



The Song that Sings Us

by Nicola Davies

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When animals speak, it's time humans listened.

with thanks to
Molly Howell
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for unfailing love and support

1

Skull Gully

Harlon

Harlon sees the lantern beams slicing up the mountainside toward her home. They've come at last, the people called the Automators. The red symbol on their black uniforms is a fist closing round the Earth and now it's closing around her family too. They've come to take her brother and her sister, Ash and Xenon. But she and Ma won't let them.

'Kill the lights,' Ma says. 'Get ready.'

They all know what to do. They've practised this routine so many times, but Harlon never thought that it would be for real. Together the three children bar the front door and lock the shutters. They don't speak.

Ma pulls two rifles out from underneath the bed. She loads both then lines up more ammunition on the windowsill and pokes the barrel of the first between

the shutters. She's not Ma now – Breen Avvon, alpaca farmer – but someone else; the person who she was *before*; the person no one is allowed to talk about, who knows how to shoot straight, and how to knock a man to the ground in perfect silence.

'Dammit,' Ma says. 'How did they find us?' Her eyes narrow, focused on the dark silhouettes darting between the rocks and trees; getting closer. She bites her lip and Harlon sees that Ma's afraid. *That* scares Harlon more than anything, but she mustn't show it. It's Harlon's job now to be strong for her little brother and sister. So she listens, looking calm, while Ma tells them what to do, speaking in snatches over her shoulder as she aims.

'You'll have to snowboard down Skull Gully,' Ma says.

What? Harlon wants to answer. *What?*

Skull Gully is six thousand feet, six thousand ways to die is what Ma's always said before. But as if Ma's read her eldest daughter's thoughts she says,

'I've done it myself, Harlon. I *know* you three can do it too. Nothing will follow you down there.'

Of course nothing will follow them because it's like jumping off a cliff!

Ash and Xeno look at Harlon. She stays steady

and she gives their shoulders each a squeeze to tell them that if Ma thinks they can do it, then they can. Really, she's not sure.

A bullet slams into the kitchen wall, striking sparks from the stone. Ash and Xeno cry out and Harlon pulls them further from the window. Ma pumps a volley of returning fire.

'That'll keep them back for a minute,' Ma says and turns from the window to look at her children. Harlon notices her close her jacket to hide the dark stain spreading through her shirt. Their eyes meet, Ma gives a tiny headshake; she's right, Ash and Xeno don't need to know about that right now.

'Get to the bottom of the gully,' Ma says. 'Don't let them catch you. Head to the coast.'

Ma gasps and takes a few deep breaths against the pain. The wound can't be hidden now.

'Ma!' Ash cries out, Xeno whimpers and moves towards her.

'No! Keep back from the window,' Ma says. 'Just listen.' She grits her teeth. 'No time to explain. You have to get to a place; it's not on any map: *An island lost in the deepest part of the ocean.*'

Ma closes her eyes.

‘No one will find you there. You’ll be safe. *Promise* me you’ll stay together, promise me you’ll get there.’ Her eyes open blazing, her voice with an edge like a sword.

‘Promise.’

Blood loss, Harlon thinks. It’s made her crazy but there’s no choice but to make the promise.

‘We promise, Ma,’ they say together, like a small chorus.

Xeno starts to cry.

‘Hey, little bird,’ Ma says more gently, ‘you have to take our song there alright?’

Ma takes a breath and hums the first notes of the lullaby she’s sung them all their lives; *the song that sings us* is what Xeno calls it. Xeno answers with the first three notes sung in her bird-like trill.

‘Good. Now, hand me that other rifle, Harlon. Quick.’

Harlon does as she told, creeping low under the window to pass it to her mother’s hands.

‘I’ll be alright, Harlon,’ Ma whispers, ‘I will. Tell them. I’ll be fine and so will you. You trained for this.’

For a moment Harlon feels about to crumble then something flips inside her like a switch. Ma is right; she did train for this, all her life. Ma trained her.

‘Travel like ghosts,’ Ma says. ‘Don’t trust anyone. Take our song. Remember, lost in the deepest ocean. Now GO!’

Ma’s voice is laced tight against the pain, her sparse words only just managing to escape her lips but still she turns to aim into the centre of the flickering torches. She has always seemed to Harlon like a dagger forced to be a spoon, and right now she’s more like herself than Harlon’s ever seen her; that secret person that Harlon feels she’ll never now get the chance to know. A person whose skill and fierce love will buy her children as much time as she can; whatever it costs.

They have to use it.

Harlon steps back from the window and dries her tears. She barks at Ash and Xeno, ‘Ma’s fine. Let’s go. *Right now!*’ And, they start to run.

The three of them race down the long, stone corridor and grab their outdoor gear from the pegs that line it. Their boards lean up against the wall, so well prepared: the straps supple, the boards silk-slick. Harlon can almost see her Ma’s long, beautiful fingers working with the oil and wax. She pushes down the questions that Ma’s words have made:

An island not on any map? In the deepest ocean?

She must not think about them right now. Their survival depends on focus: one step, and then the next. Harlon reaches for her jacket but her hand falls on Ma's old one. It's a man's coat, too big for Ma, but she used to wear it all the time when they were small. Harlon pulls it from the peg and puts it on. It's old with stitching criss-crossed over its layers of lining, but it smells of Ma; that's all that matters.

Their backpacks, ready packed with camping gear, dried food and water bottles are in size order. Ash takes his middle-sized one and catches Harlon's eye.

'The three bears,' he says. That's what Ma used to call them when they were little. *'My three bears.'*

Harlon, as the biggest, was the Daddy bear, Ash never seemed to mind that he was Momma, and little Xeno could never be anything but the baby.

Ash smiles at her, even though he's scared, so she smiles back quickly.

'Get your back pack on Mamma Bear,' Harlon says. 'No time to waste!'

Xeno lifts her board above her head to show how ready she is.

'Sky will hatch!' she says and Harlon nods even though nothing Xeno says ever makes much sense. Xeno gives a little chirrup that's her version of a

laugh and for a moment they're those three kids again, giggling insanely because Ma called them bears. Then, there's another shot from inside the house and the sound of a ricochet hitting the walls.

'Go!' says Harlon and hustles her siblings out into the dark of dawn.

Outside, the cold has fangs and the stars fizz with frost. Ragged clouds are shoaling round the moon like fish. It may snow, Harlon thinks hopefully; it would be good if their tracks were covered. Their eyes are used to the blue twilight of winter's nights, so they don't need a torch to find the way. Frozen snow is piled head high either side of the path that leads away from the house, hiding them from the Automators whose shouts and lights stab up into the sky. The alpacas call in alarm like a herd of rusty hinges, as the noise reaches their stall.

Ash stops moving.

'They're scared,' he whispers, '*So scared!*'

It's not just the calls that tell him. Ash can feel their thoughts, Xeno a little too, but the alpacas are Ash's special friends. Alba, the white cria who he reared when her mother died, cries out now, so like a human baby.

There's a burst of gun shots, the alpacas scream and Ash's legs collapse under him. Xeno turns from the path and throws up into the snow. There is a horrible silence. Harlon doesn't need to ask what's happened. Why would anyone do such a thing? Shoot defenceless beings trapped in their stable?

'Alba!' Ash whispers *Alba!*

Harlon feels she could throw up too. She's known every one of the alpacas by name and character, even if she can't eat eavesdrop on their thoughts the way Ash can. But there's no time for grief now, no time for anger even. She pulls her brother to his feet.

'We have to *go*,' she says and pulls at his jacket.

But Ash doesn't move. Xeno lays a hand on her brother's arm. Her face is printed with the horror she and Ash just felt, but her mouth is a straight, determined line and her eyes shine hard as ice. She's tougher than Ash. Like a bird, small and tough, armoured with feathers. Xeno makes a sound like the first notes of a Robin's song, but lower.

'Ash!' she says. 'Fly!'

'Right,' Ash says. 'Aright.'

'OK,' says Harlon. 'Now we have to *run!*'

Harlon calculates as they run up the steep rocky

track: a ten-minute climb to the top; thirty for anyone not used to climbing mountain paths at speed. More for someone who doesn't know the path, which is half hidden between the boulders and stumps of trees. But will forty minutes of head start be enough, to let them get away? Harlon is not sure. She picks up her pace and pushes Ash and Xeno to do the same. The sounds of hard breathing and the scrunch of footfalls enclose them as they run. There are shouts behind, voices yelling orders, more shots. Harlon gives Xeno and Ash a stream of small orders and encouragements to stop them thinking.

In Harlon's head, her ma's voice speaks.

When you are in danger, the most dangerous thing is to wish you weren't. Accept the reality of danger, then you can survive it.

Climb, she tells herself. Get away.

Xeno is first to the top, she's waiting when Ash and Harlon reach the rocks that stand like sentinels to guard the Gully, one almost overlapping the other, so the narrow entrance is hard to see. Beyond them, sheer drops hide under lips of snow. Even the most skilful skier could not go down Skull Gully, skis are just too long to make turns tight enough for the

narrowest sections. But snowboards make this dangerous descent a possibility and almost no one in the world has snowboards like these apart from Breen Avvon and her three bears. She invented them. No one else has the slightest chance of following them.

Behind them is a sudden boom and the house that has been the only home they have known, becomes a cloud of red flame and smoke against the snow. The children look at each other without a word. That's it; there is no going back. From this moment, their past life is gone, and any future they imagined utterly changed. Harlon can't lie and tell them Ma is fine and will follow when she can. All she can say is the obvious.

'Time to go!'

Because it is and they all know it. Harlon bites down on fear and sorrow and cuts off their life. A kind of reckless joy rises in her like a shiver as the three of them drop over the lip of the gully.

The light of the setting moon makes the snow glow almost blue. Thin shadows of their three bodies follow them down the slope. This first section is just steep, really steep, and narrow. There's not much room to turn, the only choice is to go straight down,

a sort of controlled fall. Which means gathering more and more speed, reacting more and more quickly. But they are very good at this, they have ridden the mountain snow every day of the long winters since Ash and Xeno could walk. That means climbing every slope before boarding down it. So they're fit and strong as well as skilled.

I know you can do this

Harlon looks round. She needs to know at all times where Ash and Xeno are. They must be close enough to keep in contact, not too close to risk collision, and a fall that could be fatal at this speed. Ash is in front. He reads the snow intuitively, and he's at his boldest when he's on the slopes. Xeno to the right and a little behind is careful and precise, naturally graceful.

A voice of doubt whispers like a mutiny inside Harlon's mind: *And you Harlon? What would you say about your skills, and strengths?*

It seeds panic in her heart. She doesn't really know what she can do.

Stay calm, Harlon. Ma's voice tells her *Think. Always, think!*

Every tiny undulation, every minute change in texture

in the snow is vibrating through through the soles of Harlon's feet, into the joints of her knees, and hips. Her whole body is reading the snow, the way Ash says bats read the night air. New information from nerves and muscles piles into her brain, more and more with every passing second, as her speed increases and increases. The slightest error, a misjudgment of balance, a turn when the edge of the board isn't perfectly positioned, will send her into a cartwheeling fall. She feels she's already at the very limit of what she can do.

There's a sudden quiver in the snow. Its surface feels unstable. A glance to the side tells her Ash and Xeno have felt it too. They all know what it means. They must float over the snow without attacking it. Slopes as steep as this one this rarely slip, but now this feels as if it wants to stop being a surface and start being a wave. It is an avalanche wanting to happen.

There's no headspace for thoughts about what lies behind, or what lies ahead. There is just *this* moment of intense effort and concentration. And then the next, the next, the next. Each second so packed with what every muscle must do, every sense attend to, that time slows down and stretches.

The gully widens a little, flattens out before a second plunge into a slope that's spiked with rocks. But the flat brings another kind of risk: slow down here, Harlon knows, and they could all sink into powder over their heads. For several moments this takes every ounce of concentration and then Harlon realises that she can't see Xeno. She's so small that if she sank here, they'd never find her. When did she see her last? A second ago? Ten? Where *is* she?

'Chirup.'

Her voice is right at Harlon's shoulder, answering her thought.

A wind is getting up, siphoning up the gully from the valley floor, slithering over the powder and whipping it into a low, icy mist, obscuring boards for moments on end. Easily enough time to hit a rock. But they can't slow down. They must keep the impact on the snow light and quick or risk starting an avalanche. Then the gully turns to the left out of wind but into deep shadow. Harlon's eyes struggle for a moment in the lower light and lose sight Xeno and Ash. When she spots them again, they are fifty feet behind her and above them, almost on them, two dark shapes.

Falcons?

Falcons! Huge and very fast. Harlon's never seen falcons so big or willing to fly in moonlight. They are strange and menacing and very clearly tracking them.

But the thing that makes Harlon's blood run suddenly quite cold is that Xeno clearly doesn't know they're there. Xeno's power of tuning in to bird minds is exceptional, she can sense the presence of a bird that she can neither hear nor see, tune in to a passing goldfinch a hundred feet up in the air. Yet she hasn't sensed *this* creature and it's almost on her shoulder.

Just as the wrongness of this hits Harlon in the belly, the birds stoop, full of malevolent intent. Their dark bodies dive like missiles, wings part-folded, like the fletches of giant arrows. The air is fractured by their speed. There's a flash of yellow eyes and outstretched talons, more like steel daggers.

Harlon screams a warning and now, at last, Xeno and Ash see them too. Xeno lets out a high-pitched cry of shock. She ducks and one falcon skims her head and wheels round for another pass. Ash hasn't been so lucky. The other bird has raked him with a claw and there's a dark line of blood across his cheek.

'Trees,' Harlon yells. 'Into the trees!'

Ash and Xeno understand at once. Close-packed trees clothe this section of the slope to the left of the gully. To board between them at this speed, in moonlight, is insane but it's the only way to lose the birds. Falcons are built for high speed in open country, not for fast changes of direction in the enclosed space of a dense woodland.

Moonlight, deep shadow, tree trunks, come at the speeding boarders in a high velocity tangle. Every micro second could smash any of them into a tree. Harlon hears the gasps of effort, the scrape and swish of boards turning at the last possible moment, as her brother and sister make split-second decisions about which way to turn and how. She sees them appear and disappear between the trees. In shadow in light, in shadow again. Close, then far, close again, as if time was being cut into unconnected chunks.

Everything seems to get faster and faster. More disjointed. Senses, muscles, joints are close to overload and still the birds pursue them.

'Look out!' Ash yells a warning. One falcon is coming straight for the side of Harlon's face. But the bird is so focused on its target that it looks only where its

feet will strike. It's used to flying where it doesn't need to think about where the ends of its wings are. Harlon jinks sideways, and scrapes the tree trunk with the edge of her board; the falcon's left wing smashes into the trunk. There's a snap, loud as a rifle, as the bird shatters into a floundering mess of feathers. Nothing more than fox bait now.

Ash and Xeno crow with delight, then Xeno screams. Harlon sees her shoot past, flashing between the trees, like a lantern show running out of control, blinking on-off, on-off. The other falcon's foot is tangled in her hood. If it wasn't horrible, it would be funny. The bird flapping, unsure whether to hang on or try to get away, Xeno swatting at it in panic with her hand, trying to keep her balance on the slope, trying to avoid the trees. She rips the hood away and swirls it. Too late, the falcon realises its mistake. Xeno smashes it into a passing tree and its head explodes.

By then the children are a hundred feet further on, speeding ever faster through the trees and, like the birds, too focused on what's just in front to see the bigger picture. By the time Harlon registers the *end* of the trees, they are all in the air. They've shot out

over the lip where the slope of trees became sheer rock face and are now falling.

Harlon is aware of the quiet once again as their fall seems to go on and on. She has time to see the moon setting behind the mountains, the stars, the shapes of her brother and sister against the indigo sky, against the dull pearl of the snow.

‘Oh,’ she thinks. ‘We’re going to die.’

And then they drop into snow on the slope below the rock face. Harlon thinks of Ma dropping berries into whipped cream one summer day, counting as they made a satisfying plop.

One, two, three.

They are blackberries dropped in cream. Side by side, alive, unbroken, up to their waists in the fluffiest powder they’ve ever seen! It seems impossible, insane, wonderful.

Xeno chirrups in delight, Ash whoops and Harlon starts to laugh. Stillness and silver light surround them, the descent already fading, like a bad dream.

They fight to get legs and boards free. Harlon manages it first. She stands to get her breath The relief of survival

runs through her. Now they are out of the gully, it's an easy ride over the last slope to the wide valley bottom below. She'll face what to do when they get there.

Then there's a sound. A crack isn't quite the right word. It doesn't carry the weight of horror that this sound does. Xeno, Ash and Harlon all know the sound of that crack. They've heard it many times and then watched as whole mountainsides of snow collapse, sweeping trees away like matchsticks. It's the most frightening sound they know. A jagged, pointing finger, a black rupture in the pale face of the slope, runs from Harlon to Xeno, and from Xeno to Ash. Some invisible tension has snapped, some hidden rule broken. Their luck has run out.

In the early light of a just-born day Ash is too distant for Harlon to see his face but she can see Xeno, though she is not close enough to grab, to touch, to hold and never, ever let go. Close enough to see her eyes fill with fear to see her mouth open in an 'o' of dismay. Close enough to hear her, for the first time in a long time, say, *'Harlon! Harlon!'*

The snow below gives way, as if it had just evaporated. They fall into a pounding maelstrom of white.

Harlon knows the theory of what to do in an avalanche.

The first thing is: try to get out of the way; but the whole slope has turned to fluid. There is no 'out of the way'. The second is: try and hold onto something; but the trees are forty feet above. There's nothing to hold onto. The third: try and swim through the snow to keep at the surface; but the force of the snow-wave is so great, she's turned over and over, helpless as a leaf in a storm. 'Up' and 'down', loose all meaning. Her head hits something and she's not tumbling in a white-out any more, but high up in the branches of a tree.

It was Harlon's birthday and they'd all come down the mountain into town. Later they would go the baker and get cake, but first Ma was delivering wool to a weaver, one of her regular customers. Harlon was to watch over the twins in the yard behind the weaver's house while Ma did business. But the weaver's garden had an irresistible tree that Harlon *had* to climb. She reckoned she could see the twins well enough from up there.

Harlon looked down through the branches and the twins were still sitting together on the back step. She'd

left them with her spinning top but they had found another game to play: a row of mice and robins, live creatures, was lined up, like toy soldiers at their feet. She knew the twins had done this and she knew *that* was bad. Bad people called Listeners called animals like this. It was wrong, worse than stealing, her teachers said. *If you know a Listener you must tell me at once, even if it is someone in your family.* Madame Mollit told the class *every* day. Listeners were taken away to stop them being bad and came back branded with a letter L upon their foreheads so you could spot them and keep away.

Harlon began to cry. She didn't want Ash and Xeno to be bad, she didn't want them to be taken away like that and have a letter burned into their skins. Sniveling, she got to the bottom of the tree as Ma came out. Ma shooed the birds and mice away, scooped up the twins, and in two minutes they were all loaded in the cart and headed out of town. There would be no cake and everyone was crying, Xeno, Ash and Harlon. Ma stared ahead and didn't say a word.

Juno their horse lost a shoe so the journey home took ages. The twins fell asleep at last.

'Only bad people talk to animals, Ma' Harlon whispered

‘They don’t *talk*, Harlon. They have a power called *siardw*, that lets them *listen* inside animals’ heads. Sometimes animals like the feeling, like a cat likes being stroked, and they come to take a look.’

‘But only *bad* people talk to animals and tell them what to do, Ma,’ Harlon insisted. ‘My teacher *says*.’

Ma shook her head.

‘They don’t *tell* animals what to do Harlon; they only *listen*. And that’s a *good* thing. Siardw lets Listeners hear animal thoughts, sometimes even plant thoughts. It helps us understand them, so we can treat them properly, Listeners are very special.’

‘Then why do people say they’re bad?’

‘Because the Automators don’t want people to hear or understand other living things, they just want to *use* them. They *fear* Listeners and what they can do.’

‘Are you one, Ma?’

Ma shakes her head.

‘No, but I think I know about what it’s like to be one. Like being able to hear a song that other people can’t hear, a song that’s everywhere all the time, that holds the whole world together. You should be proud your brother and sister have this special power.’ She pulled Harlon close and went on.

‘The Automators try to get rid of Listeners, but d’you know what? More are being born all the time.

Remember the field behind the house? How it bloomed with yellow flowers when it was ploughed and the ground was broken? Listeners are blooming like flowers because the Automators are trying to break the world apart. Listeners help to protect it, so we need to protect *them*.'

Then Ma began to sing.

Oh there was a woman, and she was a widow

Listen to the flowers in the valley

With a daughter as fair as a the bright sunny meadow

The red and the green and the yellow

There's no harp, no lute, there's nor pipe nor flute

Sings sweeter than flowers in the valley

Harlon didn't really understand what Ma said about flowers and listeners protecting the world. But she did understand that Ma's voice was sad when she sang the word 'widow'.

They had stopped going to town and Harlon had stopped going to school. She didn't mind. They could learn from all Ma's books, and the space and the solitude in the mountains were better than a load of screaming children. There were soaring eagles, deer and the calls of wolves instead of teachers. Harlon spent long summer days with Ash and Xeno, wandering

the high pastures. Ash calmed the alpacas and laughed at their funny thoughts, while Xeno connected with the passing flocks of finches for news of bears. Winters were encased in a magic, white world of snow and ice, perfecting techniques with the snowboards that Ma built and taught them all to use. Harlon sometimes thought she could hear the song that Ma had once said *'holds the world together'* even though she had none of the siardw power that her siblings had.

But down in the valleys things were changing faster and faster. Ma called it the Automators 'spreading their stain'. When Ma and Harlon went down to get supplies or sell their wool, they saw the forces of the 'Diacoch', as the mountain people called the Automators, more and more often. They saw Listeners taken from the streets, or dragged from their carts or houses. Adults sometimes, but more often children, and their families. Ma said they took them to Fidrac City, the capital by the sea, to the Automator headquarters. Most never came back. Those that did, were husks of people, able only to sit and stare, with an 'L' branded on their foreheads.

The radio signal in the mountains was unreliable but when voices came out of the crackle more and more

they belonged to Automators, telling of the bright future that waited for everyone who would leave the land and live in the city. Lots of people had listened already and there were empty houses in the small, mountain town. Often, Ma would turn the radio off, and go outside and walk for hours, even in the dark.

In the lessons Ma taught them, the threat of the Automators was there, like a shadow on the wall. As well as reading and sums and history, they learned how to survive in a blizzard on the mountain, how to travel without being noticed, how to hide. Harlon had extra lessons too: while the twins fed the chickens or tended the garden, Ma taught Harlon how to be their protector. Harlon never asked how Ma knew the things she taught: how to fight, how to use anything as a weapon, how think like a spy and a warrior.

‘One day I’ll tell you, Harlon,’ she would say. ‘But now it’s safer that you don’t know.’

As Harlon floats back up to consciousness, Ma’s secrets are like the foaming backwash of a wave that melts into the sand. She wakes to find she’s still tumbling in whiteness which stops abruptly. Now she remembers the fourth thing to do in an avalanche: as soon as it stops, *move, flail, struggle all you can*. In

seconds, the snow will change from behaving like a liquid, to being solid; it will set around her face like stone and she will suffocate.

Just in time, Harlon wriggles her whole body, if wriggle is the right word for the huge physical effort it takes to create the smallest amount of movement. She's left gasping, heart leaping, coughing out the snow that's worked into her mouth and nose and lungs. She manages to create a pocket of air, the size of a loaf of bread, next to her face.

This makes only a tiny bubble of hope that soon pops: the snow has set, like concrete. Her left arm is pinned behind her back, her right held just in front of her face, and her legs are folded like a squashed fly. Panic engulfs her, more paralysing than cold. Who is going to dig her out? There's no one. What if Ash and Xeno are both dead?

The fear says, *'yes they're dead'*.

The fear says, *'lie still, let the snow hold you tight and take your breath, quickly. Die! Die now.'*

Breathe.

Ma's voice tells her.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Harlon's heart slows. If Xeno and Ash are still alive, she's not allowed to die.

'Harlon!'

'Harlon?'

Ash's voice! He's alive. Maybe he's even above the snow. The most useful thing about the air pocket is that it gives her space to yell.

'ASH!' Harlon yells with every scrap of volume she can manage, but the cold has stolen her voice and it takes Ash an agonising time to hear her.

Then he does and starts to dig her out! Ash scrabbles with his hands and says her name over and over, but there's no sound from Xeno, no bird chirp, no second pair of scrabbling hands. *She's probably too chilled to help* Harlon tells herself, *I'll need to get them both to some shelter soon.* This thought warms her, but when she's out into the air at last: Ash is alone.

'Couldn't find her,' Ash is saying. '*No Xeno!*'

Harlon stares at Ash; she is stupid with cold. He tries hard to find the words to tell her what has happened, but he's too chilled and the words slip about like bits of broken ice.

'Was supside-down,' he sobs. 'Got out. Called.

Searched. Poked the snow like Ma taught us say. *No* Xeno. *No* Xeno.'

Xeno, little Xeno, Baby Bear, Little Bird, is alone and lost on the mountain. Or buried, waiting to be rescued. Or already dead, her mouth stopped with snow. Harlon's legs are like straws that won't hold weight.

'Don't think of what you can't change. Focus on what you can change'

Ma's voice is in her head again, the only still point in this storm of pain and disaster.

Assess. Think. then Act. The mantra that her Mother taught her.

Assess:

They are dangerously cold. Soon they will lose all ability to think or move. Snowflakes are already flying round them. A blizzard is gathering.

Think:

She can't help Xeno now, but she can help Ash.

then,

Act:

Harlon stands up and take's Ash's shoulders. She shakes him, hard.

'Stop blubbing right now,' she says. 'We have to get to shelter or we'll die.'

‘Where is Xeno?’ he wails. He’s small for his age and now he looks tiny, more like eight than twelve. Harlon thinks of stone, and ice and metal and puts them all in her heart.

If Xeno is buried, then she’s gone. But it won’t help Ash to hear it.

‘She’ll have got out, like you did,’ she tells him. ‘She’ll find shelter. She’s smart and she knows what to do. We’ll find her, after the blizzard’s gone.’

Her words work. Ash nods. He helps pull her board out of the snow. It was sticking up just like a gravestone. It’s how Ash found her. The bindings are undamaged and she still has both boots. Ash’s board is gone so she stands him on the front of hers, where she can hold him, and sets off down the slope.

She’s too cold to try to calculate how far the avalanche has taken them from where they should have been. Snow drives in from all directions, biting and scouring, wiping out all lines and shadows. The world has turned blank. Gravity is the only guide and shelter of any sort, a rock ledge, a fallen tree, anything, is the only destination.

Time too goes blank. Has Ash been leaning on her legs like this for minutes, or for hours? When did she begin to feel this sleepy? Just as she’s about to stop,

dig a snow hole to keep them both alive until the blizzard's over, something brushes past them, dark and low. Instantly Ash wakes up.

'A gula!' he says. '*It's come to find us!*'

Some animals sense siardw like an irresistible smell, but Ash's power, always small, has waned as he's got older. So why has a gula come *looking*? Harlon can think of a reason at once: gula aren't big like a bear, just a kind of hound-sized weasel, but they have a reputation: they'll eat anything alive or dead. Perhaps this gula's just waiting for them to die, so it can make a meal. Perhaps they smell of death already.

Somehow Ash has 'tuned in' to the gula, just like he does with the alpacas, seeing what it sees. It lopes easily beside the board. Harlon catches the glitter of a dark eye. She's never felt such concentrated power from any animal before.

'There's shelter,' Ash reports. 'She's going there. She says we can follow.'

That doesn't sound like eavesdropping on the gula's thoughts. That's more like *conversation*. Harlon's skin prickles with something that she can't name.

The gula ups her pace to run in front. Her shaggy

outline swirls like ink into the paper of the blizzard as Harlon steers the board behind her. And then, suddenly she's gone and the corner of a log cabin looms out of the whiteness. The board hits it hard, tumbling Harlon and Ash into a drift.

Ash sits up. 'She tuned out,' he says sadly. *She* tuned out? Harlon looks at Ash. She wants to ask *How did she tune out, if you were in her head? It should be the other way around.* But now's not the time for questions. She's too tired, and too relieved: this cabin means they won't die in the blizzard after all.

Fumbling with frozen fingers. Harlon gets herself out of the board's bindings. Together they feel their way around the cabin searching for a door. They find one shuttered window, a bank of solars poking up from underneath the snow, then finally the door, unlocked. They fall in through it and kick it shut behind them. The howling blizzard still goes on but now it can't get them. Harlon sinks down onto the floor. The relief of being safe from the cold and snow, feels almost unreal. Is this an hallucination? Or worse, some kind of trap? She signals to Ash to be silent and they creep about, exploring.

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