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Opening Extract from...

Serpent Papers

Written by Jessica Cornwell

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In the sorting room at the far end of the cloister the librarian punches in a security code. He bustles past a filing cabinet made of ruby teak, drawers the size of a single card, then slows respectfully through the public reading room. There is the black marble statue of an old man holding his book, arranged beside the Virgin and a pewter urn. Oak shelves lined with broken spines from floor to ceiling. An upper balcony reached by a series of rickety stairs and then climbed higher with a ladder set against the volumes. Behind this a second door, leading to an inner sanctum. The padlocked cellar where they keep the medieval manuscripts of the Abbey. He halts abruptly at the cleansing station.

'You must wash your hands,' the librarian says. 'The book is very fragile.'

I do as I am told.

The librarian's eyes damp-rimmed and glassy beneath long doe-like lashes. His cheeks are creased and his hair smoothed against his scalp. On his wedding finger a simple gold band. On the other hand the mark of a good family, obsidian crest against the tweed and the lined blue shirt. When I am finished he places his hands under the scalding water. *A constant ritual*. I smell him, the incense and fresh soap, the dust. He has not suffered for wealth. I

admire the line of his shoulder as he leads me; how strong he must have been in youth, when he built this place, as he first told me, when they pushed the animals out from these medieval quarters, relocated the donkey and the lamb, and the squatters, and rebuilt the Abbey; yes, of his life this man is proud as he shares his secret with me.

The cellar is not broad or lofty. It is uncomfortable, and dank, and not unlike an interrogation chamber. The wrong temperature for keeping books, I sigh, but at least there is no invasive light. A dehumidifier hums loudly at the entrance, a vain attempt to address the moisture in the air. Harsh, electric bulbs cast a sickly pall over the mortuary of nonsensical memories, the Abbey's personal collection of the antiquarian and mundane. Complaints and petty criminals. Ledgers of expenses and inventories of wheat. Some bigger than an atlas. Others smaller than a pocket dictionary. The volume I examined last week – with some annoyance – had consisted of purchases for the holiday pageants from 1468 to 1532. *1487 . . . Bought two trumpets and a rattle, twelve reales.* All labelled with numbers. Binary pairs a centimetre apart. *12 15 34. 76 85 19.* Above this an older form of notation, faded into skin. Not in the best condition, any of these, but they are not my responsibility. I will tell the librarian time and time again, vellum is an organic material, made of animal hide, and when it is stretched and dried for production, it is pulled along the lines of the animal's body. The skin never forgets the shape of its muscles, the location of its legs and heart and head, and as a result parchment cockles. The natural tension of the hide defines the tension in each page, so that when parchment becomes too hot or cold or damp or dry, *it moves*. The books are, in this sense, very much *alive*. We restore them by applying heat and gentle pressure, relaxing the hides, allowing them to let go of traumatic memories. *They need to be treated like breathing creatures, not stacked like the skulls in ossuaries. You hurt them by*

exposing them to the elements. The dehumidifier is a compromise, but it is not enough.

The librarian approaches nervously. At the centre of a small working table, a desk lamp dangles over two wooden triangles supporting the covers of an open manuscript, fat and bloated with water. I take off my coat and leave it on the chair pushed up against the wall. Pull my hair back from my face with pins. Catching my expression, the librarian's shoulders droop.

'The first gatherings are part of a Book of Hours,' he says. 'But the style shifts abruptly here.'

'It's been frozen.' *Look at the water pooling.*

'They found it in the snow.' He worries his cufflinks apologetically.

'And you didn't think to send it directly to the conservation department? Javier, you should not have called me to come here.'

A rattling bursts from his lips.

Mea culpa! He prostrates himself. 'I am guilty of obfuscating aid . . . upon receipt of this manuscript I was paralysed by tragedy! I could not think clearly, the blow struck so deep into my heart. I prayed for an hour before I could act – I was so disturbed by what I have found . . .'

He flinches beneath the tweed.

'We are the first witnesses . . .' The librarian reaches forward and turns the pages of the book.

His gnarled finger glides to the far corner. 'The book has been violated! Very cruel!' the librarian laments. 'They were very cruel! Come, look, where they cut, the quire is of a different parchment . . .' The librarian squints at the book, bringing his nose close to the manuscript. 'They have taken all but a single leaf!'

Folios excised in a hurry, using modern tools. Cuts clean. We are left with carnage. One golden page, the others ripped free. *A rigid, brutal stump down the heart of the manuscript.*

'Am I wrong?' The librarian breathless. 'Is there Greek? Hiding there, beneath the gold? Perhaps I have imagined the letters? My eyes . . . my sight plays tricks on me . . . Can you . . . Can you tell me what you see?'

A ghost. Barely visible on the page.

I peer closer.

Is that an Alpha? An Omega? Light smudges of recognizable bookhand? Beneath a Latin blackletter? My eyes read hungrily, my mouth hanging open, I can feel my tongue grow heavy, treading over the letters. Blink and look again. And then I catch it. The ultimate proof: *Rex Illuminatus.* A name I first saw written into the marginalia of an alchemical book discovered in London in 1872 through a private estate sale in Kensington. The book itself published in Leipzig, a re-edition of the German alchemist Basil Valentine's *Of the Great Stones of the Ancients* accompanied by allegorical illustrations titled 'The Twelve Keys'. Across the eleventh key an enthusiast of the subject has scribbled '*And such was the transmutation achieved by the immortal Rex Illuminatus*', with an arrow pointing to Valentine's maxim: '*If you will but remove the veil of ignorance from your eyes, you will behold that which many have sought and few found.*' On the page before me, standing beside the Abbey Librarian, I witness his signature in gold leaf painted over the ghosts of Greek letters. *Remnants of an Illuminatus palimpsest.* One hand written over another. Red tracks of deer left in damp clay. Old words, milky and half forgotten, burial mound shrouded in gold.

'You are quite pale,' the librarian says. Pulling a chair towards me.

Roll up your sleeves. Adjust the light overhead.

'We need to stabilize the parchment.' I curse the shaking in my voice, the dryness. I unsheathe the camera from my bag. *No flash. Just capture what is there. Record everything.* 'Picatrix will come and take the book to the conservation department at the University of the Balearic Islands. It will need to be dried properly; we have the

facilities there.' Fans of purple mould gobble up the golden margins of the book, spreading like pestilence into the heart of the letters. A single illumination, small, text underneath, light scoring on the page beneath the lettering . . . Mallorcan flourishes, made locally on the island. *Writing fading. Friable verdigris pigments, lifting in some areas coupled with recent exposure to water*, my heart sinks. *Wet, quite critical, the ice has melted easily.*

'There will be paperwork – permissions, legal formalities. I will stay here with the manuscript until we have the appropriate means of transportation. Once we have taken it to our department you will have continuous access during the conservation period, and we will call on you for help documenting where and how this book was found. You will not have to say goodbye to it today, even if it leaves this place. When we have finished with it, they will return the book to you.'

I continue the examination.

'It may take five or six days to remove the moisture . . . if not longer . . .' *Burns around the edges of the text block, and wax . . . Beeswax . . . not tallow . . . spattered all over the vellum, so it was likely to have been kept in a church or a wealthy household. Deep bacterial infection – deteriorating sheepskin binding . . . sixteenth-maybe seventeenth-century, wooden boards, one broken. Ornate buckle and clasp suggest baroque period, gilt tooling on cover . . . minuscule patterns. Parchment bifolia, much older, burnished on both sides, gilt highlights and iron gall ink . . . badly cockled, tannins from covering leather have stained early and final pages of the book. Wherever it was stored was unsealed and unstable. Freezing in the winter and very hot and humid in the summer. Most valuable pages missing, presumed stolen. All in all*, I sigh, *a disaster.*

But I am confident of other things.

Do not tell him what it is.

The name spinning round my head.

I park the car just north of the village of Valldemossa, along the easterly road to the Hermitage of the Holy Trinity. They have taken the book to the university, but I have declined going with them. The chemists will handle it, the supervisor. People with the appropriate skills. The book doctors. The surgeons. The right pigments and chemicals and machines. The right scalpels and humidifiers and magnets and weights. I walk angrily, burning off the energy.

To come so close, only to lose what is most valuable. Think of Harold Bingley, warm in his Belgravia office. *Neighbours to the Queen we are, at Picatrix.* An idiosyncratic location for an office, far from the relevant libraries and museums, but the one preferred by our funder as it is nearest to his favourite hotel, though we don't see him. Only Harold Bingley has that privilege. What will he think? *We have located the very object you have been looking for, through no genius of our own.* A freak storm, an old church, a bunch of monks putting out a fire find a book, which just happens to be the palimpsest we have been hunting for – *nothing you have done merits praise.* I imagine the man who will receive this information. *They have recovered the manuscript, sir, but the Illuminatus palimpsest is missing from within. It has been stolen. Disappeared. Lost.*

Will he be angry?

Will he be sanguine?

Will he experience the same raging frustration?

I know nothing about him, though rumours abound. *He is a Texan venture capitalist, American, New York, the guy used to fund the Met. I heard he was a professor of antiquity who came into a vast fortune inherited from his recently deceased Brahmin wife. No, no, no, Picatrix is an Israeli start-up engineer who sold his platform to Google for three billion . . . originally obsessed with collecting Isaac Newton's alchemical notebooks, he hunts for the source material Newton studied.* We talk about him, without knowing anything other than the size of his wallet, which is immense, and his intellectual persuasions, which seem – bizarrely enough – to run in parallel with mine. And now, I number one among Mr Picatrix's team. I kick the snow. With nothing to show for it but a mildewed book with a missing set of pages.

I entered Picatrix two years ago on a sleety afternoon. Halting light peculiar to London in October. Summoned to a grand café in St James's on Piccadilly. Dazzling black and white marble in geometric designs, sumptuous columns sprouting Japanese lacquer. Domed ceilings. Edwardian teapots in the style of George III, silver glinting. Coiffed hair and gold cufflinks. At the appointed hour Michael Crawford, Classics professor and Archivist at the Special Collections Library at Stanford University, arrived accompanied by a severe gentleman in a suit. Crawford brisk in manner, kind in language, comfortably settled into his middle sixties. Soft Midwestern tones. A mentor from my graduate days. Specialist in multispectral imaging. Papyrologist. His friend pinched in a wiry sort of way, the skin on his cheeks so pale I could see the blue of his veins.

'Meet Harold Bingley, Deputy Head of Picatrix,' Crawford had said.

'A pleasure to make your acquaintance.' I reached out my hand.

'Likewise,' Bingley lisped.

With that they demanded service.

'Devilishly miserable day,' Bingley observed, while Crawford said to the waitress: 'No tea for me, I'll have a fresh juice. Grapefruit and ginger? Anyone else?' I ordered dutifully, hiding my shoes under the table. Leather brogues. I had worn them every day. Fraying laces. Holes in the side, torn seams. Mud spattered. 'Weathered' would be the polite word, but they were destroyed. My anxiety grew deeper. Fingers un-manicured. Not a lick of make-up. *They'll see right through me.*

'Do you like your current research?' Bingley asked.

'Very much.'

'And your work with the universities? Challenging enough?'

I paused. Any positive affirmation would be a lie.

'No.'

Harold Bingley scratched on a notepad produced from a pocket.

'Novelty is good for the soul. A challenge best of all. Don't you think, Crawford?'

'It is indeed,' Crawford said. Then the men asked me if I had any questions. *Picatrix is funded by a billionaire. Would that be a constriction?*

'What's it like working for an anonymous patron?' I asked.

Bingley frowned.

'How do you handle the pressure?' I soldiered on. 'You don't feel at all compromised, intellectually? In terms of your parameters?'

'I rather view it as a privilege,' Bingley sniffed.

'And what about the man himself?'

'Our founder is quite secular. He does not take sides. His goal is the restoration and publication of lost manuscripts, particularly the missing literary and scientific masterpieces of antiquity . . . the disappearance of which he considers one of the greatest tragedies in history. He is an earnest palaeographer.'

'You would describe Picatrix as a secular organization?'

'With absolute sincerity.'

'And if I worked for you, you would not curtail my interests.'

'On the contrary, Miss Verco, we would fund them.'

You would what?

'All of them?' I stammered.

'Within reason.' He turned to Crawford. 'You're certain about her?'

I did not inspire faith.

Crawford nodded conspiratorially. 'She's one of our best, Bingley; I wouldn't send you anything less.'

Bingley coughs delicately into a linen handkerchief.

'This is our offer, Miss Verco. It will only come once. Our team is elite. We are in the unique position of being able to empower the minds we wish to work with. Picatrix trusts your intelligence, and if you prove yourself in the field, we will follow where you go. Now, as this is your interview, it's my role to ask questions. How would you describe yourself?'

'You've knocked the wind out of her, Harold.' Crawford laughed across the table.

Harold Bingley smiled coyly.

'Why so shy, Miss Verco? Where does your elusive passion lie?'

On the road from Valldemossa to the Hermitage of the Holy Trinity I pull my collar up against the cold. The monks will show me where they found that damn book. Now. Today. *Walk faster.* The rain has turned to snow, and it drifts lightly down. It is not a long journey and the cold helps clear my head, scarf wrapped round my throat, hat pulled close over my ears. Bare fingers in pockets. Buses fly by, roaring up into the mountain, careening around a one-lane highway. I move swiftly, heading towards Deià, where the road forks, until I hear the *honk-honk* of a truck behind me. '*Bon dia, Nena! Com estãs?*' the farmer calls, his red nose swollen, slapping the side of his pickup, arm hanging from the open window. 'Where are you going?' I tell him I am walking to the hermitage. '*Anem-hi!*' he shouts. 'Hop in! It's too cold to walk.' In the truck he chatters idly. 'Did you hear? The bolt struck a chapel! In the dead of night! A fire on the cliff!' I listen to the farmer, who asks about the house, our garden, if my Francesc can help him with his wife's roses. I nod. *Francesc has green thumbs, Francesc has broad hands.*

'You're not at the university today?' the farmer asks. 'I saw your man going down this morning in the car.'

'No,' I shake my head. *I'm a free woman.*

'You make a nice couple,' the farmer remarks as we veer into the mountain. He glances down at my chapped fingers. 'You should wear gloves in this weather.'

Here on the western range of Mallorca, the forest slopes from the sea. Hidden fields populated by olive groves and moribund sheep; a road, unmarked, leads from the winding coastal highway through blue, arterial woods. The truck rumbles and shrieks, mirrors pulled in; my driver inhales as we squeeze through a thin mouth of stone. A monk in the garb of a workman greets us fresh from feeding his flock. His hands crusted in a powdery, paprika dust. Teeth jagged as the Pyrenees, as he informs us in the old Mallorquí dialect of the state of this year's lambing. *No man here under fifty*, I think to myself. *These aged monks are a dying breed.*

As I wait for the arrival of the man who found the Book of Hours, I lean on a low rock wall. Eyes wandering over gardens and orchards and outstretched cliffs. Comforted by the wilderness. By the sea.

Harold Bingley's voice cuts through me, mixing with the wind. I return to the grand London café. Lights dripping down from the ceiling. Ebony glass and gold inlay. Salmon and caviar. Bingley poured himself another cup of tea through a fine silver strainer. He took a bite from a finger sandwich, and gave a little murmur of pleasure. *Divine.* He wiped the corners of his mouth delicately with his napkin.

'Crawford tells me you are something of an expert in our area. One of a select few who believe Ramon Llull's simulacrum had flesh and blood.'

'The historical evidence for the existence of the alchemist Rex Illuminatus is irrefutable.'

'You are very bold in that assertion.'

'Because it is the truth.'

'Then what I have to say should interest you most profoundly.'

Bingley smiled conspiratorially.

'A philosopher in the thirteenth century writes alchemical recipes, in the tradition of the Franciscan alchemist John of Rupescissa's *Book of Light*, onto a series of Greek codices, creating a palimpsest of a remarkable nature on two fronts. First, because the Latin work seems to have been signed by none other than Rex Illuminatus,

making it the first piece of Illuminatian writing ever to have been discovered in the original. Second, because, Miss Verco, the Greek subtext echoes findings in the sixth volume of the Nag Hammadi codices. We are effectively looking at a Hellenic poem, presumably composed in Alexandria in the second or third centuries CE, which has been recopied by a later scribe onto parchment, which Illuminatus wrote over in the thirteenth century. We know of this book because we have one page of it, due to a most unusual series of circumstances.

'A gift of *coincidence*, Miss Verco, pure chance. That ephemeral thing which drives our industry. Several months ago, a research colleague at Oxford University brought forward citations of Rex Illuminatus's work referenced in unpublished laboratory notebooks written by the American alchemist Eirenaeus Philalethes in London in 1657. These notes contain translated fragments of a text which appears to be four centuries older, excerpts from a magical book, known to medieval scholars as *The Chrysopeia of Majorca*. These laboratory notebooks link the authorship of *The Chrysopeia of Majorca* to a mysterious Catalan living at Westminster Abbey at the behest of the Abbot Cremer and Edward III between 1328 and 1331. An individual who can only be the alchemist Rex Illuminatus.' Bingley paused. 'You have heard of these laboratory notes?'

'Yes, but I have not been given access to them.'

'We can arrange that.' Bingley made a scratch on his notepad. 'Said laboratory notebooks were compiled and archived in the Bodleian library by a young English scholar in 1829, one Charles Leopold Ruthven, who went on to publish accounts of an extraordinary find at an unspecified monastery on Mallorca. He recounts the discovery of a palimpsest sewn into an illuminated Book of Gospels. Enchanted by the quality of the illuminations and the bizarre nature of the prayers – simultaneously apocalyptic and alchemical – Ruthven cut a page from the book and returned with

it in secret to Oxford, where a series of studies took place in the hopes of revealing the nature of the Greek letters written vertically beneath the horizontal Latin. This is the page we now have in our possession. What was the book Ruthven had seen in Mallorca? We asked our friends at the university to investigate. A volume in a list of works held by the Mallorcan Diocese in 1825 entitled *The Chrysopeia of Majorca* dated to 1276 CE. In 1835, when another list is published, the book vanishes from the records. We have reason to assume, Miss Verco, that the book was stolen, shortly after Ruthven's visit to the monastery.'

His voice echoes through me.

'It was a work of mesmerizing beauty. A magical book, layer upon layer of history. The manuscript's value, if it still exists, would be in the millions, the ideal purchase for a private buyer. But if the book went to auction it would run the risk of disappearing from public access. The buyer always controls their purchase. The same would be true of a claim made by the Church; should it fall into the possession of certain members of the Archdiocese, I can guarantee you that the Illuminatus Palimpsest would never see the light of day. Obviously neither case is ideal. As a philanthropic venture, my benefactor would like to avoid these scenarios if possible. And so we come to you, Miss Verco. We are in need of a scholar. A book hunter. You've been described as a Renaissance woman by your colleagues and impulsive and rash by your critics. Given your peculiar set of skills, our benefactor seeks your services. He would like you to go to Mallorca for a year or two, maybe more. Work with our faculty at the University of the Balearic Islands, make an inventory of all manuscripts at the monasteries and abbeys in the Serra de Tramuntana. The groundwork is in place already. The local diocese has agreed to collaborate, as have our academic partners. Should we find anything of value, we will have the world's top institutions at our disposal, the brightest minds, the finest

laboratories. Such is the power of Picatrix, Miss Verco. Which brings me back to the page of the palimpsest preserved in Ruthven's collection. He did not have the technology to read the Greek . . . but today we can.'

Harold beamed, turning to his colleague.

'Michael has been an immensely valuable resource at Stanford. He's connected us to the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, and the Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory. Using Synchrotron light to pick up the iron traces on paper from faded gall inks, we've gained access to the submicroscopic world on the page.'

Harold removed a laptop from his briefcase.

'Now. Why don't you take a look for yourself?'

II

ILLUMINATUS PALIMPSEST

Single folio – verso and recto

Greek subtext as translated by Picatrix

London, 2012

You have called me
Thrice Great
Two-Faced
Forked Tongue.
You have called me
Devil's Mouthpiece
Eve's Blessing
Vulture's Seed.
Skin of transgression and her Sin.
The Silence who speaks in Song.
I am the Beggar Queen who cast off Kings
Carrying silver cities on her shoulders,
Plucker of roses and violets,
Irises and hyacinths and narcissus,
Crocus gatherer
Dwelling in the deep
I gathered you like stamens
And ate the seeds of summer and birthed the cold of winter.
My tears formed rivers and oceans.
My womb the many-tiered world,
Yet I am empty,

Parthenogen Eternal!
Self-Making and Self-Destroying
Knowing and Unknowing
I am the forgotten and I am the omnipresent.
Alpha and Omega.
O!
Babylon you called me!
Grinding me to dust.
Dust!
I bear this proudly.
I say I am Foundation.
Root of your root.
Clay of your clay.
I am the Light Who Raised You To The *Knowing*
And I am Thunder
The Perfect Lightning,
I am the Storm of the Mute and I am the Alphabet of Birds,
I am the Cry from the Dark and I am the Listening.
I am the Holy Path that you have called Knowledge,
And I am the Path that you abjure as Unholy.
I am eternal and I am ephemeral
I am your Mother,
and I am your Daughter
I am Wife of your Wife,
and I am Whore of your Whore,
Dust of your Dust,
and Ash of your Ash.
I am the Moon's marriage and the Virgin's child.
The Conquering Blade and The Spirit of Insurrection.
I am the Serpent's Tongue and her Master.

III

DONUM DEI

Boots leave claw prints in earth, black holes where the rubber has crunched into snow. *Ash and fire on the air.* Smoke from a farmer's chimneystack. The path frozen over, darting through the olive grove. *The wind cold as a Norse god, ice on the tip of your tongue.* The terrain drops steeply as we enter the woods. Pine needles underfoot, snowdrifts interrupted by black trunks. I shudder, pulling my jacket close, up round my ears, feeling my breath quicken. *There he scrambles. Much faster than me.* I look to my guide, thick turtleneck, polyester coat, hunched shoulders tight against the cold. Full of thunder. Already the sun fading. Clouds ominous. Stomping out the light.

'Miss Verco!' The monk Anselmo calls. A great pine uprooted at the side of the forest. Limbs contorted beneath the snow, roots exposed. Veins frozen. 'The wind did this! The brute was fierce last night. We lost three oaks to the gale.'

'And the chapel?'

'You will see soon enough.' He whistles through his teeth, the old goat call of the shepherd, and walks faster.

And other things too. I shake the thoughts from my head. *Focus.* Hold my eyes to the path. *It is nothing.*

'I assume you heard the storm,' he says.

'Yes.'

'And did you sleep?'

'No. Not well.'

'Neither did we. Are you afraid of the wind?'

I shake my head.

'Good.'

Anselmo stops at a break in the white-frocked pines. His gaze leads along the thin spine of shale to a broken structure.

'You can see where the bolt struck,' he says. 'The lightning began a fire, but the snow soon put it out.' Blackened spokes of wood jut into the sky. Two slits for windows, or eyes, at the height of the first floor. Tiles scattered like gravestones. Above us the storm frowns. Gathering spleen. Smudging the sea with soot.

'Is it safe?' I ask, wary of the roof.

'*Segurament*.' He nods. '*Caminem amb Déu*.' *We walk with God.*

Ducking low to enter the chapel, his movements are muscular. Well oiled. Two fingers in the stone font by the door. He genuflects, crossing himself from his forehead to his heart. I wait beside him. *Listening.* Breath raw against the cold.

Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Rubble from the collapsed wall smothers the chancel and altar. Snow through the broken arch of the roof. *Adveniat regnum tuum.* Stone pulpit dusted with powder. *Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra.* He prays fiercely. The chapel intimate, designed for meditation. I rest in the fallen stones, listening to the snarl of the wind overhead. For a moment I am frightened. I can hear voices in the gale. *Cries of the Siren! One, two three, she screeches up! Up the cliffs! Into the trees, into the village! A kiss of darkness!* The gold of the tabernacle glints beneath black earth and ice, half crushed. A hallowed lamb upon his throne, obscured by dislodged dust, bears the Cross of St John. White silk trapped beneath the pile. *Give us this day our*

daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Glass on the floor. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* Shards of colour arranged in patterns like poems. I watch the sound of his words hovering in the air. *Amen.*

When he finishes, Anselmo walks into the shaft of dim light cutting through the roof near the chancel.

'I found it here. Half buried. Who knows how long it had been hidden in the foundations of this chapel – eight hundred years? Maybe more? It's a miracle that it survived. *Un donum Dei*,' he adds beneath his breath. 'If there are more pages hidden they will be here.' The wind sends a stone spinning. 'Crushed in this chaos. If we do not find them today, the excavators will come once the storm has calmed.' He looks at me closely. 'I've heard your technique for finding things is quite unusual.'

I do not bother to answer.

'You would like to work alone?'

'That is preferable.'

I push the fear down, feel its weight settling at the base of my spine. *No. Do not buckle. Wind howling like a banshee.* He points to the crevasse in the sky. 'I will check the damage to the wall outside, on the cliffs. Perhaps something has fallen there? Be warned. The rockwork is very weak. If the wind picks up the roof will collapse further.'

When he is gone I am still. Resting in the empty chapel, looking up into ravenous clouds. With each gust, the roof creaks and groans like the hull of a broken ship. But I only listen to that thing peculiar to me. *For the sound of colour. For the song a book makes.* Here amidst the shadows and great stones, the mortar and dark mud, the ash and blackened beams. Where even the gold takes on a lustreless pallor, disappointed in its fate. *Listen.* First to the wind. *Purple and thick.* I wait until I can feel the pages, grasping at a shape. Calling from beneath the stones. Emanating from the dark heart of this

chapel. A single image emerging with the gusts, rising up from the rocks in the golden shape of a bird.

Impulse guides me.

Come.

I place my hands on the wall, feeling along the cracks. I drop to my knees at the place the book was found, running my hand over the flagstones. A thick paste of snow and dust comes away. I reach back. Startled. *Black hairs.* A matted tuft poking through the earth. I gather myself. Look closer. *Almost human. Horse most likely, judging by the length of the strand, or sheep's wool for insulation and binding.* I rub harder.

And then a little bone. Black soot between my fingers.

Immured.

The half-notes of a song. Indistinguishable from the roaring of the sea but for a golden ringing. A bright tolling against the slate water.

The bone staring back amidst the stones.

Listening.

For what?

The aching begins at my temples. The shooting pain that pulls at my head like forceps. *Somewhere inside.* I wait for the dowsing tremor, hunting for a seam on the air, a little thread that weaves through the chapel. *Pure discovery belonging solely to me.* I push forward, into the rubble, stepping behind the altar, moving back in the stones. Snow floats through the roof, landing and melting on my shoulders. But I no longer feel the cold, mesmerized by the ripple of gold, warmth blinking from amidst the rocks. A sliver of ore, invisible to the naked eye, but *present* nonetheless, binding me to the solitary travellers, the grubby monks, second sons, farm workers and monastic librarians who once trod these fields. The men who moved swiftly, leading sheep or bearing fresh orders of

pumice stone and vellum, the crescent tools to scrape the animal hairs and fat from parchment; who gathered ancient heresies but could not burn them, for love of words or want of paper, and so rubbed them dry, back to flesh, leaving palimpsests they promised not to read, one book written into another, text beneath text. Ghost fragments of Seneca and Cicero, Archimedes and Homer. Reduced to flecks and smudges. In the era that formed this chapel, such books were not mass-produced commodities nor adventure stories. They were the maps of the world as God made them. Keys to our cosmos not gifted to the commoner. They were holy testaments of meaning. They were heretical or they were gospel. And nothing in between.

In an alcove beneath the creaking timbers of the roof, obscured by shadow, I reach into the cavities beneath stones. Crawling forward. Centimetre by centimetre, I stretch out onto my belly, wriggling until my hand reaches the firm, fleshy object whispering from beneath the rock. Instinct drives me. I pull gently, not wanting to lose my arm beneath the pile, holding the weight with my shoulder, tugging at the mass until it comes free with a slick, chugging thud. Struggling back from the other side of consciousness, I cannot see clearly, enchanted by the light's movement. *The fleeting, darting paroxysm of its stillness.* Gradually I focus on the physical. A heavy weight. Coated in black dust, sealed with a strap of cloth and an old tortoiseshell button. *One breath. Two.* Electricity shudders up my knuckles. A pulsing. Just behind my ears. Emerging thickets of sound. The wail of a finger sliding along crystal, taste of sherry, stale bread. I open it gently. Black ribbon of mould, fecund and festive dancing round the edges. Dank potato odour. The hard scratch-scratch of a metal nib, bent at the side, inky divots on pearled paper – *Dear Heart* – my eyes roam across the page. *A quick desire. Irresistible. Pure.*

'Miss Verco?' my guide calls.

Snap it shut. Hold the contraband against your chest. Hide.

'Anna, where are you?'

I do not answer. Crouched against the flagstones behind the altar, snow wet into my knees. He calls again.

'Quick, Miss Verco! The storm has come too fast. The wind will blow us off the mountain.' The beam of his flashlight scrapes against the musty air. He swallows his words. Staring into me.

'Are you mad? It is pitch black in here.' His flashlight reaches my face. 'Anna, you are covered in dirt.'

'I fell,' I say, dusting off my clothes. Adjusting the weight of the bag around my shoulders. Sliding the satchel behind my back.

He frowns. *Now. Outside.*

We stand in the snow. His gaze flicks to my clenched fist.

'What have you found?'

'A bone.'

'Show me.'

I give the fragment into his gloved fingers.

'Animal.'

'Perhaps.' I bide my time. 'I'll have Picatrix send up an archaeologist in the morning. They'll want access. No one should touch it until then, Anselmo.'

He nods, placing the bone in a handkerchief produced from his coat pocket. 'We will give all the help we can, Miss Verco. With some parameters, of course.' He slips the cloth bundle into his pocket and taps it twice with the flat of his hand. 'Privacy is paramount. You understand that, I'm sure. We trust you. You have done great work for us, and now the favour will be returned.'