

BLOODTIDE

Other books by Melvin Burgess

An Angel for May
Bloodsong
Burning Issy
Doing It
Junk
Lady
Nicholas Dane
Sara's Face
The Baby and Fly Pie
The Cry of the Wolf

melvin burgess

BLOODTIDE

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BOOK I

1

The top thirty floors had broken away a long time ago, but the Galaxy Building was still the tallest in London. Engineers had cleared it up so it was safe up there – sort of. A man with close, curly white hair was standing on the viewing platform, pointing out landmarks. His face was a net of fine, soft wrinkles and hard lines cut across by a Y-shaped scar over one eye. He was dressed in a loose suit, rolled up at the sleeves. As he leaned forward to point out Big Ben, St Paul's, Tower Bridge, Docklands and beyond, the man's jacket hung open. Under the suit was a shoulder holster. You could see the neat, deadly shape tucked inside.

This was Val Volson. He owned half of London.

By his side, following his finger, was a tall, wiry girl aged fourteen. She was wearing a short skirt and leggings and a little green jacket which hung open to reveal another shoulder holster containing another, smaller gun. It was handmade for her – girl-sized. But just as deadly.

You could see it all from up here – the buildings of London, its hills and peaks as far as the suburbs and the Wall.

Beyond the Wall, dappled in the distance, lay the halfman lands – acres of rubble and tumbling walls, and the trees turning yellow on this mild autumn day, pushing their way through the Tarmac. After that, the world began.

And far out of sight to the northwest, Ragnor. Its towers and buildings were said to dwarf Old London. Halfman captives said that it seemed to float on the air, made of glittering stripes of light and glass and dark stripes of shadow. At night it shone like a bright little galaxy in the great world Outside. Its very existence was a reminder that London was locked out of the world.

‘And when we’ve got the rest of London just like that,’ said Val. He pushed his thumb down hard onto the palm of his other hand to show just where he wanted the rest of London. ‘Then, my girl, we’ll break out into the halfman lands. And after the halfmen it’s the fields and the farms and the villages and the towns. And after that we take Ragnor itself and deal with the security forces...’

‘But the halfmen!’ cried the girl, in an agony of delight and terror.

‘That’s the easy part. They’ll be all dead and gone by then. Then... England... Europe. Be part of the nation again. We’ll *be* the nation. Yeah. Not long now. We’re getting so close, Signy!’

The girl stared greedily outwards. She had heard these stories all her life. They had been crooned to her like lullabies in the cradle even before she could understand the words. Now it was all coming true.

‘But we all gotta make sacrifices. D’you see...?’

Signy ground her toe onto the platform savagely. ‘I don’t want to go away,’ she said.

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‘But you will.’

The girl looked briefly up at her father’s smiling face, then away.

‘You can win as much for us like this as I have in fifty years of fighting.’

‘I wanna be in the bodyguard.’

‘You can be in Conor’s bodyguard.’ He thumped his chest. ‘I’ll insist!’

‘I hate Conor.’ Val – King Val, he was being called these days – stood upright and shrugged. Love...hate. So what? ‘This is family,’ he said. ‘This is *business*.’

Val was disappointed in his daughter. He didn’t expect her to want Conor, but he did expect her to want to do as he said.

The girl turned her chin up. ‘There are better ways for me to fight for us,’ she argued. ‘I’m better than any of them. You know that.’

‘Ben and Had and Siggie wouldn’t whine when I gave them a task.’

‘That’s not fair! This isn’t a task, it’s a lifetime. You wouldn’t ask them to go away and whore for you.’

Val hissed dangerously between his teeth. ‘They’ll marry whoever I tell them to.’

‘This is different.’

‘Because you’re a girl?’ teased Val.

‘That’s not fair! I only want to be treated the same. This isn’t the same.’

Val glared back at his angry daughter. It was she who was being unfair. ‘You’ll be like a spy...’ he said.

‘You can’t be a spy every second of your life, that’s *stupid*.’

She said the word slowly as if she liked the taste of it. Val’s hand dashed out to beat her round the head but she was out

of the way before his hand was raised.

‘I’m a fighter! Catch me if you can!’

Val stood and watched her dance around. He was getting tired of this.

‘But you *are* a girl,’ he said sulkily. ‘I can’t help the way things are.’

‘I thought you were the one to change the way things are!’

Val turned away. ‘You’ll do it anyway,’ he said flatly.

Signy put her little handgun back in the soft holster under her arm and growled, ‘I’ll do it – because I follow orders. But I hate it. Promise me one thing, then.’

‘Name it. You know I’d do anything.’

‘That you’ll give me the chance to kill Conor when the time comes.’

‘This is a treaty. There’ll be no such time. But if it does . . . I promise.’

Signy nodded. ‘Conor never kept a treaty yet.’

The two of them turned to go down. Val put his arm protectively around his daughter. ‘I know it’s hard.’

Signy smiled sweetly up at him. ‘You’d have killed anyone who dared to touch me, and now you hand me over to him to do anything he likes,’ she said.

‘Don’t think I like it either . . .’

‘Poor you!’

‘. . . but every father has to give his daughter away.’

‘Conor has some funny appetites, I bet.’

Val turned a cold eye on her.

‘I wonder what’ll turn him on? I wonder how he’ll enjoy using Val’s daughter?’

Val was suddenly furious. He pushed her from him violently so she stumbled on the stairway.

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‘You don’t care for me at all!’ she shouted furiously. ‘You’d never let the others leave your side . . . never!’ She pushed past him and ran down the long winding stairs. How was it possible to hate and love and admire her father so much all at the same time?

‘But I love you!’ She heard his voice crashing down the stairs after her. It made her cry all the more because she knew it was true.

There were two of them, skinny kids dressed in black. The black was like a uniform. One was a boy and one was a girl. Two was a stupid number to go out hunting this sort of prey but these kids had been trained.

‘Last time ever,’ said the boy.

‘Last night of my life,’ said the girl.

‘Don’t be daft. There’s always a life. You just gotta make one up.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Sorry . . .’

‘Last night of this life, then.’

‘I don’t want to do this anymore. If you get hurt tonight, he’ll kill me.’

‘But you will, won’t you, Sigs?’ The girl grabbed the boy tightly by the hand.

Sigy squeezed her back. ‘I can’t believe he’s making you do this. He’d never send any of us away.’ He meant, the boys. ‘We should all get together and tell him – he can’t treat you like this!’

Signy dropped his hand and glared. He was just making it harder. ‘But he’s right, you see,’ she said.

‘Had don’t think so.’

‘Had don’t know everything.’

‘Treaties with the likes of Conor...’

Signy shook her head. ‘It’s my fate to do it, Sigg. It’s just not a happy fate, that’s all.’

Sigg frowned. ‘But don’t you want a happy fate, Signy?’

‘Why should it be?’

Sigg stared at her. If it was him... ‘I’d run away.’

‘You’re weak,’ she said.

‘You’re stupid.’

‘It’s not stupid to make a sacrifice for something great.’

Sigg pulled a face. Of all the family he was the only one who looked down his nose at glory. ‘You know what I think of all that stuff.’

Thoughtfully, Signy spat on the ground at his feet and ground it in. There was a long pause.

‘So what are we gonna get tonight?’ he asked.

‘Big fat pig. Full of dripping!’

‘Oh yeah!’

Sigg and Signy ran quietly across the polished marble floor. Of course, the stairs were all heavily guarded, but they knew one way out that even King Val would never think to guard – down the glass lift shaft with all its grisly fruit. Then away, past the shattered tower blocks, broken away and worn by the wind like shells in the sea. The few remaining topmost windows glinted in the moonlight. Past the broken church spires and the crumbling storeys of buildings that once housed banks and the offices of international firms, past the roads breaking up with elder trees and buddleia. A group of men working by firelight were loading chunks of broken Tarmac into a vat to melt down. They needed it to extend the

car park for the wedding guests.

Nothing was new, everything was old – ever since the government moved out a hundred years ago and left it to rot under the rule of Gangland.

The kids ran right out of the tall buildings of the City and on towards the West End. It was as dark as velvet. There were no street lights. The poor slept in gangs in the doorways and it was dangerous out, unless you were rich enough to be armed.

During the day Oxford Street and Piccadilly were still thick with people, the shop windows still bright with electricity, even though it was generated privately. The shops were still packed to bursting with new goods. A lot of it was copies – citymades, usually, but some of the richer shops stocked goods smuggled in by the halfmen from Outside. Fashionable clothes, electrical goods, CDs, TVs, fruit from halfway round the world, wine from France. You could get anything if you could pay for it, except two hundred thousand tonnes of asphalt or concrete to keep the roads in order.

All around Westminster and the City it was slums and farmland. You could see cows tethered to parking meters munching slowly on hawthorn, pigs scavenging for rubbish in the streets, open sewage pits, rubbish tips, whole fields where the houses had been knocked down for land to grow crops. Terraces of houses had the walls knocked through to make long barns to house cows or pigs. Sometimes Siggy and Signy went that far, to poke their noses in amongst the moist smell of dirty people and damp walls, the thieves and the beggars, the rubbish and illness. But today was a day for Signy. She wanted fast life, fast people. She wanted a big fat pig and a game of Robin Hood.

*

The fat pig's name was Alexander. He was dripping all right. Rings on his fingers, chains on his neck. It served him right. It was stupid to wear stuff like that, it was asking to be robbed. Mind you, he was at a party inside a heavily guarded house. The other guests were all businessmen, smugglers, gangsters – it was the sort of occasion when you could actually dress up and show off your wealth for once. Alexander had done just that. The dripping was everywhere – stuck on his fingers, dripping out of his wallet. He was expecting a game of cards later in the evening and he could afford to lose heavily.

They got him in the toilet – on it, actually. He was a big man; he could have fought back, but they were quick as ferrets. Two sharp little knives were suddenly pricking his fat neck.

'How did you get in here?' he gurgled. The two kids laughed. The big one held a knife at his neck and pressed the top of his head down so he couldn't get up. Alexander was fat, getting up wasn't so easy at the best of times. The small one ran round and round in circles like an animal doing a trick, tying the rope round and round the toilet until he was all strapped up. It was over in about twenty seconds. 'Too easy,' sighed the small one. She sniffed the air and glared at her victim.

'Sorry,' he begged.

They relieved the pig of its dripping – the rings from its fingers, the fat bulge of wallet from its inside pocket, the gold cufflinks, the chains, everything. Then they strapped some toilet paper stuck on with packing tape in its mouth so it couldn't squeal, stuck the toilet roll on its lap and made their escape the way they'd come in – through the ventilation shaft. Alexander's eyes bulged with fear and rage as he watched

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them remove the grill and creep out. What about the security guards? This building was covered in security guards!

Outside, the children removed their masks. Signy shook her long hair out.

‘Good?’ grinned Siggy.

‘Nah, too easy,’ she complained again. They left with the booty, to give it away to poor kids. They didn’t need it. What more money did the Volsons need? It was a game, like Robin Hood. But it wasn’t really fair, either, not like Robin Hood at all. It was the richest family in London doing the stealing, whoever they gave it to after. But gangmen and kings can get away with what they want. Even if they got caught no one would ever dare to harm them. They could’ve got past the guards just by showing their faces.

Still . . . it was dangerous enough once the robbing started. And it was fun.

2

Signy

We were discussing how you cope with having sex with someone you loathe. I was trying very hard not to cry.

Ben was having a great time. He was skittering up and down giggling. 'Why don't you just enjoy it?' He grinned at me. 'Why not? I would.'

Had said, 'It's different.'

Ben said, 'No, it's not. She's always going on about being as good as us. Well, we like doing it, don't we, Had.'

'So do I,' said Siggy.

'You haven't done it yet,' said Ben.

'I have,' insisted Siggy. And he looked all guilty at me, because I was the only one who knew for sure that he hadn't.

'No, you haven't,' said Ben.

'Yes, I have!'

'Anyway,' said Had. 'Of course it's different. The man does it; she has it done to her.'

I said, 'Don't talk daft.' Those boys! This was useless!

'The man puts it in and she has it put in,' said Had, just in case we hadn't clicked yet.

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‘Well, you put food in your mouth, but it’s still you doing it, isn’t it?’ pointed out Siggy.

I could have screamed. ‘If he puts it anywhere near me I’ll bite it off,’ I hissed.

‘Dead good way of breaking up the treaty,’ said Ben.

Siggy, bless him, said, ‘Sod the treaty. Who believes in the treaty? She should just refuse and we should back her up...’

And then they stopped talking about how to deal with having sex with someone you’ve never met before and got on to politics. As for Siggy’s idea – it was sweet, but forget it. They talked endlessly about whether or not the treaty could be made to work, but in the end Val wanted it and that was that. It was just... yeah, well, it was gonna be pretty lonely there in that bed on my wedding night, that’s all.

‘You’ll just have to hope he’s not as bad as he’s painted,’ said Siggy.

I thought, some hope. I’d just better hope he doesn’t hurt me too much, that’s all.

3

A cold rain whipped between the buildings and across the streets, where a thin, scratty crowd was waiting quietly. Some hid under blankets and umbrellas mended ten times ten, but most of them just stood there soaking. Val was disappointed. He'd wanted the crowds ten deep, cheering and throwing bunting. But he refused to force them.

The bodyguards waited, Val's on this side, Conor's on the other. They wore black suits and let the rain trickle out of their hair and down under their dark glasses. They might have been men, or machines, or animals, or all three. Under their suits you could see the outlines of powerful weapons which may have been part of their bodies.

There had been war between these two families for generations. This was supposed to be a treaty but no one really dared believe it. It was likely just another trick. But who was playing it?

For a long time there was just a low murmur from the crowd and the steady hissing of the rain on the bricks and pavements, but at last a long convoy of cars and armoured

vehicles turned into Bishopsgate and crept over the cracked Tarmac. As the sound of the engines grew, there was a strange effect. The hissing began to get louder. The faces of the VIPs turned upwards, looking for the heavy rainfall that must be making the sound, but the rain was falling off if anything. The hissing increased, louder and louder, even over the sound of the engines, as if the rain was insisting on its right to be heard.

It wasn't water; it was people pulling an old schoolboy trick. The thin rows of white faces lifted up from their huddle of rags and bits of plastic to watch an old enemy arrive among them. They didn't dare to boo or shout abuse for fear of Val's gangmen hidden in among them, but no one could tell where the hisses came from. Faces and mouths stayed still as paintings, but hundreds of throats hissed their hatred. The gang wars had crippled London for generations. Conor and his family had fought savagely and cruelly. There wasn't a soul in this crowd who hadn't lost a loved one to the man now driving in to visit them.

The noise began to gather force, to swell. Val was white with rage and frustration, but there was nothing he could do about it. This was his dream! He was putting together the army that was supposed to conquer paradise. These were the people who would break out of the asylum and take the world into the pockets of the poor. The people of the city had shared so many of his dreams, but not this one – not yet.

Conor's convoy, tiny in the shadow of the Galaxy Building, stopped in the square outside and the soldiers emerged from the armoured cars, bristling with weaponry like little toy men in the wide road.

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The crowd began hissing again when Conor's personal bodyguard got out of the car. He . . . it . . . bared its teeth and its fur stood up on end at the sound until it looked pretty near twice as big. Then it opened its mouth – shouting or barking, who knows. It turned to open the door for Conor.

That was a halfman; Londoners had reason to hate them too, but Conor was the real monster. When he stepped out of his armoured car, the hissing swelled up until it sounded like something was going to burst. Conor pulled his coat around him and looked about as if he stood alone on the rainy street.

Out from among the umbrellas came Val, dressed all in grey, as usual, as if he was someone's clerk. But around his neck he wore a bright crimson silk scarf, as he always did on public appearances. A symbol of fire and blood.

The crowd began to cheer for their leader. They loved Val even more than they hated Conor. But the cheering faltered as Conor and Val embraced each other. A few seconds later, as Val took his daughter in his hand and handed her to Conor, it was in a stony silence. Signy was fourteen years old, and scared white even though she knew how to kill a man. Conor leaned across and kissed her. Among the guard of honour that led between the convoy and the Galaxy Building, Siggie stood with the rain streaming down his face, but he kept so completely still that no one could tell his face was wet with tears.

4

Siggy

It was shit. I mean, I never take any notice of the politics but even I could see it was shit. Val was getting old. Doing that to Signy! But he convinced them, same as he always does.

The security arrangements! Conor had to have an army pointing at our throats, we had to have an army pointing at his. What sort of a treaty is that? We should have carried on the war, even if it took another generation. But Val was in a hurry, see. The job he wanted to do was the task of a century, but he wanted it all now, while he was still around to see it. So he ballsed it up.

There were armed thugs wandering around the streets for weeks. People were getting shot up because of fights breaking out between his forces and ours. And for what? For a handful of dreams. Val's dreams. He's a big man, my father, but dreams are just dreams even if you dream them for everyone. Don't get me wrong. I don't mean you just gotta look after Number One. But first of all you got to look after the people you can look after. Like Signy for instance. That's the way I looked at it. If you can't look after your own you can't be

trusted to look after the whole world. But that was Val – his dreams were bigger than he was.

Half the city had to be prettied up for the wedding. We'd had old road surfaces broken up and melted down to re-surface the car park for Conor's cars. We'd refurbished and decorated whole floors of the Galaxy Building for Conor's guests. It cost millions. If Val wanted to make things so great for everyone else, why didn't he just cancel the wedding and give London enough to eat for a couple of weeks? It would've been cheaper. Had did the money side of things; he told me. He's good at that sort of stuff – Val reckons Had could organise the sun at midnight, but I reckon getting Conor and the Volsons to make a treaty is harder. Had's the one who's supposed to take over from Val when the time comes, but I tell you, if anyone's fit to follow Val it's my sister. She has the brains and she has the vision. She's his true successor. But he'll just sell her off to service Conor and probably half his kitchen staff as well, once things break down.

My job was getting Galaxy in order. I had to supervise the building work and the decorators, clean the place up, get it painted. All pretty boring stuff. The only fun bit was clearing out the street kids from the ventilation system.

See, the ventilation system was such a great place for the homeless kids to live. They came from miles around to get in. Whole gangs lived in there, like rats. Well, it's about thirty thousand times better than the street. They were quite happy to climb twenty storeys high or more to get in. Let's face it, Galaxy must've been the richest building in town. Just the crumbs on the floor were better than most people's dinners.

Val didn't like it much. He thought it was a security risk, but security's about all he can think of. Show him a cheese

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sandwich and he'll be wondering about the security implications. Trouble was, though, you'd get more and more of them creeping inside until the place was infested, and it'd begin to stink. Then we had to clear the lot of them out. Actually, it wasn't that smelly when Conor turned up, but we don't want his lady guests being disturbed in the bathroom by a seven-year-old rat-boy jumping out and pinching her powder puff, do we? Those ducts run all over the place and you could hear the kids in the guts of the building, whispering, laughing, chatting, scratching, fighting, from miles away. You never knew where they were. They couldn't hear us, of course, but it did something to your sense of privacy having to listen to them shouting names at you even when you were in your own room.

What you do is, you get the men to cover off the ventilation grids with nets, then you let the dogs in. Pipe hounds, Ben called them. We kept this pack of wiry little terriers just for it. It was so funny! You could hear it all going on – the dogs scampering, growling and barking like little cannons going off. And the kids screaming, yelling, trying to work out where the dogs were and screeching suddenly like demons when the dogs came on 'em, 'It's there! It's there!' Then they'd start howling and running and the whole place would rattle and ring from the inside.

One after the other they'd come popping out of the walls into the arms of the security men. Then I gave them a packed lunch and a blanket and sent them off into the street. They were grateful for the blanket. Val was OK like that. He thought it was a good political move, keeping in with the common people, that sort of thing.

Of course, they'd gradually creep back in, one by one, and

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the whole thing would have to happen all over again. It was neat. It just pissed me off it was all for Conor and his mob.

Listen. Maybe you think I'm being some kind of spoilsport. Maybe you think I'm sappy about my sister. Well, it ain't like that. I just want a life. Politics stinks. Anyway, I'm the youngest, none of that stuff is anything to do with me. As for Signy – she's my twin. I just don't like my sister being used like a lump of meat, something to barter. I just don't want her to go away.

5

Signy

I'd been having nightmares about it for months. And then there he was! He was awkward and shy – that was the first thing. I wanted to despise him for it but I couldn't.

I thought he was weak, the way he stood there smiling and not meeting my eye, but as soon as he turned away and started dealing with his men he was different. It was they who couldn't meet his eye then. It was... what is it certain people have? My father has it too. Certainty. The absolute right to have things his way. But Conor was different from Val. He was the man, the numero uno, but at the same time you got the impression that he was expecting it all to disappear at any moment. As if the bad fairy was going to turn him from a king into an urchin if he just said the wrong thing.

He sent his people away, then he turned back to me and stood there scowling, all cross with himself, like an earthquake waiting to happen. You could almost see the molten red beneath, and his expression floating on the surface. I thought, what's going on? And then I thought, this man is dangerous.

I felt a little thrill go through me, right down my neck to you-know-where and then out again through the balls of my feet.

‘I don’t know how to speak to you,’ he said.

‘Then keep your mouth shut,’ I told him.

He looked a little confused. I bit my cheeks; I wanted to laugh at him. ‘You own a quarter of London and you don’t know how to speak to me?’ I teased.

‘Not a quarter, a half,’ he said.

‘A half! Nothing like it. A third maybe. At the most.’

It was so childish, we smiled at each other. ‘A third then,’ he said. ‘Depends how you measure it, some would say.’ Then he scowled and looked intently at me. ‘Don’t hate me because of my father – that’s all I ask,’ he said suddenly. He looked me in the eye for the first time, then. I looked straight back. He blinked first.

We were talking in the fruit garden. The grow-lights spread across the ceiling over groves of oranges and bananas. Very romantic, that was the idea. There was an awkward pause, nothing to say, which he broke by spreading his hands. ‘This is wonderful. We don’t have anything like this in the north,’ he said.

‘I don’t need to be flattered,’ I sneered.

I was still scared of him and I hated him for that. I’d never been scared of anyone for years. No, that’s not true. Thing is, I always knew in the past that being scared only made me more dangerous. But now it was different – I was scared because of what he could do to me with the consent of my father and my brothers and all the troops. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men. I can kill a man. I know how. I’ve done it enough times. In a fight you can do what you

want but in this game he can stab me through and I just have to lie there and take it.

I smiled sweetly at him. ‘Here, have a banana,’ I said, and I pulled one off the tree and offered it to him. He scowled as he took it. I don’t suppose they’ve got so many bananas in the north. He stood there trying to peel it but it was green. I laughed at him. I thought, you fool.

Conor threw away the fruit. It was a real flash of violence. Anger. I flinched, but then I stuck my face forward. I thought, if you hit me I’ll stick you. I had my hand on my knife.

‘We have to decide . . . you have to decide . . . what kind of marriage we’re going to have,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘For politics. Or for real.’

I said, ‘For politics,’ at once, and my heart went bang bang suddenly. What was he getting at? Let’s face it, he could use me to blow his nose on once he got me home. Was he actually going to be decent about it? Or did he really want this mess to work? He didn’t look in the least like he was interested in decency.

Now he looked hurt and that made me feel very strange. ‘I ask for six months. I . . .’ He was looking all over the place, but he forced his eyes to settle on mine. ‘I want to try it.’

‘You want to try me,’ I said cool as you like.

‘No.’ He said it very quickly. He sounded very sure. ‘I mean . . . yes, I want you.’ He blushed. He actually blushed! Then he waved his hand dismissively, as if his own words were worth nothing. ‘I don’t know you at all, how can I say if it would work? But if it did I’d be very happy about it.’ And he blushed again, deeper than ever. I thought, you weed. But already my heart wasn’t in it. It really was sort of sweet.

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He was the enemy of decades, the murderer, the man my father had chucked me to as some sort of sacrifice, the way you chuck a morsel of meat to a lion when you want to sneak past it. Here, have this.

But . . . he was sort of sweet all the same. I couldn't believe I was thinking that he was sweet.

'All I ask is that you give it six months. Come home with me for six months. If you want to go back then, that's up to you.'

'I don't think my father would be very happy about that.'

'You'll be my wife,' he said. 'I can tell him where you'll live.'

I said, 'You can't tell Val anything,' as scornfully as I could. He didn't reply. He stood there waiting.

'I'll think about it,' I said.

Conor nodded. He looked away to a corner of the glasshouse and said vaguely, 'You're very beautiful. You're very desirable. I want you to be my ally as well as my wife. I want you to help me rule. I think . . . who knows? . . . maybe I can love you.' He reached out and touched my arm gently. It was the only time he touched me. 'See you at the wedding then,' he said. He turned on his heel and he was gone before I could say anything.

6

The wedding took place in Westminster Abbey, where the Kings and Queens of England used to be wed – as if these little gangmen fighting over a single city were kings. Val liked to curl his lip and say it was all done to please Conor’s vanity. If it was up to him, the Abbey would have to wait until he had the nation in his pocket. The roof would be put back on and the old Kings and Queens, who had been dug up and removed when the government left, would be back under the stones. Then, perhaps, the place would be ready for Val to use.

But Conor wasn’t greedy for the future; he wanted it all now. Decent houses had to be knocked down to get timber for stalls for the guests. There wasn’t a sheet of plastic big enough to cover up the roof, but they hung up awnings and canopies and put down red carpet plundered from a hotel in Park Lane. The remaining saints were painted in bright colours so you could see them better and a sound system was rigged up to play organ music for the congregation.

The Abbey was a Christian temple. The Volsons had given up on all that years ago but, like all the ganglords, Val was a

superstitious man. It's true that under his grey silk suit he wore a silver cross, just in case Jesus happened to watching, but by its side was the stubby barrel of a small handgun, sawn off short and hammered into the likeness of a man with one eye. That was in honour of the strange gods who were said to have awakened in the halfman lands, and who had been seen these past few years inside the Wall, in the slums and suburbs of London itself. And for the same reason – unknown to Conor who would certainly have objected – a dead man hung upside down from his heel out of sight behind an awning. The new deities were said to favour sacrifice in this form. All nonsense of course – silly stories grown up from halfmen sightings by men from Ragnor or the other cities checking up on them. But Val considered it wise to take all precautions.

A thousand people sat and watched Val walk up the long aisle with Signy on his arm and give her away to Conor. From above, the crumbling saints watched from their niches and the dead man swayed lightly, his hair hanging straight to the ground as the bride held her head up and said, 'I do.'

Siggy stood with his brothers and hated it all. Ben leaned across and hissed, 'Siggy, you've got a face like a ferret.'

Siggy looked at him and tried to smile.

'It's supposed to be a happy day,' Ben told him, and sniggered. As far as he was concerned, Val was God. He never did a thing wrong.

His other brother, Hadrian, just grunted. 'He won't be gentle with her tonight or any night,' he said.

'She said he was tender,' said Siggy.

'Tender or rough, it'll be worth it if the treaty holds,' said Ben confidently. Hadrian nodded grimly. But Siggy didn't

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care about the treaty or the world or any amount of ambition. When he saw Conor lean forward and whisper something into the bride's ear, he let out a sigh like a pot bursting.

7

Hadrian

The night after the wedding the guards found someone walking up the staircase towards our living quarters. It was certainly the most serious lapse of security I can ever remember. They apprehended a man – or creature, perhaps, I have my doubts. He was stepping onto the stairs without a care in the world, as if he was taking a stroll around some public amusement. Unbelievable. As if he wanted to be caught, having already got so close to us. Perhaps he did.

As head of security in Galaxy, it was my responsibility. I supervised the interrogation myself. He suffered, by the gods, he did, and there was a lot more to come, but he never said a single word. Not one. As a result I had no more to report when Val brought Ben and Siggy along to have a look than when we first caught him. I felt like a fool standing there with the guards as my father came up. Torture, you have to understand, is a fellow with a very forceful personality. It reduces the bravest of us to so much gobshite. But this man, he just seemed to soak it up. The suffering was like meat and drink to him.

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I never saw anyone like him. He had only one eye, and it was like stone. Really, like a stone. The white was grey-blue, flinty, and you had the feeling that if you flung a pebble at it, it'd click. He stood there with two guards hanging on him like they were holding on to a bull and he stared down at us like it was us who were going to die.

He was weird – but the weirdest thing was that he was there in the first place. The security was solid. How'd he done it? Val was so furious I thought he might strike me, which I deserved. But I think my father understood what I was up against when he stood looking up at the prisoner, because I never saw anyone look Val down like that. That one eye in his big, bony face, like the face of an animal. He was wearing a wide black hat tied under his chin, which had somehow stayed on his head despite the beating he'd taken. He was about seven foot tall and he looked down at Val as if he was a child.

My nerves were already stretched and Ben was making it worse. Why Val insists on bringing him along to this sort of thing I don't know. Loyalty. That's Val, loyalty before sense.

'He's a spy, he's a spy!' Ben kept insisting. He jiggled up and down in excitement, grinning. 'We cleaned out the whole place, didn't we, Father? Didn't we? He must be a spy!' I hissed at him to try and make him shut up. Val was even angrier than I was and someone was going to get it any minute. But poor Ben was beside himself. 'He'll tell us if we torture him!' he squealed, as if I hadn't spent the last hour doing just that. He spun right round on his heel and stood there clapping and grinning.

My father stood gazing up into the prisoner's face. 'He'll tell, one way or the other,' he said quietly.

'It'd be better for him if it was now!' crowed Ben.

The prisoner was so tall we had to bend our necks back to look at him. Tied with nylon ropes around his shoulders, legs and neck, the guards on either side of him looked as if they'd lift up off the ground if he stretched himself. He made me feel like a little bit of shit.

I shook my head, trying to keep thinking clearly. 'Spies are people you're not supposed to see. Why should Conor send out a spy you can see from half a mile away? There's more to it than that.'

Ben gasped. 'An assassin! No! An assassin!' He went white, but he was grinning and giggling again a second later.

'Calm down,' ordered Val. Ben saw his look and went quiet. Val was serious.

'Sorry, Father.'

The prisoner began to make a ghastly noise from the blood gathering in his lungs. With every breath he let out a crackle like a foot turning in gravel. His clothes were soaked in blood. His face was strange, like I say. His expression didn't seem right, somehow. Perhaps he had some halfman in him.

Siggy looked away. He always hated this sort of thing.

'Kill him and finish it. If he hasn't talked yet he isn't going to,' he said. It was the first time Siggy had said anything and for some reason it caught the prisoner's attention. He looked at him as if he'd only just caught sight of him standing behind the rest of us . . . and he smiled at him. It was a friendly smile, but it was a terrible shock – like a dog or a statue suddenly smiled.

We all took a step back without thinking. Then we all turned to look at Siggy.

'I've never even seen him before,' he protested.

Ben was furious because the man had scared him. He took

a pistol from his belt and whipped him with it. He had to jump off the ground to reach the big face. There was a gasp and a moan, but no words.

Val was watching Siggy. ‘Come to the front,’ he ordered. Siggy shrugged again, but he came forward under the shadow of the big man, who looked down at him and smiled again. Val was cross with Siggy these days. Father was the sort of man who could make anyone think anything, but not Siggy. Siggy had his own thoughts. Even Val couldn’t change his mind.

Siggy had on his sulky face. He had it written all over him what he thought of this whole treaty business: so much bullshit.

‘Well?’ demanded Val. ‘What’s your opinion?’

Siggy shrugged again. ‘I’d like to know how he got in with the security so tight,’ he said at last. I snorted in disgust. ‘Wouldn’t we all? He looked at the guard. ‘Is he human? I don’t mean a halfman. Is he a machine?’

In answer the guards dragged the big man round on his ropes. His clothes were almost torn off him at the back, he was all but naked. From his neck to his feet he was a mass of bleeding bruises. ‘I didn’t find any metal,’ said the guard grimly.

‘And he said *nothing*?’ asked Val incredulously, which made me proud. He knew how thorough I am.

‘Nothing. I mean, nothing. Not a single word,’ I said.

I turned to look at the big man, and I couldn’t help it... I was in awe of him. Not a single word! God knows, my men know how to do their job. Not one single word!

‘Perhaps he’s dumb. A big dummy,’ suggested Ben. ‘Are you a dummy, big man?’

The man lifted his face, black with bruises, and said, 'No.'

We all jumped, even Val. Ben squealed. That dark voice! And damn him – to speak like that just to show me he could if he felt like it! Without realising it, we all took another step away – even the guards, who had let go of the ropes for a moment.

'Quick step,' giggled Siggy.

The big man seemed to rise up even higher. The guards on either side seized the ropes and tried to hold him but he just pulled them up. He seemed to grow in front of our eyes. And I got this terrible feeling that I'd met him somewhere before. Just for a minute it seemed that if he felt like it, he could stop all of this with a wave of his hand, and for a minute all our plans and ambitions were like dust on my lips.

'God,' I said, and he looked at me with a slight smile. I felt my limbs begin to tremble. I licked my lips. 'He must be a spy,' I said. I had to try hard to speak. 'No thief would keep so quiet. This one hasn't even got lies to tell. God,' I said again, without even meaning to. He was really spooking me. Then I felt myself getting angry. What did all this mean? Who did this creature think he was?

I'd had enough of it. I said, 'Kill him. Do it quick.'

But Val turned to the guard. 'Hang him by his heel in the lift shaft. He'll be dead by the morning. If he's a thief, who cares? If he's a spy, Conor and his men can eat and drink and wonder what he told us.'

'Yes! We'll be able to tell by their faces if they know him or not!' crowed Ben. He clapped his hands. 'And let them do the same to any others they catch, Father! That'll show them.'

Val nodded. 'Certainly.' He looked at me sideways and added, 'But there'd better not be.'

8

Signy

My wedding night. Conor was being sweet again but I wasn't sure it suited him.

'You haven't been looking forward to this part,' he suggested.

'Says who?' I snapped. I only said it to disagree with him, but of course he thought I was encouraging him and he reached out to touch me. I lifted up my finger and said, 'Ah, ah!' Actually, I practically screamed it. No way was he going to touch me!

Then he looked so confused I felt sorry for him. He'd been told all about me, but I think he still thought I was some sort of girlie-girlie girl. I thought, I'll show you, and I turned the tables suddenly by rushing up and pinching his bum. 'You're a pretty little thing, aren't you?' I bellowed, and he looked shocked, which made me giggle. I thought to myself, this is easier than I thought.

We had this suite of rooms, a sitting room and two bedrooms. I asked if anyone had teased him about having two separate bedrooms on his wedding night and he looked surprised.

‘No one ever teases me,’ he promised.

I said, ‘Soon change that, then.’

We had a couple of drinks in the sitting room. He was very respectful. I appreciated that, although who was to say he’d keep it up when we got back to the north?

He put some music on. He was so clumsy! It was this disco-thump stuff. ‘Bang-a-shub BANG-a-shub, bang-a-shub,’ I groaned. ‘Do you really *like* this sort of thing?’

He said, ‘No, I thought you might.’ I just rolled my eyes. He’d obviously had squads of advisers telling him how to woo a young girl, but no one had thought of asking about my taste in music. I just turned it off and we stood there in silence. Uncomfortable silence. I was prepared to make him suffer.

He paced up and down, glaring at me half the time and chewing his lip and blushing the other half. After a bit he came and sat next to me on the sofa and said, ‘Have you thought about what I said? Have you made up your mind?’

I could feel my heart going at once. I’d talked to Sigs about it and we figured out what he was up to. ‘Nice rape,’ I sneered, because that’s all it was. Easier for him if the victim was willing and how much nicer if I liked him sticking his pork where it wasn’t wanted.

But, it didn’t feel like that. It was so weird because I’d been told all my life that he was some kind of demon. Soft sort of demon, I thought. I wasn’t thinking, sweet, though – not yet. I was thinking, wimp. But that didn’t really fit. You don’t get to be a ganglord by being a wimp.

I just wrinkled up my nose. He frowned and then, very slowly so there could no mistake, he lifted up his hand and touched me, very lightly, touched my neck. I was wearing an open-necked top and he went down to that little hollow

under your neck; it made me shiver. I put my hand on his to stop him – just to stop him, but somehow it was a close gesture and he took it for consent. Conor put his hand slowly around the back of my head and pulled me close, tipped up my face and kissed me.

I'd kissed boys before – but this was different. He was years older than me, but he wasn't thirty yet. He wasn't old like my father is. I thought, he's not that old after all. The kiss went right through me, and I was scared I wouldn't be any good at kissing, but it must have gone right through him, too, because he pulled me right up tight against him and pressed me into him.

I said, 'I'm going to bed, now.' I pulled away and almost ran into my bedroom. I lay down on the bed with all my clothes on. I heard him put a new CD on, I heard him rattle ice in a glass. I thought, if he tries to come in here I'll cut him. Then there was a soft little knock at my door that sent my heart thundering. I could have squeaked! But it was – so pleasurable. I thought, listen, girl, if you want to you can slit him, he's no trouble to you. So why be scared? And then I thought, what's happening to me?

I didn't answer the soft little knock. After a bit he went away and I just lay there. It was impossible to sleep. And you know – I didn't want him to go away! I lay there thinking, what would Had do, or Ben? What would my father do, what would Siggie do? Most of all what would Siggie do if he were me?

I could hear him saying, 'Go next door and give him one...' Except of course he wouldn't say that. He'd say that about anyone else I fancied except Conor. He was so jealous. But I suddenly thought, that's what Sigs would say, that's what I'd say to him. Let's face it, just about the only

advantage I can think of being married at bloody fourteen is, you can have sex without your parents minding. I thought, maybe I'll take your advice, Sigs, even if you wouldn't give it to me...

I mean, you gotta start somehow. And what I haven't said is... being there in that room with that man – it'd horned me right up.

Conor hadn't gone to bed yet. I slipped out of bed, tiptoed over to the door and pushed it open a few inches. Then I sort of giggled and ran back to bed. He had to come to me!

He stopped in the other room. I could hear him stopping. Then there was the door moving open, his foot half in, half out...

'Signy? Signy?'

I didn't say anything. I flung the covers over my head and I let out this stupid little squeak, it was so embarrassing. It made me furious with him. I tucked myself up. He tiptoed in. I was pretending to be asleep, and then I thought, this is stupid! So I sat up suddenly and said, 'What do you want?'

He just stood there looking at me. I felt so excited and alone, curled up in my bed with this tall man looking at me.

I said, 'I've had sex before, you know.'

He scowled and said, 'You mean...?' Then he stopped and sort of shrugged and said, 'You're very young. But I guess that's your business.'

I said, 'That's right.' I felt – in control. I patted the bed and said, 'Sit down,' and he did as he was told. It was exciting, him doing what he was told. I was getting the giggles but I was scared!

He sat on the bed and put his arms round me and kissed

me again. It was so gorgeous. It was so gorgeous! Then his fingers began to open the buttons on my top.

I whispered in his ear, 'I've had lots of sex before.'

He went a bit still and said, 'So you keep saying.'

I pulled away from him and said, 'Lots of them. Loads of them!'

He leaned back and said, 'What, do you mean all the way?'

I said, 'Fourteen-year-olds are allowed to have a sex life too.' Then I added very quietly, 'Even if it's only with themselves...'

I said that because it's so private, I never talked about that to anyone before, not even Siggy. I don't know why I said it, but I suppose, thinking about it after, I must have wanted to tell him something as private as that. It was something to give him, because I'd made him feel bad about all those boys I never had. Well, actually I had touched a couple and they'd touched me, but not like I was saying to him.

He laughed. He sounded happy about that. Very gently, very, very gently, he touched my ears and face with his fingers and kissed my neck and slid the tips of his fingers down my neck and the tops of my breasts, and then stroked right down the whole length of me, pressing his hand down into me and I thought I'd burst. And then I started to undo my buttons for him.

He didn't want to do the whole thing – to put it in me. He just wanted to touch but quite a lot later on I made him. It hurt but it was OK – I mean, it'd be OK later on. I knew it'd be OK. The thing is, everything sort of just took off. Suddenly it was all so easy! We sat and talked and talked and did things and talked all night. He was... he was so like me! I felt so

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close, even closer than I had to Siggy because of course I never could do things like that with Sigs.

I told him all about me and Sigs and the things we did, and he told me about his father, who sounds as if he was a complete bastard. I told him all about mine and he said he was jealous about Val, who seemed such a good man.

We were talking and talking, and then doing things again. That's when I made him put it in me. You should have seen his face...he looked like his head was about to fall off! I thought, this must be falling in love. That must be what I'm doing.

I said, 'Conor, are we falling in love?'

He said, 'I think we must be, but it hasn't happened to me before...'

I said, 'Well, we'll have to wait and see, then.' That was funny, and we started laughing and laughing...it was so funny! Here we were, married and having sex and we were having to wait and see if we were falling in love!

'That must be what sex does for you,' I declared.

'But not before. Not for me. Do you think you'd be like this with anyone, then?' he asked, and he looked so hurt I had to smack him, hard on the leg, for being so stupid.

There were fireworks and music, there was dancing in the streets. The party went on all day and in the morning it started again. There were fairs and shows, carnivals and festivals. Trestle tables were set up throughout London and for these days at least, there was food for everyone. In the evening came the grand finale – a great feast, where Conor was to be guest of honour, and the treaty was to be signed. An end to one war, and the beginning of new ones as the lords of London would now begin to try to move out into the halfman lands, and beyond.

The great hall of the Galaxy Building was the natural venue for such a feast. This vast internal space, hung with cobwebs, open to the winds in its upper reaches, where pigeons, jackdaws and swifts nested, was still a wonder of the world. The air conditioning had been broken this hundred years since and mists and haze formed up by the ceiling, half a kilometre overhead. Out of sight, the plastic panels peeled away, polystyrene stuffing flaked little snowfalls down, mortar crumbled, surfaces grew thick with dead spiders and flies and dust and plain old

dirt; but somehow the squalor only added to its glory.

In the centre of it all, the lift shaft, like a thread of spider's silk, spun into the mist and out of sight.

The lift shaft ran from the deep basements below, where Val's ludicrous wealth was hoarded, right up to the building's broken tip. It was so long, glass-like and brittle-looking that first-time visitors often lifted their hands involuntarily above their heads and ducked, certain that it was in the act of snapping and that a million razor-sharp shards were about to rain down upon them. But the old builders had made it from the strongest stuff on heaven and earth. No one had ever even managed to scratch it.

The lift hadn't worked for generations, but the shaft had a new use. Val used the impossible gleaming thread as a kind of temple. In here he hung his human sacrifices. They dangled like fruit among the wires and cables until they rotted and fell to pieces and their bones gathered in heaps at the bottom. There were new ones up today, glaring down at the diners with one heel nailed to a beam, their hands tied behind their backs and one leg crossed behind the other. The glass had been polished until it shone.

Ben once reckoned he could get the lift working again, given a few days and a box of tricks. He wired a generator up to it and got huge yellow sparks and leaps of blue flashing up and down the silvery glass and crackling among the cables and the sizzling dead. Some of the bodies began twitching and burning. There were strange noises; some people heard singing. Val ordered Ben to turn it off.

'The dead don't need to go anywhere, and they have nothing to say,' he said. 'Nothing that I want to hear, anyhow,' he added. Later, Ben wondered if making the dead dance and

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sing hadn't offended the gods who were slowly coming back to life. But Val wouldn't have thought like that. He'd have said, 'If you kill you'd better expect to die, but you'd better die well.'

There had never been so many people under that roof – and what people! Gangmen, smugglers, security chiefs, traders, all the rich and powerful. Outside on the streets, when you saw the poverty you wouldn't believe that such wealth could exist. But the rich are always with us. These were the most fortunate, the cleverest, the most cunning and unscrupulous men and women of two nations, the Volsons and the Conors. People who had done their best to slaughter each other for generations now sat down to eat the same food.

On a raised platform just before the lift shaft sat the two families themselves, the Volsons and the Conors. Symbolically, Signy was sitting between Val and Conor. Siggy, who had sat next to her for every other meal they had ever shared, was ten places away. Events had put this gap between them, but things had changed deep inside their hearts as well. Each twin avoided the other's eye. As he sat waiting for the proceedings to begin, Siggy kept himself busy by watching the sacrifices swaying in their glass showcase.

10

Siggy

The women had thick tights on, and the men wore trousers. When you've hung poor folk upside down a few times, you soon find out that rags that look decent one way up let it all hang out upside down.

They were all criminals, poor ones. Yeah, well, the rich are more useful alive. There was a woman who had sold children as slaves to rival gangmen – to Conor, perhaps, or to the halfmen. Halfmen like human slaves. Her face had turned purple. Then there was an old man who'd been making fake money, a murderer, a rapist. The usual mix.

And there was the big man, the spy. He'd died there alone sometime in the night. Now he hung upside down with the rest of them, his wide-brimmed hat still on his head, tied up under his chin, the tatty patched cloak hanging below his shoulders like wings, his arms tight behind him, his face black.

Ben nudged me in the ribs and whispered, 'Val should have hung them up with nothing on.'

We did that occasionally, as a sort of insult. But never to the poor, only to traitors, and you have to be rich to be a

traitor. Why waste a decent insult on the poor?

I said, 'What for?'

He said, 'Well, it's a wedding feast, isn't it?'

There was a pause while it sank in and then we both started giggling. Bastard! We bent our heads down like we were praying and hissed and spluttered. I waited until we'd almost recovered and then I hissed back, 'All stiff, too...' and we were off again. It was so sick! People were looking at us. Had was nudging us to be quiet. Some of Conor's people were scowling at us so we had to bite our cheeks and shut up quick. Then I looked across and Signy was scowling at me too – as if she was one of them. And the awful thing was, she was one of them, too. One night with Conor and she was all his. Kapow! Gone to the other side... Although I know that isn't quite fair.

I'd seen her earlier. I was... I tell you, I could hardly sleep that night, thinking about her stuck up there with him. The next morning I'd arranged to meet her in her old room. She kept me waiting hours; I was half dead with fright by the time she got there. She could have been... Well... Anything could have happened!

Then she burst in through the door and looked at me. I said, 'Well? Well? What happened?' And she... she just burst out laughing, and winked at me.

'Nothing for noses,' she smirked. But then she looked serious and said, 'He was... gentle.'

I couldn't believe it. I'd been sick about it all night and here she was all smiles and rosy cheeked. She looked pleased with herself. 'You let him do it?' I asked.

'I do believe he loves me, Sigs.'

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Love! So now it was love, already! She had no idea how ludicrous it was, that she should be in love after spending one night with this . . .

‘Don’t be stupid,’ I told her.

Then she started to go on about how he was different from what people said, and how his father had been the bad one and how he was really tender and sweet. Tender and sweet! How could she forget so soon? This was the guy who strung people up for coughing at the wrong time! Tender? Conor?

It was so obvious what was going on. In love? He was using her, I knew it at once. He was spinning her a line. But she just swallowed it all down. And Val did, too. I went straight to him to tell him what was going on, but when he heard that she said he loved her, he was pleased. Pleased! My father wouldn’t trust a saint if it came down to trade, but he’d believe Conor had fallen in love with his own daughter, just because it suited him.

But . . . It was done and, Hel, it was her day. What could I do? I couldn’t change a second of it. I sat in my place and peered across at her, past the faces, and the cutlery, and I gave her the thumbs-up to say – I’m sorry. You’re still my sis. Even though I didn’t feel that she was any more. Signy smiled back and waved, but she didn’t look all that happy about me, either.

MELVIN BURGESS

Bloodtide is based on the first part of the Icelandic Volsunga Saga.

'Since this tale nor anything else can be made to please everyone, nobody need believe any more of it than he wants to believe. All the same the best and most profitable thing is to listen while a story is being told, to enjoy it and not be gloomy: for the fact is that as long as people are enjoying the entertainment they won't be thinking evil thoughts.

I'd like to thank those who've listened and enjoyed the story, and since those who don't like it won't ever be satisfied, let them enjoy their own misery.

AMEN.'

From *Göngu-Hrolf's Saga*, translated by Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, Canongate, 1980.

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BLOODSONS

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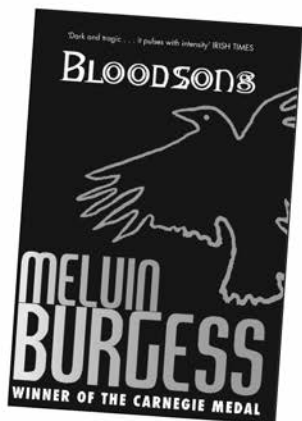
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