The SKY Beneath the STONE

For my Grendel,
who has gone through the wall

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ALEX MULLARKY

Kelpies

Praise for *The Sky Beneath the Stone*

"I absolutely adored this! *The Sky Beneath the Stone* is beautiful, bright and brilliant – a perfect blend of magic, adventure and heart, with a gorgeous Cumbrian setting, a wonderful weaving of nature, folklore and history, heart-lifting incidental inclusivity, and OS grid references at the start of each chapter so you can map the journey! It is one of those books I want to press into every young reader's hands, because I know so many of them will fall in love with it."

– Sophie Anderson, Carnegie-shortlisted author of *The House with Chicken Legs*

"A beautifully written adventure steeped in the myths and magic of the Lake District. I long to journey through the wall and explore the enchanted, dangerous wilds of Underfell!"

– Ross MacKenzie, author of the *Nowhere Emporium* trilogy

A Note

At the beginning of each chapter is an Ordnance Survey grid reference.

Adventurous souls can find their way around this story using Ordnance Survey maps of the United Kingdom.



The Goshawk



OS Grid Ref: NY 17 00

First: the map. Ivy smoothed it out over the ground, pressed a finger to her location and circled it with a pencil. It wasn't her preferred campsite, but it would have to do. She timed herself as she slotted her tent poles together and raised the heap of fabric into a shelter. Her record was four minutes, but she did it in five. That was disappointing; she was getting rusty.

She dug out her sleeping bag and mat and set up her bed, hanging the lantern overhead for when darkness fell. If the weather turned, she'd still be warm and cosy inside. At a safe distance from the shelter, she took out her dinner supplies and assembled the stove, though she didn't light it since her mum had asked her to stop doing that here.

When everything was ready, she grabbed the map again and crawled into the quiet blue cocoon of the tent. Her socked feet rustled against the sleeping bag as she took out her pencil and traced a route to Harter Fell. A day's walk, probably, and there was a barn where she could shelter if a storm blew in.

She squeezed out of the tent again and pulled her binoculars from her pack, squinting through them at the fields in the distance. The window frame was obscuring her view, as usual.

"IVY!"

Callum's voice echoed in the hallway. She could already hear his footsteps thundering up the staircase to her room. A moment later, the door flew open.

"Last day of school!" Callum stood panting in the doorway. His brown eyes sparkled beneath his heavy eyebrows, scanning the tent, the carpet, the window. His mouth quirked in its habitual lopsided smile. Ivy's little brother was tall for his nine years, and lean because some part of him was always in motion.

Ivy peered around the corner of the tent, which took up most of the floor of her room.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Mum says it's time to go!"

Ivy checked her watch and balked. She let the worn map accordion back into its deep folds and tucked it into her blazer pocket.

"Which one have you got today?" she asked Callum as they descended both flights of stairs together. He opened one of his hands so that Ivy could see. A piece of yolk-golden citrine, rubbed almost smooth from years of being rolled around in Callum's palms.

At the front door they pulled on their shoes and called goodbye to their mum. Iona's porcelain face appeared around her studio door; her eyes, on Ivy, were

gentle and questioning.

"I can drive you," she offered for the hundredth time.

Ivy felt the immediate, desperate urge to say, *Yes, okay*.

Instead she said, "No, I can do it."

Only one more day until the summer holidays. All she had to do was get there.

Before she stepped outside, Ivy slipped the map out of her pocket and opened it to the folds that depicted their house and the surrounding village. Her eyes followed the smudged pencil line that traced the route from home to school.

Callum was watching her, and when she raised her head he set off. Ivy squinted as she stepped into the sunlight after him, pushing down the tremor of nausea that surged up her throat. She kept her head down, placing one foot in front of the other.

As she walked, her thoughts kept returning to the six empty weeks ahead of her and the route she had plotted that morning. How much she would love to follow that path to Harter Fell – and then keep going, climb every fell in the county, ramble around every lake, cross every valley. No school, nothing but time and the freedom to explore with Callum and her mum.

But then she remembered the well-worn map in her hands, and she felt herself deflate like a popped balloon. She tucked it away.

It had been a year now. A year since she'd gotten herself lost in the fells, a year since she'd become too scared to step out of the front door without the security

of her map. Even then, she couldn't walk anywhere she hadn't gone a hundred times before.

This was going to be a very long, very boring summer.

The sky was so blue and vast overhead, almost cloudless. Ivy shrank away from it, her eyes fixed on the tarmac starting to glisten in the heat.

She went over the exercises the psychologist had taught her to keep her mind still. She focused on her chest, rising and falling with each breath. The weight of her body as she set one foot in front of the other, dodging piles of sheep poo and dandelions popping up at the edge of the single-track road.

Callum was speeding ahead, but he stopped to run his hands over a drystone wall. A blackbird sang in the hedge as they turned down the familiar lonning towards school.

A series of shrill cries punctured the morning stillness. Ivy stopped in her tracks, her ears pricking.

She scanned the sky without thinking. Callum pointed to the treeline and said, "There!"

The bird soared in a couple of slow circles, and as it turned side-on Ivy saw the speckled markings of its feathers, the straight line of its tail.

"Goshawk!" they called at the same time.

Callum set off running. Ivy was right behind him, and she followed him over the wooden gate and into the pasture where dairy cows grazed obliviously around them. A goshawk! They had never seen one so close to home before.

"Watch out!" Callum called as Ivy was almost bowled over by a blur of black-and-white. A great pink tongue lunged for her face, and she turned away to avoid the onslaught.

"Down, Grendel!" she laughed as his paws printed dirt all over her school uniform.

"Where have you been this morning?" she asked him as he grinned up at her, panting. He wasn't their dog; nobody seemed quite sure who he belonged to. Nevertheless, he was well fed and well loved by the villagers of Beckfoot. He often jumped the gate into their garden to play with Callum.

But Callum wasn't to be distracted today – he was at the opposite hedge already. "It's gone into the next field," he called back to Ivy, and without further ado, he climbed through a gap in the blackthorn, swiftly followed by Grendel.

Ivy felt a little flutter in her chest, but she took a breath and set off after them.

She heard the goshawk's call again as she pulled herself through the hedge. The field she found herself in was a sea of long grasses and wildflowers. The ground sloped away from them in all directions, layers of fells stretching off into the distance, and suddenly Ivy felt dizzily as though she was standing on the edge of the sky.

The world began to grow grey and blurry. Callum laughed, turning on the spot as he followed the shape of the goshawk's flight from below. The outline of the gliding bird flickered as Ivy's vision swam, and then she

stopped seeing it all together. There was only the sky, vast and heavy.

Her gaze fell at last to her feet and the grass beneath them.

She had gone off the path.

Her breath came in fast gulps. She scrabbled to pull the map from her pocket, but her fingers didn't seem to be obeying her commands.

This was the land she had grown up in, lakes and mountains that were as familiar as her own family. But for the past year they had felt like strangers to her, as jarring as looking into a mirror one day and not recognising your own face. The fells she had once seen as gentle and rolling were now uncertain and menacing, a landscape waiting to swallow her whole.

A grey fog was clouding her vision, muffling the sounds in her ears. *Focus on your breathing*, she told herself, but she couldn't turn the thought into action.

She sank to the ground, pressing her forehead into the grass, her knees tucked in against her chest. Her mind was too loud to separate her thoughts.

Callum was gently rocking her shoulder, but it was like trying to uncurl a frightened hedgehog. She couldn't move. Grendel was whining and licking beseechingly at her hands, and she couldn't even bat him away.

The sound of Callum's voice reached her as though through a closed window. Grass tickled her face as tears leaked from her tightly shut eyes onto the dirt.



By the time the fog had cleared, Ivy was sitting in the threadbare armchair in Iona's studio, a cup of hot chocolate in her hands. The curtains were drawn and she was alone, though she didn't think she had been for long. There was scuffling in the hallway, and Ivy overheard Callum's voice, quick and distressed.

"I couldn't even get her to look at me – Grendel was worried and I was getting *really* worried – and when she stood up she was like a zombie, she didn't even look where she was going! How is she ever going to be able to go anywhere ever again—"

"Hey," their mum interrupted gently. Her voice was low and soothing, clearly not intended for Ivy to hear. "Listen to me. Your sister used to be fearless, like you. But fear is a helpful thing sometimes. It keeps us out of danger. Ivy got a fright, but it won't last forever. In the end it will make her stronger, when she's far enough away to look back at it clearly." There was a pause. "Come on – we'd better give the school a ring."

Their footsteps moved away into the kitchen. Ivy's face was hot and there was an ache in her wrists and hands that was almost unbearable. She took a few tentative sips of her hot chocolate and focused on slowing her breathing.

The studio was like a cocoon, warmed by the heat of the kiln. The blue-grey walls were hung with charcoal drawings of birds and animals, underscored by bookshelves full of old hardback books with titles

printed in silver and gold. Iona didn't really care what they were about; she was in love with musty cloth-bound books and never came out of a second-hand bookshop without one.

The door creaked open and Iona appeared, bearing a packet of chocolate biscuits. When Ivy met her eyes, her mum smiled with relief, popped a biscuit out of the packet for herself and handed the rest to Ivy. Iona sat down at her potter's wheel, set her foot to the pedal and went on with her work.

"Callum tells me you went all the way to Ewan's field." Her hands gently persuaded a lump of wet grey clay into the rough shape of a plate.

Ivy felt her heart speed up, the palest memory of her panic attack. "We don't need to talk about it," she replied, circling her hands around her mug.

"We should." Iona focused on the almost-plate. "Your brother did well to get you home."

"He's not the one you have to worry about." Heat rushed to Ivy's cheeks.

"No. He's not," Iona agreed, and when Ivy looked up she found her mum looking right at her, her green eyes bright. "It's never a straight road," she said. "It'll take as long as it takes."

Somehow hearing that made her feel worse. "I know," Ivy said glumly. She took a few biscuits from the packet. "I think I'll go back to bed."

Back in her room Ivy crept into the safe blue dome of her tent. She dug out one of her dog-eared walking

guides and tried to cheer herself up by planning a walk she would take with Callum and Iona and maybe Grendel, just as soon as everything was back to normal.

If it ever was.



The Hole in the Wall



OS Grid Ref: NY 17 00

Ivy woke up on the first morning of the school holidays to the warmth of the sun on her face and a chorus of song thrushes and blackbirds outside her window. After a whole day and night spent in bed her body felt like a coiled spring, and she propelled herself up out of bed as though she were one.

When she reached the foot of the stairs she could hear the whir of her mum's wheel through the studio door. She padded past to the kitchen, where she ate a bowl of cereal beside the window overlooking the veggie garden.

It was already late, she realised when she glanced at the clock. She had slept most of the morning away.

She never took the map into the garden with her; she had been treading this patch of ground her whole life. The garden was really just an extension of the sanctuary offered by the four walls of their tilting blue-slate house.

When she stepped outside the air was crisp and fresh and filled with birdsong, the grass rubbery and cool beneath her bare feet. But Callum was nowhere to be

found. Not in the boulder field, where they had brought in the biggest stones they could find in the wheelbarrow and spaced them apart like a stone circle; nor the rock pool, where Callum's favourite pebbles from the beck were kept gleaming beneath shallow water. He wasn't lying on his back in the wildflower meadow. Nor was he building another cairn along the top of the drystone wall.

Ivy pushed open the studio door and stepped onto the smooth flagstone floor. Her mum was elbow-deep in what looked like an enormous plant pot.

"Have you seen Callum?" Ivy asked. She noticed a wet pot seeping into a book and swooped in to rescue them both.

"He'll be in the garden somewhere," Iona said breezily.

"He isn't," Ivy protested. The three of them were a unit: Iona and Callum and Ivy. Each always knew where the others would be.

Iona's shoulders shook in a little laugh. "The two of you worry about each other more than I do. I think you forget who the parent is sometimes."

Ivy narrowed her eyes sceptically but decided not to engage her mum on that front. If they hadn't heard from Callum for this long there was bound to be a reason.

She checked his bedroom. The windowsill, the mantelpiece, the bookshelves and the headboard of the bed were all lined with jars of pebbles, categorised by size, colour and shape. On the walls were posters depicting the geological eras of the British Isles and

the differences between igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rocks. Unlike his mum and sister, Callum kept his room meticulously organised. The only item out of place was a green book lying closed on his pillow.

Fighting a rising tide of panic, Ivy went back to her room and sat down at the window, chewing the inside of her cheek.

There was a flash of movement in the corner of her eye. Grendel! He was pacing up and down a stretch of wall at the far end of the garden. It occurred to her that there was a chance, if a small one, that Grendel might be able to lead her to Callum.

Ivy rushed down the stairs and out the front door, twigs and stones poking into the tender soles of her feet as she crossed the grass. She called to Grendel as she approached, but though he wagged his tail low and slow he didn't come to her, and as she drew closer, she realised why.

There was a hole in the wall. A hole that had never been there before.

Grendel was fixated on it, sniffing around its edge and whining. Ivy was not quite sure how a hole could have appeared in their garden wall, given that the drystone structure was an intricate puzzle. Even if Callum had been experimenting with pulling stones out, he couldn't have created such a perfect gap at ground level. You'd have to be a master stonemason.

Ivy felt a prickling sensation travel up her neck and behind her ears.

Then Grendel's eyes fixed on something through the hole, and he barked, which made her jump – that wasn't like him. She shielded her eyes against the sky and looked out across the fields beyond the garden, but there was nothing – no one – there.

"Callum?"

There was no response, no movement. Only the long grass swaying in the breeze.

With a sinking sensation, Ivy realised it was time to tell Iona that Callum had vanished. She took two steps away – and then she heard his voice.

"IVY!" It sounded distant – and desperate. "Ivy!"

"Callum?" She wheeled around. He was nowhere in sight.

"Ivy!" came his voice again, and Grendel barked twice at the hole in the wall. Her brow creasing in confusion, Ivy knelt down to Grendel's level and looked through the opening.

She nearly toppled backwards when she saw Callum running towards her. He was sprinting across the field towards the garden, toiling up the slope but still running as fast as she'd ever seen him. She scrambled back to her feet, but the second she straightened up and looked over the wall, he was gone.

"Ivy, here!" Callum yelled frantically.

The sound was coming from the hole in the wall.

She dropped to her knees again, peering through the gap between the stones, and though her mind rebelled against what she saw, there he was in the field again.

There was something wrong about the colours of the sky and the fells in the distance. Callum was running for his life, tripping and stumbling and shaking his head.

"Are you okay?!" she shouted. He was still a hundred metres away at least. He drew nearer, and her stomach dropped as she realised that he was engulfed in a swarm of small birds. They were darting around him and pecking at his clothes and hair, doing everything they could to get in his way.

"Come here!" Callum's arm was outstretched, hand curled into a fist.

Ivy felt a thrum of panic.

She shook her head. She couldn't.

But what was that sound? The air seemed to be full of a low rumbling – a voice. It was a song, though she couldn't understand the words, and it was issuing like a blast of wind from the hole itself. Callum was trying to cover his ears with his hands, and she recognised the signs that his words were wisping away.

He was close now, and she saw the bright autumnal colours of the little finches that harassed him as he ran. Something about the song was urgent and frightening in a way that Ivy didn't understand. Callum looked at her. Straight at her, right into her eyes. He couldn't speak, but that gesture communicated everything. He needed her. She *had* to go to him.

She straightened up again, preparing herself to jump over the wall and run to his aid. But – he wasn't there!

She dropped back down, shaking her head, and there he was.

Through the wall.

Not in the field on the other side of it.

In a different place entirely.

The song was growing louder and louder and something about Callum's run was wrong now, too. He was hobbling, one shoulder jerking back as if being pulled by a string. His eyes went wide in alarm.

Now her breath was coming fast. Ivy put her hands on the stones on either side of the hole to pull herself through, but her searching gaze found no sign of a path. A grey fog pushed in around the edges of her vision and blurred everything. She let go.

Callum's eyes found hers again, pleading with her to come. Misery gripped her and she tried to move again but her body resisted – she didn't have her map; she didn't know the way!

Callum stumbled. Something was wrapped around his legs. They weren't his legs any more. His left arm was not an arm; it had become a wing, and his right was stretched out to her.

The deep, resonant singing filled her ears, a chant that echoed in the fells.

Callum was almost upon her, and she screwed up her face and shoved her arm through the hole in the wall, grasping for his hand, and found it. Something smooth and small was pressed into her palm, and the hand that had held it became soft like down and slipped out of her reach.

Ivy opened her eyes, fingers closing on nothing but that small object, just in time to see the last of Callum swallowed up into—

A bird.

A bird that winged up and away from her, chittering shrilly, its wingbeats uncoordinated and frantic. The flock of finches swarmed upon it and drove it high into that strange sky, and then it was gone.

The singing abruptly ceased. The weight of the sky settled onto Ivy and she scrambled back from the hole, heart racing. Grendel was at her side, licking and nudging her and whining in agitation.

Callum was gone.

Ivy drew herself up and checked one more time over the wall. He wasn't there; he hadn't been there at all.

He was gone.

Through the hole in the wall.

