



Adventures in
THOUSANDWORLD

Eken Press Limited
87 Fore Street, Hertford,
Hertfordshire, SG14 1AL UK

Adventures in Thousandworld – The Darkenstar

© 2021 by Stevali Barn and Joseph A. Davis

First Edition
ISBN 978-1-908233-32-5

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Printed in Estonia by Print Best

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The Darkenstar
Joseph A. Davis

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1

Julia realised that something about Kasir was off from the very moment the twelve-year-old refugee boy was presented to her class one chilly February morning. It wasn't his appearance, even if his broad, tanned face, his straight, black hair and his narrow brown eyes were rather unusual among the students in 6B. It wasn't his clothes, either, even if Julia thought they seemed a bit newer and nicer than they ought to be. It wasn't even the fact that he was a refugee – she knew a couple of girls from Syria in 6A, and Kasir wasn't like them at all. He wasn't like anyone else Julia had ever met. But it wasn't until April that she could finally put her finger on what was so different about him.

The school day began as normal: the quiet refugee boy sat drawing in his notebook as he ignored Ulf's maths lesson. As usual, Julia couldn't help but peek at the beautiful scene as it took form on the lined paper. *He's drawing too fast – he's sure to make a mistake*, she thought as a sketch of a palace with five towers rose up out of a meadow. The surrounding grass looked so realistic that Julia could almost feel it under her feet.

A garden with flowers and fountains grew around the palace as Kasir's pencil flew over the paper. Forests, lakes and mountains sprawled to the edges of the page. Closer to the palace, Kasir's pencil finally slowed as he drew a man and a woman dressed in long, beautiful garments. Their broad, smiling faces resembled Kasir's, and their hair was straight and dark like his. They stood holding hands at the centre of the drawing, even more beautiful than the exquisite scenery around them.

Julia realised she had once again let herself get distracted by Kasir. With a sigh, she turned her gaze to the whiteboard that Ulf was busy covering with numbers. She had just gathered that the lesson was about division when the sound of the refugee boy's pencil suddenly grew louder and quicker. Julia glanced back at his drawing and was horrified by what she saw. He was destroying the whole thing! His pencil quickened, and grey flames licked their way up the five towers. Thick, black smoke rose skyward.

"Stop it," Julia said quietly. The words came out a bit sharper than she'd intended, but then her feelings caught up with them, and her rising anger burned like the inferno that was destroying the lovely scene.

He drew too fast and made a mistake, she thought. And now he's trying to hide it by destroying the whole drawing. He's trying to show how brilliant he is, trying to pretend that he never messes up. Determined not to show that she cared, Julia sighed loudly. "Kasir, can't you stop scribbling and

listen to the lesson instead?" she hissed. "You're never going to learn anything if you sit scribbling all the time." She was quite deliberate about using the word *scribbling*. If he was fishing for compliments, he wasn't going to get any from her.

As usual, Kasir didn't listen to her. He was completely engrossed in the destruction of his little fantasy world. The flames spread to the garden. The plumes of smoke grew, twisting into strange shapes, like dragons and nameless monsters made of black cloud. The looming figure of a giant grew out of the smoke, towering over the man and woman.

"I said stop it!" Julia whispered, a bit louder, as the smoky giant reached out with black tentacles and covered the lovely couple.

A drop of water appeared on the paper where the couple had disappeared. It gleamed in the sunlight that came slanting in through the classroom window. Julia looked at Kasir and discovered to her surprise that a tear was rolling down his cheek as he covered the entire drawing with black smoke. She forgot her irritation at once. "Kasir?" she said hesitantly.

"This is a maths lesson, not a chatting lesson," Ulf said in his stern voice. "Let's let each other focus!" He didn't say Julia's name and didn't even look at her, but everyone knew where his indignation was aimed. Her cheeks burned with humiliation as the teacher turned back to the board to write more numbers. A bubble of giggling swelled up in the corner where the horse girls

sat, and Julia overheard the whispered words “Kasir” and “boyfriend”, which made everything a thousand times worse. Of course Ulf didn’t tell them off. He never told them off.

I’m just doing what Ulf told me to do, Julia thought bitterly as she pretended to be deeply fascinated by the numbers on the board. It was Ulf who had moved her to the desk beside Kasir’s and asked her to help him – a job that was difficult and thankless enough even when she wasn’t getting punished for doing it.

“Ulf,” Tony, the class clown, said in an exaggerated whine. “Kasir’s crying!”

Ulf whirled around to face Tony as if he intended to say something very stern. Then his gaze slipped to Kasir, and he hesitated. “Well, er . . . sometimes people cry – there’s nothing wrong with that. But let’s leave him in peace. Don’t worry about him. Worry about yourself and the maths test. We’re all going to have a reason to cry if we haven’t learned this in time for the test.” He tried to smooth things over with a smile, but it looked more like a strained grimace. No one laughed at his joke. Under normal circumstances, Julia would have laughed a little, purely to be kind, but not this time.

Ulf cleared his throat. “Anyway. As I was saying—”

At that moment, the fire alarm went off. Everyone jumped as the deafening wail pierced the relative silence of the maths lesson. Kasir looked up from his drawing and met Julia’s gaze. His dark, gleaming eyes were wide with surprise. “What?” It was probably the

first word he had said all day. He didn’t pronounce it quite right – it sounded more like “Waath?” – but Julia understood what he meant.

“That’s the fire alarm,” Ulf explained hastily, approaching their desks. “It goes off if there’s a fire – you know, flames, smoke – but this is probably only a test. It’s not– Kasir, wait!”

But the boy had already risen from his chair at the word “smoke” and fled the classroom.

Julia stared at the doorway where Kasir had disappeared, mouth agape with shock. It wasn’t just that he had run away so suddenly. It wasn’t the strange fact that she had seen him draw a slender paintbrush from his pocket as he had leaped to his feet. What shocked her most was the thin plume of smoke she had seen trailing from the paintbrush’s tip.

For a confused moment, Julia had the decidedly unpleasant feeling that the flames Kasir had drawn had somehow spread to the paintbrush and triggered the fire alarm. She shook her head. *I must be seeing things*, she thought. *I was looking at the drawing when I heard the alarm, and my eyes played a trick on me – that’s all*. But the unpleasant feeling remained.

“All right, 6B!” Ulf shouted over the din of the fire alarm. “Let’s get up nice and calmly and go to our assembly point in the playground.”

“But Ulf, Kasir’s run off!” Tony protested.

“Don’t worry about him, Tony,” Ulf said sternly. “You just worry about yourself. Everyone leave your

things here,” he added. “We’re going straight out to the playground, quickly and quietly.”

As chairs scraped on the floor and students rose to their feet, Ulf turned to Julia. “Could you go see if you can find Kasir? You know where we’re supposed to gather. You can show him.”

Julia tried to tell herself it was irritation with Kasir and Ulf that made her want to refuse. But her burning frustration had given way to a cold feeling writhing in the pit of her stomach.

She opened her mouth to say “no”, but too late. Ulf had already moved on and was telling Tony off about something. Reluctantly, Julia rose to her feet. *I must have imagined it*, she told herself, trying hard to forget the image of the smoking paintbrush as she hurried out into the corridor.

2

Outside in the corridor, the piercing wail of the fire alarm mingled with the excited chatter of a crowd of year fours whose hapless teacher was trying to herd them toward the exit.

“Julia! Julia!”

Edvin’s tousled shock of brown hair bounced up and down as he jumped in place among the other year fours. His blue eyes glittered cheerfully.

For a moment, Julia forgot Kasir’s smoking paintbrush and groaned loudly. She had told Edvin never to talk to her at school. It was hard enough to fit in without a hyperactive little brother clinging to her all the time.

She pretended not to see him and hurried along the corridor in the opposite direction. But his shouting had already called unwanted attention to her.

“Julia!”

It was Manuela, Julia’s art teacher, who was usually so happy to see her and her drawings. Now she looked anything but happy. “You’re going the wrong way.” The motherly woman’s voice, with its exotic accent, was unusually firm.

“Ulf told me to find Kasir,” Julia said, trying not to whine at her favourite teacher. This took quite some effort. It was so unfair that two different teachers would get cross with her because of Kasir on the same day!

Manuela’s dark eyes narrowed. “I think Kasir can take care of himself,” she said.

If only that were true! Julia thought. “Please, Manuela,” she begged. “Ulf told me that I had to.”

“Strange,” said Manuela. “Very strange. But if you— Erik!” She turned to confront a large, blonde boy who had taken a small girl’s mobile phone and was waving it over her head. The girl jumped and shrieked as if panicked at the thought of a gloomy, empty life without her precious phone.

She doesn’t want to end up like me, Julia thought, taking the opportunity to flee. Mobile phones were one of the thousand things that Julia’s mum had a firm opinion about. Like trendy clothes, riding lessons, trips to the cinema and everything else that all the other girls did. “It costs money,” she would often say about such things. And she wondered why Julia sat in her room all the time, reading and drawing and never seeing any friends anymore.

Julia turned a corner and realised she should have asked Manuela if she had seen which direction Kasir had gone. Klippridge School was the largest school in the whole municipality, with two floors and a labyrinth of corridors. He could be anywhere. Maybe he had gone

out to the playground with the others. The thought came almost as a comfort. Julia was not really sure that she wanted to meet Kasir alone at the moment.

But then she turned a corner and almost ran into him. The black-haired boy stood by a row of lockers, looking around in confusion at the crowd of students streaming past. This corridor was mostly year sixes, so the mass exodus was at least fairly orderly compared to the chaos of the year fours.

Kasir clutched his paintbrush in a white-knuckled grip. To Julia’s relief, the brush looked completely ordinary, without a trace of smoke. It was in fact a very handsome brush, with a slender shaft of dark brown wood tipped with fine black hairs. *I must have imagined it,* she thought, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Come on, Kasir!” she said. “We have to go down to the playground and gather with the others.”

The boy turned his confused gaze on her. “Smoke?” he said, gesturing quizzically with his free hand.

Julia’s blood froze, and for a terrible moment she thought he was referring to his paintbrush. Then the wailing of the fire alarm pierced her thoughts and she shook off the ridiculous misunderstanding. “No, there’s no smoke,” she said. “And no fire, either. The school isn’t burning, it’s just a drill. It’s pretend. We’re supposed to go out to the playground and wait for them to tell us to come back in again.”

“Pretend,” Kasir said, seeming to understand at last. “Not smoke.” The word smoke sounded strange

coming from his mouth. He let out a small, relieved chuckle. Then he thrust the brush into his trouser pocket.

“Come on,” Julia said. She remembered his earlier tears, and with a small degree of effort she managed to speak in a gentler tone. “We have to go out to the playground.”

Kasir whistled a low note before nodding and following along. He had a strange habit of whistling quietly like that.

“You know, if you stopped whistling like that, people would stop teasing you for it,” Julia said as she led him towards the stairs. “It isn’t normal. You know, normal? If you want to fit in, you have to try to act like everyone else.”

Kasir made no reply.



Julia felt a certain trepidation about art class after the fire drill. But as she entered the classroom, Manuela was her usual, cheerful self. She made no mention of Julia’s earlier disappearance.

“Welcome, everyone!” Manuela said once all the year sixes had seated themselves at the long, black tables. As usual, Julia sat next to Kasir – but she was so relieved that Manuela wasn’t cross with her that the seating arrangements hardly bothered her. In fact, she felt positively happy as she studied the coloured

pencils, crayons, brushes and paints that lay waiting on the table. She loved to draw and paint. And she loved receiving praise from Manuela for her work.

“Today we’re going to do something very special,” the art teacher went on, holding up a manila folder. “As you all know, Easter is around the corner. Which means it’s time for Klippsby’s annual drawing competition.”

Julia’s heart leaped with joy. She had come in second place in year four and won the competition in year five. Which meant that last year, her winning drawing of a peacock hatching from a jewel-encrusted egg had been in the newspaper and hung in the library. She had received lots of praise from her teachers, and even the horse girls had been jealous of her for once. For her, the drawing competition was the high point of the school year.

“Easter?” Kasir said beside her. He spoke even slower than usual, as if trying to decide how the word tasted.

Julia’s heart sank. A part of her wanted to tell him to forget the whole thing. Why couldn’t he simply get lost in his drawing and ignore the teacher as usual? But then again, this was all about drawing.

At the front of the room, Manuela opened her folder and produced a number of photographs of birds and rabbits – large, beautiful close-ups. “You can study these and use them for inspiration,” she said. “Your challenge this year is realism. If you want a challenge.

Otherwise you're free to draw as you please. But now you've made it all the way to year six, and since I know we have so many talented artists in the class ...” Manuela smiled her special smile, the one that Julia loved to sun herself in. This time, the smile landed on Kasir.

It was as if a sudden thundercloud rose over Julia, blotting out the sun. *Why do all the grown-ups have to be like this with Kasir?* she thought. *He doesn't even care, and he never tries! Why is it always "poor Kasir"?*

Julia's mum had once said that Kasir must have experienced something terrible in his homeland – something so awful that he had been forced to flee to Sweden – and that must be why he hardly ever spoke. *But he's not the only one who's been through something terrible,* Julia thought. Her hand drifted to the ring that hung on a chain around her neck, the ring that was too large for her finger. As she felt its cool metal surface, a series of memories flashed through her mind: the smell of hospital, grown-ups dressed in black, the cold, echoing sanctuary of an old church. Suddenly she had forgotten all about Kasir and the drawing competition.

It wasn't until Manuela had finished speaking that Julia let go of the ring and came back to reality. She had a competition to win. She went to the front of the room and chose a particularly lovely picture of a toucan. If she could choose a bird that was prettier than Kasir's, maybe she would have a chance.

Maybe she could even convince him to choose an ugly photograph.

But Kasir didn't even bother to look at the photos. He just sat there drawing, in pencil as usual. It looked like he was working on a landscape. As Julia watched, rugged cliffs took shape around a small, round-topped hill. So far, the scene was hardly beautiful. Though it was very realistic, and that was the challenge.

Julia studied her toucan photo, considering the best way to capture the bird's bright colours. Should she try watercolour paints? Manuela loved watercolour, but it was a risky medium – so easy to make a mistake, and so hard to correct.

At last Julia decided to use coloured pencils and began selecting shades to match the exotic hues of the toucan's beak. Unfortunately, no pencil was quite perfect. But after a long debate with herself over two different shades of yellow-green, she had finally gathered some suitable colours.

As she reached past Kasir for a normal pencil to start sketching, her gaze fell on his drawing. It was very dark, with heavy black clouds reminiscent of the smoke monsters that had destroyed his previous drawing. Julia saw hints of wings, teeth, eyes and horns among the dark masses. The clouds, or monsters, darkened the entire sky – except for a single spot in the middle of the drawing, where a sunbeam broke through. The sun was nowhere to be seen; instead, the ray of light seemed to come from below, from something that

looked like a letter T on the little round hill. Kasir whistled quietly to himself as he slowed down and worked on the T-shaped figure.

Soon it had become Jesus on the Cross, agonized and bleeding.

Julia breathed a sigh of relief. Kasir had missed the whole point. This was supposed to be an *Easter* picture, with cute, chubby chicks or cheerful rabbits, with flowers and sunshine and chocolate – not a dark, religious picture. They would never print something like that in the newspaper or hang it on the wall in the library.

“Oh my,” Manuela said, appearing behind them and peering over Kasir’s shoulder. Julia waited eagerly for her to say, “Well, I suppose that’s one way to draw an Easter picture,” or something else that would show how inappropriate the drawing was. But instead she praised the feeling that Kasir had captured. “You can almost feel his pain – but then that triumphant light! The contrast between the darkness and the light is wonderful. Have you come up with this picture on your own?”

“No, Manuela,” Julia said quickly. For now she recognised the picture from the class’s visit to the church the day before. The priest had stood and spoken about Easter in the vast, echoing sanctuary while the students had played quietly with their mobile phones. For once, Kasir had listened attentively. He had stared wide-eyed when the priest had pointed to a painting

hanging on the wall and said something about “the light of the world”. Julia vaguely remembered the man going on about the light “conquering the darkness” or something like that. Anyway, that painting had looked almost exactly like Kasir’s drawing. Except for the clouds.

“It’s from a painting,” Julia explained. “We saw it yesterday, in the church.”

“It must be a Maja Liljestrom,” Manuela said. “And you’re drawing it from memory?” She sounded deeply impressed.

Kasir didn’t even bother to look up from his drawing. “Easter,” he said quietly.

“And how is your picture coming along, Julia?” Manuela asked, shifting her gaze to the blank paper in front of Julia.

“Just fine, thanks,” she replied. “The only problem is the colours. I can’t seem to find any that are just right.”

“Ah,” the teacher said with a chuckle. “Well, there’s precious little in this world that’s just right. But I’m sure your drawing will be lovely.” She patted Julia on the shoulder before proceeding to the next student.

3

“Julia! Time to wake up!”

Julia sighed and put her book facedown on her stomach. She had already been awake reading for two hours. There was nowhere she would rather be than here in her cosy bed with a good book or her drawing pad – except possibly the library. Today, the town square was at the very bottom of her list of places that sounded appealing. The adventure in her book was much more exciting than the boring ceremony in the square.

“Julia!” Her mother opened the door a crack. “Oh good, you’re awake. Come down to breakfast. We have to hurry – we don’t want to miss the excitement.”

Julia groaned. “Can’t I just lie here and read while you and Edvin go?”

“Oh, come on, Julia!”

Julia hated it when her mother said “Oh, come on, Julia!” For some reason, it seemed like she had been saying it constantly ever since Julia had started year six.

“This is both art and local history,” her mother continued. “And a little bit of sunlight and fresh air wouldn’t hurt you.”

Julia’s mother never thought that a little bit of sunlight or fresh air would hurt anyone. That was what she said whenever she made them bike somewhere instead of taking the car. Julia’s thoughts drifted to the book she was reading. The protagonist, the thief Rapp Galacto, was steering his spaceship right into the sun. If Julia’s mother had been on the bridge, she probably would have said “A little bit of sunlight and fresh air won’t hurt” right before they crashed into the sun and were obliterated. And if Julia were piloting the ship, she would probably add an “Oh, come on, Julia!” Julia giggled.

“I’m glad you’re so bright and cheery,” her mother said. “Maybe you can help cheer up your friend Kasir.”

“Kasir?” Julia sat up in a sudden panic. “What does he have to do with anything?”

“Eva asked me if we could bring him along with us today. She recently became his guardian, after the last one quit.”

“Mum, you have to say no! Seriously!”

“Oh, come on, Julia! He’s been through so much.”

“He’s not the only one!” Julia’s gaze landed on the framed photograph of her father, beside the battered pony book on her bedside table. “Mum, you have to say no! I can’t deal with him today!”

“I’m sorry, Julia, but ...” That was also something her mother said all too often. This time she finished with, “... they’re already on their way.”

“On their way here?” Julia cried. “Are they coming here?” She leaped up out of bed and rushed to the

bathroom. This was a nightmare. Kasir must not under any circumstances be allowed to enter her house. He must not be allowed to see how small it was, how everything was broken, how they didn't have all the fun things that everyone else had. And under no circumstances could he be allowed to see her in the old, worn out pony pyjamas she had grown out of ages ago.

The door to the bathroom was locked. "Edvin!" Julia shouted, pounding on the door. "I have to shower!"

"Okay, just wait a minute," he said. Julia heard a page turn.

"You can read your comic book on the couch!" she said. "I have to use the shower now! You have thirty seconds!"

"It sounds like someone wants to be nice and fresh and smartly dressed for Kasir," her mother said with a little laugh.

At that moment, Julia wished that her mother really had crashed into the sun in a spaceship. And that she herself had also been obliterated in the same crash.

Her mother hummed cheerfully as she slipped past Julia towards the kitchen to prepare the porridge.

After what felt like an eternity, Edvin flushed and opened the door. Julia didn't even bother to tell him to wash his hands – she just rushed in and closed the door behind her. The mirror confirmed what she had feared: her hair looked even more atrocious than her pyjamas. She was usually proud that she had inherited

her father's wild brown hair, just like Edvin. But that was after she had washed and dried and brushed it. Now she wished she had inherited her mother's straight blonde hair instead.

Julia got ready faster than she had ever done before. But it wasn't fast enough. She heard the front door open, and then the sound of her mother and Eva falling into a bottomless pit of chatter. Those two could chat for an eternity without ever tiring. And since the bathroom door, the front door and the stairs were all right next to each other in their cramped little house, Julia had no chance of sneaking up to her room without being seen.

She looked at her pyjamas and bitterly regretted that she had not thought to bring a change of clothes with her into the bathroom.

"Julia!" her mother shouted. "Your friend Kasir is here!"

"I'm almost ready, Mum!" Julia shouted. "You can start without me!" But she took her time drying and brushing her hair. She waited until she was certain that Eva had left and the others had gone into the kitchen.

Then she wrapped herself in her towel – better than the pink pony pyjamas – opened the door and sprinted up to her room as fast as she could. There she considered putting on the pretty yellow spring dress that her aunt had bought for her twelfth birthday. But then she remembered her mother's comment about wanting to be smartly dressed for Kasir and

chose blue jeans and a T-shirt instead. Also presents from her aunt.

When she arrived at the breakfast table, Edvin was busy doing his card trick for Kasir. “Is *this* your card?” he asked, proudly displaying a five of spades.

Kasir nodded and whistled quietly.

Edvin imitated his whistle almost perfectly. He was good at whistling, as their mother said that their father had been. Julia couldn’t remember ever hearing Dad whistle, but she had only been six years old when he had passed away. Edvin, on the other hand, she had heard thousands of times – and it got on her nerves.

But when Kasir heard Edvin’s whistle, he brightened, suddenly happier than Julia had ever seen him. He smiled and laughed, slapped Edvin on the shoulder and whistled another tone.

When Edvin saw his excited gesture, he copied that tone as well, and Kasir laughed and clapped his hands.

“That’s enough!”

Julia was shocked by the vehemence in her mother’s voice. Mum shook her head as if she was a bit taken aback herself. “Stop copying him, Edvin. It’s not polite.”

“But Mum, he thinks it’s fun!” Edvin protested.

“No, I’ve said that’s enough. Eat your porridge.” Their mother turned to Kasir and addressed him in a gentler tone, as if she were ashamed of her outburst. “Congratulations on winning the competition. I saw your drawing in the newspaper. You really are talented.”

Kasir nodded and whistled quietly.

“You should say thanks,” said Edvin. “That’s what we say here in Sweden.”

“Thanks,” Kasir said quietly without lifting his gaze from the tabletop.

“I see that you and Eva rode your bikes,” Julia’s mother said. “I hope you feel all right about biking to the square.”

Julia groaned.

It was Julia’s turn to do the washing up after breakfast, but that was fine with her. Rather than be with Kasir. She just wished her mother hadn’t insisted on showing him the whole house.

When she had finished with the dishes, it was time to get the bikes out. Thankfully, Kasir’s bike wasn’t too much nicer than hers. Though it was a bit bigger, almost exactly the right size for him. He was slightly shorter than Julia, but her bike looked like a little girl’s toy next to his.

Julia had plenty of time to study his bicycle as she pedaled slowly so as not to have to talk with him. He seemed a bit unused to biking and had a hard time getting started again each time they stopped at a junction. And although Edvin showed him plenty of tricks and challenged him to try them, he just pedalled straight on ahead, wobbling a bit from side to side.

As Julia pedalled behind Kasir, she tried not to stare at the paintbrush sticking up out of his pocket – the same brush he had taken out during the fire drill a few

days ago. She suppressed the unpleasant feeling that it awoke in her and tried just to be irritated with Kasir instead. *Why does he have to bring that along?* she thought. *Can't he stop showing off for one second? Does he have to let everyone know that he's the great artist, the proud winner of the drawing competition?* She thought bitterly about how her picture hadn't made it into the newspaper this year. *That picture of Jesus was completely inappropriate,* she thought. *If all the grown-ups didn't feel so bad for Kasir, they would never have chosen it. If I had drawn it, they would have told me it didn't fit the theme of Easter. He didn't even colour it!*

She tried to focus on her frustration as they approached the square. For a while, she managed to forget the lingering dread that the brush inspired in her.

They were among the first people to arrive at the town's bicentennial celebration. That suited Julia just fine, because it meant that relatively few people saw her park her small, beat-up bike. It also meant that she got to see the drama playing out between the arrangers of the event and the Troubadour, Klippsby's most notorious resident, as they tried to remove him from the premises.

4

Julia didn't know why the large, middle-aged man was called the Troubadour. She had never seen him sing or play any instrument. He usually just sat on a bench in the park or in the square in his ragged brown coat, whistling at passers-by. When she had walked past him in her new yellow dress on the day of her birthday picnic, he had whistled at her. Her mother had been livid and given Julia a lecture about how the man was a drunk and how it wasn't safe to talk to him. As if she didn't already know.

Now the Troubadour sat on the low marble pedestal where *The Unlucky Hand* stood. The bronze sculpture's proper name was actually *Welcome*. Julia's mother had worked in the art museum once upon a time before she had become unemployed and then cashier at the supermarket, and she had made sure that Julia learned the proper names of every single one of Klippsby's peculiar statues. Julia had learned that *Welcome* was the work of Angelica Skogsbergh, the city's great sculptor who had filled Klippsby with her incomprehensible art some time before Julia had been born. But most people called this sculpture, which stood in the very

centre of the square, *The Unlucky Hand*, and they didn't bother about who had created it. It was, after all, a hand, with an upturned palm and fingers slightly bent, large enough for two teenagers to sit in and snog or for five children to climb on at a time. And the hole going straight through the centre of its palm showed that the hand's owner must have suffered some unfortunate accident. Some children called it *The Clumsy Carpenter's Hand*. Maybe because the woodwork teacher at Klippridge School called it that – he tended to use it as a warning example.

Today there weren't any children playing on *Welcome*. No one dared while the Troubadour sat on the pedestal, turned toward the new sculpture that stood waiting to be unveiled about four metres away. He certainly looked frightening, with his puffy red face, his unkempt grey beard and his long, foul-smelling brown coat. He was the kind of person one was happy to avoid. But now he had sat himself right in the middle of the action. Therefore, something had to be done about him.

This heavy responsibility fell on the shoulders of Hans Karlfeldt, the man who always gave speeches on Walpurgis Eve and every other occasion when the town needed a speech. He was an important person in some way, even if Julia had never really understood what he had done to deserve it. Perhaps he was just elegant and well-dressed.

While Julia's mother remained behind at the bike rack, chatting with another woman, Julia stood at a

safe distance and watched Hans Karlfeldt's attempt to shoo the Troubadour away from *Welcome*.

The tall man with his well-trimmed grey goatee and his fine suit approached the slumping, heavysset vagrant with determined steps. "Excuse me," he said. "We're going to have an unveiling ceremony here soon."

"Generosity," said the Troubadour. He had a habit of speaking a bit incoherently. "I wouldn't miss it, Hansy boy." He took a gulp from the bottle he had with him.

Hans Karlfeldt stared, mouth agape. It was quite entertaining to see.

"This is a great day," the Troubadour continued. "A day for celebration, wouldn't you say? Shall we have a toast?" He held out his half-empty bottle.

Hans Karlfeldt cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. "The speech is to be held here, between the sculptures," he said.

"Is that right?" said the Troubadour. "And who will be speaking about Angelica's work today? Some expert, I suppose? A great artist or academic? Or maybe someone who knew her well?"

Now Hans Karlfeldt raised his voice. "Professor Modéus," he said. "Would you kindly vacate this sculpture so that the ceremony may commence?"

Julia didn't know why the smartly dressed man chose to call the Troubadour *Professor Modéus*, but it sounded like some kind of ironic insult. She almost felt bad for the Troubadour. But then the man rose with a look in his eyes like a gathering thunderstorm. He was a large

man, as tall as Hans Karlfeldt but perhaps twice as wide under his filthy coat. For a moment, Julia thought he was going to punch the other man in the face.

Hans Karlfeldt looked just as angry, and the two men stood glaring at each other. Then the Troubadour lowered his gaze, whistled quietly and loped off to sit on a bench at the edge of the square.

“Well done, Hans,” another man said, patting Hans Karlfeldt on the shoulder.

Julia hastily looked away before the Troubadour could look up and catch her staring. She quickly surveyed the square in search of someone to talk to. Her brother had run off to the ice-cream stand, her mother was still engrossed in conversation with the woman by the bike rack, and Kasir . . .

Kasir was headed straight towards the bench where the Troubadour sat hanging his head. As Julia watched in horror, the boy whistled three notes that almost sounded like a question, drew the paintbrush from his back pocket and held it out as if he wanted the vagrant to take it.

The Troubadour leaped to his feet. Without thinking, Julia rushed forward to rescue Kasir.

“Kasir!” she hissed, pulling the boy away. “Come on. Let’s leave him in peace.”

The Troubadour towered over them. His face was frightful to see, with large, staring eyes. He looked as if he had gone completely mad.

Kasir struggled with Julia and held out the paintbrush again. He whistled the same three notes.

With a wordless cry, the Troubadour turned and fled the square. “Forgive me, Angelica!” he wailed as he ran. “I tried.” Soon he had disappeared behind the corner of the off license.

Julia’s mother came hurrying to the children. “Are you all right?” she asked. She placed a hand on Julia’s shoulder and looked into her eyes, then repeated the same procedure with Kasir. “Did he say anything to you? Did he hurt you?”

“Wow!” Edvin said, appearing behind Julia. “Kasir, you scared off the Troubadour! You’ve saved the day!”

Kasir didn’t seem to understand any of this. He stood with his paintbrush in his outstretched hand, staring at the corner where the Troubadour had disappeared. For a moment, Julia was almost afraid that he meant to follow him.

“Are you all right?” her mother continued.

“Yes, yes, we’re fine, Mum,” Julia said with an exasperated sigh. “You don’t have to ask us a thousand times!”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Caroline and Elin, two of the horse girls, in their fashionable clothes. They stood by the ice-cream stand, and they had their eyes on her.

Oh no, Julia thought, wishing the earth would open up and swallow her. *Did they see what happened with the Troubadour? Are they going to talk?* Of course they were going to talk. And Julia didn’t know which would be worse – if they talked about her as if she were friends

with the Troubadour, or if they talked about Kasir as if he were the hero who had chased the man away.

Mercifully, the ceremony eventually began, and by that time so many people had gathered, Julia was able to hide herself in the crowd.

Hans Karlfeldt stood between the two sculptures, with *The Unlucky Hand* on his left and the new, hulking shape hidden under a white cloth on his right. He tested his microphone. When he was finally satisfied with the sound quality, he began a long, solemn speech about Klippsby, their beloved hometown. He spoke about how Klippsby had been a haven for the arts from the very beginning, ever since the days when the Klippstream Colourists had painted in their cottages out in the woods. He spoke about how much the arts had meant to the town and about all the great artists who had lived there over the course of Klippsby's two-hundred-year history.

It was a very dull speech, and after a few minutes, Edvin wandered off to look in the shop windows. Kasir, on the other hand, stayed right where he was and stared – but not at Hans Karlfeldt. Instead, he seemed to be studying *The Unlucky Hand* intently.

His behaviour irritated Julia, but not as much as the paintbrush sticking up out of his back pocket. The fact that he had tried to give it to the Troubadour, and that the Troubadour had then fled, gnawed at Julia's thoughts. She tried to think about something else, anything, and her thoughts landed on the book she

was reading at home. The hero, Rapp Galacto, had started off as a pickpocket. And he had humiliated the arrogant general Riff Torum by stealing the power wand from his belt in the middle of a conversation, while the general was busy calling him a simple thief.

Julia looked around to make sure no one was watching. Her mother had her eyes on Hans Karlfeldt and seemed captivated by his every word. And Edvin was off by the toy shop, staring at whatever new toys were being displayed in the window. Their mother would never buy any of it for him, but maybe he would manage to convince their aunt the next time she came to visit.

Stealing from a refugee is a horrible thing to do, a voice inside Julia whispered.

True, she answered the voice, *but I'm going to give the brush back tomorrow. I'm just going to ...* But her thought was so ridiculous that she didn't even want to admit having it, not even to herself. Really, there was no reason to inspect the paintbrush – what could it be, other than an ordinary brush? *No, I just want to teach Kasir a lesson*, she thought. *Show him he can't show off his brush like some great artist after winning the drawing competition so unfairly.*

Silently she approached the refugee boy. She would have to act quickly. She reached out her hand, but then she hesitated. Was she turning into a bully like Tony at school? But then she remembered Kasir's infuriating, inappropriate drawing in the newspaper. Her hand shot out, and her fingers closed on the brush.

As she touched the smooth wooden handle, something like an electric shock ran through her hand. Thankfully she managed not to cry out.

That's not all that strange, she thought, backing silently away and slipping the brush into her own pocket. *It's the same thing that happens when Edwin walks on the carpet at home with his fuzzy slippers and gives me a shock on the ear. Nothing strange at all.* The brush was too long to go all the way down into her pocket. She moved it to the other pocket, as far away from Kasir as possible.

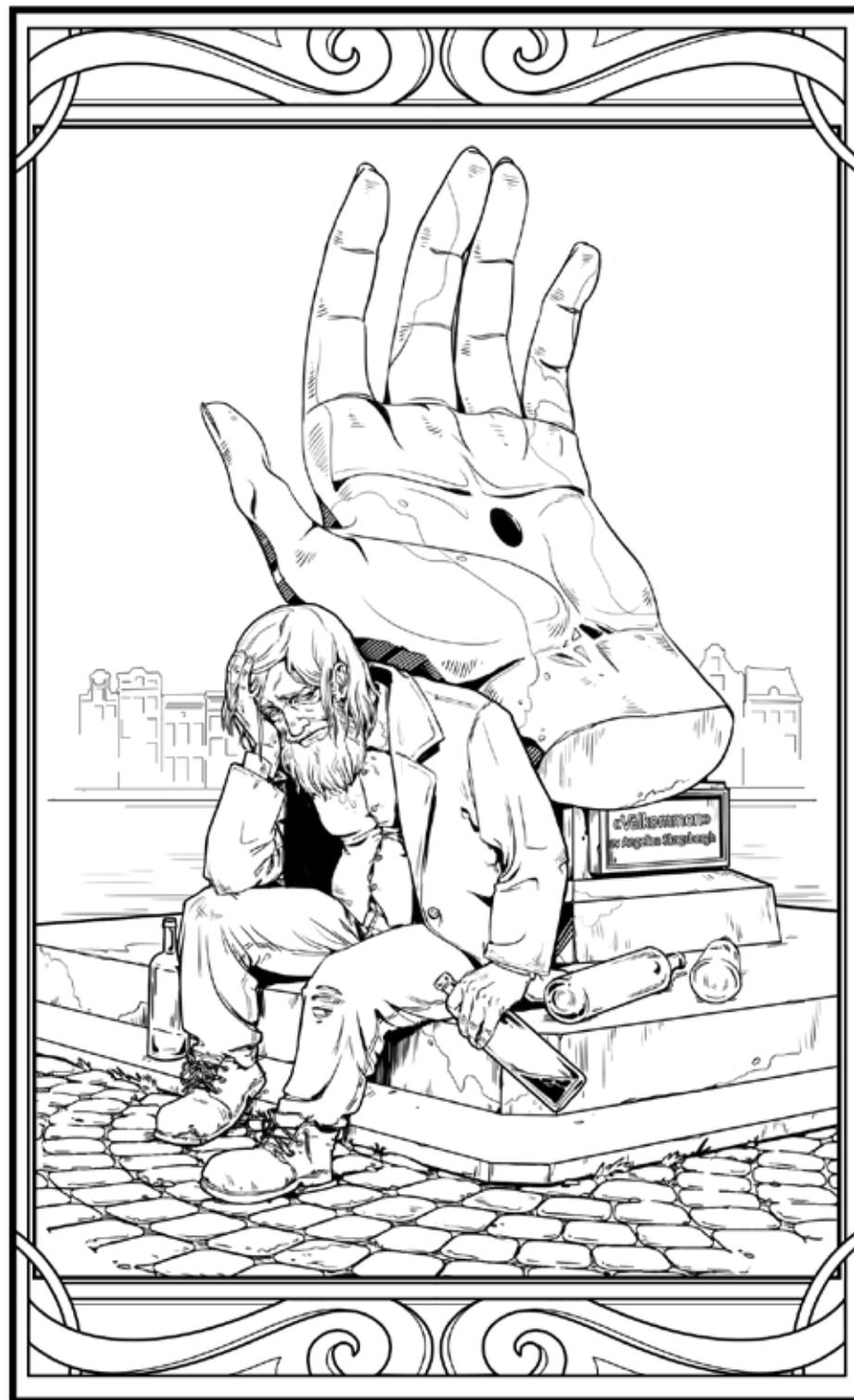
“And so,” Hans Karlfeldt was saying, “it is my great honour and privilege to show you Angelica Skogsbergh’s masterpiece ... *Generosity!*” He drew back the white cloth with a flourish, revealing a large sculpture in weathered bronze.

It was another hand, almost exactly like the first. A mirror image of *The Unlucky Hand*.

A confused murmur went through the crowd. Kasir leaped for joy, whistling and shouting aloud in a language Julia did not understand. She backed away a few more steps with the brush in her pocket.



Eva called Julia’s mother later that day. Apparently Kasir had lost something – she thought it must be something very important to him, but she couldn’t get him to explain what it was. He had refused to go home and insisted on biking straight back to the square. Even



as Eva spoke, he was still searching there. She wondered if anyone in Julia's family had seen anything – if Kasir might have forgotten something at their house.

“Julia?” Her mother looked up from the phone. Julia had been sitting at the kitchen table listening to the entire conversation as she pretended to do her homework.

She sighed. “Mum, how should I know if he's lost something here, if I don't even know what it is?” She closed her maths book and marched off to her bedroom with heavy steps. There she closed the door behind her and took a deep breath. An unpleasant feeling was growing in the pit of her stomach.

I should have said something, she thought. Everyone would have thought I was so kind, if I just found his lost brush so he could stop searching and go home. But now it was too late. She had made her decision. I'm going to give it back tomorrow anyways, she reminded herself. I don't have to say that I took it from his pocket. I can say I found it on the road on the way to school – like it just fell out of his pocket while we were biking.

She cast a sideways glance at her pencil case. Should she finally take the brush out and inspect it properly? But now the whole thing felt ridiculous. *It was just my imagination, she thought. And now I've stolen from a refugee.*

She opened her maths book again to give herself something else to think about. After a while she gave up and dug out her book about Rapp Galacto. But somehow, reading about a thief did little to raise her spirits.

That evening, Julia's mother was unexpectedly called in to work at the supermarket. So Julia was left to make dinner for herself and Edvin. As usual when they were home alone, he was completely impossible. He complained and whined when she told him to do the washing up after dinner, and when she tried to get him to go to bed, he protested that he should get to stay up as late as her. “It's Easter break,” he whined.

“You're only ten, and I'll be thirteen soon,” said Julia. “And you know that Mum wants us to get our sleep. I'm going straight to bed as soon as you've settled down.”

But when her little brother had gone to bed, she took out her drawing pad and her pencil case and settled down at the kitchen table to draw. She had to do something to try to calm her nerves after all the stress about Kasir and Edvin.

Julia opened the pencil case and was just about to select a pencil when her gaze fell on the fine, dark brown handle of the brush she had hidden there. Why did Kasir have to get so upset about such a small thing? It was a rather nice brush, but she had never even seen him use it to paint anything. Why go back

to the square to look for it? Why not just buy a new brush?

Julia shifted in her seat and became aware of the cool touch of the ring against her collarbone. Her father's ring. If she lost it, would she just buy a new one?

In her thoughts, she groped for the last happy memory she had of her father. Julia, then a sleepy six-year-old, had lain in bed listening while he had read from the old pony book and performed all the voices. She still read it now and then when she had a hard time sleeping. Sometimes she even thought she could remember how all the voices had sounded. Sometimes she couldn't remember, which hurt terribly.

Could the brush be something that Kasir remembered his parents by?

I'll have to apologise when I give it back to him tomorrow, Julia thought. *Not for taking it – he can't ever find out about that. I'll say I found it and apologise for not recognising it and giving it back to him right away.*

She reached out her hand to take the slender brush. Then she remembered the shock she had experienced in the square and hesitated. *Don't be ridiculous,* she chided herself and took a firm hold of the brush. No shock.

The dark wooden handle was soft and smooth. A sudden impulse made her raise the brush to her nose – perhaps to check if it smelled of smoke? But of course it didn't. It was probably just the late hour that gave her such strange thoughts. Instead she detected

a faint spicy odour. Was it made of some rare wood? Something that only grew in Kasir's homeland?

She felt the brush's tickling softness against the palm of her hand. Then she pressed harder and saw how the silky bristles spread out against her skin. When she pulled the brush back, a small grey spot remained on her palm.

Typical, she thought. She laid the brush down on the table and went to the tap to wash her hand. *He cares about the brush so much but can't be bothered to clean it properly. Boys.*

The cold water failed to rinse the grey spot away. Julia soaped up her palm and tried again, with the same result. *How irritating,* she thought as she scrubbed her skin with a wet cloth. At last the spot disappeared. But now the cloth was completely grey.

She stared at the discoloured cloth, and her thoughts drifted to the smoke monsters that Kasir had drawn a few days ago – the monsters that had destroyed the palace and the whole little world he had created.

A movement in the corner of Julia's eye made her jump. She turned toward the kitchen table. Had something moved in the darkness outside the window?

It was only a bird or something, she told herself. With some mental effort, she forced herself to return to her seat at the table and resume drawing. She chose a pencil and began sketching a horse – the kind of horse she had longed to ride ever since Caroline and Elin had got their horses in year five and stopped spending time with her. But just like her friendship with them, her drawing

couldn't seem to go quite right. She was forced to erase several times, and the eraser left grey splotches that once again made her think of Kasir's smoke monsters.

As she worked on her drawing, she shifted in her seat, unconsciously scooting further and further away from the dark window. Several times she thought she saw movement out of the corner of her eye, but she told herself she must be imagining things. It was probably just a tree waving in the breeze. She kept her gaze locked on the paper, afraid of what she might see in the darkness outside if she looked too closely.

A clicking, rattling sound at the front door made Julia jump. The door opened with a creak.

"Mum?" Julia said. She cast a glance at the clock: 10.45. Her mother was supposed to work until eleven.

Footsteps approached in the hall, and Julia rose from her chair. "Mum?"

A short, dark figure came around the corner into the kitchen, and Julia screamed.

It was Kasir. The boy strode into the kitchen and approached Julia silently, with a determined look in his eyes.

"Kasir?" Julia said, her voice thin with panic as she backed away.

The boy drew closer, and every evil rumour Julia had ever heard about refugees and violence, everything her mother had told her not to believe, flashed through her mind. *He's come here to murder me*, she thought, horrified, as the window-ledge pressed into her back. She was cornered.

With a sudden, violent motion, Kasir lunged. Julia raised her hands to defend herself, screaming.

But Kasir wasn't going for her. He snatched the dark brown brush from the table and then whirled around to face the hallway, holding the brush out before him like a little sword. "Not safe," he said without casting a backward glance at Julia. "Smoke."

Julia's fear melted away in a sudden wave of burning anger. "What's this about, Kasir?" she demanded. "You can't break into people's houses in the middle of the night without knocking! I don't know what you're used to where you come from, but here ..."

Something moved in the doorway, and the refugee boy charged with his paintbrush raised and ready to strike.

"Easy there!" Edvin said, retreating back into the hallway. "Kasir, what are you doing here? I was sleeping, and I heard a scream and ..."

Kasir lowered his brush and shoved Edvin toward the front door. "Not safe ... smoke."

Now Julia's rage boiled over. "Don't touch my little brother!" she roared, charging out into the hallway. "If you—"

Edvin shrieked. His face was pale, and his eyes were as wide as saucers.

Julia turned to see what her little brother was staring at – and caught sight of a dark, hulking shape in the darkened living room. The shape was moving, and it clearly wasn't human.