind of looks like Klasodin,” Rimida whispered. “Only everything’s black.”

Raiodin’s eyes lit up. A grin crept across his blond features.

“It’s the Dark Santa,” he breathed.

“I like it,” Forodin chuckled.

Henry edged closer, desperate to get a better look. His family had to be there somewhere.

Zadira grabbed him and shoved him back against the rocky wall of the tower. She looked him in the eye urging him to stay silent and gestured to the others to do the same. Then she pointed upwards.

“Look,” she breathed.

All Henry could see was clouds.

“Look closer,” she whispered. “Up in the air between the towers. They’re camouflaged to look like the clouds above, but they’re not.”

Raiodin swore under his breath.

Then Henry saw them – stretched between every tower – almost invisible because they were the same colour as the sky.

Walkways.

And someone was moving about on them.

Suddenly hundreds of black clad warriors emerged on every walkway, aiming bows and arrows and crossbows down at the dark figure with the sleigh.

“Oh no,” Balnir breathed. “We got it wrong. This is Omnitec’s lair. But the Dark Santa isn’t with them. He’s here to destroy them. And we’re right in the middle of it.”

Chapter Eighteen

There were warriors on every walkway. They aimed bows and crossbows down at the elf in the black hooded cloak, who ambled casually over the ice, dragging his black blade over the surface – as if the appearance of hundreds of enemy warriors made no difference to him at all.

Henry was pretty sure the armed men on the walkways were the Gaardreng, the mercenaries who did Omnitec's dirty work. He recognised the clothes and the weapons.

“Put down your weapon and surrender,” a voice shouted. “You are surrounded.”

The hooded elf let out a laugh – like he had before when the dark bauble in Henry's foster home had burst into life. It was a grating, guttural sound, which echoed off the ice and the rocky walls.

There was a rumble. The ice trembled under Henry's boots.

Gaardreng fighters looked about them nervously for the source of the noise.

Then came a sound like a rock slide. Little dark rocks the size of Henry's fist appeared from nowhere, bouncing and tumbling over the ice, striking the cliffs and the walls of the tower structures. A flurry rolled past where Henry and his friends were hiding. They gathered in number and rolled over the frozen lake in a dark mass like a black wave rolling over still water and breaking against the towers. An avalanche of black stones spilled out of the cliffs at the opposite side of the lake. Piles of them gathered around the base of every tower. A heap of them crawled up Henry until they reached his shoulders and he was pinned against the tower wall.

He wrestled himself free as the others did and picked one up. He realised they weren't just rocks - they were lumps of coal.

“The stones in the factory,” Forodin whispered. “They weren't just stones, were they?”

“I never saw them properly,” Henry replied, his mind churning over.

“And that black footprint we found,” Zadira added. “We thought that black dust was from the fire. What if it wasn’t? What if it was coal?”

The elves looked at each other.

Henry watched something dawn on Ellodine. Her face paled.

“Oh no,” she breathed. “I know who it is. He loves coal - he uses it all the time.” She looked around at the others. “His sword. The blade is black because it’s made of obsidian.”

“Who is it?” Raiodin said.

“I thought it was just a story Klasodin told me,” she shuddered. “Something that happened a really long time ago. But that’s him. He calls himself Krampus.”

“Krampus?” Raiodin repeated. “What kind of a name is that?”

Ellodine shrugged.

“Who is he?” Zadira asked.

“He was an elf of Alvahame like us,” Ellodine replied. “He had a different name back then. He believed in the Black List long before Gronodin - or Balnir.”

“I still do,” Balnir insisted, folding his arms. “And I stand by it.”

“Well,” Ellodine continued, aiming a scowl at him. “Leaving out the bad children wasn’t enough for him. He believed every child was bad and that none of them deserved a gift, so he wanted to punish them – by giving them coal.”

“He wanted to put coal in their stockings,” Henry said. “That’s real?” He looked at the elves. “The story of Santa has always been that he punishes bad kids by putting lumps of coal in their stockings.”

“That wasn’t Santa,” Ellodine said. “It was Krampus.”

“What happened to him?” Raiodin asked. “Where has he been all this time?”

“They sent him away,” Ellodine replied. “That’s what Klasodin told me. Somewhere he couldn’t escape.”

“And now he’s here,” Balnir said, his tone bleak.

“We need to get out of here,” Rimida uttered. “Now.”

“We can’t,” Balnir replied. “If we move now, someone will see us.”

“What do we do?” Rimida whispered – she was starting to panic.

“We wait until the fighting breaks out,” Balnir decided. “Then we can escape when no one’s looking.”

“That’s your plan?” Zadira hissed. “Wait for them to start killing each other?”

“Works for me,” Raiodin shrugged.

“We haven’t found my family,” Henry whispered.

“I don’t know how we can,” Balnir replied, a sympathetic look on his face. “Not without getting killed. Look at them all.”

The hooded elf wandered around the open space between the black sleigh and the tower opposite the one that looked like a castle, scraping his black blade on the ice.

“What’s obsidian?” Henry asked.

“Volcanic rock,” Ellodine said. “It’s like hard, black glass. It makes good blades because it’s really sharp.”

“He has his own form of Madjik, doesn’t he?” Balnir said. “That’s how he turns everything grey.”

“I’ve never seen those black arrows that shot us down before either,” Raiodin added.

“He’s an Aesr whose Madjik’s turned dark,” Forodin said. “Look at him. Everything about him is a dark version of us.”

“He’s a dark version of Klasodin,” Ellodine said.

“The Dark Santa,” Raiodin breathed.

Ellodine rolled her eyes.

“You like that way too much,” Zadira commented.

“It’s a good name for him,” Raiodin shrugged. “And I thought of it.”

A movement caught Henry’s eye. A fleet of giant black snowmobiles, each driven by a Gaard with eight more Gaardreng in the back, slid silently on their runners over the ice until they surrounded Krampus.

“Whoa,” Forodin breathed. “They’re like sleighs with their own power. I want one.”

Ellodine glared at him.

“They’re an Omnitec invention,” she hissed. “We want nothing to do with them.”

Krampus didn’t react to the new arrivals. He just ambled about on the ice, his Obsidian blade scraping on the surface.

It made Henry’s skin crawl – like it did every time he heard it. He just wanted it to stop.

“What’s he waiting for?” Raiodin whispered.

A knowing grin crossed Balnir’s features.

“He was waiting for them to show their hand. They just did.”

A grey hand with black claws for nails removed the hood. Krampus had grey skin with lines and fissures as if it had been carved from rock. His wild black hair clung to his head and neck. His eyes looked like they were made from Obsidian – the same as his blade.

Henry stared at him with a mixture of curiosity and horror.

“He used to be an Aesr?” Balnir breathed.

“He’s a monster,” Rimida said.

A noise reached Henry’s ears. It took him a few seconds to work out what it was - muffled shouts and screams - coming from the large covered compartment at the back of Krampus’ black sleigh.

Krampus wheeled round. His black eyes turned lava red and burned with fury.

“SHUT UP,” he roared.

Silence.

Henry felt sick.

“They’re in the back of the sleigh, aren’t they?” he whispered.

Krampus eyeballed every Gaard, his eyes burning.

The Gaardreng opened fire.

Arrows and bolts rained down on him.

Krampus moved his sword at lightning speed and deflected every one. His obsidian blade collided with arrows and bolts, sending them shooting in every direction.

The Gaards leapt out of their snowmobiles and charged at him.

Krampus took a few steps back, his sword striking every shot. Once every Gaard was out of his snowmobile and running towards him, he angled his blade and deflected the volley of arrows back at the advancing Gaards. Krampus’ blade became a black blur as it bombarded the Gaards with their own arrows, then hammered them up at the warriors on the walkway.

A band of Gaards ducked the arrows and bolts and leapt at Krampus. He beat away kicks and punches. His sword sliced at flying arrows and smashed into swinging blades.

The obsidian blade caught fire. Flames flared from it. Every flying arrow and bolt was consumed in the fire. Krampus sliced and stabbed through every enemy warrior. He hacked at thrusting swords and turned them to ash. He swung his burning blade and a lava-coloured flame burst from the sword, arched through the air and blazed through a group of Gaards.

Shouts of alarm sounded above. Chaos broke out on the walkways. Nerivari burst out of the tunnels in the cliffs above and onto every walkway. Their blades flashed. They hacked and swung at the Gaards.

More warriors appeared from the tunnels – who looked just like the Gaardreng - only they weren’t Gaards anymore. They fired crossbows. Bolts blasted from them and exploded on

their targets with flashes of blue light. Bodies spilled off the walkways and crashed down onto the ice.

Henry felt a surge of terror as he spotted a familiar figure on the walkway leading off the castle tower at the far end. The rebel Gaards were led by Bayne.

The Nerivari and the Gaards working for Krampus cut and shot their way through the Omnitec army. The Nerivari fought savagely, biting, punching and stabbing with their claws when their swords didn't land. Then they leapt off the walkways and swarmed over the Gaards still standing on the frozen lake.

Krampus turned and ambled back to his sleigh, his blade scraping over the ice. He stopped at the sleigh. He turned his head – and looked Henry in the eye.

Henry froze. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck.

Krampus leapt into his sleigh and grabbed the reins. The sleigh slid off, disappearing and reappearing behind the towers scattered over the ice. It picked up speed, lifted into the air and flew off.

Henry edged around the tower to watch it land on the edge of the frozen lake and disappear up the tunnel they'd come from.

There was a snarl – from really close by. Two sapphire blue eyes set in a charcoal-coloured face appeared from around the tower and stared back at him. More faces joined it.

The pack of Nerivari rounded the tower, swords in their hands. They closed in on Henry, ready to kill him.

Chapter Nineteen

Henry backed away.

The Nerivari advancing on him were a foot taller than the saboteurs in London. They looked like Rodin had described – savage warriors with big muscles, thick skin like body armour and brutally sharp teeth.

Their leader wielded his sword like a trained pro. He drew it back and slashed at Henry's face at lightning speed.

Raiodin leapt in front of Henry and deflected the Nerivar's swing. Their blades clashed. A blaze of gold arrows from Ellodine's bow took down three more Nerivari. Henry retreated and pulled his bow. The string and arrow materialised. He fired – but a Nerivar swatted it away with his sword.

He retreated, wondered where the others were. Then saw the other four backing away as another crowd of Nerivar warriors advanced on them.

The leading Nerivar beat Raiodin back. He slashed at him with a deft flick of his blade. Raiodin rolled out of the way.

Henry and his friends grouped together and retreated. The army of Nerivari advanced on them and surrounded them, blocking off every escape route. Through the tiniest gaps, Henry caught sight of the dead bodies littering the ice behind them. The rest of the Gaards fighting to defend Omnitec's hidden lair had surrendered and were being marched inside the towers.

He looked up at the walkways – and saw hundreds of arrows and bolts aimed in their direction. Most were trained on him.

The frozen lake was silent.

Henry locked eyes with Bayne, who stared him down from the walkway off the castle-like structure from behind his crossbow. He could see the splotch-covered watch face of the

Hafskod out of the corner of his eye and wondered if his Madjik would work in Omnitec's hidden lair – even if it was being taken over by invaders.

The Nerivari closed in on Henry and his friends until they stood just a few metres away, brandishing swords, clubs and maces. They were so close he could only just see Bayne's crossbow over their heads.

It occurred to him - maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

He looked up to the closest walkway and saw more crossbows trained on him. The Nerivari would have to be pretty much on top of them to get in the way of those.

Balnir was thinking the same thing. He muttered his plan.

"If you and your elves put down your weapons and surrender, you might get out of this alive," came a loud voice from the walkway above.

"Your elves?" Rimida grated. "Is that what we are? His pets?"

"That's what he meant," Balnir said with a grin.

Rimida swore and grabbed some pieces of coal that were heaped on the ice.

"Now you've made her angry," Balnir said gleefully.

Henry had never seen Rimida angry. He could imagine what was coming.

Rimida hurled a volley of coal lumps at the walkway and bombarded the Gaards up there like machine gun fire. The guy who'd shouted took one to the face.

Henry ducked low. He fixed his concentration on his bow and it changed to the same small gold crossbow he'd used before. He aimed at the Nerivari to his left and squeezed the trigger as quickly as the new darts appeared.

Ellodine fired her arrows up at the walkway. Madjik exploded everywhere in bright gold flashes. Balnir, Forodin and Raiodin let off a blaze of arrows into the advancing Nerivari. Zadira's ice arrows shot into the frozen lake around them. The ice stretched over every Nerivar until none of them could move.

Arrows whistled over Henry's head. A blue flash exploded into the frozen lake metres behind him, sending shards of ice everywhere.

Forodin shot off like a rocket. He crashed through the Nerivari – like a bowling ball smashing through pins. The others followed him, firing arrows and flinging coal at any Gaard or Nerivar in sight. Forodin veered under the walkway and dived into one of the sleigh-sized snowmobiles. Henry clambered in after the others and dropped to the floor.

Arrows and crossbow bolts hammered into the snowmobile's bodywork. A volley of bolts zipped over Henry's head.

Ellodine and the elves fired a stream of arrows at Krampus' army, holding them back.

Henry reached his hand over the top and squeezed the trigger, sending bolts of Madjik shooting and exploding over the ice.

Forodin took a few seconds to work out the controls. Then the snowmobile took off and flew over the frozen lake. Tall towers flashed past on both sides. The snowmobile lifted into the air and shot away, throwing Henry into the back of the sleigh. Balnir, Ellodine and Zadira landed in a pile on top of him. An elbow hit him in the ribs. A knee landed on his leg. He recoiled in pain and shoved them off him. Rimida and Raiodin were still clinging desperately to the sides.

Forodin let out a laugh. The snowmobile arrowed down towards the tunnel they'd slid through to find the frozen lake. The runners bounced on the ice. The snowmobile careered into the tunnel. It took one turn after another at full speed, hurling Henry and the others around in the back, then exploded out of the tunnel into bright daylight.

Henry recoiled, squeezed his eyes shut and threw up his hands to shield his face.

The snowmobile careered up the snowy slope, shot over the ridge and flew towards the grey cloud screen.

Then there was nothing but grey everywhere. Henry could just make out six silhouetted figures in the sleigh with him. Moisture clung to his face and trickled down his neck.

The sleigh flew out of the cloud into the night and Henry breathed a sigh of relief. He leaned over the side, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. In a few minutes they could just make out the Seine below.

“I love this thing,” Forodin grinned.

“It’s Omnitec technology,” Ellodine said stiffly. “It doesn’t deserve to be enjoyed. We should ditch it first chance we get.”

Henry puffed out his cheeks and rolled his eyes. He’d had the same argument with Ellodine before.

“This thing saved our lives,” Forodin said.

“We’re a lot safer getting shot at in this,” Balnir agreed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ellodine snapped. “It’s not Alvahame Madjik.”

“So jump out then,” Raiodin grinned, sitting on the floor of the snowmobile and stretching out his legs.

“Our Madjik won’t be strong enough when we get out,” Ellodine scowled. “Mixing it with other Madjik or human technology taints it. Our Hafskods won’t work.”

“So we don’t get out,” Forodin shrugged.

Ellodine turned her back on the others and leaned over the side. Henry watched her out of the corner of his eye. She let out a sigh and rested her chin on her hands. She didn’t look angry anymore – just sad.

They rode in silence.

Then the flying snowmobile lurched and rose higher into the air.

“Uh oh,” Forodin said. He looked around at the others. “I’m not driving anymore.”

“Who is?” Ellodine said in alarm.

“The screen says it’s on autopilot and heading for home,” Forodin reported. He fought with the controls. “And I can’t do anything about it.”

“Where are we going?” Rimida said.

“Germany,” Forodin replied, sounding more annoyed than afraid. “Some place on the Rhine Valley. It looks way too small to be a base of operations.”

“That’s probably where Henry’s family is,” Raiodin replied.

“How would we know?” Ellodine snapped. “Our Hafskods don’t work.”

Henry tried his. There was a ring of darkness around the watch face, which was covered with a layer of grey spores. And it didn’t do anything.

“Can’t we just jump out?” Zadora suggested.

“No chance,” Forodin replied.

“So we wait until it lands.”

“Where they’ll all be waiting for us,” Ellodine grated.

They sank to the floor and sat there in silence – except Forodin - who stayed at the controls just in case.

“We wanted to know who these people are,” Raiodin said eventually. “It looks like we’re about to find out.”

Chapter Twenty

Henry peered out over the side as the flying snowmobile descended over a group of large detached houses clustered among the trees overlooking the frozen River Rhine. There was nothing that looked like the base of Klasodin's enemies.

The six elves scrambled around inside the snowmobile for their snowboards and weapons, ready to jump out and escape the second they were close enough to the ground.

Henry checked his Hafskod again. It gave him nothing. He remembered Klasodin telling him to trust the Madjik and wondered how that was supposed to work out now.

But it had helped him escape the dark Madjik in SuperToys – and given him a crossbow on the field in France. He wondered how it would react if he got himself into even more danger. Then he remembered lying on the snow outside the warehouse in North London – and Ellodine touching his hands, sending the Madjik surging back through him. He could feel it happening again – even though she wasn't doing anything. He looked down at the Hafskod and a burst of bright gold Madjik beamed through the splotches on the watch face.

Was that really all it took?

The elves stood at the sides, braced to jump out.

“Wait,” Henry heard himself say.

They stopped dead and turned around.

“We don't know what this place is or who's here,” he said.

“What do you want to do?” Zadira asked.

Henry took a breath. Even in his head, the answer he was about to give sounded insane.

“Let them catch us.”

“And then what?” Balnir said.

Henry looked at Ellodine, who gave him an encouraging smile.

“Everyone keeps telling me to trust the Madjik,” he shrugged. “Maybe it’ll be enough when we need it.”

“He has a point,” Raiodin added. “There’s nothing here. How bad could it be?”

“There was no cloud screen,” Zadira said. “No sign of a hidden elven realm.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Forodin agreed. “Alright, Glondir. We’ll do it.”

The snowmobile lowered through a gap in the trees and landed on a snow-covered driveway leading up to a detached home. It had wooden shutters outside all the windows and a pitched roof with more windows in it. Dimly-lit lamps lined the driveway, going right up to the house in one direction and disappearing down the hill in the other. The house itself had lights around the door and windows.

Henry and the elves threw their snowboards on their backs, slung their weapons over their shoulders and climbed out. Their boots landed with a crunch in deep, crisp snow.

Loud metallic clicks sounded all around them.

Henry jumped. The others grabbed their weapons.

Crossbows shot up out of the snow and pointed right at them, cutting off every route leading away from the house. They were attached to steel arms - probably buried underground and triggered by motion sensors, Henry decided. He could see tiny cameras positioned on each crossbow and picked out more in the trees lining the driveway.

The elves put their weapons away.

Henry stared at the crossbows. What had he got them into?

As if she could read his mind, Ellodine squeezed his hand.

“Like you said,” she smiled. “Trust the Madjik.”

“Looks like we’re definitely going in now,” Forodin said.

“Yeah,” Zadira aimed at him. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Forodin just laughed.

The seven of them trudged through the snow. The place was quiet. There was no sign of anyone around - except that new crossbows kept bursting up out of the snow ahead of them as they made their way down the driveway.

The heavy wooden front door swung open as they reached it. Balnir marched straight in and the others followed. Henry was last to step through the doorway. He turned his face back to the light outside – and the door slammed shut, leaving them in pitch black.

Lights burst into life overhead. They were in a large hallway with a grand oak staircase sweeping up to the floor above. Every other door was locked, so Henry led the elves through the open double doors into a large room that stretched the length of the house to the floor-to-ceiling windows at the back. It had a couple of seating areas with comfy looking sofas and a dining table big enough for twenty people.

Someone was standing in the middle of the room waiting for them. Someone Henry recognised – and the last person he'd expected to see. He had dyed blond hair and tanned skin that was almost orange. His bleached white teeth gleamed in the light. He wore a silver suit, an open purple shirt, a gold necklace and a signet ring on his stubby little finger.

His name was Zander Drock.

Chapter Twenty-one

“If it isn’t Henry Frey and his loyal band of elves,” Drock grinned.

His voice was gravelly. The cigars and booze still clung to his throat and sloshed around in there when he coughed. The smell of it flooded out of every pore and overpowered the expensive aftershave he’d doused himself in. It caught Henry by surprise - he hadn’t been so close to Zander Drock before.

“I thought you were the CEO of Omnitech,” he said warily.

“I was,” Drock replied. “But I had a better offer. Now I run a competing enterprise in the same industry. And, in case it isn’t clear already, I’m winning.”

“You sent them to destroy Omnitech’s lair.”

“No one else knew about it,” Drock said. “Until I told them. Grimmir started building that place before we met.”

“So you’re a mercenary like Bayne and the Gaards,” Ellodine snapped.

“Of course I am,” Drock laughed. “I’m just a lot richer.”

He led them to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the back garden and the lights dotted through the forest, which illuminated the other houses close by.

“I took a few ideas from Omnitech and added some of my own,” Drock said. “I own every house within two square miles of this one. And that’s not all.”

He turned and strode to the seating area in the middle of the room. He pulled back the sleeves of his jacket and shirt to reveal what looked like a steel Hafskod on his left wrist.

“Don’t worry,” he grinned. “It’s not elf Madjik. This is the superior human version.”

He tapped his stubby fingers on his Hafskod’s touchscreen. The fireplace next to the armchairs split in two to create a doorway. Drock led them through it into a small, square space with steel walls, floor and ceiling. LED lights lit up around the floor as they stepped

inside. The brickwork closed behind them, shutting them in. Then a steel wall slammed down in front of it. They were in an elevator.

Drock touched his steel Hafskod. The elevator shot downwards.

Henry swallowed as his stomach turned. He leaned against the wall to steady himself. The elves had barely noticed that they were plummeting downwards. Except Forodin - who looked disappointed it wasn't going faster.

The elevator slowed to a stop. Henry stepped out last – into a vast open space bigger than the warehouse in North London. The sliding doors behind him were set in a brick elevator shaft running up to the ceiling high above and was one of about twenty dotted around.

“Each elevator connects to a different house on the hill,” Drock said, wandering into the middle of the space with his hands in his pockets. “This is the largest factory and warehouse anywhere in the world. And no one has any idea.”

Piles of boxes that nearly reached the ceiling were arranged in aisles wide enough for forklift trucks to run silently between them. At either end of the space was a dark tunnel. One was a thoroughfare with forklifts running up and down it at regular intervals. The other lay silent and empty – none of the people working there went anywhere near it.

The walls were covered with steel panels and touchscreens. More boxes emerged on the ends of conveyor belts, dropped out of holes in the walls and were collected by workers in grey overalls, who loaded them onto the forklifts.

“It's not fully automated yet,” Drock said. “But we'll get there. Our factory machinery and conveyor belts are built into the hillside and fully computerised. If anything does go wrong, and it hasn't yet, a robot repairs it. Or it fixes itself.” He gave a laugh. “I love computers.” There was a glint in his eye. “Oh, and don't worry. It's not just toys and gadgets. When the weapons Omnitec supplied to the many governments around the world start melting and exploding in their hands, I'll be there to step in and save the day.”

“That’s your plan,” Ellodine said, her voice shaking. “You destroy all the presents, then save Christmas yourself?”

“Save Christmas?” Drock laughed. “My partners would never stand for that - even if I wanted to.” He gave a chuckle. “No. Christmas is done for. It’ll be the most disappointing and miserable December anyone’s ever known. Then, when January comes, I’ll announce that I’ve managed to put together a load of new products, which will be on sale for one day only. I’ll even suggest a day we all open our purchases together. After that, there will be no Christmas. But every year, people will stretch themselves to celebrate the time I saved them from a miserable winter. I’ll also be monopolising the weapons market at the same time.”

Henry and his friends stared at him in stunned silence.

“Aw,” Drock grinned. “It’s worth it just to see their little faces, isn’t it?”

“Why are you telling us?” Balnir asked. “Why give all that information away?”

“Because there’s nothing you can do to stop me,” Drock replied.

His eyes darted up and around the space.

Henry followed his eye line – and saw ten snipers armed with rifles and crossbows positioned on ledges around the walls just under the roof – all aimed at him.

“I also like to show off,” Drock said. “That’s the trouble with secret plans and hidden bases. You can’t ever tell anyone what you’ve done. Now I have a captive audience.” His gaze trained on Henry. “And there’s something about looking your enemy in the eye and telling him you’ve beaten him.” His eyes narrowed. “You recognise me, don’t you? The last time we were in the same building, you were a little closer than I thought. You saw my face. You were listening in.”

Henry said nothing.

“You’re better than I gave you credit for,” Drock said. “Not that it matters now.”

“Where’s my family?” Henry blurted.

“Who?”

Drock pulled a face – pretending to be really confused.

“My family,” Henry repeated.

Drock’s expression darkened. His jaw set. His eyes deadened.

“Your family’s dead,” he said plainly. “Oh. You mean that woman and those kids you live with in that house in Blackheath? I don’t see that lasting very long.”

Henry stared back at him, stunned. It was like being punched in the stomach.

“You just missed them,” Drock continued in a casual, conversational tone. He pointed down the tunnel that no one was going anywhere near. “Krampus took them down there not so long ago.”

Henry and his friends peered down the tunnel, then looked at each other. They eyed Drock with suspicion.

“It’s where they went,” Drock shrugged.

“Why would you tell us?” Forodin said.

“Because I don’t care that you know – or what you do about it,” Drock laughed. “You won’t get above ground without my men taking down at least four of you. Can’t have you raising the alarm, after all. So, you can either linger around here under armed guard or you can go down that tunnel and try to save your “family”.” Drock made the speech marks sign with his fingers. “And I’d rather not waste the manpower.”

“Why?” Rimida persisted.

“Krampus has done all he can for me,” Drock shrugged. “I’ve won. I don’t care who wins once you get down there. So make your decision and stick with it. Because if you go down there and try to sneak back up here, I’ll have you shot.”

He stepped away to speak to an armed operative.

“It’s a trap,” Ellodine hissed.

“What choice do we have?” Rimida whispered. “If they’re down there, we have to try to find them.”

“We can fight our way out,” Raiodin suggested, a wild look in his eyes.

Zadira slapped him round the back of the head.

Henry wasn’t listening. He gazed unblinking down the dark tunnel.

“If there’s a chance they’re down there, we have to look for them,” he said.

“We need to save Christmas,” Ellodine insisted. “If we go anywhere, it should be breaking out of here to go back to Alvahame.”

“But if Krampus is down that tunnel, we defeat him by going after him,” Balnir argued.

“Where he’s probably waiting for us,” Zadira muttered.

“So we escape and go back to Alvahame,” Ellodine said.

“If we get out of here,” Forodin replied. “Like he said, I doubt we’ll all make it.”

“We haven’t heard anything from Alvahame,” Balnir frowned. “Either they haven’t found the poison or they can’t get it out.”

“So they need our help,” Ellodine grated.

“Or we take out the poison by beating Krampus,” Henry said.

His eyes were still fixed on the tunnel. He had no idea where it led, but his one chance at getting his family back was to rescue them himself.

“I’m going down there,” he decided.

“You can’t make that decision for all of us,” Ellodine hissed.

“You don’t have to come with me,” he returned. “But I’m not leaving them.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He turned and strode towards the mouth of the tunnel, painfully aware that at least ten weapons were aimed at his back.

Chapter Twenty-two

The tunnel was a lot bigger when Henry reached the mouth. Three double decker buses could have driven down it side-by-side. It was so dark he could only see about twenty metres ahead. Without the lights in the space behind him, it would be pitch black in no time.

“So long, Henry Frey,” Zander Drock called after him. “I look forward to enjoying Mrs Mcready’s business in January. If she can afford any of my stuff, that is. And assuming you’re still alive and living with her once they find out they’re down there because of you.”

Henry burned with fury. He wondered how many more insults he could take before he fired an arrow at Drock’s face and took the risk of being killed.

But whatever happened, there would be no getting to him before Christmas – not if stopping Krampus was the priority. He made a mental note to ruin Zander Drock as soon as possible in the New Year – whatever it took.

A movement caught his eye. Ice crawled over the ground behind him, catching him up. It hardened under his feet and covered the floor of the tunnel ahead of him, stretching over the walls and ceiling.

“We need to go after Zander Drock and ruin him as soon as possible,” Forodin said, sliding past him. “I really want to punch that guy. But even I’m not fast enough against a sniper’s bullet.”

“You won’t know if you don’t try,” Raiodin grinned, snowboarding after him.

“At least we don’t have to hear him talk anymore,” Zadira sighed, rubbing her forehead. “His voice. It’s like listening to a drill.”

The others sailed past him.

Henry let out a laugh and jumped on his snowboard.

Ellodine slowed down and slid next to him.

“We have to try to rescue them, don’t we?” she said quietly. “Even if we did save Christmas first, it would be ruined for them.”

“If we rescue them, maybe that’s what they remember,” Henry said. “And they get to meet you.” He took a breath. “It would be easier if they knew about you too.”

“The Christmas they met Santa’s elves,” she smiled.

The darkness in the tunnel swallowed every last ray of light from behind them. Their Hafskods all burst into life, throwing their gold light around the tunnel and over the ice glittering on the ground.

Ellodine looked at Henry. The smile vanished.

“You could do more last Christmas,” she said. “Your Madjik still isn’t what it was.”

Henry shook his head in agreement.

“Have you tried?” she asked.

“Last time, I didn’t have to.”

They slid on in silence, the ice crawling over the walls and floor a few metres ahead of them, Henry and Ellodine at the back of the group, Balnir and Raiodin at the front, each of them carrying a weapon just in case. They followed the gradual slope of the tunnel, sliding faster and faster, shooting around every corner.

Henry slid after the others around a gentle curve. He took a sharp turn and found himself flying down a slope so steep it was almost vertical. Part of him screamed to brake and slow down, but he copied the others, crouched and shot down it, relying on his reactions as he catapulted out of the base of the slope and zipped around the next corners at lightning speed. The tunnel straightened out. Henry fixed his gaze on the stretch of ice ahead and glanced at Ellodine sliding next to him. The euphoria flooded his brain. His head felt light and full of clouds. The tunnel made it better because it shut out everything else. There were no

distractions. There was nothing else in the world apart from Henry, the six elves, their snowboards and the ice.

He knew they had been following the tunnel for miles, heading deeper and deeper underground. He had no idea where he was, but he was enjoying snowboarding so much, it didn't matter. Slowly, he forgot where he was and where he was heading.

The tunnel ahead darkened suddenly and snapped him out of his reverie.

The ice beyond Balnir and Raiodin disappeared.

Then Balnir and Raiodin vanished.

Forodin, Zadira and Rimida disappeared.

Henry watched a thick dark cloud fill the tunnel ahead and shoot right at him.

Ellodine screamed in alarm. Her screams died suddenly. Thick tendrils pulled her into the cloud and she disappeared.

Then there was nothing but deafening silence. It was pitch black. Henry couldn't see anything. The dark cloud wrapped around his face and lifted him off the ground. It felt like he was floating. He kicked and struggled, but it was no use. The cloud had already beaten him.

Chapter Twenty-three

Henry found himself lying sprawled on a cold, hard floor staring up at a stone ceiling and stone walls that reeked of damp. Still in a daze, he lifted his head and his eyes focused to pick out the prison bars silhouetted in a faint light coming from somewhere outside them. He was alone, trapped in a cell.

That was when his ears took in the shouts and screams coming from either side of his cell. He could hear the elves in a cell to his right – and Oliver, Tabitha and Emily in a separate cell to his left.

He'd found them. But he hadn't rescued them. They still weren't safe.

A laugh rang out, silencing the other voices in an instant. It was guttural and raw – and sent a chill creeping up Henry's spine. Then came the scraping sound that made Henry's skin crawl – an obsidian blade being dragged over a stone floor.

Krampus appeared behind the bars of Henry's cell, wearing the same heavy hooded cloak. In the darkness, he looked like Klasodin.

"Greetings, Glondir," Krampus growled. "Alone again." His jagged sharp teeth bared in a cruel grin. "Sitting between two families, but not belonging to either of them."

"You can go on all you like," Henry retorted, "It won't make any difference."

"It already has," Krampus said, towering over him. "I've been telling you that you don't belong in Alvahame and you believed me. You gave up on Santa Claus and his minions in no time. I couldn't believe how easy it was."

"My Hafskod," Henry said. "That was you."

"I did more than poison your Hafskod." Krampus gave a chuckle. "I have been waiting a long time for this." He leaned on the bars. "I was an Aesr of Alvahame many years ago. That made everything I have done a lot easier."

“You wanted to give kids coal, so they threw you out,” Henry said.

Krampus’ eyes burned like lava.

“They threw me in jail,” he snarled. “And left me there.”

“Alvahame has a jail?”

“Hidden deep underground.” Krampus drew in a deep breath. “I lived there for centuries among the rocks – with no chance of escape.” His lips curled into a smile. “But I grew to love the rocks. I became at home among them. I became something else.”

He curled his clawed fingers into a fist. Thick dark cloud plumed from it, then burst into bright red flames. Krampus opened his hand, shook his fingers and extinguished the fire.

“You created your own Madjik,” Henry said. “You have your own Epicentre, don’t you? I bet it’s made from coal and obsidian.”

A lump of coal materialised in Krampus’ hand. He played with it with his clawed fingers.

“I love coal,” he purred. “The colour, the stain it leaves behind. Touch it once and it stays to tell the world it’s touched you. It lingers on your clothes and your skin, coating your insides.” He let out a contented sigh. “I love the way it burns. And if the fire doesn’t destroy, the smoke will.”

Krampus waved his fingers. Bright red flame burst from them. He stretched out his arm and the flame burned brighter, lighting up Henry’s cell.

Henry looked down at his hands. They were covered in coal dust. He patted and clapped them together, but it wouldn’t come off.

Krampus gave a laugh.

“I wanted to send coal to every child to stain them and tell the whole world they’re bad.” His voice lowered to a snarl. “Like you are.”

Henry looked up at him in panic.

“What do you mean?” he blurted.

“You are no Glondir,” Krampus uttered. “No child on the Black List deserves presents or Madjik. You threw away presents you didn’t deserve and you killed your parents.”

“That’s not true,” Henry shouted.

“Your Madjik is weak,” Krampus growled. “I isolated you from Alvahame and you gave up on every one of them. You lied to your foster family. Now they’re all here – because of you.” He gazed down at Henry. “You belong here, in a prison cell, covered in coal – alone.”

Henry felt sick. He hated Krampus, but every word he’d said was true.

“What are you going to do to us?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the floor. He wanted to cry but he wasn’t going to let Krampus see it.

“Keep you here,” Krampus replied. “Turn your Hafskod to the colour of coal. Wait for you and your friends to become like me.”

“That will never happen,” Henry said – without any conviction.

“It’s happened already,” Krampus gloated. “You humans see a bad Christmas ahead and you tear yourselves apart. You fight in the streets. You steal and riot. I’ve already poisoned Alvahame at its core. It will take longer, but I will see the Aesir destroy themselves.”

Henry had no answer. He’d seen the reports on TV.

Krampus looked up to the ceiling, the flames still dancing over his fingers. Something emerged out of the ceiling, floated down and hung over the ground. It glittered from the light of the fire. It looked like the teardrop-shaped dark bauble Henry had found in his London home, only bigger.

“You received my gift,” Krampus said.

“It gave me a headache and weird dreams,” Henry complained. “Strange idea for a gift. I don’t think you get what a gift is.”

A smile crept over Krampus’ features.

“Gift.” Krampus said the word like he enjoyed the sound of it coming out of his mouth. “My favourite word. In English, it’s a present to open at Christmas. In other languages, it means poison.”

“Why did you give me this?” Henry demanded.

“Not just you, Glondir,” Krampus gloated. “Everyone.”

He gestured with his hand. The bauble turned in the air. Bright light beamed from it, emblazoning images on the walls – of people in their homes with their Christmas trees – and the dark bauble hidden among the other baubles in the branches.

“Dreams are just the start,” Krampus said. “Building enmity, mistrust and hatred between humans who say they love each other, revealing love as a lie.”

“Hasn’t been working very well then,” Henry retorted. “Me and my friends still get on. We came down here together.”

“I haven’t started the second phase,” Krampus replied. “So you could be here to watch.”

The image of two other cells appeared on the wall. One with Ellodine, Zadira, Rimida, Forodin, Raiodin and Balnir. The other imprisoned Mrs Mcready, Emily, Tabitha, Rosie, Archie and Oliver. They were all staring at the bauble in their cell and the images it projected onto the walls.

“What’s it going to do?” Henry said warily.

The images changed. They showed Henry at home with his parents and at school – doing things he’d tried to forget. The last Christmas Day with his parents. What he’d done with the presents Klasodin had brought him that Christmas morning.

With horror, Henry could see the others were all watching the same thing. What they thought about him was painted over their faces. They hated everything they saw.

Then it wasn't Henry. The bauble went through the others in turn, showing all the horrible things they had done and what they had said about each other. Henry listened to what some of them had said about him – and it really stung.

More images appeared of homes all over the world where Krampus had planted a dark bauble that hung on the Christmas tree. Each one emblazoned images on the walls that showed them the things their friends and family had done and said about them.

There were shouting matches. Arguments and fights broke out.

Krampus' eyes gleamed and burned red like lava.

“I have given a gift to the world that spreads truth - and it stains like coal.”

Chapter Twenty-four

Henry stared at the images beaming over the walls of his cell - of things he had done and what other people had said about him. There was no way to take back or erase any of it.

Fights and arguments were tearing friendships and families apart all over the world – anywhere there was a Christmas tree.

Krampus laughed. He wandered away, his obsidian blade dragging on the ground, but the bauble stayed and the images kept coming.

Henry sank to the ground and sat with his eyes squeezed shut, his hands planted over his ears. He hummed to himself, trying to drown it out. But everything he'd seen and heard swirled around his brain. It was too late to shut it all out.

“OPEN YOUR EYES,” Krampus roared.

Henry jumped.

Krampus stood over him, inside his cell, eyes burning. His skin was the colour and texture of grey rock, making him almost invisible. His long black hair was like horse hair. It clung to his head. His claw-like nails and his clothes were back. In the darkness, his silhouette could have been Klasodin's.

Henry scrambled to the back of his cell. He could feel the coal dust covering the floor. With every move he made, it billowed into the air, plastering his face and getting into his mouth and lungs. He spat and coughed violently. Then he groaned and eased himself up into a sitting position.

The cell door slammed shut.

Krampus stood outside the cell, his burning eyes staring Henry down. An enormous black sack lay on the ground next to him.

“I'm going to see the world tear itself apart,” he said.

His gaze fixed on Henry.

“No more Christmas. No more Santa Claus. And no more Alvahame.” He nodded to the images on the walls. “Watch it happen – and know the part you played in its downfall.”

Henry stared at the giant black sack.

“You’re delivering coal, aren’t you?” he said, just glad to have something else to think about and focus on.

Krampus chuckled – and gestured to the black bauble.

“They turn to coal when their task of revealing truth is complete.” He looked at Henry and his mouth flattened into a smile. “I will deliver two things.” He pulled a folded piece of paper from the top of the sack. It was streaked and smeared with coal. “A letter to every greedy child, telling it what it will not receive for Christmas. Bikes, computers, toys, games, chocolates, sweets, food and family will not be waiting for them on Christmas morning.”

A thought struck Henry. He remembered something else he’d heard on the news.

“Presents and food can’t be delivered and families can’t get together because of all the snow,” he said. “Did you cause the snow to happen?”

“The world loves snow at Christmas,” Krampus gloated. “For pictures and for their ideal image of what Christmas should be. Until it’s no longer convenient. Until cars, trains and planes are rendered useless. Until there is no food, no gifts and no family. Then no one ever wants to see snow ever again – because of the time it ruined Christmas.”

Henry felt like the world was crashing down around him.

“What else are you delivering?” he said hoarsely.

Krampus pulled a sword from the sack – followed by a knife, a crossbow, a cricket bat and a gun.

“I’m going to place them everywhere,” he said with relish. “To fuel the spread of war and hatred throughout the world.”

Krampus shoved everything back in the sack and loaded it onto his back like it was no heavier than a cushion.

“You are secure here, Glondir.” He gave a cruel laugh. “To become like me. It’s happening already.”

Henry looked down at his hands and recoiled in horror. They were covered in the same dark grey splotches and spores as his Hafskod. He rolled up his sleeves and found them running up his wrists and his forearms. Some of them were growing out of his skin, taking on the same rocky texture as Krampus’ skin. The Hafskod had changed completely - there was no gold or silver at all – just grey rock.

Krampus gestured with his fingers. The bars of the cell moved back inside the cell towards Henry. More bars materialised out of the walls and closed in on him, shutting him in on all sides. The floor rose up. The ceiling lowered. Everything slammed together – trapping Henry in a cage just tall and wide enough for him to stand up or lie down.

The wall to his left parted, revealing nothing but darkness. The cage moved into it. Henry stared ahead of him, terrified that he’d be left in the pitch black. But an opening appeared ahead and the cage floated into the cell holding Mrs Mcready, Archie, Oliver, Emily, Tabitha and Rosie. The wall slammed shut behind him.

Krampus appeared behind the cell bars and every human there cowered at the sight of him.

“It’s worth it just to see their little faces,” he chuckled.

He disappeared, his laugh and the sound of his sword scraping over the stone floor echoing around the cell.

Chapter Twenty-five

Henry slumped down in his cell. The others watched him in silence. He could feel them staring at his hands, which were covered in Krampus' dark Madjik. He shrank back, leaned against the bars and tried to hide them, but it was too late.

The images beaming on the walls blazed through his cage. He tried to fix his eyes on the floor and ignore what was playing out in the rest of the world, but it was impossible. The world was in chaos.

Mrs Mcready climbed to her feet and stood outside the cage. She gave a smile.

"Are you okay?" she said quietly.

Henry just shrugged.

"Are you?" he asked.

"Considering we've been kidnapped by some strange being with magical powers, flown around in a black sleigh and imprisoned deep underground, we're not doing too badly," she said with a dry laugh. She surveyed him with narrowed eyes. "He said he was taking us because of you. And that awful man with the dyed blond hair seems to know you as well. You've been keeping secrets."

They were all waiting for him to say something.

Henry took a deep breath – and told them everything - about Klasodin, Alvahame, being Glondir and the elves imprisoned a couple of cells over.

"I'm sorry," he finished with a sigh. "You are all here because of me. I gave up when I stopped hearing from them. I should have tried to find out what was wrong." He glanced around at his family, who were staring at him open-mouthed. "Now you've seen everything. I don't think I'll be Glondir anymore."

"Is that how it works?" Oliver asked. "You have to take a test to prove you can do it?"

Henry shook his head.

“How did you get to be Glondir?” Rosie said.

“Klasodin said the Madjik chose me. I think the ValdFyurring does it.”

“It sounds like you don’t have anything to prove,” Mrs Mcready commented.

“You saw all the things I did,” Henry said glumly.

“We’ve all done things we regret,” she told him. “You’ve had a few really terrible years.”

“It’s not enough,” Henry stated.

“Didn’t you save Christmas last year?” Mrs Mcready laughed.

“YOU DID?” the others chimed in.

“There won’t be another one now,” Henry shrugged.

“You really saved Christmas?” Tabitha persisted.

“I helped. It wasn’t just me.” Henry frowned. “Wait. I never told any of you what happened last Christmas.” He looked at Mrs Mcready. “How did you know?”

“You think I’d let any of my children disappear for weeks at a time without being given a very good reason?” she replied. “I’ve met Klasodin. Where do you think my TV came from? Why do you think I got so upset when it broke?”

“Because you knew what it meant,” Henry finished for her.

“And I left you to get on with it,” she told him.

“I tried,” Henry said.

“I know,” she replied. “We all do.”

“How did you find us?” Oliver asked.

Henry held up his Hafskod, which looked like a hunk of damp rock.

“It tracked you and showed where you were. We followed you to the underground warehouse, then just came down the tunnel.”

“That’s a really long tunnel,” Mrs Mcready said.

“We used our snowboards. Zadira put ice everywhere for us.”

“Still. You must have been flying down there.”

“I can go pretty quick on it now.”

“WOW,” a few of them gasped.

“What’s happened to your special watch?” Tabitha frowned.

“How does it know where we are?” Emily asked.

Tabitha skipped over, reached through the bar and poked the Hafskod.

The dark Madjik shrank from her touch. Her fingertip left a bright gold mark. The gold Aesir Madjik spread out from it. Then she planted her hand over the watch face. The darkness was blown away in an instant. When she took her hand away, the Hafskod shone like new.

“How did you do that?” Rosie marvelled, looking over Tabitha’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” Tabitha shrugged.

“Because it knows her,” Henry said. “From all the time she spends fiddling with it.”

“Why would that help?” Rosie questioned.

“Because she’s human. That’s why I’m Glondir. Humans make Madjik stronger.”

“Even down here?” Mrs Mcready said. “Surrounded by all this? Does that mean we might be able to get out of here?”

Henry didn’t know.

They all stood around him, watching the Hafskod glow. It seemed to react to them and grow even stronger.

There was a BOOM somewhere close by – followed by the sound of iron bars clattering over the stone floor. Then whoops and cheers.

Ellodine, Zadira, Rimida, Forodin, Balnir and Raiodin appeared outside the cell with big grins on their faces.

“WOW!”

“Are they Santa’s elves?”

“Are you elves?”

“Do you look like kids but you’re really old like in the film?”

“Are you Henry’s friends?”

“Are you really elves?”

Henry waited for the barrage of questions to subside.

“How did you get out?” he asked.

“Our Hafskods suddenly burst into life,” Balnir said.

“That was me,” Tabitha announced.

“We shot our arrows at the bars til they exploded,” Raiodin said.

Henry touched his Hafskod to the bars of his cage and they collapsed. Another touch to the cell bars and they were all free.

Ellodine threw her arms around him. Everyone else hugged him or gave him a slap on the back. Then Henry watched them all meet each other and let out a sigh of relief. No more having to keep half of his life secret from the other half.

“Let’s get out of here,” Balnir said.

The elves drew their weapons and Balnir led the way along the corridor, past more prison cells and came to a dead end.

The other end of the corridor was blocked off as well.

They were trapped.

Chapter Twenty-six

There was no way out. They were imprisoned underground by walls of rock.

“We could blast our way out,” Raiodin suggested.

“And have the whole thing collapse in on us? Zadira said, rolling her eyes.

“We’re going to starve down here, aren’t we?” Rimida sighed.

A message from Rodin flashed up in bright green on every Hafskod.

“Where are you? Poison found and obliterated. Happened suddenly after hours of trying.”

“He sent the message about the time we blew the bars,” Balnir frowned. He looked at Henry. “And we could only manage that when you got your Hafskod working.”

“Our Hafskods must have connected to the ValdFyurring,” Ellodine said. “Enough to kill any dark Madjik poisoning it.”

Another message appeared.

“Most presents are ruined. We don’t have nearly enough.”

“I wish he’d started with that one,” Balnir complained.

“No presents?” came a few voices clustered around Mrs Mcready.

But none of them sounded as disappointed as Henry had expected.

“Right now I’d settle for getting out of here and having some roast turkey,” Rosie said.

“One present would be okay,” Emily conceded.

“Anything sounds good compared to spending Christmas in an underground prison,”

Oliver added.

“Where are you?” another message read. “I can’t see any sign of you.”

Then.

“Get in touch. We’re worried.”

“We can tell him we’re alive,” Zadira shrugged. “But we don’t know where we are.”

But before anyone could answer, there was a rumble and the ground above them shook.

“Is it an earthquake?” Oliver panicked.

The elves looked at each other.

“No,” Forodin said. “It’s not.”

The walls, floor and ceiling shook. There was an ear-splitting CRACK. The wall at the end of the corridor split wide open. Pieces of rock spilled out of it and over the floor, leaving a huge hole. An icy breeze blew through it and wafted into everyone’s faces.

“What happened?”

“Krampus is back.”

“It’s not him,” Forodin cut in. “It’s someone else. They’re digging us out.”

“Still doesn’t explain how we escape,” Balnir said.

“We could be miles from the surface,” Mrs Mcready added. “There’s no way any of us could climb up there.”

Zadira strode up to the hole, climbed through it and disappeared. She re-emerged a minute later and turned to face it. She held up her hands, letting freezing cold air blow through her fingers. Then she crouched and planted her hands on the ground.

Pure white snow spread from them over the floor and under their feet. Henry felt two inches of snow squeeze under his boots and push him up. More snow spread over the cracked wall. It surged through the gap and up the tunnel.

“Now we just need something to get us up there,” she said, looking at Henry.

“We made it happen once,” Ellodine told him. “Remember?”

While Balnir sent a couple of messages back to Rodin, Henry gazed down at the Hafskod, focusing his concentration on it, shutting out everything else.

“Come on,” he muttered at it. “We need help.”

Suddenly he wasn't imprisoned underground at all. It was as if his mind had left his body and was firing through the ValdFyurring. He could see corridors and corridors of toys and gadgets, clothes and games. He moved towards a wall of toys – and a sick feeling spread through his head. He edged away and the sick feeling eased away to nothing. Moving around more carefully, most things in the ValdFyurring made him feel sick. He knew what it meant – that the ValdFyurring had been poisoned.

He found a small section where nothing had been touched by Krampus' dark Madjik. They were all easy to summon and one item was just what they needed.

When Henry found himself back in the underground prison, three wooden sledges had appeared on the floor. They expanded in size to fit four people in each.

“Everything else in the ValdFyurring was poisoned, wasn't it?” Ellodine said.

“Pretty much,” Henry replied. “Wooden stuff like sledges, tables and chairs were the easiest things to summon. That and food. For some reason this is the stuff Krampus' dark Madjik didn't poison.

“We want to go up, not down,” Rosie said.

“Elven sledges do both,” Forodin replied.

“Cool!”

Henry climbed in a sledge next to Ellodine and let her drive – with Oliver and Rosie in the back. Zadira and Forodin jumped on their snowboards and took off, shooting through the hole in the wall and up the tunnel. Ellodine set off after them with the other two sledges driven by Balnir and Raiodin sliding up behind them.

The tunnel was steep, but wide enough to fit a car. The ice Zadira had sent up covered every square centimetre, which meant the sledges flew up it with ease. But Ellodine, Balnir and Raiodin steered carefully, taking each twist and turn as gently as they could.

After about ten minutes, bright sunlight streamed down the tunnel from somewhere out of sight. Ellodine turned a corner and the light beamed into their faces. The sledge flew up the last few metres and out into the open air, skidding to a halt on thick fresh snow. The other two pulled up behind them and everyone jumped out.

They were on top of a mountain, looking out over a frozen lake surrounded by white meadows and silvery trees – and more snow-covered mountains in the distance.

Henry was the first to notice the lone figure in all black waiting for them a few metres away. He was tall and lean – with ivory pale skin and jet black hair. He was an elf, but not of Alvahame. Henry had come across him before and they were not friends.

His name was Morikend.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Henry locked eyes with the elf standing just a few metres away. They were enemies. He couldn't work out what Morikend was doing there.

Six young elves drew their weapons behind him.

"You're welcome, Glondir," Morikend said casually.

"Why would you dig us out?" Henry asked.

"Seeing as we're enemies, you mean?"

"Right."

"Nothing's changed," Morikend shrugged. "It just serves my purposes to see you and your friends above ground."

A sudden thought lit up in Henry's brain.

"You're the one who dug Krampus out of his underground prison, aren't you?" he said.

"I am indeed."

"You were in Alvahame last Christmas," Henry thought out loud, his mind still firing away. "You poisoned the ValdFyurring."

Morikend laughed and gave a gracious, florid bow.

"Well done, Glondir. I'm actually impressed."

"But you're winning," Ellodine said. "You've pretty much destroyed Christmas. How does letting us out help you?"

"I'm looking several moves ahead," Morikend replied. "Krampus only got this far because of me. Now he's served his purpose and I could do with him out of the picture. That's far more likely to happen with you back in play."

"Why?" Henry said suspiciously. "What do you want?"

Morikend gave a laugh.

“As I said, I’m thinking several moves ahead.” The king of the Morivari glanced over his shoulder. “Your transportation is about to arrive. They will not be pleased to see me.” He looked at Henry. “We will see each other again, Glondir.”

“Well,” Henry said slowly. “I know you didn’t do this for our benefit, but thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Morikend grinned.

A riderless sleigh appeared behind Morikend, driven by two black horses with dead white eyes. It was jet black and reminded Henry of a chariot. Morikend jumped in. It took off down the mountain and disappeared.

“Who was that?” Rosie said.

“His name’s Morikend,” Balnir replied. “He’s the king of a race of elves called the Morivari. We’re sworn enemies.”

“He is not a fan of Santa Claus,” Raiodin added.

The late afternoon sun shone over the mountains and two silhouetted shapes appeared on the horizon. Henry watched them grow bigger very quickly as they shot in his direction.

“There’s our ride,” Raiodin said.

“Are they what I think they are?” Oliver asked.

“Probably.”

“And we’re going to ride in them?”

“Yep.”

Henry’s family all cheered. He liked seeing them so excited.

“What does Morikend want?” Ellodine frowned.

“For us to take down Krampus,” Forodin said.

“That’s not everything. He wouldn’t dig us out just like that.”

“You want to jump back in the hole and have someone more worthy dig you out of that underground prison we had no hope of escaping?” Raiodin grinned.

“It just seems wrong, that’s all,” she scowled.

“He won’t get in our way now,” Henry told her.

“Not til next Christmas anyway,” Zadira added.

Ellodine looked at Henry and gave a nod.

“One war at a time,” she agreed.

The two sleighs landed on the mountain top, sending snow flying everywhere and covering everyone. Henry wiped the snow off his face. He was pretty sure Slepnr and Vega were laughing. Rodin and Amira jumped out of one sleigh. Klasodin leapt from the other.

“WHOA!”

“IT’S SANTA CLAUS!”

“Why isn’t he wearing red?”

“It was you I talked to in London. I know it was.”

Five human children crowded around Klasodin, hugging him and firing questions at him. Even Rosie couldn’t stop herself. Henry was pretty sure that if he didn’t know Klasodin already, he’d probably be crowding around him too. There was something about him. And seeing him among human children, made it even more obvious. Once they were done with Klasodin, they crowded around Rodin and Amira as well.

Klasodin sidestepped the excited kids and stood over Henry.

Henry remembered he was never supposed to leave London in the first place – and Klasodin had ordered him to stay put.

But the elf king’s features creased into a broad smile.

“You’ve done it again,” he said. “You’ve saved my city from destruction.”

“Krampus is going to ruin Christmas and I couldn’t stop him,” Henry said. “I got everyone caught.” He looked down at the Hafskod on his wrist. “I’m not good enough to be Glondir.”

“I told you,” Klasodin said gently. “It’s about trusting the Madjik. And you have a powerful Affinity for Madjik. You’re probably the best Glondir I’ve ever seen.”

Henry looked up at him in amazement.

“How? I can’t even do everything I did last year.”

“Someone targeted you,” the elf king said. “But you came back fighting. You set out to save your family and you’ve done an amazing job.” Klasodin glanced over his shoulder.

“Look how happy they are. You’d never think they were imprisoned underground twenty minutes ago. And them being happy and believing in me makes my Madjik stronger. Christmas is looking more promising already.”

“What about Morikend?” Henry asked.

“We’ll deal with Morikend when the time comes.” Klasodin’s gaze hardened. “It’s time to find Krampus – and put him back where he belongs.”

The King of Alvahame turned, strode to his sleigh and jumped in, grabbing the reins in one fluid move. Henry watched him, remembering him as the feared Aesir warrior Alvahame knew him to be. Seeing Klasodin as Santa Claus, surrounded by children who loved him, it was easy to forget. Then Klasodin gave a wave of his staff and stairs appeared outside and inside the sleigh, so Mrs Mcready and the kids could get in by themselves.

Henry climbed in Rodin’s sleigh with the elves. Both sleighs took off and shot up into the air. They flew over Germany and France, then across the English Channel.

It was dark by the time they reached Kent. Henry watched the gold holographic map beaming from his Hafskod, which showed a dark mass travelling over London. Then he realised it was Rosie looking over his shoulder, not Ellodine.

“I want to help,” she shrugged. “Can anyone do this or does it have to be you?”

“I think it’s just me,” Henry replied. “You have to have the Affinity for Madjik.”

She looked at him.

“This is why your parents died?”

Henry nodded.

“That’s horrible,” she said quietly. “That stuff we saw you do. I’ve done way worse. You shouldn’t feel bad about it.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s not like it changed anything,” she shrugged. “We all like having you around.”

She looked away - embarrassed at having said something nice.

Henry closed his mouth to stop himself laughing and watched the snow-covered Kent countryside fly past under the sleigh.

A change on the Hafskod caught his eye.

The dark mass split in two. One part moved about over London, the second flew south, heading straight for them.

Something shot out of the sky – right at Rodin’s sleigh.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Rodin swerved the sleigh out of the way. Klasodin moved his sleigh up and the shadowy black arrow bulleted between them.

A band of men in black body armour shot out of the night sky on flying snowboards and aimed their crossbows. Bolts of dark Madjik flashed at the sleighs.

Klasodin shouted to the reindeer. His sleigh corkscrewed through the air. Then it banked and flew at the biggest group of Krampus' flying warriors. Gold Madjik beamed from Slepnr's antlers. They consumed every bolt shooting towards him and blew them apart. Klasodin released a string of bright gold arrows from his bow and shot four of them out of the air. Henry glanced at everyone in the back of the elf king's sleigh, expecting them to be cowering and terrified. But they were cheering him on. Oliver kept asking for a weapon, but Klasodin ignored him.

The sword in Amira's hand moved like gold lightning, deflecting bolts fired at their sleigh back at the rebel Gaards. Henry fired his crossbow, sending off two bolts at a time. Ellodine blew three of them off their snowboards with blazing arrows. Zadira turned one into a snowman. Raiodin, Balnir, Rimida and Forodin blitzed another group with arrows.

Klasodin swung his sleigh right and it shot away to the east. Rodin's sleigh flew after it, putting distance between them and Krampus' warriors before they could regroup.

Once they were out of sight, both sleighs turned to head north. Everyone in Rodin's sleigh spread out, their backs to each other to watch the ground and the night skies from every angle with their bows drawn and arrows primed to fire in a split-second. Henry gazed wide-eyed out into the distance, not daring to blink in case he missed something, darting regular glances at his Hafskod.

The sleigh turned suddenly. Henry leaned his weight on the side to steady himself and looked down at the Thames below. The sleigh lowered after Klasodin's and landed on the river, which was still frozen solid and looked like a silvery white sheet in the moonlight.

They slid west over the ice towards London, watching out in silence for signs of an attack, not relaxing or lowering their guard for a second.

Darkness clouded over Henry's Hafskod.

Before he could open his mouth, the two sleighs slowed to a stop on the frozen river. He and Rosie edged towards the front to get a better look.

Ten metres in front of them stood a small army of armed rebel Gaards in body armour. Leading them was Bayne.

Henry felt a chill of fear crawl up his spine, then a hot surge of anger. He drew his bow and an arrow materialised, ready to fire.

"Give me a weapon," Rosie whispered.

"No," Henry breathed back.

"Why not?"

"I don't know if it'll work." He looked at her. "I don't want you getting hurt."

She rolled her eyes, but didn't say any more.

Then a movement on the river bank caught Henry's eye. A band of Nerivari lined up along the frozen Thames, swords drawn. Shouts of alarm from Zadira and Rimida made him turn around. A second posse of Nerivari was lined up along the opposite bank.

A bow wouldn't be enough so Henry let the string relax and watched the arrow disappear. The bow changed into the small gold crossbow with two darts primed to fire.

Amira and Rodin jumped into Klasodin's sleigh, leaving Forodin with the reins. Everyone else in Klasodin's sleigh ducked down. After a frantic gesture from Mrs Mcready, Rosie did the same. Slepnr stamped on the ice, but Klasodin stood impassively with the reins in his

hands. He glanced to his right, across Henry's sleigh to the north bank of the Thames – as if he were waiting for something.

The Nerivari on both banks charged down onto the frozen river.

The elves fired a blaze of Madjik arrows, which thudded into Nerivar armoured skin or exploded with gold light. Arrows of ice crunched into the frozen river and the snow-covered riverbank. Ice flared from them, spreading over any Nerivar that didn't get out of the way quick enough. Then snow blew over the river, burying about ten of them.

Henry followed it all out of the corner of his eye, but kept low behind Forodin, his crossbow trained on Bayne.

Bayne glanced behind him and uttered a few words. The Gaards advanced.

Then a second, larger army of Nerivari loomed on the north bank of the Thames.

Slepnr's antlers glittered with bright Madjik. The four reindeer leading Rodin's sleigh bellowed and stamped on the ice so hard, Henry could feel the tremors.

"Wait," came Klasodin's calm voice. "All of you."

The elves lowered their weapons. The reindeer stood still.

Henry ducked lower, but kept his crossbow aimed at Bayne.

Bayne's former Gaards closed in, now just a few metres away. They trained their crossbows on the reindeer and every elf in the sleighs.

The Nerivar army marched onto the ice.

Chapter Twenty-nine

“Hold,” Klasodin murmured.

It took everything for Henry to stand still and hold his crossbow steady. His arms were trembling. His heart hammered hard, punching away at the inside of his chest. The blood roared through his ears. It felt like he was about to explode.

The Nerivari crouched, ready to attack. Krampus’ Gaards closed their gloved fingers around the triggers of their crossbows.

Klasodin darted a glance to his right. A faint smile crossed his features – like he knew what was about to happen.

A sleigh flew off the north bank and ploughed into the Nerivari. Bright bursts of Madjik blew through them. A hail of arrows rained down on the Nerivari and the Gaardreng from both sides. The sleigh slid on and careered into the soldiers, scattering them. Driving the sleigh, red-haired Appodin tugged on the reins and it skidded to a stop. He whipped out his sword in an instant, leapt from the sleigh and hacked his way through Bayne’s army. More Alvahame elves leapt from the banks and charged the Gaards.

“Now,” Klasodin ordered.

Both sleighs shot off.

Henry’s finger squeezed the trigger. Two gold bolts flashed at Bayne, who recoiled and went down, disappearing behind other soldiers.

The sleighs crashed through the chaos. Slepnr’s glowing antlers exploded onto body armour and sent bodies flying. Vega and Gratall led Rodin’s sleigh into a group of Gaardreng, then charged into another. Forodin heaved at the reins to pull them back on track and they flew along the frozen river next to Klasodin’s sleigh. Henry fired his crossbow. The elves let off a stream of arrows. Rodin and Amira jumped out of their sleigh onto their

snowboards and flew into more soldiers. Swords collided. Madjik exploded. Then they joined the sleigh again and leapt back inside.

Henry leaned over the back of the sleigh as they pulled away from the fighting. He caught sight of Appodin giving him a wave before striking down another soldier. But no sign of Bayne. Henry didn't know if he'd hit him or not.

The sleigh left the ice and flew away into London. He turned his attention to the Hafskod and both sleighs homed in on the dark mass.

A large sleigh and eight reindeer stood on an East London rooftop. A dark silhouetted figure stood over the chimney. His eyes burned red like lava as he watched the sleighs flying towards him. He held out a folded piece of paper and a sword. They turned into black dust, which blew into the air, divided into more parts than Henry could count and surged down every chimney in sight.

Krampus leapt back in his black sleigh and it took off.

Forodin pushed the reindeer harder and they sped up.

Krampus' black sleigh veered suddenly. It turned around and flew straight at Forodin's sleigh. The black reindeer-like beasts bared their sharp teeth. Their eyes flared with lava-coloured fire.

Slepnir, Vega and Gratall roared with fury and charged straight at them, dragging both sleighs behind them.

Bright red flames burned from the dark beasts pulling Krampus sleigh. Krampus snarled from behind the reins. He raised his Obsidian blade. A stream of fire burst from it. He swung it like a giant flaming blade.

Slepnir roared. His sleigh pulled ahead. Madjik beamed from his antlers and collided with the fire. The explosion blew up into the sky and pushed the sleighs back.

Slepnir let out a blood curdling roar. He charged again. Gold Madjik burst from his antlers. It burned through the fire from Krampus' beasts and enveloped them. They recoiled and screamed in pain. They veered wildly. The sleigh banked in the air and they sped away.

"GET BACK THERE," Krampus yelled at them.

But the black sleigh shot away over London and flew out of sight.

"Whatever they are, they're more scared of Slepnir than they are of him," Ellodine chuckled. "Maybe they'll trample him to death and save us the bother."

There was no celebrating. As the young elves in Henry's sleigh opened their mouths to cheer, Klasodin barked an order. His sleigh turned and flew off. Forodin's sleigh sped after it, flying over streets of terraced houses, offices and shops.

A black arrow shot up from the ground. Klasodin's sleigh swerved and just avoided it. A second shot up into the air just past the side of the sleigh where Henry was standing.

Henry hauled himself up onto the side, rested on his stomach, leaned over and caught sight of a band of Gaardreng positioned on the snow below. He aimed his crossbow and fired. Two gold bolts exploded in the snow. The Gaardreng scattered.

But one Gaard stood still in the snow, neck craned, eyeballing Henry. He aimed his crossbow and released a black arrow. It shot at Henry's face and just missed him.

Henry gripped the side to climb down. The sleigh swerved, throwing him further over the side so he hung by his thighs.

The Gaard followed Henry with another primed arrow - and released.

Two hands grabbed Henry by the belt of his trousers and dragged him back in the sleigh. The arrow blew past him.

Rosie and Henry both let out a sigh of relief.

"Don't lean over the side like that," she told him. "You'll get yourself killed."

"I can't see them if I don't."

“Can’t you just drop a table on them or something?” she suggested.

He looked at her open-mouthed.

“You know,” she said. “Like you did in the underground jail.” She pointed to the portion of air just the other side of the side of the sleigh. “Put it there.”

“I never thought of that.”

“Moron,” she grinned.

Rodin, Amira and the elves fired a blaze of arrows down at another group of Gaardreng. Blue arrows and bolts zipped over the sleigh. Henry and Rosie took turns to dart glances over the side. Henry concentrated on what he wanted to do. He searched the ValdFyurring and found what he wanted.

Flying black arrows told him where the Gaardreng were.

He summoned what he wanted. A large oak table materialised in the air outside of the sleigh and dropped. It landed in the snow – sending white powder everywhere. The Gaardreng it had narrowly missed scattered.

Henry summoned two oak chairs and flattened one of them. Then he dropped another table on a group of three of them.

After that, he didn’t even look. He knew how long it took to summon something. So when Rosie told him, he summoned a table or a chair. Soon furniture was strewn over snow-covered streets in East London.

The black arrows had stopped.

“Look.” Rosie pointed down at the ground.

Henry watched people emerge from a few front doors, spot the chairs and tables lying in the street and look up to the sky. They stood around, pointed at the gouges in the snow where they had landed, and gazed up in the sky again. Then they started carrying the furniture into their homes.

Klasodin's sleigh drew alongside them.

"They needed one of those," the elf king called. "The old one broke. They were going to have Christmas dinner on their laps."

Henry dropped some more chairs and watched people from the same house come running to get them.

On a street close by, a fight had broken out close to some shops. It was growing among the massive crowd of people filling the street.

"There are Gaardreng in the crowd," Zadira said. "They're inciting the fight. They're leaving weapons in the snow."

Henry watched a small group of Gaardreng ready their weapons, then turn and aim at the most concentrated section of the crowd.

"Do it now," Rosie uttered.

Oak tables and chairs rained down on the Gaards. They dived out of the way.

"They've got weapons," someone in the crowd shouted.

More Gaards pulled their crossbows.

Rimida scraped snow off the side of the sleigh that Zadira had put there. She hurled a volley of snowballs that bombarded the Gaardreng like bullets. They dropped their weapons, turned and ran for it.

A couple of men stood over the tables. One of them looked up into the sky. His eyes met Henry – as if he could see him. Then he saw Klasodin and his jaw dropped.

"Can I keep this?" he shouted.

"Yes," Klasodin called back.

"Got a turkey to go with it? I can't find one anywhere."

Klasodin drew his sleigh alongside Henry.

"There'll be nine of them for Christmas dinner," he said. "Find him a big one."

Finding food was easy. A fourteen pound turkey landed in the snow at the guy's feet. Then it rained root vegetables.

Henry looked at Klasodin.

"You know him?"

"Of course," Klasodin said. "That's Gary. He stopped believing in me years ago, but I still keep track."

"Looks like he believes in you now," Ellodine laughed.

"Is that a turkey?" came another voice in the crowd.

Soon a few more people were looking up at the sleighs like they could see them.

"We'll need turkeys and vegetables," Klasodin said. "And plenty of nuts – there are some vegetarians down there too."

After the food, a flotilla of new sledges landed in the snow – perfect for dragging the ingredients home for Christmas dinner. Cheers, shouts and thankyou's rang out. People grabbed what they needed, talking excitedly to each other about how great Christmas was going to be now. Then they all headed for home. Soon the street was deserted.

Klasodin's staff glowed with Madjik. So did every Hafskod.

"I feel stronger already," the King of Alvahame said.

"Will Krampus be back?" Rimida asked.

"He will," the elf king replied. "But not this Christmas."

"What do we do about Christmas?" Ellodine asked. "We don't have enough presents."

Klasodin looked at Rosie and Henry and smiled.

"Maybe we do."

Chapter Thirty

It was early Christmas morning. The sleigh landed on the roof of Henry's foster home in London and slid to a halt. Henry climbed out. His boots landed in the snow with a crunch. He climbed down onto his balcony and through the window into his bedroom.

"You think they're already up?" Ellodine whispered behind him.

"Course they are," came Balnir's voice.

Forodin, Rimida and Zadira climbed in after them, followed by Rodin and Amira.

Henry hurried down the stairs. Every bed was empty. Covers, sheets and pillows were strewn all over the place like they had been thrown off in a hurry. A growing noise and a gaggle of excited voices came from the lounge.

All five children were sitting on the floor around the Christmas tree. It was a small pile of presents but they were still very excited. Mrs Mcready watched them opening their presents with a happy smile on her face, clutching a mug of tea.

"HE'S HERE!"

Five kids jumped to their feet and surrounded Henry.

Henry hugged them all. For him, it had been quite a long time since he'd seen them last and he'd really missed them.

"Did you do it?" Rosie said quietly.

Henry nodded, a grin spreading over his face. He couldn't wait to show them the result of all the work happening in Alvahame.

Tabitha looked up at up at him, her eyes wide.

"Santa's here, isn't he?"

Tabitha tore downstairs, the other four behind her.

Ellodine and the elves followed.

Mrs Mcready gave Henry a hug.

“You look like someone who hasn’t seen any of us for weeks,” she said. Her eyes narrowed. “But we saw you leave London two days ago.”

“It’s been four weeks for us,” Henry said.

“You’ve been busy.”

Klasodin waited for them downstairs in the basement area. There were more presents under the tree – and a huge pile of biscuits on the table, but no one who had just spent four weeks in Alvahame would say how they got there.

They opened their presents. Sledges. Board games. Toys. Nothing complicated. But everything was appreciated and loved.

Then Klasodin had them all sit down around the Christmas tree. Henry noticed a large gold bauble nestled in the branches of the tree, which looked like the ones in Klasodin’s London home.

The room fell silent. Everyone watched the images appearing inside it.

Happy families gathered around their Christmas trees, opening presents. Everyone had something to open. Everyone loved what they received. It wasn’t just the presents. They were happy to be together. Some families hadn’t seen each other in a long time. They hadn’t expected to see each other at all at Christmas. Yet somehow, at the last minute, they had found a way to be together. The fact they couldn’t remember how they had travelled many miles on Christmas Eve night didn’t matter.

Then there were dinner tables groaning with food. Roasts with all the trimmings. Food that hadn’t been there on Christmas Eve, but now, there it was. And that was all that mattered. Some houses were filled with family. Some had neighbours join them from up and down the street. Everyone had somewhere to be and someone to be with. In parts of East London,

stories were told about how Santa Claus and his elves had dropped the turkey and all the food they needed in the snow just before Christmas.

“And this is all because I wanted you to drop a table on those Nerivari?” Rosie said.

“It is,” Klasodin replied.

“How did you move all the people?” Oliver asked.

Klasodin gave a smile – and said nothing.

When it was time to eat, a table full of food was waiting for them. Balnir and Forodin sat at the table first, claiming they were starving.

Ellodine was still staring wide-eyed at the images coming from the bauble. Henry sat down next to her.

“It’s strange,” she said. “It was the worst Christmas ever. No one got what they asked for. All the presents were ruined. Now look at it. One of the best Christmases ever.”

“Things go wrong,” Henry shrugged. “Then you realise what’s important. Suddenly no one needs a whole list of expensive presents anymore. Everyone wants something to open and a family there to eat dinner with.”

She looked at him.

“You’re good at that, aren’t you? Doing what it takes. Getting the job done.” She sighed.

“I like things perfect. I don’t know if this is perfect or not.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Henry said. “Everyone’s happy. More people believe in Klasodin than in a long time. Without everything going wrong, it wouldn’t have happened.”

“So I should stop trying to make everything perfect and keep things pure? Like Madjik and weapons?”

Henry thought for a second and shook his head.

“No. You wouldn’t be you anymore.”

She laughed.

“Next year I want the Sleigh Room full of perfect presents,” she said. “The lists will get longer again. People will forget this.”

“So we remind them,” came Klasodin’s gentle voice behind them.

His head nearly touched the ceiling. Henry realised he was probably stooping. It reminded him of the first time they had met.

“Gronodin is constantly reminding me about marketing and thinking like a business,” the King of Alvahame said. “Having a London base was his idea. I have a property portfolio now and everything. I’ve never seen him so happy.”

Henry hadn’t always got on with Gronodin, one of Klasodin’s oldest friends. But Klasodin was right, he was a lot happier now.

“Maybe we can use some of these new ideas and keep Christmas more to what it should be,” Klasodin continued.

“Lists’ll be ten times longer next year,” Balnir said. “They’ll remember all the things they didn’t get today.”

Everyone looked at him.

“What?” he protested. “It’s true.”

“Well, we can’t all live in a city with Santa Claus where we have everything we want already,” Rosie shot back at him.

“My name’s Balnir,” Tabitha said loudly – in a mimicking tone. “I’m an elf with a superpower but I’m miserable and I hate everyone.”

Raiodin and Forodin collapsed into laughter.

“Why is everyone else so rubbish?” Emily cried out mournfully.

Ellodine snorted – which made the others laugh even harder.

Henry sat at the table next to Ellodine. He piled his plate with food and watched everyone eat as the insults and banter flew around the room.

His worlds had collided and somehow it had all worked out. Everyone got on. Everyone knew everything about his other life. He had a family and lots of great friends. And after all the things that had gone wrong, he was pretty sure he had never been happier.

THE END

A GUIDE TO ALVAHAME

Aesir (ez-EER): The race of elves in Alvahame led by Klasodin.

Aesr/Aesrine (EZ-ur / EZ-reen): An elf (male/female) belonging to the Aesir.

Affinity for Madjik: The potential ability of certain human children to wield Madjik.

Alvahame (ALV-a-hame): The city of Santa Claus and his elves.

Amira (a-MEE-ra): Aesrine warrior. Orek's daughter.

Appodin (APP-o-din): Aesir warrior and sleigh driver.

Azmar (AZ-maar): The product of fusing Madjik with human technology.

Balnir (BAL-neer): Elf in Henry's class in Alvahame. Talent for tactical thinking.

Bardag (BAR-dag): Reindeer.

Bayne: Leader of the Gaardreng and a Yotunmens.

The Black List: The naughty list.

Blaze: Reindeer.

Ecromir (ECK-ro-meer): The elf who wrote Klasodin's memoirs.

Ellodine (ELL-o-deen): Henry's classmate and best friend in Alvahame. Klasodin's direct descendant. Talent for healing, which she tries to keep quiet.

Elven Realm: A realm on Earth hidden from everyone except elves and those possessing elven Madjik.

Epicentre: Every form of Madjik comes from one and needs one. Every race of elves has its own Epicentre, which is made of a combination of precious stones or metals.

Equodin (ECK-wo-din): Looks after the reindeer in Alvahame and manages the stables.

The Five Crafts: Everything the elves of Alvahame do falls under one of the Five Crafts:

The Craft of Care: Looking after elves, animals and nature.

The Craft of Creation: Designing and making toys and gifts.

The Craft of Education: School and learning. Studying humans and the wider world.

The Craft of Giving: Reading Christmas lists. Wrapping and delivering gifts.

The Craft of War: Warriors defending Alvahame.

Forodin (FOR-o-din): Henry's classmate. Talent for speed.

Fyoreig (FYOR-egg): Nourishing hot drink made from the sap of Iddrassil.

Fyur: The purist form of Aesir Madjik.

Gaard: Member of the Gaardreng.

Gaardreng: Armed mercenaries doing Omnitec's dirty work – such as sabotage and murder.

Glondir (GLON-deer): The name given to Klasodin's chosen human helper.

The Gold List: An idea for desperate times. You have to be good enough to earn your place on the Gold List. Only those on the Gold List receive a present from Santa Claus.

Gratall (GRA-tal): Reindeer.

Grimnir (GRIM-neer): Codename of the traitor, the elf working against Klasodin from inside Alvahame.

The Great Santa Claus: Sarcastic name and insult aimed at Klasodin by Grimnir.

Gronodin (GRON-o-din): Klasodin's second-in-command and his oldest friend.

Grrhdrig (GURR-drig): Polar bear. King of his tribe.

Hafskod (HAFF-skod): The Madjikal gold wristband worn by Glondir. It looks like a watch and possesses Madjikal powers.

Hamedall (HAME-daal): Village on the edge of Alvahame, inside the Margullring. The elves living there are guards protecting Alvahame.

Henry Frey: Our hero. An orphaned boy living in a London foster home.

The Hollow: The massive space inside Idrassil.

Idrassil (ID-ra-sill): The Great Tree at the centre of Alvahame.

Ivrakend (IV-ra-kend): Morivar warrior.

Klasodin (KLAAS-o-din): Santa Claus. The King of Alvahame. The great warrior who led the Aesir from Vanahame.

LagFyurring (LAG-fyur-ring): Hovering gold globe used by the Aesir to watch humans.

Larodine (LAR-o-deen): Ellodine's mum. Head of the Craft of Care.

Leglodin (LEG-lo-din): Head of the Craft of Education.

Madjik (magic): The magic of the elves.

Mannhame: The settlement close to Alvahame inhabited mainly by half-elves and humans who've spent time in Alvahame.

Margullring (MAAR-gull-ring): The dome of ice surrounding Alvahame. A Madjikal shield protecting the city.

Merrodine (MERR-o-deen): Klasodin's wife. Head of the Craft of Giving.

Monira (mo-NEE-ra): Henry's school teacher in Alvahame.

Morikend (MOR-i-kend): King of the Morivari.

Morivar (MOR-i-vaar): Elf belonging to the Morivari.

Morivari (mor-i-VAA-ree): Race of elves living in the underground city of Svaravame in the elven realm. Mortal enemies of the Aesir.

Nerivari (ner-i-VAA-ree): Savage race of elves living much deeper underground than the Morivari. Rarely seen above the surface.

Omnitec: Massive world-conquering multinational intent on world domination, controlling the world's toy market and destroying Santa Claus in the process.

Orek (O-reck): Head of the Craft of Creation. Amira's father.

Pellodin (PELL-o-din): Warrior and guard. Lives in Hamedall.

The Purpose: One of the Three Foundations. The Purpose is Alvahame's primary reason for existence – Klasodin's role as Santa Claus.

Raiodin (RYE-o-din): Henry's classmate. Talent for warcraft.

Rimida (ri-MEE-da): Henry's classmate. Talent for throwing.

Rodin (ROE-din): Warrior. Head of the Craft of War.

Salvodin (SALV-o-din): Toy designer in the Craft of Creation.

Shoffodin (SHOFF-o-din): Former Head of the Craft of Creation.

Slepnir (SLEP-neer): Klasodin's white eight-legged horse who changes into a reindeer.

Svaramar (SVAR-a-maar): Dark Madjik wielded by the Morivari.

Svaravame (SVAR-a-vame): Underground city of the Morivari hidden in the elven realm.

The Three Foundations: The three rules governing and defining life in Alvahame:

The Equality of all Elves.

The Purity of Madjik.

The Purpose.

Ullnir (ULL-neer): Gadget specialist in the Craft of Creation.

ValdFyrring (VALD-fyur-ring): The Epicentre of Aesir Madjik. Made of pure gold. It sits in Iddrassil's roots.

Valdir (VAL-deer): One of the human children with the Affinity for Madjik.

Valdiri (val-DEE-ree): The chosen human children with the Affinity for Madjik. Klasodin selects one of them to become Glondir, his human helper.

Vanahame: Klasodin's old home. The city he and the Aesir originally came from. Klasodin led a group of elves from Vanahame. They built the city of Alvahame and became the Aesir.

Vega: Reindeer.

Visr/Visrine (VIZ-ur) (VIZ-reen): The Aesir term (male/female) for "Your Royal Highness".

Yohann: The human boy helping Klasodin, but not officially named Glondir.

Yotunhame (YO-tun-hame): Home of the ice giants in the Antarctic.

Yotunmens: Half-elf. (Half elf, half human). Bayne is a half-elf.

Zadira (za-DEE-ra): Henry's classmate. Talent for working with snow and ice.

Zander Drock: CEO of Omnitec.