

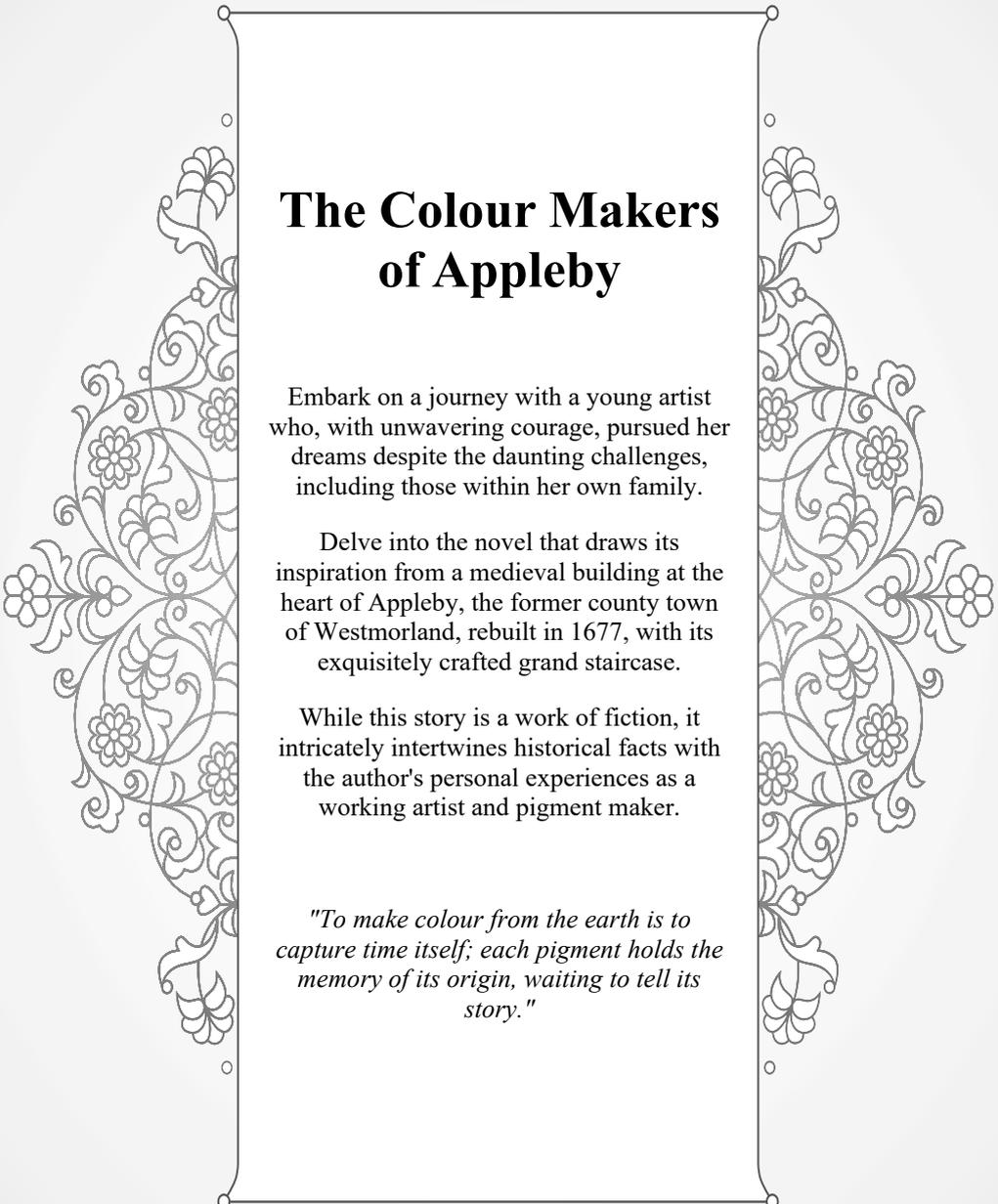
The Colour Makers of Appleby

by Mark Hilsden

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, symmetrical on both sides, framing the central text.

Thanks you to my supporters
and subscribers
on a journey that was a lot longer than I
originally thought it would be.

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The Colour Makers of Appleby

Embark on a journey with a young artist who, with unwavering courage, pursued her dreams despite the daunting challenges, including those within her own family.

Delve into the novel that draws its inspiration from a medieval building at the heart of Appleby, the former county town of Westmorland, rebuilt in 1677, with its exquisitely crafted grand staircase.

While this story is a work of fiction, it intricately intertwines historical facts with the author's personal experiences as a working artist and pigment maker.

"To make colour from the earth is to capture time itself; each pigment holds the memory of its origin, waiting to tell its story."



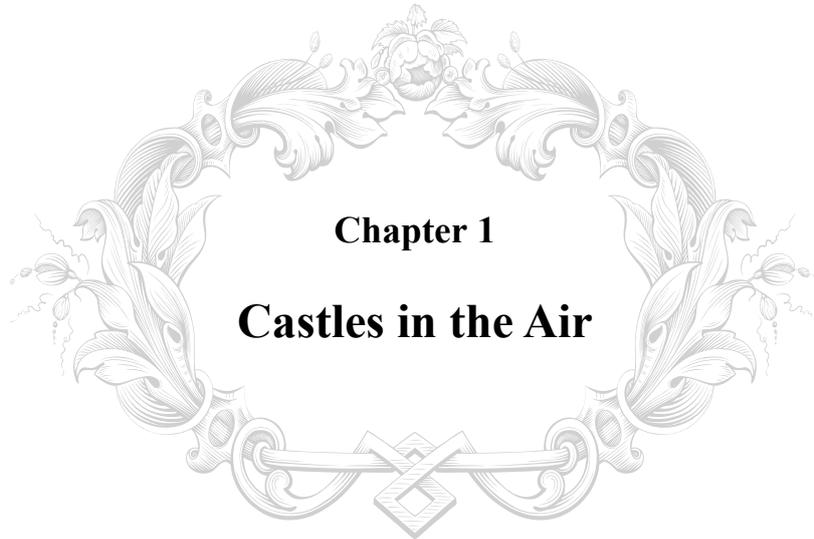
Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

Castles in the Air

Could Appleby hold the answer?

'I want to be a full-time artist, but I just don't know how!' she exclaimed, her desire palpable in the car. Alice's hands tightened on the steering wheel as the last of the gigantic lorries rumbled past, its draught nudging her small car. The motorway had been a monotonous grey ribbon leading her ever northward under a gunmetal grey sky, dampening her spirited drive.

Her father's voice echoed in her thoughts. "You've got your BA; now get a proper job. You'll never earn a living as an artist." Those words had felt like chains, despite her friends' excitement over her work.

The tension eased across her shoulders as she navigated away from the mechanical giants toward her hope for freedom. Professor Blick's criticism had clung to her throughout her final year: "Your work isn't as vivid as your mother's." His words carried the weight of someone who had known her mother before Alice was born, someone whose opinion her father inexplicably valued enough to fund a new studio block at the university.

Now that Mum was gone, the complicated dynamics between her father and her former professor remained a mystery, one Alice was

determined to leave behind as she pursued her own artistic voice in Appleby.

Then, the sunlight city of Lancaster emerged beyond the shadows of the murk, a majestic, sooty black silhouette of a castle against the backdrop of a glorious blue sky. The commanding, dramatic hilltop castle with numerous towers and turrets overlooked Morecambe Bay and the distant Lakeland mountains beyond, so sharp you could almost touch them. Alice struggled to keep her eyes on the road instead of admiring the breathtaking view unfurling to her left.

She was jumping forward straight out of her comfort zone into the unknown, a move that was both exciting and scary all at the same time. Relieved to turn off the motorway, after passing through several picturesque stone villages, she climbed the side of a steep hill, emerging to a dramatic vista of space and a vast open blue sky. Every mile taken carried her further from Oxford, from the family home, and from the shadow of her mother's artistic legacy.

Stunted golden gorse and heather painted vibrant patches amid wild grasses. Sheep dotted green slopes, their tranquillity contrasting with earlier traffic chaos. The cattle grid's clatter disrupted Alice's daydreaming as her car descended the hill, winding through the countryside. Moss and lichen-covered stone walls lined the narrow road. Silver birch trees almost closing above her like a tunnel nodded their slender trunks in welcome.

Alice's thoughts turned to the colours she longed to paint on her canvases, a variety of ochre and sienna shades dancing atop the fells, deep greens and browns of the moors begging for her brush's stroke. She envisioned capturing the moors' rugged beauty, the sky's ever-changing hues, and the countryside's tranquillity.

As her hatchback laboured up the last incline, on cresting the hill, parts of the town emerged, a canvas painted with nature and history. The stone castle keep stood proudly above the trees, while an old church nestled in a valley, sheltering beneath the sweeping fells beyond.

Easing down the road, Alice felt the town's charm envelop her. Tall green trees reached skyward, leaves rustling softly as if applauding her arrival. Rounding a sharp bend, she passed a tree-lined village green encircled by old stone cottages separated from the road by black and white wooden posts linked by a heavy chain. Opposite, a somewhat wavy, high, pale stone wall topped with heavy, almost bushy clumps of dark green ivy.

Around a sharp, narrow bend between battle-scarred stone walls, the road widened as it approached the castle gates; Alice's eyes found a tall, cream painted stone obelisk. Before, it stood an old wrought iron lamp and a wooden bench overlooking the picturesque town below against a sweeping backdrop of trees, with distant fells rising beyond. The mysterious obelisk evoked both familiarity and unanswered questions within her. Amidst the timeworn grandeur of Appleby, the weight of her father's expectations waned.

Her sketchbook lay beside her on the passenger seat, each blank page an invitation to capture her visions.

Alice's little red car moved slowly down the hill beneath the avenue of mature stately lime trees lining either side of the wide road. Quaint cottages appeared in between, some adorned with ivy and roses, others surrounded by colourful flower borders, each offering a glimpse into a world where time moved at its own pace. Behind her in the car mirror, the castle keep watched over Appleby, its pepper-top turrets and castellated battlements standing stoic against the sky, a steadfast protector of the histories it held within its walls. Below, the small stone town with its narrow streets leading off the broad high street, charming cottages interspersed with some grander, more formal houses layered with a rich history, a collection of magical scenes waiting to fill her sketchbook.

Compelled by the pull of discovery, Alice guided her car to the edge of the cobbled square at the foot of the town. She stepped out, her boots clicking against the weathered stones, each echoing a testament to the countless souls who had traversed this space before her. Another market cross, similar to the one outside the castle gates, displayed a painted sundial whispering of the eternal dance between time, light and shadow.

Pale pink stone Cloisters with gothic pointed arches echoing the curves of history. A decorative, battlemented roof line joined castellated towers on either end that commanded the square in front of her. Glazed arches on either side transformed into shops. Their windows displayed an array of treasures: handcrafted jewellery that glistened like captured stars, witches' besom brooms and even wands, books of many shapes and colours with spines creased from loving hands, and pottery glazed in hues that rivalled the palette of the earth itself. Each storefront beckoned with the promise of stories waiting to be told, of dreams carefully crafted and offered to those who wandered through.

Her sketchbook in her hand, heavy with anticipation against her side, harboured blank pages yearning for the touch of her pencil. These pages, eager to cradle the vivid impressions of this place, were a canvas of potential. Her old professor's words often echoed with a sting; a part of her clung to the hope that beneath his critical exterior lay the key to unlocking her true potential. His knowledge, however begrudgingly imparted, might yet guide her hand to capture the soul of this town and surrounding landscape, to translate the whispers of the lime trees and under the steadfast gaze of the castle into strokes of genius upon paper.

With each step, Alice's fingers itched for the familiar grip of her paintbrush, her eyes drinking in the shades and textures that would later bloom under her careful attention. And so, drawn by the silent call of heavenly beauty and history, Alice drifted towards the ancient church that presided with quiet dignity beyond the cloisters. Its castellated tower reached upward, silhouetted by trees, piercing the canvas of the sky, promising a story of faith, patronage and artistry entwined, a tale she was eager to unfold onto her canvas, one delicate brushstroke at a time. The body of the old church, walls of glass and a pale pink stone, a monument of reverence and awe, stood as a testament to the beauty of the town.

Back in the square, clutching her sketchbook, her auburn hair cascading down her back, Alice cut a striking figure. Her loose, blousy top fluttered as she meandered between stalls, her black jeans and boots a sharp contrast to many older locals. The aroma of fresh produce, the allure of handcrafted goods, and the promise of local delicacies captivated her senses. Yielding to temptation, she savoured a slice of homemade apple pie and a cup of coffee on a sunlit bench. Her back against the old Moot Hall, gazing up towards the castle, immersed in the lively dance of locals weaving in and out of shops, the heartbeat of the enchanting market town pulsing around her.

An elderly man with weathered hands and kind eyes approached her bench, nodding at her sketchbook.

"An artist, are you?" he asked, his voice carrying the distinctive lilt of the region.

Alice instinctively pulled the sketchbook closer. "Trying to be," she admitted, then immediately wondered why she'd diminished herself to a stranger.

"My wife was the same," he said, gesturing to an empty spot beside her. "Mind if I rest these old legs?"

Alice shifted to make room, surprised by her own willingness to share her space. "You said 'was'?"

"Aye. Painted till her final days." His gaze drifted to the castle. "Never stopped seeing beauty in everything. Even when the doctors gave up, she'd have me wheel her to the window to watch the light change on the fells."

Alice found herself opening her sketchbook, turning to a half-finished drawing. "I'm not sure I see things clearly enough yet."

The man's laugh was warm like honey. "Nobody does at first. That's the journey, isn't it? Learning to see." He pointed to a shadowed corner of her sketch. "You've caught something there, though. The way the light breaks through."

"My mother would have done it better," Alice said softly.

"Another artist?"

"Yes. She's... gone now."

"Then you're carrying something precious." He stood with a slight groan. "Don't let anyone tell you it's not worth carrying."

As he walked away, Alice called after him, "I won't."

And for the first time in months, she actually believed it.

Crossing the road, Alice's steps slowed as she approached the old-fashioned greengrocer's shop, her gaze captured by the vivid tableau in front of the old shop windows. The array of produce was a riot of colours that seemed to dance before her eyes, the tiered arena of weathered wooden boxes, a still life awaiting the stroke of a brush. Red and yellow peppers lay in a cosy embrace, nestled against the purple-tinged shallots and paper-thin brown onion skins. Bunches of bananas curled like golden crescents amidst the citrus medley of oranges, their pebbled skins ranging from navel to blood-orange hues. The lush greens of sprout stalks, firm cabbages, and dark kale formed a backdrop that brought the brighter colours into stark, beautiful focus.

A breath caught in Alice's throat as memories of her mother flooded through her. Punnets of open raspberries and strawberries brought back images of summers past, laying out desserts with fresh fruits covered with crumbled meringue and cream for her dad's friends. Each vegetable held its own memory; the shared moments of selecting fresh produce together, the communal act of creation as they transformed ingredients into meals filled with love and laughter. Alice

felt the old yearning stir within her, the desire to capture such beauty and share it as her mother once had, with boldness, with colour, imbued with life. Behind her father's blustering expectations, she sensed his own form of love, rough-hewn and obscured by shared grief.

Wiping dampness from her eyes, Alice continued up the hill where ancient stone cottages lined the tree-shaded path. Their autumn flower borders and narrow passageways opening into hidden courtyards whispered stories of centuries past. She paused before a stout wooden gate with carved shields, glimpsing a secret garden beyond, a cobbled courtyard sanctuary crowned by a three-tiered fountain. Her fingers twitched with the urge to capture it on paper, but uncertainty held her back. Professor Blick's condescending voice echoed in her mind, threatening to eclipse her creativity.

"Perhaps another day," she whispered, clutching her sketchbook tighter as she continued her ascent toward the castle.

Paying her fee, she passed through the gates, and a reverent hush seemed to settle over her. The tall keep, Caesar's Tower, as locals fondly named it, dominated the landscape with stoic grandeur. Its imposing stone pink and grey walls spoke of past sieges and noble defences yet stood now as a guardian to peace and history.

The climb to the top via the twisting, narrow, uneven stone steps was a winding journey through time, each step taking her higher above the world she knew. From the roof walk, Appleby lay sprawled beneath beyond the wooded parkland, like a painting, every home and pasture a deliberate stroke of an unseen artist's brush. To the east, the towering fells rose with dramatic assurance, their peaks rounded against the softness of the sky. Southward, the Yorkshire Dales unfolded in rugged splendour, a tapestry of green and brown undulating into the horizon.

And there, to the west, the distant Lake District mountains awaited the setting sun, which would soon cloak them in hues of orange and pink, a daily masterpiece unmarred by human hand. Alice's heart swelled within her chest, a crescendo of emotion that blurred her vision momentarily. She steadied herself against the ancient castellated stone walls, thinking of her mother, whose love for nature's palette had first inspired Alice to pick up a brush.

The professor's voice, once a looming spectre in her thoughts, faded here amidst the vastness of the rugged landscape. In this elevated solitude, his words were distant echoes overpowered by the call of her

dreams. She opened her sketchbook, pages fluttering in the gentle breeze, ready to capture the essence of this moment.

'Art,' she whispered, 'is not confined to canvas and walls.' It was alive, breathing in the rolling hills from the top of the stately tower and the air she breathed. With a tender pencil stroke, she began to sketch, her hand moving confidently, spurred by the stunning vista before her.

Alice descended the steep path by the castle moat, her footsteps softened by the thick carpet of pine needles beneath her boots. The ancient yew trees stood guard on either side, their twisted limbs entwined with centuries' secrets. The fading light filtered through their dense canopy, dappling the ground with a mosaic of shadows and light. As she reached the riverbank, the day's last light clung to the water, turning it into a ribbon of molten gold. Alice paused, allowing the serene beauty to wash over her.

Retracing her steps, she went back through the town, quieter now with far fewer people, some of the shops already shut. Turning off by the bridge she followed the riverside path, passing the ancient church, its tower piercing the twilight sky like a silent sentinel. She marvelled at how its worn stones had weathered the passage of time, each one a testament to endurance and faith of the future. The Georgian and Victorian houses lined the streets like esteemed elders, their golden windows reflecting the dying embers of daylight. In this town where history whispered from every corner, she sensed a kinship with those who dared to dream before her.

As the evening chill settled, Alice wrapped her coat tighter around her, comforted by the thought of tomorrow. With fresh sketches waiting to spring to life and the hues of Appleby etched in her heart, she knew the journey ahead was hers to paint.

Alice navigated through the network of ancient wiends that lay to the western side of town. The information boards she had paused to read moments ago had detailed these narrow passageways, their stones worn smooth by the passage of countless feet over centuries. A shiver of intrigue traced her spine as she considered how these streets once served as bulwarks against marauders, the Scots and the notorious Border Reivers. The history in the air felt almost tangible, like a mist that clung to the weathered stones and whispered secrets of survival and resilience.

Her mission this evening was clear, etched into her mind like the memories of her university days. She remembered the vivid conversations with university friends, their excitement about an art shop that seemed to exist out of time, a repository of colours and

dreams nestled in a town smaller than the village where her father resided.

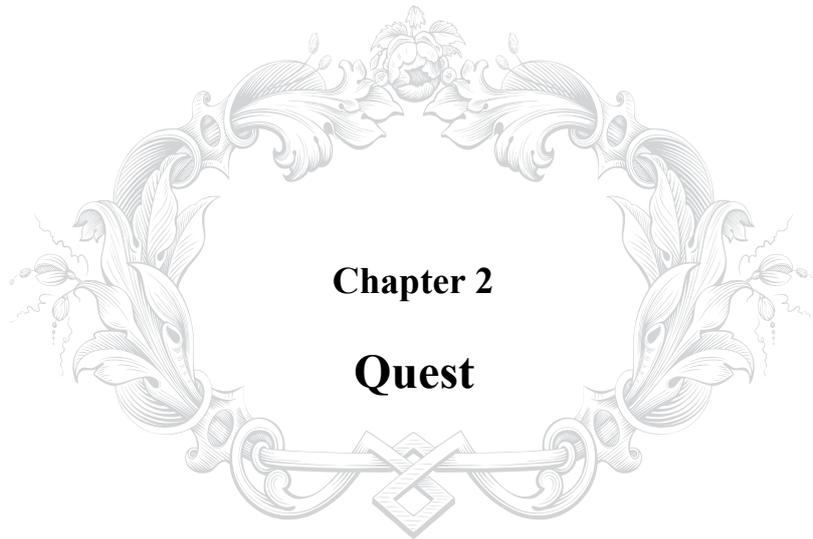
A soft glow from a nearby street lamp illuminated the road ahead, casting Alice's shadow against the uneven stone walls as she moved with determined steps. The quaint little art shop her peers had praised beckoned to her, a beacon for her artistic soul. The light falling through the old windows patterning the road as dusk fell. It represented more than just a place; it was a tangible symbol of her choice to pursue what felt right to her heart.

'Tomorrow, I'll step into that shop, and who knows what worlds will open up?' The thought ignited a fire within her, dispelling the shadows of past criticisms. Through the mullioned windows, she watched as the sweet little lady within moved with unhurried grace, her hands deftly closing each shutter over the windows that held jars glittering like a treasure trove of gemstones.

The last glimmers of sunlight caught the edges of the jars inside, sending prisms of light dancing across the room. It was a sight that tugged at her soul, beckoning her inner artist to come forth and play with these hues, to give life to the landscapes and emotions that churned within her. The shop's quaintness and shelves laden with hundreds of rich tones spoke to her of history and tradition, a lineage of artists who painted their dreams with the very essence of the land.

The old Colour Maker's House, not as tall as its neighbours, stood resolute and steadfastly proud against the passage of time, its walls having witnessed the birth of countless masterpieces. There was an air of reverence, as if the cobblestones and timbers were infused with the silent echoes of inspiration.

As the little silver-haired lady secured the final shutter, the click of the latch seemed to close more than just the shop; it felt like the closing of a day, the end of a chapter. Yet for Alice, it was the promise of a new beginning that she would step into when the dawn returned to warm the old stone buildings once more. With a nod to herself, affirming her return on the morrow, Alice stepped back from the window. Her heart held the comforting weight of purpose. Her mind buzzed with anticipation for the colours that awaited her.



The early morning sun cast long shadows across the broad width of Boroughgate. Delivery vehicles waited patiently while others unloaded goods at open shops. As Alice made her way back to the shop, she sensed an air of excitement in the new day. Passing the bakery, the smell of freshly baked bread wafting from the open door made her mouth water.

Her pace quickened as bright sunlight shone down on the narrow street, illuminating the sign hanging above the ancient, heavy wooden doors in the centre of the building. They creaked and protested as the little old lady pulled them open. A symphony of scents enveloped her as they escaped through the open door, each note a testament to the artistry that had breathed life into the venerable space for centuries.

The sharp tang of turpentine cut through the air, an invigorating and inspiring call to creation. At the same time, the sweet, homely scent of linseed oil hummed a mellow tune, grounding and inspiring. Earthy notes of pigments, harvested from far-flung corners of the globe, danced in harmony with the wood smoke spiralling lazily from the big old-fashioned fireplace in the shop.

Alice paused just inside the doorway, her eyes wide with wonder and her heart beating with eager anticipation. Above her, low wooden beams bore silent witness to the legacy they upheld, and Alice felt a

deep reverence for the artists who had come before her. Each groove in the timber seemed etched with the whispers of artists past, their dreams suspended in the dust motes that floated in the slanting light. Venturing deeper, her footsteps soft on the worn stone floor, her gaze flitting from one marvel to the next.

Hiding the wall, opposite the mullioned windows, were shelves rising from the floor to the bowed beams supporting the floor above. They were heavily laden with jars of varying sizes displaying every imaginable colour. On one shelf, vibrant reds stood out, with jars of crimson and scarlet radiating energy that suggested both the passionate embrace of love and the lurking edge of danger. Below them, the intense yellows shone like captured rays of sunlight, offering a comforting warmth that enveloped the space in a cosy embrace.

Before her stretched a vast expanse of Caribbean and Mediterranean blues, ranging from the pale azure of the sky to the deep, inky Prussian blue tones of midnight. These colours represented the dreams of those who dared to dip their brushes into the essence of the sky and ocean, striving to capture their vastness on canvas. Greens were abundant as well, varying from the rich viridian of forest canopies to the delicate whisper of lichen clinging to ancient stones.

The pigments in another corner, first appearing white were unlike any other, on closer inspection shimmering and glinting in the dappled sunlight that filtered through the small windows. The mother-of-pearl hues whispered secrets of the deep, their iridescence captivating Alice's artistic soul. Golds, silvers, and metallic shades beyond imagination called out to her, each bottle resembling a treasure trove fit for royalty. Yet, here they sat, within reach of her eager fingers, contained in glass bottles and wax-sealed vials like potions in an old apothecary.

Alice's heart swelled with a sense of connection to the lineage of artists who had once stood where she now stood, their hands stained with the very colours surrounding her. It was as though the room itself held memories, echoing back the laughter and sighs of those who had poured their souls into their work.

Letting her fingers trace the cool surfaces of the reflective glass jars as they bounced light around the room, Alice knew that beyond the myriad of colours lay something more profound, a chance to cast off the shackles of expectation and weave her destiny with bold strokes of defiance and beauty. A gateway to the future she dared to claim.

With its deep emotional resonance, the sheer vibrancy and range of the historic blue bice caught her attention amidst the range of jars lining the aged wooden shelves. The bice pigments were like fragments of nostalgic tropical blue skies, reminding her of family holidays long past. The delicate blue sky of dawn above the pyramids, the warm turquoise of a Thailand sea, the cooler turquoise of a Hebridean sea. So many shards of the elusive celestial blues that had somehow found their way to this quaint shop hidden down the narrow side street. Each shade of blue held a memory, a story, a piece of her past.

Alice held her breath, lost in the potential of the unusual, historical, and intensely vibrant blues, only recently re-introduced to the modern artist's palette. These blues were rediscovered from recipe books in a secret hidden hole under the stairs of this very building. This discovery filled her with excitement and anticipation.

Her mind's eye painted vast canvases: skylines where this blue deepened from the zenith to the soft blush of dawn at the horizon, seascapes with warm, gentle turquoise blue waves that lapped against white sandy shores. This was the blue of dreams, the blue that spoke of distant journeys and the courage to dive into the abyss of one's aspirations.

A voice drifted to her ears, pulling her from the embrace of images.

"Can I help you, dear?" The words rippled through her like a soft wave, pulling her back from the edge of her daydreams.

She spun around, still holding the jar of blue bice, and met the eyes of the little old lady who had locked up the shop the night before. The same soft smile graced her wrinkled face, inviting trust and confiding whispers.

"Your shop is like stepping into another world," Alice said, her voice soft and filled with wonder. "I've never seen anything like it, these blues especially." She held up the jar of bice.

The old lady's eyes crinkled with interest. "I'm Margaret, though most folks around here call me Maggie."

"I'm Alice," she replied, carefully returning the jar to its shelf.

"The Ruskin School of Art at Oxford, that's where you studied, isn't it?" Maggie asked perceptively. "That's quite prestigious."

Alice's surprise must have shown on her face. Maggie smiled knowingly. "Something in the way you examine the pigments. You have a trained eye and your friends told me they send you here."

"I left six months ago," Alice said, turning away slightly to examine another row of pigments.

"And yet here you are, in a shop full of pigments far from Oxford." Her eyes twinkled. "That tells me something important about you, Alice."

Maggie moved to a workbench, her small frame dwarfed by the ancient wooden surface. "This place has quite an effect on people. For over three centuries, we've been making pigments here for artists of all kinds—those just beginning their journey and legends like Turner, Potter, and John Ruskin himself."

Alice gasped at the names. "Did they stand right here, where I am?"

"Perhaps," Maggie replied, her voice bridging time. "The walls of this place have absorbed artists' dreams and aspirations. Now, it listens for yours." She paused, studying Alice's face. "What do you want to create that's uniquely yours?"

The question hung in the air between them, both challenging and liberating. Alice had been so focused on failing to meet others' expectations that she'd stopped asking herself what she actually wanted to paint.

"I'm not sure anymore," she admitted, vulnerability evident in her voice.

"What draws you to these colours?" Maggie asked, beginning to organize jars on the counter.

Alice's eyes lit up despite herself. "The way they capture feeling, not just appearance. A beautiful sunset that makes your heart ache, water you could almost feel running through your fingers."

Maggie nodded. "That's what matters in the end, not technique alone, but how the work makes people feel."

"My mother used to say the same thing," Alice said softly.

"Smart woman, your mother," Maggie said with a decisive nod. "My husband Thomas would have liked her. He has little patience for academics who've lost their soul to technique."

Alice perked up at the mention. "Your husband is he here? My friends who told me about this place mentioned him specifically."

"Not today. He's gathering new materials from the fells," Maggie replied. "Some of our rarest pigments come from the local landscape, colours you won't find anywhere else in the world."

"Like Turner's Pendragon Gold?" Alice asked, pointing to a jar she'd noticed earlier.

Maggie's eyebrows rose in appreciation. "You have a good eye. Yes, exactly like that. Thomas could tell you stories about each colour that would make your head spin—histories, mysteries, and secrets passed down through generations of colour makers."

Alice felt a flutter of excitement. "I'd love to learn."

Maggie came around the counter and took Alice's hands in her own. They were small but strong, stained with decades of working with pigments.

"My dear, this shop has always been a sanctuary for seekers, for dreamers and those that are plain curious. Those who know there's something more to discover about colour, about art, about themselves." She squeezed Alice's hands gently. "Thomas doesn't teach just anyone, but I have a feeling about you."

"What kind of feeling?" Alice asked, hope rising unbidden in her chest.

"That you came here for more than just pigments," Maggie said simply. "Come with me, and I will show you how we craft and magic these colours from the earth. Then tomorrow, when Thomas will be back, you can tell him what you've learned."

Alice followed her through a heavy oak door at the back of the shop. A soft shimmer seemed to dance in the air around them, wrapping them in an enchanting embrace that made Alice's skin tingle with anticipation.

The workshop beyond was a revelation. Sunlight slanted through tall, narrow windows, bathing the space in a golden hue that felt almost alive, casting ethereal shapes that flickered like spirits along the ancient stone walls. The room breathed with history, low beamed ceilings darkened by centuries of woodsmoke, worn flagstone floors that dipped in the center from countless footsteps.

Alice sank into the cushions strewn across the window seat, the sun's warmth a gentle caress against her back. From this vantage point, she could observe the entire workshop, alive with the quiet activity of creation.

Two younger artisans worked at ancient wooden benches that bore witness to countless hours of meticulous craftsmanship. Their hands, stained with patches of indigo, umber, and vermilion, moved with practiced precision. One woman with a tight silver braid hanging

down her back used a glass muller to grind pigment against a marble slab in hypnotic circular motions. Beside her, a young bearded man with rolled sleeves carefully measured drops of amber liquid into a small ceramic bowl.

"That's Eliza and James," Maggie explained, following Alice's gaze. "Eliza has been with us for twenty years. James is newer—only five years, but he has an extraordinary gift for creating metallic based pigments."

"It feels like stepping back in time," Alice murmured, watching as Eliza lifted her muller to reveal a streak of cobalt so intense it seemed to vibrate.

"We work much as colour-makers have for centuries," Maggie said, moving to a worn oak cabinet. She opened it to reveal rows of mortars and pestles in various sizes, some tiny enough to fit in her palm, others large enough to require both hands. "Each pigment demands its own approach, some need gentle persuasion, others require force to reveal their true nature."

Alice leaned forward, her gaze following Maggie's every movement. The rhythmic dance of palette knives mixing hues spoke of earthy forests and deep oceans, the careful pouring of viscous binders into the heart of dimpled piles of powdered pigments. Every motion was an art form in itself.

"Where do the materials come from?" Alice asked, noticing the collection of glass jars that lined the far wall. Some were filled with crystals, others with lumps of broken stone, various shades of red and bright yellow rocks, chunks of marble, chalk, fragments of soapstone, and broken pieces of alabaster.

Maggie's face lit up as she moved to the jars. "Everywhere and anywhere. The local slate quarries provide these greens." She pointed to a jar of rough grey stones. "When ground fine and treated properly, they yield colours you'd never imagine were hiding inside such humble rock."

She selected a piece and handed it to Alice. "Feel its weight, its texture."

The stone was cool and surprisingly heavy in Alice's palm. Nothing about its dull exterior hinted at the green Maggie claimed lurked within. "How do you transform it?"

Maggie's smile deepened. "That's where the magic begins." She took the stone back and placed it in a small brass mortar. "Watch."

With practiced movements, she began to crush the stone, adding small amounts of water as she worked. "Thomas, my husband, is the true alchemist. He knows every stone, every mineral, every plant that can yield colour. When he returns from the fells tomorrow, you'll see."

As she spoke, the grey dust in the mortar began to change, darkening, showing hints of green, a soft humid rain coloured green, that grew more pronounced with each turn of the pestle.

"Is it just grinding?" Alice asked, moving closer.

"Sometimes. But other pigments require fire, or acids, or time to mature." Maggie gestured toward an ancient stove in the corner where several small crucibles glowed with a dull red heat. "Heat can transform a muddy brown or yellow into the most brilliant reds."

Alice was transfixed. The art she had studied seemed suddenly sterile, divorced from this primal connection to the earth. How many artists truly understood the origins of the colours they used, the alchemy that brought them into being?

Her eyelids grew heavy despite her fascination. The soporific melody of others' productivity, combined with the warmth of the room and her own fatigue from the journey to Appleby, coaxed her toward slumber. The small vial of golden ochre that Maggie had pressed into her hand earlier lay beside her sketchbook, a talisman of her newfound allegiance to a craft that had spanned generations.

A soft sigh escaped Alice's lips as her head dipped, chin touching chest in a moment of repose. But the sudden realization of her drifting consciousness jolted her awake, cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I didn't sleep much last night..."

Maggie waved away her apology with a gentle hand. "No need for that. The workshop has that effect, there's something about watching colour being made that soothes the soul."

Alice straightened, determined to stay alert. "I was fascinated by how the simple act of grinding can draw out such beauty from something so ordinary as stone. Who first discovered these techniques? These transformations?"

"That's a question Thomas loves to answer," Maggie replied, carefully adding a drop of oil to her mixture. "Some methods date back to prehistoric cave paintings, others were jealously guarded secrets of medieval guilds. Many were lost and rediscovered through the centuries." Her eyes met Alice's. "Thomas has spent his life collecting these forgotten recipes, testing them, refining them."

"And recording them?" Alice asked, her academic mind suddenly engaged.

"Yes, though not always in ways others might understand." Maggie's answer was cryptic, her smile knowing. "His workshop journals are... unique."

Alice felt a shiver of excitement. Perhaps here, among these ancient methods and forgotten knowledge, she might find what had been missing from her studies, a connection not just to technique, but to the very soul of artistic creation.

"Would he," she began hesitantly, then gathered her courage. "Would Thomas consider teaching someone? I know I've only just arrived, but I feel... drawn to this."

Maggie set down her pestle, the blue in her mortar now impossibly vibrant against the brass. "Thomas doesn't take students often. But there's something about you, Alice." She studied Alice's face intently. "You remind me of someone who came here many moons ago, another dreamer, a young lady who looked very similar to you."

"Who?" Alice asked.

"Your mother, Liz," Maggie replied simply.

Alice's breath caught. "My mother came here? To this shop?"

Maggie nodded. "Many years ago, before you were born, I think. Thomas would remember more clearly. Her work with colour was intuitive, remarkable."

The revelation struck Alice like a physical blow. Another connection to her mother, one she'd never known existed. Had her mother kept this place secret deliberately, or had she simply never found the right moment to share it?

"I had no idea," Alice whispered, imagining her mother in this very room, perhaps sitting where she now sat, watching the same ancient processes.

"The path to finding one's artistic voice is rarely straight," Maggie said gently. "Sometimes we must wander a while, even circle back, before we discover where we were meant to be."

The setting sun painted the room in hues of gold and amber, casting long shadows that danced across the stone floor. Alice's heart swelled with a quiet resolve. Her mother had walked these floors, perhaps learned these same techniques, not a burden to measure up to, but a connection, a shared journey across time.

"Thank you," Alice said softly, her voice carrying the weight of gratitude and newfound purpose. "For everything."

Maggie smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Our doors are always open to those who seek the alchemy of colour. You're part of our tapestry now."

As the day drew to a close, the workshop settled into evening's calm as things were put away for the next day of creation. Eliza and James bid them goodnight, their footsteps fading down a back staircase.

"Will you return tomorrow?" Maggie asked, as she walked Alice to the shop's front door. "Thomas should be back by in the morning."

"Yes," Alice replied without hesitation. "I'll be here."

As she stepped outside, the cool evening air brushed against her skin. Taking a deep breath, Alice realized that Appleby was already feeling more like a spiritual home than just a distant place on a map. It was a sanctuary where her artistic soul had found kinship. In this haven, dreams were not just flights of fancy but could become a reality of beauty that could set the world on fire.

And now, with the discovery that her mother had also sought wisdom within these walls, Alice felt the first tendrils of understanding. Her mother's artistic legacy wasn't a shadow to escape, but a path to follow—one that might lead her to the artist she was meant to become.



Chapter 3
Colour Maker

As she passed the post office, Alice's steps quickened, drawing her inexorably toward the cream-ochre facade of the Colour Maker's House just around the corner. The golden portcullis, an old fire insurance mark high on the wall, shone like a beacon in the bright autumn sun.

Approaching the door, she noticed the thick layers of accumulated paint adorning the wood, which seemed to chronicle the passage of time. Each mark and dent revealed another chapter in the history of the countless dreamers who had dared to cross its threshold.

The bell above the shop door sounded softly as she entered. Maggie, the same old lady from yesterday, stood near the counter, her eyes twinkling behind round spectacles. Her hands rested atop a cane adorned with intricate carvings. "Ah, there you are," she said, her voice aged like fine wine, rich with the timbre of wisdom. "I wondered if you'd return."

"I couldn't stay away," Alice admitted, moving farther into the shop. "After yesterday, this place hasn't left my thoughts."

"I'm not surprised," Maggie said with a knowing smile. "When my husband came back, I told him about you. There's something special

about the way you connect to colour. It's not just about the surface; it's about the stories within each shade."

"Your husband, is he here today?" Alice asked, trying to keep the eagerness from her voice. Her friends who had visited Appleby had spoken of him with such reverence, describing a man who understood colour as if it were a living language.

Maggie nodded. "He returned from the fells late last night. He's in the workshop now." She studied Alice's face. "What is it you're seeking here?"

The question caught Alice off guard. What was she seeking?

"I need to find my own voice," she finally said, the words emerging with unexpected clarity.

Maggie's expression softened. "Artists," she spoke as if reading the unvoiced questions in Alice's eyes, "are often lured here by an invisible thread. Your journey, my dear, will be painted not only on canvas but on the canvas of your being." She reached for Alice's hand. "Would you like to meet the master colour maker?"

The invitation hung in the air, a golden key proffered to unlock doors of possibility. "He has been awaiting someone who can see beyond the obvious, a visionary like yourself."

"Lead the way," Alice replied, her voice a mere whisper, yet resolute.

Maggie nodded with sage understanding and led Alice through the shop, past the main staircase, toward the workshop at the back.

The workshop was transformed by morning light compared to her visit yesterday. A wave of heat washed over her as she entered, pushing the early chill from her skin. The Victorian range commanded attention, standing proud within the embrace of the immense plain stone chimney breast. Pans sat upon iron trivets, their contents murmuring softly, bubbles breaking the surface of the powder in lazy succession. The red glow emanating from the firebox seemed disproportionate to the room's modest dimensions, creating an overwhelming presence.

"Welcome, Alice," called a low voice, warm and imbued with the timbre of experience.

At the central table stood a man whose presence immediately drew her gaze. His shoulder-length silver-streaked hair fell in disarray around his shoulders, framing a face weathered by years spent under the sun

and moon. His eyes, a striking sea-green, crinkled at the corners as he smiled.

"Welcome to the Colour Maker's House," he greeted. "I am Thomas, the keeper of this sanctuary for artists."

Alice was immediately drawn to his magnetic presence. Behind him, shelves displayed jars of powdered colours, each labeled with meticulous calligraphy. The white of his beard was peppered with traces of colour, and his dusty leather and velvet tailcoat seemed a uniform of his devotion to the art.

"You must be Thomas," she said, the name feeling both foreign and familiar on her lips. "Maggie said you might be willing to speak with me."

"Indeed," he replied, setting down a small brass mortar he'd been using. "My wife mentioned you yesterday, said you had a remarkable sensitivity to colour." He gestured to a stool near the workbench. "Please, join me."

Alice moved forward, her attention momentarily captured by the hypnotic dance of light reflecting off the myriad jars that lined the shelves.

"Your shop is extraordinary," she said, settling onto the stool. "I've never seen anything like it."

Thomas smiled. "It has stood here for centuries, though I've only been its keeper for thirty years. The colour makers before me left their legacy in these walls, in these recipes." He indicated the worn leather-bound books marked with interesting symbols on a nearby shelf. "Some of our methods date back to the Renaissance, others are even older."

"My friends who studied with me at Oxford told me about your shop," Alice explained. "They said you create colours unlike any others."

"Did they now?" Thomas's eyes sparkled with quiet pride. "And what brings you here, Alice? What do you seek from these old pigments and ancient methods?"

The directness of his question momentarily startled her. She glanced down at her hands, remembering how her mother's had always been stained with colour.

"I want to learn," she said finally, raising her eyes to meet his. "I finished my studies but struggle to understand how to earn a living as an artist like my mother. Something was missing."

"And who was your mother?" Thomas asked unexpectedly.

"Liz Harper," Alice replied, watching his face for recognition.

Thomas's expression shifted dramatically, his eyes widening as he stepped back slightly. "Liz Harper?" he repeated, his voice suddenly thick with emotion. "My God... Liz Harper's daughter."

"You knew her?" Alice's heart quickened.

Thomas nodded slowly, his gaze distant as if looking into the past. "Knew her? She worked alongside me in this very room, many years ago." He gestured to a worn workbench in the corner. "That was her station. We were both apprentices under old Ebenezer, the Colour Maker before me."

"What?" Alice could barely breathe. Her mother had never mentioned this connection, this vital piece of her artistic history.

"Liz was brilliant," Thomas continued, a wistful smile playing on his lips. "She had an intuitive understanding of pigments that even Ebenezer remarked upon. The way she would blend colours... it was like watching someone speak in their native tongue."

He moved to a small cabinet and withdrew a leather-bound album. Carefully opening it, he revealed a faded photograph of two young people standing before the range, both with pigment-stained hands and bright eyes. "This was us, nearly forty years ago."

Alice stepped closer, her hands trembling as she recognized her mother's face, so young, so full of life and possibility. "She never told me," she whispered.

"She worked here for almost three years," Thomas said. "Then she received an opportunity for that exhibition in Edinburgh. Her landscapes caused quite a sensation, she had a way of capturing light that seemed almost supernatural. After that, her career took flight, and she moved on from Appleby."

Thomas gently closed the album. "I followed her work over the years, of course. I even travelled to Oxford for her retrospective exhibition. Her use of colour was... extraordinary. Always. She never forgot what she learned here, but she transformed it into something uniquely her own."

Alice nodded, a bittersweet ache flowering in her chest. "That was her. She died three years ago."

"I'm sorry," Thomas said, and the simple words carried genuine empathy. "And your professor, he knew her?"

"Professor Blick," Alice confirmed. "He knew her when they were young. I think they were...involved at one point." She hadn't meant to reveal this, but something about Thomas invited confidence.

Thomas's expression darkened momentarily. "I remember Blick. He came here once with your mother." His voice took on an edge Alice hadn't heard before. "He had theories about art, but no feeling for it. He could analyze but not create."

"You met him?" Alice asked, surprised by this new connection.

"Once was enough," Thomas replied with a wry smile. "He dismissed what we do here as 'folk art', beneath serious academic consideration."

Alice suddenly understood her professor's dismissal of her interest in traditional pigments and techniques. It wasn't just about her; it was part of an old conflict that predated her.

"What was my mother like here?" she asked, eager to hear about a side of her mother she'd never known.

Thomas's face softened. "Fearless. Curious. She would experiment for days to achieve just the right shade." He walked to a shelf and pulled down a small journal bound in faded green leather. "She kept notes. I've safeguarded them, thinking she might return for them one day." He handed Alice the journal. The handwriting inside, precise yet flowing, was unmistakably her mother's. The journal contained pages of formulas, sketches of the local landscape, and notes on light and shadow. It was like finding a hidden treasure map to her mother's artistic development.

"I want to learn everything about colour," Alice said, carefully closing the precious journal. "I have dreams and ideas but don't know how to make them real. How to make them mine, not just echoes of what I've seen before."

Thomas nodded, his eyes softening. "The academy teaches you to see art as others have seen it. Here, we teach you to see as you alone can see." He leaned forward slightly. "Your mother found her voice here, not by imitating others but by discovering the colours that spoke to her soul."

He turned, gesturing to the room with a sweep of his hand. "Come," he beckoned. "Let us begin to discover the alchemy of art and how to portray the invisible spirit of emotion that makes life worth living." Alice rose, following him to the far side of the room where a collection of blue pigments stood in careful arrangement on a shelf. The room was filled with the earthy scent of the pigments, and the sunlight streaming through the window cast a warm glow on the

scene. Thomas lifted one jar, a stunning cobalt that vibrated with intensity, and the colour seemed to leap out, almost tangible. "Colours are not just hues," he murmured, his voice as textured as the pigments he caressed. "They're the echoes of history, curiosity, inquiry; they are the whispers of the earth and the language of the heart." Each colour, he explained, had a story to tell, a narrative that could stir the soul and evoke deep emotions. Alice felt the weight of centuries in his words, envisioning the generations of artists who had stood where she now stood, each seeking to capture something intangible on canvas. "Each shade is a narrative," Thomas continued, holding up another jar containing a rich ochre that seemed to glow with the last rays of a dying sun. "They tell tales of ancient seas, battles fought on distant shores, and peaceful dawns that promised new beginnings." "How do you know which colours to use?" Alice asked. "At school, we were taught colour theory, the colour wheel, complementary colours—but it always felt so... clinical." Thomas chuckled. "Those are merely the grammar rules of colour. Necessary, yes, but no more capable of creating art than knowing grammar can make one a poet." He set down the ochre and lifted a vial of deep green. "True mastery comes from understanding the emotional language of colour, how it speaks to the human spirit." "That's what my mother always said," Alice whispered. "She told me to paint what I felt, not just what I saw." "Wise advice," Thomas nodded. "The greatest art transcends mere representation. It conveys emotion, spirit, the invisible currents that move beneath the surface of life." He studied her face. "What do you feel when you look at this?" He held up a spherical jar containing a gentle blue so magically vibrant it seemed to hold a fragment of sky within its glassy confines. The substance inside shimmered with an ethereal quality. "It's... hopeful," Alice said, surprised by her immediate response. "Like the moment just before dawn breaks, when anything seems possible." Thomas smiled a flash of approval in his eyes. "That's bice blue, created from copper minerals gathered from the nearby copper mines in the fells. Each batch is unique, influenced by the specific rocks, the water, and even the collection season." Alice's fingers grazed the cold, smooth surface of the jar. "It's beautiful." "I can teach you to see not just with your eyes but with your heart," Thomas said, placing the jar into her hands. "The academy taught you to analyze art. Here, you'll learn to feel it." He moved to a workbench where several small panels had been

prepared with gesso. "At Oxford, did they teach you to make your own panels, grind your pigments, mix your own mediums?"

Alice shook her head. "We used commercial paints, ready-made canvases."

"There's your first disconnect," Thomas said, not unkindly. When you separate the artist from the materials, you create a barrier between intention and execution." He handed her a small, smooth, white wooden panel. "Here, you'll begin at the beginning."

"The materials themselves become part of your expression," Thomas continued. "When you dig earth from the hillside, grind it to powder, bind it with oils you've pressed yourself—every step connects you to the final image in ways no factory-made paint can match."

"Is that what made my mother's work special?" Alice asked. "This connection to the raw materials?"

"Partly," Thomas nodded. "But more importantly, she learned to trust her instincts, to let the colours guide her rather than forcing them into predetermined patterns."

He moved his hand through a shaft of sunlight streaming from the window, particles swirling around his fingers like fireflies at twilight.

"These colours are not mere pigments on a canvas; they hold power to transform our emotions, our perceptions, and even our very selves."

"colours," his voice dropped to a reverent whisper, "can lift your spirits, infuse joy into your heart, or envelop you in sorrow, causing tears to flow like forgotten memories. After over fifty years as an artist, I'm still unravelling the mysteries of how colour communicates feelings to the viewer."

Alice felt her heart flutter with every word as if they were incantations drawing her closer to an unseen realm. The air seemed to hum with unspoken secrets.

"Will you teach me these stories?" she asked, her voice steady despite the fluttering in her chest. I want to learn how to weave them into my art and share them with the world."

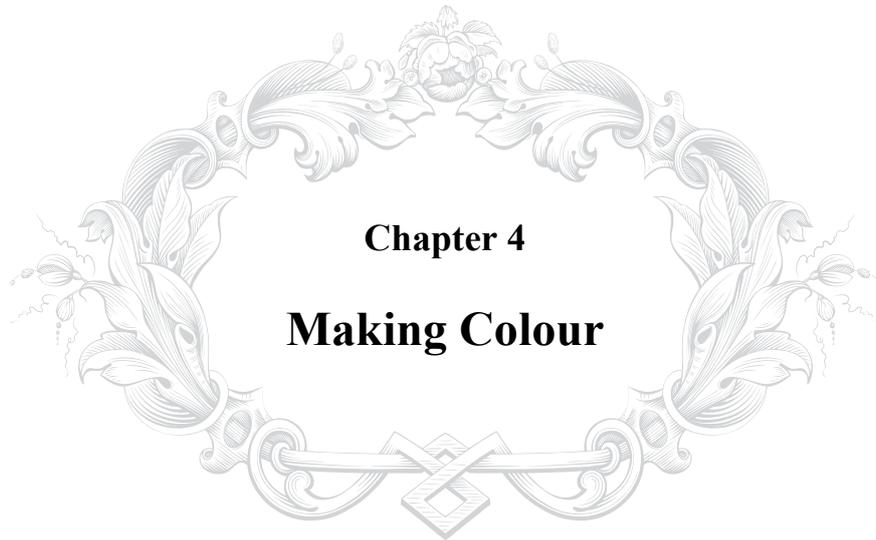
"Patience and courage," replied Thomas, his hand reaching out to gently close her fingers around the jar of bice blue. "The learning journey is long. It is a marathon, not a quick sprint. But together, we'll explore every shade and every hue until the story within you unfolds upon the canvas."

Alice nodded, a solemn vow forming in her heart. In this place, among these vessels of eternal colour, following in her mother's footsteps yet blazing her own trail, she would find her true palette and, with it, the freedom to create her masterpiece.

"When can we begin?" she asked.

"We already have," Thomas replied with a smile that seemed to illuminate the room more brightly than the fire ever could.

As the morning light shifted through the windows, casting new patterns on the worn stone flags, Alice felt something within herself shifting too, a reclamation of purpose, a rekindling of the passion that had been smothered but never fully extinguished. In the Colour Maker's workshop, surrounded by jars of possibility and guided by hands that understood the soul of pigment, her journey was finally, truly beginning.



Chapter 4

Making Colour

Alice's fingers danced with a settle tremor as she reached for the jar, the coarse texture of its yellowing, stained paper label brushing delicately against her skin. Within, the vibrant yellow powder seemed to encapsulate the very essence of sunlight, sparkling like tiny grains of gold captured in a crystalline embrace.

"Dufton Pike Yellow Ochre," she read aloud, her voice imbued with reverence.

Her eyes sparkled with inquisitiveness as she turned the jar in her hands. "So, how exactly do you make this?"

Thomas chuckled softly, a sound reminiscent of the gentle rustling of ancient parchment. He had a habit of tugging at his left earlobe when pleased by a question, a gesture Alice had begun to notice. His cobalt blue eyes crinkled at the corners beneath unruly silver eyebrows that refused to be tamed.

"Ah, Dufton Pike Yellow Ochre," he mused, taking the jar from Alice's hands and placing it carefully on the table. "Within this jar lies not just a colour but the intricate alchemy of earth and time."

He reached for his worn leather notebook, never far from his side, and flipped it open to a page filled with sketches of the surrounding

landscape, annotations crowding the margins in a spidery hand. Several alchemical symbols were carefully drawn beside various locations, the symbol for iron, a circle with an arrow projecting from it, appearing most frequently.

"Creating ochre is an ancient alchemical practice that connects us to the elemental forces of our landscape," Thomas explained, tapping a sketch of rolling hills marked with the symbol for earth, a downward-pointing triangle bisected by a horizontal line. "This particular shade hails from the foot of the fells near Dufton, a site steeped in geological and alchemical history."

The morning light streamed through the mullioned windows, casting patterns across the wooden workbench between them. Alice noticed a photograph propped against a shelf, a much younger Thomas standing beside a woman with wild hair and paint-stained hands. She wondered about his life beyond these walls.

"You said my mother worked here," Alice ventured, her curiosity getting the better of her. "Did she help make these pigments too?"

Thomas's eyes softened. "Liz was particularly skilled with the blues. She had a patience few possess." He gestured toward the photograph. "That's my wife, Margaret, and me about forty years ago. Your mother would have arrived not long after this was taken."

He returned his attention to the ochre, seemingly eager to continue the lesson. "This part of the world has been sculpted by elemental forces, water, fire, earth, and air, over millennia. Around two hundred and fifty million years ago, great coral reefs of tropical seas were laid bare as sea levels receded, leaving behind pockets of iron-rich sediments that would eventually evolve into the ochre we cherish today."

Alice leaned forward, absorbing his words while trying to imagine her mother in this very room, learning these same ancient techniques.

"First, we honour the earth element by carefully harvesting the raw materials," Thomas continued. "The alchemists of old understood that ochre is more than just dirt, it's a manifestation of iron's spirit, governed by Mars, embedded within the earth's body."

He traced the symbol for Mars in the air, a circle with an arrow extending from it at an angle. "To the alchemists, iron represented strength, courage, and the power to manifest change in the physical world. When we work with ochre, we're not just making colour; we're channeling that Martian energy into our art. All the iron based pigments have similar characteristics including Prussian Blue which is another iron based pigment."

"It's remarkable that something so beautiful comes from dirt," Alice mused, tracing a finger along the edge of the workbench. "My father would never understand this. He sees art as frivolous—a guaranteed path to poverty."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Is that what concerns you? The practical aspects of pursuing art?"

Alice sighed, a sudden heaviness settling in her chest. "My father built a successful business from nothing. He's proud of providing security for our family and sees art as... well, as throwing that security away." She hesitated. "He always says artists don't get rich until they die, if at all."

Thomas snorted, setting down the ochre jar with a decisive thump. "Your father isn't entirely wrong, but he's missing the entire point."

"Which is?" Alice asked.

"That creating art isn't about getting rich. It's about transformation, the core principle of alchemy itself." He gestured expansively around the workshop. "Do I look impoverished to you? I've spent fifty years making colours, selling to artists across the country. I'm not wealthy by your father's standards, perhaps, but I've never once regretted my choice."

He fixed her with a penetrating gaze. "The question isn't whether you can afford to be an artist, Alice. It's whether you can afford not to be. The iron element in ochre embodies will power and assertiveness, qualities you'll need to overcome these obstacles."

The words struck her with unexpected force. She thought of the months since leaving Oxford, the emptiness of not creating, the slow suffocation of denying her true self.

"Would you like to try your hand at it?" Thomas asked, breaking through her reverie. "Making colour, I mean. The alchemical transformation of earth into art."

Alice nodded, grateful for the redirection. "Yes, I'd love to."

Thomas's hands were weathered yet precise as he reached for a heavy bucket concealed beneath the workbench. A faint whistling escaped through his teeth, a quirk that surfaced when he was focused on a task. As he placed the container on the table, the clink of stone against metal reverberated softly.

"This is an iron oxide, a marriage of iron and oxygen that has stained the clay," he explained, scooping up a handful of soft yellow stone

and letting it crumble between his fingers. "It can be found worldwide in various shades, from yellow, red, and orange to rarer blacks and purples." His eyes twinkled. "But it's not just any iron oxide. This is the iron oxide that transforms dreams. The alchemists called it 'crocus martis', the saffron of Mars."

Alice leaned closer, the warmth from the fire in the black iron range brushing her cheeks. The damp earth's rich scent filled her nostrils, grounding her in the moment.

"It's the colour of the golden orange sun setting over distant lakes," Thomas said, a poetic lilt entering his usually practical tone. "You can almost feel the sun's warmth emanating from it, Mars and the Sun in perfect harmony."

The words resonated with Alice, stirring memories of dusks spent chasing the last rays of light with her sketchpad. She remembered Professor Blick's critiques, how they'd stung with their cold precision. But here, that chill was replaced by the nurturing embrace of the Colour Maker's House.

"May I?" she asked tentatively, reaching toward the pale yellow stones.

"Of course," Thomas said, stepping aside. "Feel the weight of earth's element in your palm, the strength of Mars channeled through iron."

Gingerly, she picked up a piece of the stone, feeling its surprisingly light texture. The subtle graininess was comforting, like worn linen or the pages of an old book. She was amazed at how the golden yellow stone coloured the ends of her fingers.

"My mother used to come home with hands stained like this," she whispered, studying her fingertips. "Father would fuss about it, saying it wasn't proper for a lady to be covered in paint."

Thomas leaned against the workbench, crossing his arms. "And what did your mother say to that?"

A small smile tugged at Alice's lips. "She'd tell him that proper ladies made terribly boring artists." The memory warmed her. "Then she'd chase him around the kitchen threatening to put handprints on his clean shirt."

Thomas laughed, a rich, full sound that filled the workshop. "I can picture that. Liz never did have much patience for propriety." He straightened, gesturing to the stone in her hand. "What does that feel like to you? Not just physically, but what does it evoke?"

Alice closed her eyes, focusing on the sensation. "Possibility," she answered after a moment. "Like holding a piece of unmade art. And... grounding, somehow. Like it's connecting me to something ancient."

"Exactly," Thomas said with satisfaction. "That's the earth element you're feeling, stability, grounding, the manifestation of ideas into physical form. Let us begin the transformation. From the earth to the canvas, from raw material to the philosopher's stone of art."

He retrieved a rough glass plate and placed it on the workbench. Beside it, he set a beautifully shaped glass muller with a textured face.

"First, we must grind the stone into a fine powder," he explained. "The finer the grain, the more vibrant the colour. This process is called levigation, a term the alchemists used for the purification of substances."

Taking the muller in hand, Thomas demonstrated the technique, circular motions with even pressure, gradually working from the center outward. The initial harsh grinding sound softened as the ochre surrendered to the process.

"Your turn," he said, offering the muller to Alice.

She took it hesitantly. "What if I do it wrong?"

"There is no 'wrong' in grinding pigment," Thomas replied with a dismissive wave. "There's only effective and ineffective. And the only way to become effective is to try. Remember the Martian qualities of iron—courage and the drive to overcome obstacles."

Alice positioned herself at the plate and began to grind. Her first attempts were awkward, the muller skipping across the surface, pushing rather than grinding the ochre.

"I'm making a mess of it," she muttered, frustration building.

"Here," Thomas said, moving beside her. "May I?" At her nod, he placed his hand over hers, guiding the movement. "Feel the rhythm? Like breath, in and out, round and round. The ancient alchemists believed that circular motion was sacred, mimicking the celestial movements. Don't force it."

Under his guidance, Alice found the motion, and the powdered ochre began to yield to her efforts. A sense of accomplishment washed over her as the stone transformed into a fine dust.

"Professor Blick would never have shown me like this," she said, continuing the circular grinding. "He'd have criticized until I figured it out or gave up."

"Some teachers believe struggle builds character," Thomas said, stepping back to watch her work. "I believe struggle happens naturally enough without manufacturing it. My job is to remove obstacles, not create them."

As Alice worked, sweat beading on her forehead, Thomas moved to the Victorian range and lifted a kettle. "Tea? I can't work without tea. One of my few vices, that and licorice allsorts. Can't resist them." He pulled a small tin from a shelf and popped a candy into his mouth.

The casual gesture, so human, so unlike the almost mystical figure she'd first encountered, made Alice smile. "Yes, please. No sugar for me."

"Sensible," Thomas nodded, preparing the tea. "Sugar masks the complexity of good tea just as artificial colours mask the complexity of true pigments."

Once the ochre was ground to Thomas's satisfaction, he guided Alice through the next steps, adding the powder to water in a glass jar, shaking it vigorously to create a storm of suspended particles.

"Now we introduce the water element," he explained, his voice taking on a reverent quality. "Water symbolizes fluidity and dissolution. In alchemical terms, it represents the process of 'solutio', the breaking down of one form to create another."

He handed the jar to Alice. "Shake it well. Feel the transformation happening. The water element is cleansing the pigment, separating what we want from what we don't, just as it does in our lives, washing away the unnecessary to reveal the essential."

Alice shook the jar vigorously, watching as the particles swirled and danced in their liquid prison.

"We then pour the coloured water through a sieve into shallow trays," he explained, demonstrating the careful process. "The fine particles will settle over a few days. This sedimentation is another alchemical process, what the ancients called 'separatio.'"

"Days?" Alice asked, disappointed. "I thought we'd finish today."

Thomas laughed, his eyes crinkling. "Patience, young artist. Colour-making, like alchemy, is not for those who demand instant results. Nature works on her own schedule, not ours. The transformation of base materials into something precious requires time."

He gestured to another set of trays near the range. "Fortunately, I prepared these earlier. They're at the next stage, ready for drying."

"Could you carefully lift that tray with the clear water and put it on the table?" Thomas asked, pointing.

Alice approached the task with reverence, fingers curling around the tray's edges. She lifted it with utmost care, mindful of the delicate balance of water and pigment.

"Perfect," Thomas praised as she placed it on the table. The sunlight caught the ripples, casting prismatic reflections across the stone walls. "See how the water element has done its work? It's cleansed the ochre, leaving only the finest particles suspended."

"Now, we will let the moisture evaporate," Thomas explained, wiping his hands on his leather apron. "The heat from the range speeds the process. This is 'coagulatio' in alchemical terms, the solidification of the purified substance."

While they waited, Thomas busied himself organizing jars along a shelf. Alice noticed he arranged them not by colour family but in some other order meaningful only to him. She realized with surprise that he had organized them according to their alchemical associations, earthy pigments grouped together, followed by those associated with water, air, and fire.

"May I ask you something?" Alice ventured after a comfortable silence.

"Of course," Thomas replied without turning from his task.

"Did you always know this was your path? Making colours, I mean."

Thomas paused, considering the question. "No," he admitted. "I wanted to be a sailor when I was young. The sea called to me, the water element has always been strong in my nature."

"What changed?"

He turned, leaning against the shelf. "I nearly drowned in Wastwater, the deepest lake in England. Was convinced I was going to die. As I was sinking, all I could think about was the incredible blue-black of the water." A rueful smile crossed his face. "I was rescued by a passing boat, but the experience changed me. The alchemists would call it a 'nigredo' moment, the blackening, the death that precedes rebirth. I became obsessed with capturing that colour."

"Did you ever manage it?" Alice asked.

"Still trying," Thomas replied with a wink. "Some colours haunt you forever. That's the true alchemical quest, not turning lead into gold, but transforming experience into understanding."

The afternoon light began to shift, casting longer shadows across the workshop floor. Thomas checked the trays near the range.

"These are ready now," he announced. "Come, see the alchemy completed."

Alice joined him before the now-dried pigment trays. The colours within seemed to pulse with life, no longer wet mud but vibrant potential. The transformation was complete, earth and water elements had done their work, leaving behind the purified essence of the stone.

"Here," Thomas said, handing her a soft-bristled brush. "Gently now."

With a tenderness born from reverence, Alice swept the brush over the surface of the dried pigment. Fine powder lifted easily, clinging to the bristles and swirling in the air.

"Watch how it gathers," Thomas instructed, guiding her hand to tip the collected ochre into a glass jar. Each tap released more of the precious dust, golden motes joining their kin. "This is the culmination of our alchemical work, the 'rubedo,' or reddening, the final stage of the Great Work."

"The possibilities are endless," Thomas said, sealing the jar with a cork stopper. "With these colours, you can create anything you imagine, paintings that speak of your journey, the challenges you've faced, and the triumphs waiting beyond the horizon. You'll be wielding the power of Mars, the stability of Earth, and the transformative qualities of Water in every brushstroke."

"If my father could see me now," Alice mused, studying the jar of ochre they'd created together. "Covered in dust and utterly content."

"Perhaps one day he will understand," Thomas said. "Not everyone can immediately see the value in transforming earth into art. But when he sees what you create with these colours, what comes from your heart—he may begin to understand the true alchemy at work."

"And if he doesn't?" Alice asked softly.

"Then you will have still honored your gift," Thomas replied. "That's all any of us can do. The iron in ochre teaches us to be resilient, to assert our will upon the world."

He straightened suddenly, as if remembering something. "Let me show you one of my favourite pigments," he said, bending down to retrieve a large bucket filled with fine powdered substance. "It is a green slate that comes from Honister Slate mines."

The green powder was unlike anything Alice had seen before, as if Thomas had bottled the humid air at the heart of the Cumbrian landscape. He ran his fingers through it with reverence.

"It's waste material from their cutting rooms," he explained, the afternoon light catching flecks of mica in the powder. "We refine it like the golden ochre using water to remove coarse particles. Another example of the water element's power to purify and transform."

Thomas reached for a much-used paintbrush, its handle worn smooth from decades of use. "Never could bring myself to replace this," he confessed, noticing Alice's gaze. "It was my first proper brush. Superstitious, perhaps, but we all have our quirks. The alchemists would approve—they understood the power of tools imbued with personal history."

"It is the colour of hard rocks," he continued, dipping the brush into a mixture of the green slate and binder, "but with a magical quality that allows us to portray distant woods, hills, humidity, and misty rain."

With swift, confident strokes, he demonstrated on a small piece of paper, creating a landscape in miniature. The pigment granulated on the paper, some particles clinging to the fibres while others spread in a wash, creating a natural texture impossible to achieve with commercial paints.

"It's beautiful," Alice breathed, watching the misty hills emerge from just a few strokes.

Thomas added more concentrated pigment to the brush and created opaque marks that suggested mountain summits emerging from fog.

"Commercial paint manufacturers try to eliminate this granulation," he said, gesturing to the varied texture. "They want consistency. But in doing so, they remove what makes these pigments special, their connection to the earth element, their grounding power."

He offered the brush to Alice. "Would you like to try?"

She nodded eagerly, taking the brush. Her first stroke was tentative, then bolder as she felt the pigment respond to her touch. The green slate bloomed across the paper, creating effects she could never have achieved with her Oxford paints.

"I never knew," she murmured, adding another stroke. "They never taught us this."

"Some knowledge isn't found in schools," Thomas replied, watching her work with evident satisfaction. "It lives in places like this, passed

from hand to hand across generations. The alchemists kept their knowledge close, sharing only with those who demonstrated the right combination of passion and patience."

As the day's light began to fade, Thomas lit several oil lamps around the workshop. Their warm glow transformed the space, shadows dancing along the walls lined with countless jars of pigment, each containing its own story, its own potential for beauty.

"That's enough for today," Thomas said gently. "colour-making, like all alchemical work, teaches patience above all else."

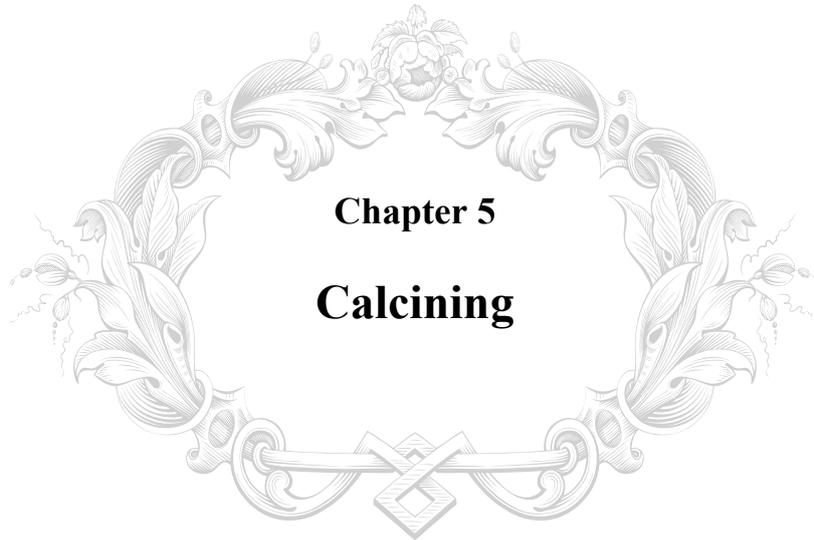
Alice reluctantly set down the brush, looking at her dust-covered hands with a sense of accomplishment rather than concern. The rusty red stains on her fingertips reminded her of the Martian energy she had worked with today.

"Same time tomorrow?" Thomas asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," Alice replied without hesitation. "I want to learn everything. Every element, every transformation."

As she stepped out into the cool evening air, the town of Appleby settling into twilight around her, Alice felt lighter than she had in months. The doubts that had plagued her, Professor Blick's criticism, her father's disapproval, her own fears of inadequacy, seemed less overwhelming now.

In her pocket, a small jar of the golden ochre they had made together clinked gently against her sketchbook. It wasn't just pigment she carried away from the Colour Maker's House, but possibility, the first brushstrokes of a new chapter in her life, of sunrises or perhaps a halo around her hero painted in colours ground from the very earth beneath her feet, purified by water, and infused with the strength of Mars itself.



Chapter 5

Calcining

Alice's footsteps echoed softly as she walked the path skirting the river and churchyard. Late autumn had stolen the sun's warmth, shrouding the day in gray that pressed against the distant windows of the Colour Maker's House. Her auburn hair was tucked under a woolen cap, a concession to the cold that her loose artist's blouse and black jeans couldn't quite fend off.

She paused, gazing at the weathered stone bench among the cloisters. The arches stretched upward, framing the ochre cross—a silent sentinel against the changing skies. The blue sundial atop it revealed no time, its face obscured by shadows, as if even the hours had abandoned this quiet corner of the world.

The bite of cold air was sharp, yet it wasn't this that sent shivers down her spine. The tremble came from deep-seated anticipation, eagerness mixed with a flicker of fear. What secrets would today unfold under Thomas's tutelage?

The last few weeks with Thomas had transformed her in ways she couldn't have anticipated. His guidance had given her courage to experiment, to embrace mistakes as much as triumphs. Each critique he offered was seasoned with kindness, a stark contrast to the harsh admonishments she'd received at Oxford.

Inside, Thomas was coaxing life into the flames with practiced motions. The fire cast dancing shadows onto glass jars lining the back wall, each safeguarding colours waiting to be born.

"Ready to embrace the challenge?" Thomas asked, his voice grounding her amid swirling emotions.

"Good morning, Alice, my special apprentice," he said, eyes gleaming like polished lapis beneath furrowed brows. "Are you ready to learn the nigredo of our craft—the first stage of the great work?"

"Ready," she whispered, the word unlocking tomorrow's future. She removed her coat, hanging it on a peg by the door where it dripped the last vestiges of morning mist onto the worn floorboards.

Thomas gestured toward the array of pigments spread across the workbench. "Today," he began, "we embark on a time-honored transformation. Calcination is a process that unites the artist with the elements of nature. It is the first and most fundamental stage of the alchemical magnum opus, the great work."

Thomas unveiled the pigments with the ceremony of a priest revealing sacred relics, ochres holding the sun's warmth in their golden depths, umbers rich as newly tilled soil. He handed her a small jar of yellow powder that seemed to capture summer itself.

"Through fire," he said, voice lowering as if sharing a profound secret, "we coax out hidden hues, each a secret until the flame reveals it. Just as the alchemists of old subjected matter to flame to purify it, to burn away the prima materia until only the essential remains."

"Can you show me how it's done with this?" she asked, lifting the jar of yellow ochre.

"Of course, just be patient," Thomas replied with an affirming nod, the lines around his eyes deepening with his smile. "First, we need to heat the pigment to a high temperature. This will cause the chemical bonds to break down and reform, transforming them into new colours."

Thomas picked up a lump of yellow clay from a wooden box beside the hearth and put it into the fire with careful precision. "Observe carefully what happens as we roast it. Watch not just with your eyes, but with your artist's instinct."

The warmth painted Alice's cheeks with amber as she watched. The ochre, cradled within blackened tongs that showed years of similar use, was guided to the heart of the fire where it lay like a promise waiting to be fulfilled.

Minutes stretched on, marked only by the occasional crack of splitting wood. The transformation began subtly. A wisp of smoke curled from the stone, a spectral harbinger of change, followed by a soft sizzle that spoke of molecular bonds breaking and reforming under heat's insistent pressure. The ochre, once the colour of autumn leaves, bled into a red as deep and vibrant as the dying day when the sun pours its last desperate light across the horizon.

"See how it's changing?" Thomas asked, voice barely audible above the fire's constant murmur. "That's the magic of alchemy. We're using heat to transform the pigment into a new hue."

Alice nodded, mesmerized by the metamorphosis occurring before her. When Thomas withdrew the piece from the fire and broke it with a small hammer, the interior revealed the story of its incomplete journey. The exterior of the clay burned a deep, rich red, while the interior remained tinged with earthy yellow, like a sunset caught in stone.

"Do you see how when we break it, it doesn't change evenly?" Thomas observed, turning the pieces in his weathered hands. "Normally, we cook the raw powder, which makes it easier to get a consistent colour throughout."

He paused, sipping from his cup contemplatively. Alice's gaze traveled to the array of crucibles and pans hanging from the thick wooden beam above, each bearing the marks of countless transformations.

"Why are there so many different types of pans?" she asked.

"Each metal interacts differently with the flame," he explained, rising to run his fingers along the edge of a copper vessel. "Copper heats up faster than brass, but brass gives a more even heat across the pan." He reached for one particular pan with a long iron handle that gleamed dully in the firelight. "Today, we will use the brass one for its consistent heat, which is essential for your first attempt."

"Now, let us begin with the powder," Thomas said, returning to the workbench where jars of pigment awaited their transformation.

With reverent care, Alice poured finely powdered yellow ochre into the brass pan. The pigment settled like a golden carpet upon the metal, promising sun-drenched fields and olden days recaptured through art yet to be created.

Thomas stoked the fire with practiced ease, then swung the trivet across with a whisper of metal against stone. He placed the pan above

the flames, adjusting its position with the care of one setting a crown upon a monarch's head.

As minutes passed, measured by the steady drip of condensation from the kettle's spout, she leaned closer, breath catching as the yellow ochre began to deepen along the edge of the pan, blushing into red like sunset's final kiss upon a winter field.

"Start stirring with the spatula," Thomas instructed, handing her a long wooden tool with a metal end. "Keep it moving gently, or it will cook unevenly."

Alice took the wooden handle, which felt warm and familiar in her grasp. The powder shifted like a thick, golden fluid rather than the dry substance it had been, tiny gas bubbles percolating through the surface and rising to burst in ephemeral puffs that joined the smoke-laden air above.

Then, as if by silent command from some unseen conductor, the darkening red spread across the pan in a sudden flush, a blush spreading across the face of a shy maiden.

"The longer you heat it, the darker it gets," Thomas explained, his shadow dancing alongside hers as they both leaned over the pan. "But be careful not to overheat the pigment, or it will lose its magic and turn dull."

Lost in concentration, watching the ochre surrender its golden soul to fire's insistent courtship, Alice didn't notice how the brass had conducted heat up the spatula's metal end and into the wooden handle. When she adjusted her grip, sliding her fingers lower to get a better angle for stirring, searing pain shot through her fingers like lightning forking across a summer sky.

"Ah!" she gasped, instinctively releasing her hold. The spatula clattered to the floor with a sound that seemed to echo her pain. Worse still, the pan tilted with the sudden movement, spilling transformed ochre across the hearth stones in a cascade of fire-kissed colour.

"Your hand!" Thomas exclaimed, reaching for her with swift concern. "The metal conducts heat through to the wood—I should have warned you. An apprentice's first burn is an initiation I had hoped to spare you."

Alice cradled her reddened fingers against her chest, embarrassment flooding her cheeks hotter than the burn itself. She stared in dismay at the scattered pigment—precious earth now decorating the floor instead of canvas or panel. "I'm so sorry," she stammered, meeting

Thomas's eyes with genuine remorse. "I've ruined it and wasted your materials."

Thomas shook his head, his expression softening from concern to reassurance. "No harm done," he said, guiding her to a basin of cool water nestled in the corner of the workshop. "The first lesson of the workshop: respect the fire in all its forms. The second lesson: mistakes are part of the process."

The cool water soothed her skin as Thomas retrieved a small earthenware jar from a shelf lined with similar vessels. "Comfrey and beeswax," he explained, opening it to reveal a green-tinged salve that smelled of honey and herbs. "Nature provides remedies alongside its pigments."

As he dressed her minor burn with the gentle touch of one accustomed to tending injuries, Alice glanced at the spilled ochre illuminated by firelight. Rather than forming a uniform pile, it had scattered in a pattern that reminded her of autumn leaves on stone, or perhaps a map of some unknown land drawn in shades of sunset.

"You know," Thomas said, his voice taking on the gentle cadence that came with remembrance, "your mother did almost the exact same thing when she was learning this craft."

Thomas smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he gazed into the middle distance, seeing not the workshop around them but a scene from decades past. "We were fellow apprentices under old Ebenezer Ludlow, a master colour maker with hands like oak and a temperament to match." He chuckled softly. "This was, oh, must be thirty-five years ago now. Your mother was just seventeen, full of fire and determination."

He secured the bandage around Alice's fingers before continuing. "Ebenezer was a harsh taskmaster, nothing like what I try to be for you. He believed in learning through severity, thought comfort bred complacency in artists."

Thomas shook his head. "One winter morning, colder than today by far, we were calcining a batch of rare terra verde he'd imported at great expense from Italy. Liz, your mother, was tasked with stirring while I kept the fire stoked."

Alice settled onto her stool, entranced by this unexpected glimpse into her mother's past, a side of Elizabeth Harper she'd never known. The mother in her memories was already an accomplished landscape artist, known for her luminous paintings and remarkable use of colour. This

younger version, an apprentice like herself, seemed almost like a different person.

"Ebenezer was standing over us like a storm cloud, criticizing every movement. 'Too slow, girl! You'll ruin the batch with that timid stirring!' he kept barking at your mother." Thomas's voice deepened in imitation of the long-dead master. "Your mother's face was flushed with the heat and humiliation, but her eyes" he paused, looking directly at Alice, "her eyes had that same determination I see in yours. She gripped that stirring rod tighter, moved faster as instructed."

Thomas sighed, rubbing his own scarred palm absently. "The inevitable happened. The rod had been sitting too long in one position, had grown hotter than usual. When she adjusted her grip, she burned her palm badly, worse than your burn today. She dropped the rod with a cry, and the entire batch of precious terra verde went flying."

He gestured to a dark stain on the floorboards near the hearth. "Some of it landed right there. Ebenezer went absolutely purple with rage. I thought he might dismiss her on the spot, it was a costly mistake."

"What happened?" Alice asked, leaning forward.

Thomas's expression softened. "Your mother stood up straight, looked Ebenezer in the eye, and said, 'I'll work to pay for it. Extra hours, whatever it takes. But I won't be leaving until I've mastered every pigment in this workshop.' The old man stared at her for what felt like eternity, then burst out laughing. Said he hadn't seen such spirit since he was a young man himself."

A gentle smile played across Thomas's face. "He never again raised his voice to her. And Liz, she did exactly as promised. Stayed late every evening for months, became one of his finest apprentices." He looked meaningfully at Alice. "Talent runs in your blood, but so does persistence. That's the greater gift, in my experience."

"She never told me about any of this," Alice murmured, her chest tight with a confusing mix of emotions, wonder at this new connection to her mother, and a renewed sense of loss for all the conversations they would never have.

Thomas reached for a jar of licorice allsorts on a nearby shelf, offering one to Alice before taking one himself. "Your mother had an intuitive understanding of pigments that Ebenezer said he'd rarely seen. She could look at a colour and know instinctively what it needed, more heat, more grinding, more oil. It was as if she could see into the very soul of the material."

Alice nodded slowly. Professor Blick had often referenced her mother's "intuitive brilliance with colour" when pointing out Alice's own perceived shortcomings. She'd never understood that this brilliance had roots in practical knowledge, in hours spent before a fire learning the very craft she was studying now.

"Did you know about her relationship with Professor Blick?" Alice asked suddenly, the question escaping before she could reconsider.

Thomas's expression flickered, something unreadable passing across his features. "I heard about it, yes. After she left Appleby." He seemed to choose his words carefully. "Your mother never did have much patience for propriety, and she had a tendency to get entangled with complicated men. First Blick, then your father, who could barely understand why anyone would want to stare at a landscape for hours, let alone paint it."

He shook his head slightly. "I always thought Blick was drawn to what he couldn't possess himself: that natural, emotional connection to art. He could teach technique until the cows came home, but he couldn't teach what your mother was born with, that spark of soul that true art requires."

Alice looked away, absorbing this. It shed new light on the professor's fixation with comparing her to her mother, perhaps it had never really been about her work at all, but about his unresolved feelings for Liz Harper.

"Look," she whispered, pointing with her uninjured hand. "The pattern it's made, it's beautiful. Like a landscape seen from above."

Thomas followed her gaze, a slow smile spreading across his weathered face. "Sometimes our mistakes reveal possibilities we would never have discovered through caution alone." He helped her to her feet. "Let's clean this and start again. But first, let's sketch what we see. This accident might inspire your next work, many great artistic discoveries begin with what seems like failure."

He reached for a leather-bound sketchbook on a nearby shelf and handed it to Alice along with a stick of charcoal. "Capture it quickly, before we must clean it away. The most fleeting visions often make the most lasting art."

Alice nodded, settling on a stool to hastily sketch the scattered pigment pattern, seeing in it the beginnings of something unexpected, much like her journey into this ancient craft. Her burned fingers smarted as she worked, but she welcomed the discomfort as a reminder of the lesson learned.

"There," she said moments later, holding up the sketch for Thomas's appraisal. "I've caught it, I think."

Thomas studied the drawing with appreciative eyes. "You have a good hand for seeing patterns in chaos," he observed. "That will serve you well in art and in life."

He set the sketchbook aside carefully. "Now, shall we try again? The pigment beckons."

Together they cleaned the spilled ochre, salvaging what they could and sweeping the rest into a small pile that Thomas promised would find use in a less pure form. The ritual of cleaning was itself a lesson in respect for materials and space that Alice absorbed silently.

With renewed care, Alice sprinkled umber powder into a clean pan, her movements more deliberate after her experience. The dark earth settled into an even layer, waiting for heat's transformative touch.

Thomas warned, "Be prepared for an unusual aroma this time. Each pigment speaks in its own voice, even to our noses."

As heat embraced the pan, an odd scent permeated the room, distinctly different from the ochre's earthy perfume. Alice wrinkled her nose, surprised by the unexpected smell. "It smells like cabbage burning," she observed, watching the umber darken to an almost black sheen on its surface.

"That would be the magnesium within the umber," Thomas explained as the pigment darkened before their eyes to a rich reddish-black that seemed to absorb the light around it. "As it burns off, it imparts a unique fragrance. Every natural element carries its own signature, if we learn to recognize it."

The morning stretched into afternoon, marked by the changing angle of light through the windows and the tolling of church bells in the distance. They worked side by side, calcining different pigments, each unveiling its secret colours under heat's persuasive influence. Alice's confidence grew with each successful transformation, her hands moving with increasing surety despite the tender reminder of her burn.

As the day drew to a close, Thomas's expression suddenly grew serious. "Alice, there's something else I wanted to tell you about your mother."

Alice looked up, sensing the shift in his tone.

"Liz didn't just learn colour-making here, she contributed to it." He moved to a locked cabinet in the corner of the workshop, one Alice

had noticed but never seen opened. From his pocket, he withdrew an old brass key and turned it in the lock.

"After your mother left, after she became well-known, she would sometimes send me samples, pigments she'd discovered or created on her travels." He opened the cabinet to reveal shelves of small jars, each labeled in a flowing hand Alice recognized immediately as her mother's.

"This one," Thomas said, carefully removing a jar filled with a luminous blue-green powder, "she found in Morocco. And this," he continued, taking out another containing a vibrant purple, "she created herself, experimenting with traditional madder techniques and materials she gathered in the South of France."

Alice's hands trembled as she accepted the jar. "I had no idea," she whispered. "She kept all of this from me. Why?"

Thomas replaced the jars and closed the cabinet. "I don't think she was keeping it from you, specifically. Your mother compartmentalized her life, perhaps too much. She never spoke to me about your father either, until the day she told me she was expecting you." He smiled sadly. "She was afraid, I think, afraid that if her worlds collided, something precious might be lost."

"But why keep her connection to this place, to colour-making, a secret from me? Especially when she knew I wanted to be an artist too?"

Thomas sat beside her on the workbench. "Did you ever ask her about where she learned to use colour?"

Alice thought back, trying to remember conversations with her mother about art. "I asked her once how she knew which colours to mix. She just said it was intuition, that she could 'feel' when a colour was right."

"That was true, in its way," Thomas nodded. "But only half the truth. The other half was here, learning to grind and burn and transform raw earth into paint. Perhaps she wanted you to find your own path, not follow hers too closely."

He squeezed her shoulder gently. "Or perhaps she was waiting for the right time to bring you here herself, to share this part of her life with you. A time that never came."

Alice felt tears threatening. "I wish she had told me. I wish she had brought me here."

"Yet here you are," Thomas said softly. "Finding your own way to the same doorstep. There's a kind of magic in that, don't you think? A circle completing itself."

Alice nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat.

Thomas stood, moving back to the hearth. "Tomorrow, we'll begin working with your mother's pigments. I think it's time they found their way onto canvas again, through your hands this time."

The words hung in the air between them, a promise and a legacy all at once.

As Alice left that evening, the burn on her fingers throbbing gently beneath the bandage, she felt changed in ways that went beyond the day's lessons in colour transformation. The discovery of her mother's secret connection to this place, to Thomas, to the very art of creating colour, it was as if a missing page had been restored to a book she'd been trying to read all her life.

She stopped by the churchyard on her way back to her lodgings, seeking the quiet company of ancient stones and the whispering trees. The bench where she had paused that morning welcomed her again, and she sat, opening her sketchbook to the drawing of the spilled pigment.

In that accidental pattern, she now saw not just a landscape but a path, winding, unpredictable, beautiful in its very randomness. Perhaps her own artistic journey was meant to be the same, not a careful tracing of her mother's footsteps or a rebellion against them, but something new entirely, informed by but not bound to the past.

The evening bells tolled as she closed her sketchbook and stood, ready to return to her temporary home. Tomorrow would bring new colours, new stories, new connections to a legacy she was only beginning to understand. The calcination process had begun—not just for the pigments in Thomas's workshop, but for her own artistic spirit, burning away the unnecessary to reveal what was essential.

And perhaps, in that transformation, she would finally find the voice that had been waiting within her all along.