

PROLOGUE

Listen. I'll tell you a story. When I was a boy, a young and handsome adventurer, I embarked on a quest through the Amberley Wilds. I was drawn to uncover the myth of the Interland. I was chasing a dream, a vision of a place in legend that had lodged in my mind. It took hold of me and wouldn't let go.

The Wilds are so thick that they're impossible to navigate in any meaningful sense – you have to just feel your way. My grandmother used to say that the only way to get through the Wilds is to connect with the energy of Nature, and then flow with it – push in the same direction, don't resist it.

So I pressed bravely through the thick undergrowth, seeking my connection. Brambles tore my skin and mosquitos raised welts in my neck. Doubt crept in as I grew cold, hungry, and scared. But something pushed me on and sometime before dusk I stumbled into a clearing on the bankside where the river widened onto a flood plain.

I felt a charge in the air. Dusk drew in, and a thin mist hung over the river. The smooth surface of the water stood black and still like a painting. Poppies in the fields waved in the breeze,

scenting the air. A wooden raft, its logs tied with vine, stuck lodged against the bank like an invitation. I climbed aboard.

After a few minutes drifting through fog, the river narrowed, and I picked up speed. With the wind in my face, the current took me straight to a sheer face of rock, where the river disappeared into a cave.

The gateway to the Interland is where the three rivers of the Wilds meet, converging at a magical pool, an oasis of energy at the heart of the wilderness. The charge was electric as I passed through the hill, a tunnel of rock, and into the pool - the Gateway - where an intricate beehive of caves stretched deep into the earth. I was mesmerised. I felt the energy in the ground, the stone walls, and the Wilds. But more than that, I was a part of it - that delicate interdependence between us and our environment. I was at one with Nature. For the first time in my life, I was free.

Jay sat cross-legged on the roof where the sloping tiles connected with the house next door. She gazed across the fields towards the hills of Devil's Dyke. The wind off the sea gave a vicious whip as it rose over the sand and through the Beach Lane housing estate, and Jay sensed frustration in the air. Something was coming. She closed her book, stifling the wind-ruffled pages.

'Jay!' Her dad's voice from downstairs. He called again, his tone more urgent. She climbed through the Velux window to her room. Over her shoulder she glimpsed the flickering light of a fire up on Highdown Hill and she paused for a moment to watch. Her dad called again, and she turned to head downstairs.

Jay avoided the kitchen and made straight for the dining room where her brother Sammy was laying the table. He rolled his eyes at the noise coming through the wall. Jay took four place mats from the cupboard and arranged them on the table. 'What now?'

'Same as always,' said Sammy.

'Anything and everything?'

‘Exactly.’

Their mum, Sonia, was *challenged*, to use the words of Jay’s best friend, Stitch. She struggled to exist in the world. She was bitter, jealous of everyone. She made Jay feel like she and her brother had done her a terrible injustice just by existing in the world; it was a powerless feeling. Sonia used to drink, not much, but it only took a single glass of wine to bring on her aggression. It wasn’t that she threw fists or anything. She would stalk around the house seeking out someone to find fault with. Jay and Sammy learned to stay out of sight, tiptoe, avoid attention.

‘Here we are,’ Jay’s dad, Ben, said as he entered the dining room, placing two bowls of spaghetti bolognese on the table.

Sonia flicked on the television on the sideboard and waved her hand for Ben to shift up so that she could take her favourite seat. Ben shuffled up next to Jay, giving her a wink. Back when she and Sammy were small, when her powers were beginning to surface and life was confusing enough, their parents’ arguments scared and confused her. Not so much now. She’d turned 18 last month, and that magic number made her suddenly feel immune to the conflict in the house.

Their arguments took Jay back to one day in particular. She was nine years old, and Sammy was seven. Her parents were arguing, her dad trying to keep his voice down, unaware that kids hear everything no matter how quietly parents speak. They wanted to watch the TV, but the signal was intermittent, so Jay sat next to it and wiggled the aerial to get the picture to settle. That was when she heard her dad’s muttering and turned to ask him to be quiet, only to see that his lips were sealed. Yet his words continued. *I won’t*

rise to it. Not this time. I won't let her wind me up. It's not my fault you're like this.

Then she heard her mum, swearing, bristling with anger, the words pinging around her head like angry bees. Jay screamed and clamped her hands to her ears. She ran upstairs to her loft bedroom where she leaned out of the big Velux window and gulped the fresh sea air. She tried to focus, to read her dad's thoughts again, but couldn't figure the mechanism. She even tried a metal coat hanger from her wardrobe and held it in the air, twisting it around. When her dad came to her room a moment later, she looked him in the eye, trying to read him.

A picture formed in Jay's mind, a simple image of feeling – a sense of warmth and concern. Oranges and greens, swirls, curves and waves of colour. Her dad stood in her room frowning at her, but before he said any words the colours changed and she saw that he knew about the power. He had it too.

'Keep it to yourself,' he whispered.

'It's beautiful!' Jay said.

'Yes, it is. It's a gift. But you have to be careful.' He put a finger to his lips.

Sonia's raised voice dragged Jay from her memory. 'Give it a bash,' her mum shouted at Ben, frustrated at the quality of the picture on the television.

'It doesn't help by hitting it,' Ben replied as he tried to keep from raising his voice. Sammy stiffened and Jay caught his eye and tried to reassure him with a stiff smile.

'Then use your powers, see if they'll fix the TV, if they're good for anything useful,' Sonia said, forking spaghetti into her mouth. Ben stopped and looked at her. Then at Sammy. He'd not spoken to Sammy about the powers, only Jay. Sammy knew of course, it just wasn't something that anyone

brought up in conversation. ‘What?’ Sonia asked, mocking innocence.

‘Don’t,’ said Ben.

‘I just can’t see the point if you don’t use them for the benefit of the family,’ she said. ‘They’re pathetic. Can they pay the mortgage? Fix the car? The TV? No. What a waste. Thank god no one else in this family has been blessed with this “power”.’ She flashed air quotes as she said the word ‘power’, drawing out the word with a sneer.

Ben lowered his head, staring into his dinner. Sammy stood to fiddle with the aerial on the TV, turning it until the picture improved. Sonia laughed, ‘There you go, Ben. That’s *power*. Thanks Sammy, love.’

The room was cold, and though filled with people it felt hollow and empty.

Jay looked at the television as she swallowed her dinner as fast as possible. On the screen, a news reporter, on location, shouted to be heard above a chanting crowd. Sonia mumbled something about the unnecessary protest developing. The BBC News programme was following an escalating crisis outside Downing Street.

‘That’s a lot of people,’ said Jay, a slight shiver at the thought of being stuck in the middle of such a crowd, unable to move.

‘Thousands,’ said Ben. ‘They’ve been gathering all day. They marched through St James’s Park and now they’re massing all along Whitehall by the looks of it.’

‘What are they protesting?’ asked Sammy.

‘Nothing better to do,’ Sonia said, without looking up, but Jay could see that this was no ordinary protest. A tiny spark of static passed between Jay and her dad – his anticipation meeting with her own.

The police had gathered in numbers behind the gates

that sealed off the approach to the Prime Minister's residence. On the other side of the gate was a crowd of angry looking protesters. Jay leaned closer to the television. The aggression in the faces of the protesters unsettled her. A group of police on horseback moved up Whitehall.

'Who's that?' said Jay, motioning towards a striking-looking woman caught on camera at the front of the crowd. The way the crowd moved around her it was clear she was important. She punched the air and then pointed and shouted at the police on the front line at the other side of the gates. 'She's angry.'

'That's Zadie Lawrence,' said Ben, almost a whisper. Jay had heard Zadie's name before. She was a defender of the rights of the gifted. The BBC camera remained focused on Zadie Lawrence as she railed at the police, barring the way through to Downing Street. Jay saw the energy flow from her, shooting from her body like flares. Her passion caught Jay's breath. It sparked something inside of her. She put a hand on her dad's arm, 'We're on her side, right?'

'No,' snapped Sonia.

'Why not?' Ben said. 'She speaks for the oppressed. All kinds of oppressed, not just the Given.'

'She's an extremist,' said Sonia. Jay sensed her dad's pulse quicken, then ease as he took a deep breath. His colours were mixed.

The cameras scanned the protesters. A woman in a red dress with long dreadlocks blew a whistle as she bounced up and down in the crowd. A man held a sign that said *Diversity is Power*. Four young men pushed a police officer who held up his plastic riot shield. Amongst the chaos stood Zadie Lawrence, her arms folded, her eyes nearly closed. Her face was still, an image of peace. While the BBC journalist estimated crowd size, the camera stayed on Zadie.

Suddenly, the line of police guarding Downing Street dropped their shields and began to step backwards. Their arms hung slack, their heads drooped forward. They shuffled until they had revealed the entrance to Downing Street, unguarded. The commentator fell silent as the crowd surged, pouring through the gate and on towards Number Ten. There were more police on horseback, and teams in riot gear with shields and batons. They manoeuvred around the protestors, their shields forming a wall.

Jay sensed the atmosphere as if she were there in person. Aggression hung in the air like a flammable gas cloud waiting for a spark. Ben stood to get closer to the television, leaving his food at the table.

Two police officers at the fringe of the main protest beat a man with their batons as he tried to get away. A police horse barged another into the side of a building, before collapsing on the floor. The camera returned to Zadie Lawrence as she was approached by a line of police.

Jay saw Zadie's colours turn black. 'Dad?' Jay said, her voice trembling. Ben reached across the table and took her hand.

The riot police led a tall man dressed all in black towards Zadie. 'What's happening?' said Jay. 'I don't like this.'

As the police reached Zadie, two of them launched at her with their batons. She went down after the first blow but they continued to beat her. Jay wanted to avert her eyes but couldn't. When the police stopped hitting Zadie, the plain-clothed man approached, crouched and seemed to whisper something in her ear before drawing back. He was doing something to Zadie Lawrence; a dark terrible energy passed from him through her, reducing her in front of the cameras on national television.

Ben looked at Jay, his mouth open and disbelief in his eyes, then back to the screen as Zadio writhed on the floor, her hands clasped to the sides of her head. The man in black stood and nodded to the police officers who reached and pulled Zadio up, dragging her away by her arms, her legs dragging lifelessly along the floor behind her.

Jay glanced at her dad, his eyes fixed on the television, anguish in his expression like she'd never seen before. She turned back to the television as Zadio Lawrence was pushed towards the back of a police van. She'd regained consciousness but was unable to stand.

Just before they pushed her into the van, Zadio Lawrence turned, blood pouring down the side of her face, and looked squarely into the television camera. Jay's world stopped. She felt a bolt of energy and resolve course through her. It was like Zadio Lawrence had looked directly into Jay's mind.