

*THE LAND THAT RISES:*  
DIALECT AS UNHEIMLICH  
IN BRITISH WRITING

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*The Land That Rises*

*A Novel*

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‘But the land that rises from the sea  
Will be dry and clean and soft and free  
Of mankind’s dirt and therefore be  
The source of man’s new dynasty.’

Prophecy ascribed to Ursula Shipton (née Southeil), c. 1488–1561.

*This is Non's Speyk.*

*Non went to TAN L NN to live as a Black Sheep.*

*She lived there after er babbies deed. She ad umpteen dead babbies an di-nt wan- no mower. So she toddled er way up on –tops, away from er dead babbies an all them Fellas that sed she war an oppen gilt, flayed thed giyer mower merrybegotten chance-barns.*

*She wa badly for a bit, arse-end smittled an raw, an appened that she wa mekkin ready fo –ayont, til, wiya whew, she war on –mend. Afterward, she roared for all them dead babbies, kennin she wa-nt to join em just yet.*

*Yonks sin that, a day o-so annyrooad after er fever ad lifted, she war slinkin round -back yard an cem upon a wall an yate, all o glass so she reckoned. She'd heard tell of a beild for –Best Beasts to stint on, not fo –Fellon Beasts, like them lot, left out in –cold, an ere it wa, this famous house, reight nex doowr.*

*She crammled along this ere wall, stiff wi –lurgy an clogged up wi white meat, not able to see owt through them big limewashed winders, nor, when she put er lugs on em, could owt be eard, deadened in er lugs like cloth shoved in on a cold day. Til, like a sudden spurt o whistlin wind, a shrill an gastridden bellin piked er lugs and she thought it war a barghest come once an for all to tek er to –ayont.*

*Bundled up, war this reight little bellwedder, all skewbald an wrung out. Non di-nt dare go near it, but, as she watched an watched, nor did no other. An as er white meat nagued wi all –blother it wa mekkin, Non gathered up this blairy bag o rags an dashed it back to TAN L NN, cooin an clockin er tongue to calm its rage.*

*She put it down on -hearth, afower -fire she allus kept bruslin low, an unlapped er bundle. It bunched its neeves an waved its arms, skin dark as pick, eyes, wide from -shock o sudden cold, blea as early bilbries.*

*'Ah but tha's nobbut a Dod,' sed Non and latched me to er white meat, afterward playin clap-benny to seh thanks fo bringin one of er babbies ome.*

*Non sed she war an oppen gilt, a Bitchdaughter come from Contrary folk, which meant she war a Lass. An that meant nowt good could come of er, by all accounts. She war a reight good user mind, she sed, after all -dead babbies that a-nt supped the dinner of er, an so er white meat wa-nt yet down to -last strippins, meanin she let me ave sup whenever a wa famished an it slipped down nice.*

*But Non sed a cu-nt be a Bitchdaughter.*

*'Tha's no oppen gilt far as a see. Appen a Freemartin,' she sed. Not like ersen annyrooad, but not quite anent neither, she wa-nt so sure.*

*'Appen a bit o both,' she sed. 'Barghests are begotten o Bitchdaughters an Guytrash after-au, come to think-us-on ussens, an o thems we've lost, to lead us on to see em agen, or to summat better, in t-ayont.'*

*She reckoned ad bin sent to er for safe keepin after all them Fellas stuck dead babbies in er belly an med em come out all bloody an raw, like all er rops ad felled from out er wame, an for mekkin er roar.*

*We set traps together an kept -fire allus brusllin low. We et milk caps an penny buns, brambles an bilbries when -weather allowed, an dead nettles all -time. A liked it best when we picked at fouse-banes together an chucked em on -fire an she told me er tales. Of er mam, who allus kept avin dead babbies anall, an who'd gone to ayont wiyer last en. Of er allus avin to keep moggin on -moors to keep away from them Fellas. An she liked to say about ow she found me, oft tekkin me reight to where it wa she found me, outside them*

winders, pitted, but not like rain-spattered stone about TAN L NN, more like checkstones 'd bin chucked ard at em by folk tryin to blast the way into -Stints fo yonks.

'Y war reight ere, Dod,' she sed, peffin an jeffin cos she wa-nt so fit. 'Put out like rubbidge on -Backdoowr step, but fo me y'are a wondrous little pad of all that wa lost an now is returned.'

'Who put me out?' a sed, that day when a war old enough to ask.

'Jealousy, a reckon. It mun be a reight rose garden o summat clavverly inside.

On 'y Jealousy builds er walls that high,' she sed wiya wonder.

'Who's that?' a sed.

'Er in charge,' sed Non.

'In charge o what?' a sed.

'All tha can ever know,' sed Non.

'Not in charge o me, though?' a sed. 'Av nibber met er.'

'Appen not,' sed Non, laffin.

'Ast tha met er?' a sed.

'Ca-t say Iyav, Dod,' Non sed. 'On 'y, a reckon she mun o lost er Key,' she added wi a snert, oddin summat in er and.

'What's that?' a sed, regardin -cankerin lookin summat o nowt she wa now wavin at me.

'Backdoowr Key into -Stints, ad seh, Dod, that wa lost when she chucked you out,' she sed. 'A kept it, but it wo-t turn fo me.'

'Can a try?'

'Course, but a reckon Jealousy mun've changed -locks bi now.'

She lifted me up to where she'd got od of it all them yonks since, stuck high in a crack awteen -winders, an put it back in.

'Yve to sweep it,' she sed. 'All old secret doowrs oppened that way in times past, so the seh.' So we swished it an swept it, but doowr wunt oppen.



*'Appen yav to push it,' a sed, sweyin it into –crack wiyall me might, both ands, gruntin at it not shiftin. Non laffed at me agen.*

*'Av tried it all, Dod. A tell y, she's changed er locks. We'll not be gettin into –Stints away from them Fellas, but we do reight enough, do-t we? Come on, Dod, hey fo heym, back to TAN L NN afower it's too dosky to spy em comin.'*

*But Key'd got stuck in –crack, ad pushed it so ard.*

*'Leave it, Dod,' sed Non. 'It'll not aid us.'*

*But a wa-nt one to giyup on owt, so while Non wa still oddin me up tryin to rive me away, a set me feet upon them winders an, pushin wi me other and aside –Key, a gev a last yank. An wi that, it lit up like –luminations under me and, wiyall sorts o figures that med no sense to us that cu-nt read. An then it oppened up. Just a slifter, but oppened up all –tsame.*

*'Y've done it, Dod!' Non shirled, peepin in at –Stints fer -furs time.*

*'Appen it wa-nt Jealousy oo'd lost er Key after-au,' a sed reight suited wi mesen.*

*'Appen it wa mine all along.'*

*'Appen so,' sed Non, blowed.*

*'So appen am in charge o –Stints? An am not Jealousy, me, am a?'*

*'No, a do- reckon y'are Dod. Appen tha's bin sent to share it wiyus Fellon lot at last.'*

*An into –Stints we went.*

*We cem an went as we pleased, though nibber stayin so long, o goin too far from TAN L NN to mek Non jiggered. An whenever them Fellas cem lookin forrus on -outside in –Fellon lands, we could let ussens inside to -Stints, through ar smoot-ole, to hudgemudge safe an sound an out o sight beyind them big winders wi –curtains drawn.*

*But Non nibber did reckon on –self same Fellas bein inside anall.*

*Di-nt think it war allowed.*

*So wen she saw em cum for er, an she war old an lame an peffin, she bid me tek -  
Backdoowr Key an let mesen out an not come back for er til furs thing.*

*Furs thing, a cem back in as she sed, an a beet er sack o brocken banes, dwined an  
drubbed, back to TAN L NN. A wa still nobbut a smite anall.*

*Non wa nibber a lig-a-bed afower, so a knew she wa deein when er milk turned all rammy  
an she sed a wa to stop suppin in case a took on -lurgy too. After a bit, wen she started er  
rutlin, Iyad to tek on an look after Non, settin er traps an keepin a fire brusslin low.*

*'Ere yare, Dod,' Non sed one day after ad picked hare-banes and put em in er  
saggin gob. 'Am passin Iyam. Am fo -bucket. So tha'll after tek on fo thassen, an do- be  
lither else tha'll be fo -bucket soon after.'*

*'Why a y passin?' a sed.*

*'Cos nowt lasts, Dod, like rain an snow an peevish winds, all blow ovver in time an  
bring summat fresh in its passin. Like sneels needin fresh air after a dousement, an -  
edders that foller to eat em up.'*

*'An what will your passin bring?'*

*'Drownded sneels an ungary edders, no doubt,' she sed. 'So tha's to steer well clear  
o them Fellas, Dod. Neither Best nor Fellon'll gi y nobbut bother to my wittins.'*

*'But am not a sneel,' a sed. 'An am not flayed o them Fellas. A shall ave the guts fo  
garters if the come near us agen,' a sed, jumpin down from Non's bed an showin er exactly  
ow a would. Rivin at em wi me bare ands. Hoddin ther innards ovver me ead.*

*'Daft apeth,' Non ruttled. Laffin at me like she did.*

*'Am not an edder either am a?' a sed, utchin back up close aside er. 'Ad sooner be  
fo -bucket wi you.'*

*'Tha's nobbut you, Dod,' she sed. 'Don- be told nowt else. Tha'll av a job on, mind. They shall thee tell, ow they thee find.'*

*'The'll not find me at all, then. Not if a do- want em to. An appen when a do, it'll be me doin all -tellin,' a sed.*

*'Aye, Dod, fo betterment o worse, tha's a barghest reight enough. Come to lead us all to ussens, then. To ussens, or to -ayont, or both together, appen.'*

*Non sud a known a'd be ard-set to do as she sed. Connecting folk wi thi sens, when no bugger sees owt like another, like a brigg atween heym and the unheymly, wa nibber boun to be baht fratch an framation.*

\*\*\*

Tykes

1.

(Adam)

The prostitute walked down the Lister Old Road, passing doorsteppers with horse-pins stuck in their arms, purple as the blotchy November sky above them, and wondered why, despite radical measures taken to preserve human life, so many people still sought to destroy it. They huddled together, exposure-raw faces chapped like those of teething babies, beneath a dirty woollen blanket printed with giant strawberries; the peripheral warmth of close bodily contact apparently sustaining them as they slumped into silent, lonely dreams. Globules of rain hit the causeway, splattering wide. The prostitute's pace quickened to reach the Business Stop before the weather worsened, hoping no-one else had the same idea. Further ahead, the lights to the kebab shop flickered on, the harsh white staccato fluorescence fracturing the growing evening gloom before breaking through like ice over the grisaille landscape.

The old concrete buildings in the derelict town were once the height of modern technology, rising as tall as twenty stories in places. Most were now just empty frames of steel and stone, their large panels of glazing missing, smashed and lost, ground up over time and adding to centuries' accumulation of dust. The cankered structures rose out of the earth like giant petrified trees of distant countries; a strange and dark forest from a fairy tale. Nobody thought to replace them, to clean up the area, rebuild. There were stories about buildings that once stood even taller, in the lost cities. Here, the tallest buildings had been pulled down for Cleaner Living, resources pilfered by the Network to reuse elsewhere. Here, all that was left, were ruins and empty spaces.

Small, broken communities still lived in the area, like the kebab shop owner and his family, traditional people living and working at the Edges the same way as they had for generations; hand to mouth. Nobody came to this part of town, except those selling old-fashioned vices and those with a taste for nostalgia. It was too close to the Uncothlans.

The prostitute watched the shopkeeper step outside, stride over piles of litter and faecal matter at various stages of erosion and stand back to take a better look at the fresh, red letters spread wide across the door and windows: 'DISEASED'. Steamy vapour left the shopkeeper's mouth as he sighed deeply, and the prostitute saw the same jaded look on his face that he had every evening as he went back inside to get a bucket of soapy water. Washing off the latest daubings was the next part of his nightly opening-up routine, but the prostitute never offered to help. Time was Brass. The shopkeeper would have understood that.

The Business Stop was already occupied. Robin, head bowed, bare-armed and shivering, was talking to someone who, from the back, top to toe in a battered floor length leather coat, complete with trademark platinum crop contrasting against darkest skin, could only be Diot.

'Evenin' duck,' Diot sneered, stepping out from under the pitted plastic shelter into the dim street light, pulling a wide coat collar high against the cold. 'What a night to be out. Silin' it down. Ah wa' just saying to Robin Redbreast 'ere, you'll catch y' deaths tonigh', what wi'y'it bein' Mischeivous Night an'all. Y' should watch yersens.'

Robin smiled passively, while Diot continued. 'Anyway, ma lovely birdies, you're not' only ones wi' business to attend to. Adam? Sweet apple o' my eye, what can ah get y' tonigh'? Ah've some cheeky smellin' salts that'll wake y'up nicely?'

'Y' know a'm a non-starter D', so why y'even tryin'?' Adam didn't have patience for this shit tonight.

'You're a real ball-buster y' know duck. Whereas ma little Cock-Robin 'ere appen likes a pick-me-up on a cold winter's night.'

'Aye well, if 'Little Cock-Robin' wants to dwine 'is Brass on a membership o't' Pins and Needles Gang, that's up to 'im,' Robin looked sheepish at this but remained silent, 'but freezing under damp baby blankets in't fo' me. I prefer being paid to warm up

under someone else's blankets. Why don't y' ply your trade on them that can't say 'no' D', 'cos you're wasting y' time on me.'

'Gee, Batman, here's a riddle for-yuh.' Diot flashed a toothy grin, but was clearly rankled. 'Where does a trickster get off talking about plying a trade that's not wanted? Aren't y' getting a bit old for all this lark?'

'Mebbe. But while this old dog's got a few tricks left, it seems there's a living to be med in it.'

'Aye, well, where the's muck the's Brass, right?' she laughed. 'We both provide a service, duck. Both got our customers, even if *we* don't want what each of us is selling.'

Adam conceded with a bow of the head.

'But ah want paying, as ah wa' just reminding y' little birdie friend here.' She wiggled her fingers, grinning as before, and walked away. 'Later, Boy Wonder,' she called out to Robin over her shoulder, 'don't mek me come lookin' for-yuh.' Her cropped hair rippled like a flame on a non-existent breeze as she turned the corner and was gone.

'What about her, eh?' Robin shivered with a giggle, shaking his head dismissively. Adam joined him under the shelter taking a long drag from a near-empty E-Bac. Last one. Getting more would mean a trip into the Network where they were strictly controlled and limited by the Clinics, which Adam didn't attend. Or from Diot. Like most things, Diot would have some. But he didn't want what Diot could provide. Anything to do with her came at a price he didn't think was worth paying.

'Ah do't understand what she's on about most o't' time. Where did she get tha' massive coat? Ah've not seen owt like it, 'ave you? Network folk do't wear stuff like that, do the'? It's not Network-New, but dun't look Reprocessed either. Not grey enough. Not like' crap we wear at any rate. And, 'ave you ever seen 'er durin't' day, y'know, just doin', normal stuff?'

Adam smiled at Robin's attempts to divert attention away from Diot's threat and played along. 'Oh aye, she's a right Pied Piper, that 'en. Rats follow er all ovver.'

‘Rats?’ Robin said, his voice shivering with cold.

‘Yeah, rats. Vermin. Ah mean, what Tyke in the’ right mind follows a lass like ‘er and teks off their own kind, eh?’ Adam replied. ‘The’s a big bunch of ‘em. Reckon the’r archaeologists, or some shit. Basically a bunch o’ bone-grubbers that dig around in t’crap left at t’Edges.’

Robin pulled a face. ‘What fo’?’

‘Looking for stuff from’ GOD. Pictures, books, machines, owt. They listen to old music, watch old films. They like ones about t’future best, ah don’t know,’ Adam shrugged. ‘Waste o’ fucking time if y’ask me.’

‘How come you know all that?’

‘Been around t’block a lot longer than you,’ replied Adam.

‘Ah do’t know owt about t’GOD. ‘Old Days’, yeah, but what wa’ so ‘Good’ about ‘em to leave us in this state? An’ why are the’ so interested in t’future? Nowt changes, that you’d notice anyway. Starts shit and stays shit.’ Robin said. He shifted around edgily and stared at his feet. His dirty pumps were cracked at the toe. ‘Is that what y’ reckon Digs is? One of ‘er rats?’

Adam didn’t say, but thought it likely.

‘Ah reckon Diot’s just weird,’ said Robin not waiting for an answer. ‘Or a Bobby. Ah said to Digs ‘ah bet she’s a Bobby really’.’

‘Nah, not a Bobby. Summat wo’se ah’d seh.’

‘She just comes out o’ nowhere, dun’t she? Like some kind of animal, or like, what wa’ those fucked-up things you said about once? Vampires, or summat?’

‘As usual Robin, y’ full of insight and wisdom, except in carryin’ on wi’ Diot and ‘er lot, who, like vampire’s’ll bleed y’ dry one way or t’other. Best y’ keep away, not that it’s owt to do wi’ me.’

‘You know it’s not for me, that stuff she sells? Ah do’t want owt off ‘er. What’s been tekken’s already been tekken, but not by me. Ah tell ‘im, ‘Digs, we an’t enough Brass



fo' y' to loss it to t'likes o' Diot.' But it meks no odds. He's gettin' worse if owt. Ardly see im these days. Just seem to pick up 'is debt.'

Adam nodded, breathing out a long stream of vapour. The rain was much harder now, teeming down the scratched old windows and clattering on the patchy, recovered metal roof above. Robin shivered again, wrapping his spindly arms around himself in a poor attempt to warm his pale, clammy body. The damp seemed to seep out of him; his watery presence diminishing with each bead of cold sweat that escaped through his limpid skin. Disappearing down the drain with the rainwater.

'Y' look half-starved. Where's y' coat?' Robin shrugged evasively. 'Or a jumper even?'

Robin scuffed his foot on the causeway.

'Don't tell me, y' gi' them away an'all?'

'He needs it, it's so cold at night if 'e's out on t'street. What am ah supposed to do? He dun't work, 'ardly eats, all he's got is what ah give him and that's not much.' Robin wandered over to the front of the shelter and leant against the post, splashes of rain hitting his face and running down his cheeks. Adam squinted at the dirty grey light glowing from within the shelter; a degraded notice from the Age of Man, with one faint word 'Friends', was still just about readable against its faded blue background, dimly lit from within. He felt bad, but hung back. He'd wasted enough time before now trying to convince Robin he was better off alone with no-one to look out for but himself.

'Work's a'right, though? Ah mean, busy enough. Mekkin' enough to get by?' He said eventually.

Robin shrugged again, casting uneasy glances up and down the street. 'Yeah, but it's a bit weird, in'tit?' he said, suddenly coming back inside, his voice lowered, 'that it's so busy? Some o' t'other lads are uneasy, like. Lasses gettin' more demandin', have you noticed?' He leaned in closer and lowered his voice further. 'Y' know some lads 'ave gone missin' an'all, don't y'? Just gone.' He clicked his fingers. 'Noone knows where.'

‘Ah, shush yersen. Y’ know what this place is like.’ Adam felt a smack to his guts for dismissing him like that, but persuaded himself he was only trying to reassure Robin without getting involved. ‘Folk come and go all t’ time. Just t’way it is. Pay no attention to them others. Half o’t’ time they’re off their ‘eads on summat, probably off Diot or some other bugger. Stuck fast, either ravin’ or raven. Course the’ paranoid. The’d soon be less jittery if the’ stopped swilln’ Spogs dahn the thoats.’

‘Aye, but all t’same, it’s worryin’. The’s new punters coming along, ‘ave y’ noticed? And the’s talk o’ them Clinics goin’ mobile again like a few year back...’

The low whirr of an approaching vehicle broke the discussion. Robin turned back to the street and stuck his head out of the shelter, a halo of light surrounding his head from the oncoming vehicle. It drove by. Not a Bobby van. Definitely a sightseer on a recce. When Robin turned back, the unease remained.

‘Y’ could allus go back in,’ said Adam.

‘To t’Network? Not likely.’

‘Told y’ before, y’ve to go out Elmet way, ask for that fella, ‘Old Man’, ‘e calls issen so ah’ve ‘eard, though I an’t been mesen. It’s im we’ve to thank fo mekin it so as we could use Brass out at t’Edges. Before ‘im, we only ‘ad swapsies, sneak and snatch an’ ‘e ‘elps lads, that want back in. Fakes Clean-ups where ‘e can, gets ‘em work, nowt flash-like, Brat-work, that kind o’ stuff. It’s not for me, ah’d never pass for bein’ Treated now, but you could for a while yet, y’ scrawny get. No point bein’ so ‘ard on yersen.’

‘Ah’m awright,’ said Robin, looking far from it.

‘OK, well, y’ worried about Digs, so go find him,’ said Adam. ‘There war a bunch o’ kids getting cosy down Beckside. They were pretty flaked out though, so if he’s wi’ ‘em you might ‘ave trouble rousing.’

‘What about Diot? I ‘ave to work. She’ll be after us later.’

Adam pulled a small, brown card from his back pocket, felt the thin sharp edges, looking over the fingerprints on the dull metal surface and wondering which punter they’d

belonged to. Dim light crawled across the barely reflective surface of this rudimentary form of currency, stalling against each clammy, ridged print. Brass was only useful at the Edges these days, soon to be phased out by the Network altogether in favour of something more governable and less easily passed around.

‘Tek it,’ said Adam. ‘The’ should be enough on it to get yersen sorted. Better owing me than ‘er, right?’

Robin hesitated.

‘Go on, tek it, ah’ve others,’ said Adam. ‘It’s fine, ah told you, work’s good. Go ‘ome before y’ catch cold. And get yersen a coat while you’re at it.’

Robin took the Brass and put it in his back pocket. He didn’t smile or say another word before heading off.

‘Ah’m a mug,’ Adam muttered, clicking off his E-Bac and putting it away.

Beams of light shone refracted through the rain-streaked windows and the hissing sound of tyres on wet, disintegrating asphalt and the unusual loud growl of a diesel engine announced another approaching car. This time, the car slowed, so Adam stepped outside for the driver to approach if they wanted to. The beams from the headlights were too bright to be able to catch any glimpse of the driver. This was always a problem in winter, not knowing what you were getting until it was too late. The wiper blades smudged against the windscreen as a dark old fashioned vehicle came to a halt beside the Business Stop, the blacked-out passenger window squeaking slowly down.

‘You lookin’ fo’ company?’ Adam said, leaning toward the window, though still a good step away from the door. The head of the driver tilted, keeping one eye on the road ahead though there was nothing coming. In the shadows only the nose and cheekbones could be made out.

‘How much for the whole night?’ A low voice replied; the dark made it impossible to see any lips move.

Adam had heard it all before. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ussens, sha’ we, love? We’ll go by t’our and see how we get on.’

The guttural whir and click from the antique door locks answered the question. Inside was colder than out, the blowers emitting a gentle but steady stream of chilled air. The original scarlet fabric seats were in good condition and the only comfort among the antique black plastic mouldings within. Only money people had cars, this wasn’t news, that’s how the few Network folk that went to the Edges got there. But rare pre-Bother models were usually Repossessed and recycled. Fuel was scarce and controlled by the Network, so you had to have contacts to get hold of it, or the wherewithal to convert the vehicles to accept some other source.

‘What’s your name?’ said the driver, manoeuvring back onto the road.

Adam checked the backseat to make sure there was no entourage, settled down and answered, ‘Adam. You?’

‘Guess I’m Eve.’

‘Yeah? You an’ everyone else, love.’

She drove in silence for over an hour. They ambled through rubbish-strewn roads in abandoned old towns and passed beneath the Peatfields Power Line, the shadowy secure dome of Peatfields Power filling the passenger side window like an inselberg in the landscape. They entered the dark boggy fields of the Edges beyond before finally reaching the outside edge of the Network, where the habitable lands governed by the Network were divided from the Uncothlans by the PEEKs. The vast opaque panels lined the road to their right, with ‘PEEK’ stamped on each as though daring you glimpse through at the rotten past that had been abandoned outside. Though, of course, you couldn’t. After decades of inadequate walls and fences, the PEEKs were eventually erected by the Network to prevent people from wandering into the wilderness, for their own safety, and, more importantly to stop whoever or whatever might still be outside, with diseases from the past that the

Network had so diligently brought under control, from coming in. Adam knew it wasn't as impenetrable as it seemed. They followed a long, empty, broken road of the past, through unlit, un-lived areas, until it became a puddle-filled lane, and the lane became a muddy track. Here, she brought the car to a halt.

Beyond the rain-washed windows and the slow-moving wiper blades, the car headlights illuminated each PEEK panel with a faint halo around their thirty-foot frames. There were no buildings. Just panel after panel of dense off-white plastic rising from the scrubby undergrowth. Her perfume, dense and strongly-smelling of alcohol, had filled the car the entire way, clinging to the humidity of his short, shallow, breaths, so he was glad when she opened the car door and stepped out, leaving it creaking on its hinges. She leaned on the bonnet and lit a cigarette. A real one. Car. Cigarette. He'd hit the jackpot with this one. Her silence on the way had unnerved him a little, sure; he was used to clients who wouldn't shut up about their jobs and families, passions and frustrations. Words tumbled from them like bricks of collapsing buildings, each thought dislodging the next until the whole house came crashing down. He smiled. Listened. Agreed. And then cleared up the mess. But this one had stronger defences, a barrier between them, cold and high like the PEEKs. But she had plenty of Brass and that was all that mattered.

'Come, look at the view,' she commanded without turning. Adam obeyed, used as he was to following orders from Network women. The headlights dazzled him as he rounded the car, his customer an elongated smoky cameo against the beams. He shielded his eyes. She swept her dark hair off her face, but it fell back, flattened and heavy with the persistent rain. The headlights illuminated blue hues in it, like the glowing otherworldly lights he had seen high up on the moors at night from distant decaying bogs; deadlights only fools followed.

'Do you know what's beyond that barrier?' She waved her cigarette vaguely in the direction of the PEEKs behind him, the red tip like a laser pointer used by York ARCHIVE guides. He turned to look, but didn't answer.

‘Beyond the boundary,’ she continued, her voice as monotone as a bored guide on repeat. ‘Is what used to be the North Sea. Those in the Network, they’re not sure now what it is. Ocean, lake, desert, or just the same as it ever was, because they’ve not looked in over a hundred years. Became agoraphobic. Not that they are the first to do so, obviously, otherwise perhaps we wouldn’t even be here. But I think it’s a shame, don’t you?’

‘It’s to keep us safe, so the’ seh,’ said Adam.

‘Go on,’ she said, amused. ‘Tell me what else they say.’

‘That all t’Bother elped turn what used to be towns into seashores. And that t’Great Fallin’ Out med t’shores unsafe.’

‘And you think they know this, when they’ve not even seen for themselves? Have you?’

‘Ah’ve seen it in t’VLE,’ replied Adam.

‘Exactly. Like everyone. Why bother with the real thing when you can have a virtual life? You can see pictures of it, stand around in it, hear stories about it. Vast grey waters, giant crashing waves, shadowy depths. The people who used to sail on it, fight over it, play in it, even feed from it before Polonium levels got too high, but by then the Bother was well underway, so what did it matter if you were dead anyway?’ She paused to take a drag on her cigarette. ‘But you can’t feel the spray on your face or taste the salt on your tongue from an image.’

‘So, what, *you’ve* seen it then, ‘ave y’?’ he asked. He was doubtful. He’d met plenty of bullshitters in his time who told him plenty of tales. Quite frankly he didn’t care if they were true or not.

‘As a child, I think,’ she said, her voice unsure. ‘Whenever I come here I feel a return, but I’m not sure what of.’ She hesitated. ‘But I keep looking.’

‘Do you have kids yersen?’ he asked. Clients with children always seemed to be looking for the lost youth in themselves.

‘No,’ she replied, throwing her cigarette to the floor and walking to the back of the car. She opened the boot, removed a bag and closed it again. She shut the driver’s door and locked the car, the headlights killed immediately. Adam squeezed his eyes shut to force them to adjust quickly to the dark. She brushed past him. On opening his eyes he saw she gripped a curved torch that projected two weak beams of light from each end.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked, beginning to feel nervous.

‘For a look,’ she replied.

‘Oh, ah’m not sure that’s a good idea,’ he said. ‘Do’t know who or what’s out there. Dun’t t’Network think it’s all still full of Bother an’ disease?’

‘Where isn’t?’ she replied.

‘You’re starting to sound a lot like someone I once knew.’

‘Ah, but did they have the means to actually find out?’

Adam didn’t like to say, but in any case it wasn’t an episode he cared to repeat.

‘Look, ah thought you were in need of my services, love,’ he said. ‘Ah din’t come for all this.’

‘I have plenty of Brass,’ she said. ‘And all I want is an escort. That’s what you are, right? Someone to keep me company. That’s what you asked me, right at the start, did I want company? Well I do. Shouldn’t take long. Promise.’

Adam hesitated.

‘It’s a long walk back,’ she said, striding off towards the PEEKs.

Adam followed.

Adam remained a few steps behind her. She kept the PEEKs to her right, trailing her hand along them like someone trying to escape from a maze. Her hand bumped over the ridges where one panel butted against another. The moon was hidden behind swollen rainclouds and the torchlight illuminated little else than the ground around her feet. She stopped at a panel, undistinguishable to Adam from the others, and ran her fingers up and down the

crease. She didn't wear a ring, like most Network folk did, instead placing her hand flat on the PEEK surface and placing a Brass card that looked like any other into an almost imperceptible space between the sections. A VLE alphagraphia appeared within the plastic but she didn't type, or speak her name at it, like those who whispered their secrets into the VLE each day, instead she pushed the Brass card harder into the crevice. He had seen it done successfully before, just once; he'd tried himself, after, with a number of the cards he'd earned, just to see if they'd work, but they never did. These other cards were different, not currency, more like a key, with uncommon Network access that opened up the PEEKs and seemed to alert no one. The alphagraphia display faded and the panel slid back on its industrial runner, producing a small opening to the other side. She stepped through without hesitation. He admired her nerve but feared her recklessness. Network folk were coddled and told to be afraid of things the Network didn't control, but she appeared to not have learnt this lesson.

'She just wants to look,' he told himself. He doubted she'd want to go far once through, it was too dark to see anything. 'Better dark,' he thought. And he'd be more alert this time, keep an eye out for danger. They wouldn't be long.

He ran his hand over the edge of one of the panels, feeling the sawn bumps and ridges made by old blades long before he was born. He didn't remember seeing them the other time he had been through, but he'd been much younger then and never paid enough notice to things he should have. The amazement he now felt upon seeing the height and thickness of the PEEKs, the consideration he now gave to where they might have been made and how and when, and how they had been placed in a circle all round the Network, would never have occurred to his younger self. Things were different, he was different. Back then, he cared little about stuff he didn't know or understand. He had enjoyed defying the Network and evading them with his friends. He'd since learnt the feeling of loss, and that it wasn't only Network Bobbies he should avoid. No one was ever quite who they seemed. He learnt to look out for himself and avoided getting too close to others.



There were risks he accepted as part of that self-sufficiency and, to survive and make any kind of living at the Edges, he'd had to toughen up and do many things he didn't want to. But those risks and harm were his own to bear, not to put onto others, just as the benefits, little as they were, were his to keep. So he followed her into the Uncothlans. She wouldn't be long. He'd make sure she wasn't long.

Behind the PEEKs ran ancient rusting metal fences, curled at the bottom like twisted autumn leaves, sharp oxidised spikes sticking out like bramble-thorns where the criss-crossed wires ended. They carefully peeled back fractured sections of brittle steel and climbed through the gaps, squeezing sideways, avoiding the barbs.

'Come look,' she called through the tangled rusty web. Beyond her, a diffused green glow seemed to spread for miles in front of them; patchy and insubstantial, it revealed nothing of the landscape ahead, but imparted a delicate ethereal presence of its own. Coastal winds threw more rain at him as he stepped out into the open, whipping fresh air around a brackish effluvium that seemed to amplify with every breath.

'Can you hear it?' she said, away to his right. Adam heard invisible wavelets stumbling over shale in the distance and, where she was, the discordant sound of metal on metal, of chiming coils of chain that imitated the sound of the fast falling rain.

'It's too dark,' he said. 'You should come back when it's light. And less wet.'

'Build sandcastles and eat ice-cream?' she said, walking back to him.

'If y' like,' he said.

'But I can do that all year at the Lido,' she said, whispering in his ear and pulling at the zip of his jacket. The icy rain pricked at Adams shirt, permeating each fibre, a surge of cold sweeping through his body. 'I can relax on warm, soft sand. UV light on my bare skin.' She ran her hand over his hair, down his face, soft and warm, gently pulling his head to the side so she could kiss his neck. 'But it's not real.'

Adam hissed at the metallic bite on his neck and the trickle of icy liquid that percolated into his vein; the winter rain had finally eroded through his skin, slowly flooding his head with unconsciousness.

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Adam tried to blink. Blinded. He was sure, he'd been blinded.

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Sleep pushed at his eyes. Clouds in his head like thunder. He felt sick and heavy.

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Arousal surged through his body. A cold shower cutting through a thick hangover. He jolted, disoriented. His eyes so wide it felt as though his eyeballs would fall from their sockets. He couldn't feel his arms. Higher than his head. The ground was wet beneath him. He tried to pull himself up. Too heavy. His eyes were heavy. She was there. He could see. Not well. His eyes were heavy, but he could see. Flashes. Blurs. Blood pumped in his ears.

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Roses climbed her body. Like in the VLE. Marble statues in the York ArchIVES. Fake. Not real. Sown in the dark shadows of her pubic hair, green stems winding, delicate and thorny, upwards. Big, clean, white blooms bursting at her chest. Petals falling like milky tears. Fake. Not real. She had said. Not real.

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Grit grazed his back with each rocking, twisting movement. Sharp stones carved his flesh. One thousand, two. Each cut chipped at his stupor. Slow slicing.

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He shuddered. Temporary body heat quickly ebbed away. He sensed she'd gone. He couldn't feel her anymore. His head was thick and his eyes sore, but he forced them to open. He could see. His lids were heavy. But he could see. She crouched by her bag in the torchlight, her back to him, a few steps away. Her soaked dark dress hung over her shoulder like a dripping carcass. It fell to the floor, and there was another rose. He

remembered the roses. This was different, smaller. Older, grubbier. Rudimentary blue-black lines. Not drawn with skill. He tried to say something, but his tongue lolled in his mouth, limp. His throat was dry and only rasped.

He waited for her to unchain him. He would never leave the Network again. This would be the last time. He'd go home. He had enough Brass to not work a while. He'd find something else to do. Away from women. Far away. There'd be somewhere he could go.

She returned in silence. The torchlight winked dimly off the thin, curved blade in her hand, blemished with black. The tip was broken and left jagged.

Adam willed his legs to move. He tried again to speak, to entreat. But she didn't see him as a whole. Her face was full of concentration, her fingertips clinical. Bile rose in his throat and the sightless dark returned.

2.

(Robin)

Robin liked Adam, but he didn't really understand Robin's responsibilities. Adam had none, other than to himself. He was always telling Robin to do something else, like he had much choice in the matter. Go back into the Network? That was a laugh. Digs would never agree to it and he wasn't going anywhere without him. So, instead, Adam sent him off on errands and nicked his punters. Not that he could ever really be mad, Adam subbed him more than he could earn, but Robin didn't see what else there was to do, exactly, other than what he did. He didn't scavenge, like those rats Adam talked about, he wouldn't know why, or how, or what to do with anything once he found it. What was the point? He didn't need stuff. What would he do with stuff? He couldn't eat it. He wouldn't know if he could sell it or to whom. There was only one thing he had worth selling; it cost him nothing and he had an endless supply of it for the growing number of Network folk who appeared to want it.

It was a long walk back to Hebblebeck. Too far, Adam told him frequently, but it was quieter than down the Lister Old Road, so you were less likely to bump into Bobbies out this far. He was tired, hungry and hadn't found Digs anywhere. He hoped he'd gone home.

Home. Across the road, the weathered sign that rose out of the tumbled stones and read 'Perseverance' addressed him as it did every day and he nodded. He played out a little joke in his head, where he patted down his trouser pockets in mock panic of having lost his keys. It irritated the hell out of Digs who had no patience with Robin's sense of humour and called him a wassock, so Robin only did it when he was alone now. He pushed the unlocked door, a single battered batwing clinging to its rotting jamb that didn't keep intruders or the cold out, and entered the broken building.

‘Ah.’ Still playing out the game in his head, he breathed deeply, the foistiness of fungal wood, mouldy plasterboard and old, decomposing floor coverings began to slink back into his nose. ‘No place like it.’

He stepped carefully across the rotting boards, passing the darkened downstairs rooms. There seemed to be fewer bodies in there each day, a smaller huddle of bent backs and mounds of blankets around the single fire they tried to keep going to stop the damp from getting into their bones. Robin knew this was futile; once you came here, the damp set in. The longer you stayed, the higher the tidemark. The ground floor had always been a last in, first out kind of place though, new faces every other day, gone before you got to know them. Young Tykes from who knew where, going nowhere. He remembered that. Believing that if he left the Network he could just keep going until he found something, that feeling of possibility, that there was more out there if he just got off his arse and looked. When he hit the wall, literally, he realised he didn’t really have the gumption or the appetite to figure out a way to go any further and so stalled at the Edges.

‘All of us, neither ‘ere nor there’, he thought, going upstairs, stepping carefully near the wall, his hip grazing the crumbling plaster. Maybe all those kids had simply gone back. He wasn’t sure where else they could go. Maybe they weren’t missing and were absolutely fine.

‘Digs?’ he called along the hallway. He knew every crack and creak of the floor, which helped him avoid the worst of the dry rot in the dark. ‘Ah’ve some Brass we can pay Diot wi’. It’s a loan, mind, but it’ll get us by, for now, so long as we don’t rack up any more debts. Digs? D’y’ear?’

Robin put aside the splintering board he’d bothered to position across their doorway and groped around on the floor for an antique wind-up lantern Digs had found who-knew-where. He gave the crank a quick turn and the dim glow illuminated the shadowy piles of blankets slung over the stacked boards he’d slept on alone the night before. There was the raised metal grate he’d salvaged from an empty room upstairs,

before the floor up there had given way completely, full of ash, rind too tough to chew, and the few stripped chicken bones they'd chucked on the fire the night before last. And there was the one bag of clothes they shared, always packed, ready to move on. The room was exactly as he'd left it. Digs hadn't been home again after all. The lantern ticked in his hand, counting down the seconds to obscurity.

Robin didn't know how long he'd sat in the dark. All night he supposed. He couldn't help thinking that if he sat there long enough he would dissolve like soggy bread, bits of him leaching misery and pointlessness through the crumbling timbers of this pathetic wreck of a house.

'Oh, a'right, ah just wondered if Diggory were around?' A young lad stuck his head inside the doorway.

'You an' me both,' Robin replied, not wanting to speak.

'It's just that Diot war after 'im earlier, ah wondered if it meant 'e 'ad new Spogs.'

'Aye, well he's not 'ere so y' can go cadge off some other poor bugger,' Robin said, rising to his feet, anger rising. 'In fact, ah reckon you an' all y' Horse-ridin' mates probably owe me a fair bit o' Brass. Cos it's me who goes out to addle a livin' just to see it dwined on ungrateful gauvies like yersen. Ah may as well o' spunked up t'wall.'

The young Tyke appeared unmoved by this outburst, his eyes heavy but hungry and more than used to receiving abuse.

'Gerroff wi' y', ' Robin said, sinking back into his pit.

The boy didn't need telling twice and sauntered back downstairs without a care for where he trod, like if he fell through the floor, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Robin's thoughts clouded once more. Diot must have found Digs. No wonder he wasn't home again. Probably out sharing his spoils at his expense, likely much further down Becksid than he'd dared to go. How long would he be missing this time? Diot knew there was always someone who'd pay, that was the problem. Well not any more. That was

it. If that was the life Digs wanted, he could have it. He could sleep under the stars and be just another body bloating and rotting down the snickets and side streets of the Edges. The Bobbies didn't do anything about them. The way they saw it, leaving them there just gave the people who were left another reason to move into the Network. Some Edge-folks would move a corpse if they found it soon enough, bury it if they could. Other bodies, found too late, nibbled by rats and maggots, too runny to move in one piece, were usually burnt where they lay, often taking the ghost of the empty building behind with them. Doing the Network's Cleaner Living job for them and Diot helped it to happen. Adam was right. She'd bleed everyone dry and watch the lot of them burn. Had Digs really left him to join her bunch of bonegrubbers? After everything Robin had done for him? Or was it his inertia that had pushed Digs towards it? The one thing Robin feared to lose had finally been lost. He'd let it happen.

'I need to find Diot!' Robin pushed in front of the customer waiting for his Döner at the kebab shop and slammed his hands down on the counter. Shaf calmly looked over, his twenty inch knife midway through a ribbon of meat peeling from the giant rotating column. He returned to his task without speaking, taking the meat and stuffing it into flatbread with onion and lettuce.

'Chilli sauce?' he said to his customer, a pale and podgy middle-aged chap who looked barely able to hold up his own weight, drooping like a deflating lilo Robin had once played on at the Lido. 'It's' wife's recipe, med wi'y us 'ome grown chillies. Right 'ot and tasty?'

The chap nodded for longer than was necessary, looking from Shaf to Robin. He looked like he would have been nervous but lacked the vitality for it. Robin wondered why he was out this way being clearly from within the Network. Shaf spooned on a generous helping of thick, brown sauce for the chap.

‘Wa’ she in ‘ere tonight? Ah’ve seen both of yer, callin’, all pally-like.’ Robin was growing impatient.

‘Thumb, please, sir,’ Shaf said to his customer, attempting to enter a figure onto a square flat panel on his counter, the spectral alphagraphia glowing green from within the dull white plastic. The customer lifted a limp arm to place his stumpy digit onto the reader. Shaf waited a moment for the payment to register, still unsure about whether his updated device worked, before handing over the kebab with a smile.

‘Thankin’ you, Mr. Grant,’ he said, the name glowing in confirmation of payment. His customer shuffled away, yawning his mouth around his food, shredded lettuce falling out of the sides of his mouth onto the shop floor in a sticky mound. Shaf returned to his workspace, wiped over the counter with a damp cloth and began cleaning his knife.

‘Di’n’t y’ear me, Shaf?’ Robin banged his hand on the counter again. ‘I need to find Diot, ‘as she bin in today or what?’

‘Are y’ungry?’ Shaf asked, his back still to Robin.

‘No, ah’m not ‘ungry,’ Robin replied. ‘Ah’m bloody angry.’

‘Maybe y’ should eat before goin’ off half-cocked?’

‘All ah want to know is whether y’ve seen ‘er or not. What time and where she were off.’

‘Not since ah saw you yesterday,’ Shaf said, turning around, drying the newly washed blade. ‘She ‘ad her usual, but shot off sharpish an’ ah di’n’t ask where she wa’ bahn to.’ He began to slide it over a long, flat stone, over and over, tip to heel, turning it and repeating the rhythmic action on the other side. Robin watched as though hypnotised. ‘Ah hope y’an’t got any silly ideas in that barnet o’ yours? Not mellin’ where y’ sh’un’t?’

‘Ah’m sick o’ folk reckonin’ ah can’t ‘andle mesen,’ said Robin, still watching the slowly sharpening blade glinting in the stark white shop light. ‘Lettin’ ‘em walk all over us, like we’re nowt, while they get away wi’ murder.’



Robin's rant was interrupted by Shaf's youngest daughter suddenly appearing in a doorway towards the rear of the shop, a deep cough rattling her chest, her nose running. Apparently reticent in front of a customer, she clung to the jamb, fingers splayed like one of those tiny geckos he remembered seeing at the Animal ArchIVE when he was a child. Not bright and showy, or the hissing, aggressive type, she was smaller and delicate-looking, belying the self-reliance that stared out from wide amber eyes. Her skinny, bowed legs dangled from her worn-out khaki dungarees.

'What is it, beytey?' Shaf said, smiling to mask the hostility in the room.

The little girl stared at Robin, sniffing back her nose, suppressing a cough that echoed in her throat. Her elder sister brushed past her from the dark rooms behind, shrugging a jacket onto her shoulders.

'Awright, Robin, y'look nithered, where's y' coat?' she said striding past them all and out onto the street, not waiting for a reply. 'Ah'm off out, dad,'

'Not all night, y' mother'll fret,' Shaf yelled at the window, his face taut with concern, as Isra raised her hand in a wave. 'Tabassum?' he returned to his youngest child. 'It's alright, you can talk,' encouraged Shaf.

'He's angry,' his daughter replied, bunged up.

'Ah'm off anyway,' said Robin, turning to leave.

'No,' said Shaf, and grabbed Robin's arm across the counter, the first sudden move he'd made since Robin's arrival. 'What is it, Tabassum?'

'It's Samir,' she replied, in a maungy voice. 'He's been really mean.'

'It's late. Can't y'ask y' mother to sort it out?' Shaf's voice remained level and calm, despite the strong, tight grip on Robin's wrist.

'She's talking to Chanda Khala in t'VLE.' She thought for a moment before continuing. 'Besides, she'll only say it's *your* book and she dun't care if it's torn to shreds and chucked down t'bog.'

Shaf released Robin immediately and Tabassum darted away, either to gloat over whatever might be about to happen to her brother or in fear of her father's reaction to her part in it. He dropped his knife with a clatter and immediately made to go and sort out whatever was so important inside. Apparently remembering himself, he stepped back and retrieved the knife.

'Stay there,' he said to Robin, pointing it at him like a sword, as he followed Tabassum inside. 'Ah'll be back in a minute and y' can tell me what's mekkin' y' so fractious.'

Robin's heated momentum subsided during the domestic interlude, but a festering frustration with his inability to act immediately, with his constant stalling, remained. Whether Shaf knew where Diot was or not, he obviously wasn't going to tell him. He just wanted to calm him down, send him home, not to go off like a mad aleck. Not to do anything. But that was the problem. No one did anything. It was easier to do nothing. He'd fallen into the same trap. But he wasn't weak or incapable. He'd left the Network hadn't he? Got Digs out too, looked after him all this time. Sure, he needed help sometimes, but he made the best of a bad job, day after day, that just kept being ruined by the likes of Diot, making Brass out of other people's weakness and desperation. And what did she have to fear? Nothing. She could go where she pleased without fear of persecution.

'Well, sod that for a game o' soldiers,' Robin said. He walked around the counter and grabbed the first knife he saw. It wasn't as big as the one Shaf had taken away, less than half the size in fact, nor as sharp, but he didn't have time to copy Shaf's actions on the sharpening stone; if he came back, Robin wouldn't have a knife at all. He grabbed a paper bag off the counter top so he could conceal it, he didn't fancy getting stopped by the Bobbies for having it gleaming in his hands as he stalked the streets, and left.

Robin wandered from doorstep to doorstep, asking Tykes, in various states of delirium, where he might find Diot. Most had no idea who he was talking about. Those that seemed

to know her by description rather than name were vague; he couldn't tell if they were nervous talking about her or just out of it.

'D? A'y'on about D?' said a particular lucid kid who wore a stained flat cap. 'D's a'right, mate, one of us like, know what ah mean? Sorts Tykes out wi' proper shit that want it. Clean, like, not laced wi' no dodgy mash in it like them Cleaner Livin' lot try to pump into yus. It's dead spicy, if y'like that sort o' thing.'

'Ah do't want y' Spogs, daft lad. Ah just want to know where she is?' Robin said, getting stalled.

'Where *she* is?' The kid looked confused, shrugging his skinny shoulders but not taking his hands out of the pockets of his coarse brown jacket, puffed up all important. 'No idea, mate. Off to an Excavation, 'appen. That what yer interested in?'

'A what?'

'Excavation,' he said, animated. 'All ovvert' Edges, the' brilliant, but can y' imagine all t'treasure we'll dig up in t'Uncothlans!'

'Uncothlans? Treasure? Where? Ovver t'rainbow?'

'No, ovver t'Johnson Flyovver.'

Robin shook his head. 'Ah do't know if y'noticed, but t'Flyovver wa' blown up long aflower any of us wa born. No one goes there, y'wassock.'

'T'Network do,' said the kid. 'We've sin em go. Well I an't, but folk ah know 'ave. To t'First-End, the' reckon.'

'Do y'think ah'm touched? First-End?'

'It's where t'Offcumdens first set emsens down in t'Bother. It's where t'PEEKs wa med, the' brung em ovver t'Flyovver aflower they...'

'Ah know what it is, daft lad,'

'Well then, what d'y' reckon the keep it fo' then, t'First-End?'

'Nowt that want's diggin' up ah'll bet.'

Bryth's expression changed from enthusiasm to caution.

‘S’what ah thought,’ said Robin. ‘What do you know about owt, lad? Nobbut thirteen, ah’ll bet, an’ bad as t’rest of em. No clue, believe owt.’

He sank to the ground, crouching, concealed knife in one hand, head in the other. Useless. Once again he’d hit a wall. He was tired and he wasn’t a murderer. There was only so long you could keep going, whether fuelled by anger or fear, sooner or later it starts to run out and then you find yourself left in the middle of nowhere, wondering how the hell you got there and where the hell you thought you were going in the first place.

‘Seems like you’re t’one who believes owt. Y’reckon’ Network tells t’truth about t’Uncothlans? That the’s nowt left, anywhere? Ar’t y’even curious?’ the kid said, more serious now, standing over Robin. ‘So ah’m thirteen. Reckon ah know more o’ what goes on than you do. The’s loads of us at Hen Pecked House. See fo yersen if y’ like. D might be there an’all, if that’s who yer after.’

Robin looked up.

‘Ah’m Bryth,’ said the kid. He tugged the peak of his cap before holding a hand out to Robin.

Thirteen. Digs had brought Robin out of the Network and out to the Edges just before he turned thirteen. Ten years since. What good had it done them? He’d only wasted their lives, put them at greater risk. It was what Digs thought, he was sure, and why he’d finally left him. They were no longer children, either of them, yet Robin felt no different to how he felt at fifteen. The same fear, same ignorance, same worthlessness. ‘A slow developer,’ his House Mater had called him after his third Clinic trip without needing any Treatment.

He took the lad’s hand.

It had been a while since Robin had climbed so high and walked for so long. They were well off the beaten track. Ling scratched at his ankles and the wind pierced his inner ears like spiteful pin pricks. He tripped over tree roots, fell over boulders and had to stop a

number of times to catch his breath as Bryth strode on tirelessly. At the top of the moor, Bryth finally waited. He took a battered looking metal canister from inside his coat, took a long drink and offered it to Robin once he caught up.

‘Water,’ Bryth said. ‘Found this bit of old tin rummagin’ in a site up north.’ He pointed to the canister as Robin drunk. ‘The’s loads o’ stuff waitin’ to be found if y’only tek’ time to look.’

Robin looked back over the course they’d taken. A few lights dotted here and there, with a few small clusters where habitation in the Edges still held strong, like along the Lister Old Road to Hebblebeck. The wide arc of the Orbital Autoroute dominated the distant horizon in one clean line of white light, blocking out any view of the Network and Inner Circle. He’d never even been all the way around, on the great loop that encircled the whole Network. In fact, since he’d left, he hadn’t gone anywhere much beyond Hebblebeck, yet this young Bryth seemed to know the Edges like he’d grown up on the moors.

‘Which Boys’ House wa’ you in?’ asked Robin.

‘Ah wa’nt in a Boys’ House,’ replied Bryth.

‘How’d y’end up out ‘ere then?’

‘D’ an’ Wymond brought me, after the’ saved me from a Bobby Van.’

‘So y’ve allus lived at’ Edges?’

‘No,’

‘So y’ave family? In t’Network, like?’ Robin was confused.

‘Not anymore,’ said Bryth. ‘Best mek tracks,’ he changed the subject. ‘If we’re sharpish we might mek breakfast.’

As a colourless dawn arrived, they came to an abandoned town. No longer inhabited, nature reclaimed man-made creations, pulling them to the floor, dust to dust. Long lines of houses stacked one after the other sloping towards the old town, like crumbly old books on

broken shelves, with tatty covers and stories to tell. The town itself looked like a giant cage with the door left open, tarnished metal in straight lines, blocks and angles. They passed the burnt out carcass of a large building with only parts of the broken facade still standing. A stone archway remained and appeared to be held up by the carved relief of books, open wide either side of the entranceway like wings over well-worn steps that led to nowhere. No vehicles remained. All must have been Repossessed, many years ago, at the time of rebuilding. In some towns, bricks and glass and metal had been taken to the Network too. Others, like this one, were left to waste away and fade out of existence. Statues of old warriors fallen in the encroaching undergrowth reached out to the lady with broken arms and a crestfallen expression standing high above them. Further on, the spectre of two great domes blackened by a fire that had clearly once raged there too cast a skeletal silhouette against the slowly lightening sky.

A low crenelated wall emerged from the early morning grey. Knotted stems in shadowy winter tones and dark green, twisting ivy threatened to engulf the entire structure, infiltrating the mortar and overpowering the stonework. It rose to a wide turreted archway, a miniature battlement for the small band of mercenaries loitering beneath.

‘Ave y’ a brew on?’ called Bryth to the men leaning at angles around the entrance. They came over with welcomes and smiles and pats on the back for Bryth. ‘This is Robin,’ he said. ‘Fella’s lookin’ for ‘is friends.’

‘Aye, an’ we’ve some bacon butties on an’ all, so come on up to’ House an’ explain where it is y’ think y’ve been,’ said an older man, with the grizzliest grey beard Robin had ever seen. ‘If D ‘ears y’ve bin traipsin’ off by yersen again...’

Bryth didn’t answer but smiled sheepishly at the man. A tall, broad giant of a man. He held out his hand to Robin as they walked up a winding path with high weather-pitted stones either side of them.

‘Wymond,’ he said to Robin. ‘Ah’m t’gaffer o’ this muck ‘oil. Y’ need owt, y’ come see me. Y’ave trouble wi’ any o’ this idle lot, y’ come see me. Who’d y’ say y’ war after?’

‘Ah din’t, ah...’ Robin began.

‘Is D ‘ere then?’ Bryth interrupted.

‘Oh aye, about somewhere,’ he said fondly. ‘No doubt laikin’ about wi’ all t’suff we just got in order.’

Robin listened to them chat about this D, who was evidently well thought of. Defintely not Diot. Diot was a lass, cold and cruel and calculating and in charge. Noone here would think well of that.

Unlike the other buildings they’d passed, Hen Pecked House wasn’t damaged or burnt, but the years had taken hold of it like everywhere else. Ivy grew over the outside of the double fronted building like a winter coat, a precarious tower rising from the middle like a long neck that had lost its head.

Inside, the grandeur of the place was revealed. They led Robin through the vestibule, under a high ceiling with dark wooden beams, carved columns, gilt mirrors, marble ornaments, to the bottom of a grand staircase. They told him to wait there while they went in search of D. Light flooded in through an enormous window at the top of the stairs, dust dancing before it like pixies leading him to a fantasyland. Some lower panes were broken, but higher up, where people couldn’t reach with hands and rocks, were colourful images of an ancient family with serious expressions. He wondered, as he stared at the proud, seated woman, with her men behind her, whether things had always been this way. The men’s expressions weren’t hard to read; the young one vexed, resentful, looking towards the older man for advice, for instruction, for explanations about how this could have happened, and the elder, too downtrodden, too tired, too used to how things are, looked away. Robin wondered if there had ever been a time when women hadn’t been in control.

‘Well, well,’ said the familiar taunting voice after all. ‘Ah’d never ‘a believed it if I ‘an’t seen it for mesen. Robin Redbreast, my faint-‘earted, reluctant little outlaw, ‘as fligged ‘is nest. Come to join *my* merry band of brigands ‘ave y’?’

Robin turned expecting to see Diot, all teeth and flashing eyes, exactly as he knew her, but instead found something more muted, her hair not as sharp or bright, her attire more casual, Reconditioned, grey and loosely fitting, painting an altogether less harsh, less intimidating picture, almost indistinguishable from the many lads that followed her into the atrium. Camouflaged.

‘What’s matter?’ she said. ‘Y’ve come such a long way, a’ y’ not goin’ to seh why?’

When Robin imagined catching up with Diot several hours earlier, when his deep-seated misery was stirred and his blood was hot, he imagined cornering the snappy lone wolf in some squalid sidestreet along the Lister Old Road, somewhere familiar, just the two of them, with the tables turned. He didn’t expect to be tired and grateful, among kind people in a comfortable setting, facing a relaxed and somewhat diminished, yet somehow stronger, version of his adversary.

‘Na then, Boy Wonder. What’s tha’ got there then?’ she (or was it he?) said, nodding towards the paper bag Robin had unconsciously raised and pointed towards Diot as though on automatic.

‘You.’ It was all he could manage.

‘Me?’ Diot laughed and looked around at the growing crowd of men; all shapes and sizes, young boys and full-grown men. Robin was used to fresh-faced men with thick, strong hair, but many, like Wymond, were thick-set and bearded and others, remarkably, were balding.

‘Yeah, you!’ Robin continued, his arm and voice beginning to shake. ‘Where is ‘e? What did y’ give ‘im? Look at what y’ave.’ He gestured around the vast, opulent space, his



head swimming with a returning anger. ‘I’n’t all this enough, that y’ave to keep tekkin’ and tekkin’ off those who ‘ave nowt?’

‘Robin?’ Bryth stepped forward. ‘What’s all this? Ah di’n’t bring y’ to cause a to-do.’

‘Stay back!’ Robin warned and pulled the bag off the knife blade. He swung it around wildly. He felt sick. Sweat prickled his eyebrows. ‘Rats,’ he muttered at the gathering crowd of lads. ‘Rats, just like he said, feedin’ off us that ‘ave nowt.’

‘Y’are kiddin’ ar’t y’?’ Diot laughed and held her arm up to stop anyone from intervening. ‘After all this time, after all the shit you’ve been though, what you’ve put yussen through, Little Cock Robin’s finally grown some balls an’ this is ‘ow y’ choose to use ‘em! What a waste.’

Robin charged down what felt like a long, dark tunnel to get to Diot. He didn’t know if he got there.

Light poured in from the window but it was blowing a gale outside. The ivy gripped the stonework as the wind tried to wrench it off. For now, the ivy seemed strong enough. Robin blinked against the brightness and tried to lift his head but a searing pain prevented him and he let it drop back. Instead of hitting a board, or the floor, his head sunk into the softest pillow, a real pillow, and slowly, the sensations in the rest of his body returning to him, he realised he was laying on a bed. Not piles of blankets or bags of paper. A fire raged nearby and he was covered with a long, black leather coat.

‘Ah found that thing many years ago,’ said Diot, cross-legged on the floor next to the fire. ‘Ah wo’t seh where, y’ll not know it. On me own a wa’, back then. Truth be told, a war reight enough on me own, managed just fine, ta very much. But Tykes kept turnin up, allus lookin fo’ summat, an’ only windin’ up sick or getting’ emsens more lost. Like you. So I elp em look til the’ find what it the’ after. What’s it yer after Boy Wonder, eh? D’y’ even know?’

Robin blinked, he didn't know for how long, but woke with a sharp pain across his face. Diot was no longer sat by the fire, instead stood above him, gently touching the cheekbone under his left eye with something cold. Robin hissed.

'Aye, well, that's what 'appens when y' get silly ideas i'n't it? Wymond dun't tek no nonsense and y' not' first whelp 'e's brayed,' said Diot. 'Now, what were all that trammel y' blathered about? Rats? Y' wrong about rats, y'know. Inquisitive. Hardy. Sociable. Useful. Very useful. Can learn a lot from rats.'

Robin didn't know what to make of this kindness, this change of character. He didn't know if he could trust her, or his own judgement. He tried to open his mouth to speak, but it hurt his head.

'Never mind,' said Diot. 'You 'ave a kip an' ah'll come back later.'

There may have been something else, but Robin didn't hear.

It was quiet and dark when Robin woke again. The fire had gone out. He moved his head and, though it ached, he could at least move it and the rest of his body without feeling as though it would rip open. He stepped carefully through the door and moved as delicately as if he were treading the precarious floors at home. Though it was much more stable underfoot, he wanted to get out unseen. His eyes adjusted quickly to a darkness he was used to. Each room he passed contained strange and varied items: rocks of all shapes and sizes laid out on tables, some glittering in the dark; animals and reptiles, like at the Animal ArchHIVE, only not moving; strangely shaped tools and old machinery that looked like instruments of torture; a strange wooden girl with a blue headdress inside a glass case, and other objects that Robin didn't recognise. Triggered by something he stepped on, glass paintings, like the ones in the window, suddenly glowed dimly to the low purring of an old generator. They flickered a bile yellow colour, causing a shutter effect on Robin's eyes, flickering from one sombre face to another, all depictions of death and battle. The only

smiling face was of a naked woman cavorting under a tree, handing a similarly naked man some fruit that, from the expression on his face, he was taking reluctantly.

‘About right,’ said Robin.

‘What is?’ said Diot from the dark corridor behind. He didn’t jump. He knew she wouldn’t be far away. He nodded towards the figures as the lights continued to flit.

‘Allus mekkin’ fellas do what they don’t want. Even ‘ere, wi’ all them lads about, the’s these glass pictures remindin’ ‘em o’ the’ place in t’world.’

‘Aye, even ‘ere in this temple to misogynies past,’ she said. ‘Ow about y’ look again at what y’ not seein’, as usual.’

He saw the snake and a rat, and other, more docile, creatures, but otherwise there was nothing but barren land with high mountains blocking out anything that might be beyond.

‘The’ war a whole world outside their prescribed perfect paradise,’ said Diot. ‘She wanted to know more, but wan’t allowed out. He’d got too comfortable, some might say lazy, but that’s what comes o’ priviledge no matter who y’are. She were only ever tryin’ to oppen ‘is eyes, show ‘im summat more. But folk allus reckon on maintainin’ what they ‘ave, in case they loss it, never to get it back. Do’t tek risks. Do’t go outside. Keep ‘od o’ what’s yours and mek others do likewise. And above all, mek shewer y’ do as y’ told.’

‘It’s only a picture o’ some lass fossin’ summat on a lad, like always,’ said Robin, moving on.

‘Aye, a tale, a ratcher at that,’ Diot replied following him. ‘But true as owt else in’ world afore t’Bother. Once he’d had a bite, he wanted more. An’ while she took all t’blame for owt shit that ‘appened after, he got all t’credit for owt good. That wa’t’ Bother then, and it’s t’Bother that remains, it just got all switched about a bit. The’ reckon the’ got it all sorted, that Network lot. But Bother remains.’

Robin continued to pass more rooms with a variety of curios; skeletons, robed mannequins, a ‘Peace Box’ that was either coffin or cradle, and carved wooden women

with black wings that only confirmed his worst fears and feelings about the malevolent force that woman had always had over man. Then there was the cavernous futility of his own life. Here, was a million lifetimes worth of stuff made, found or owned by people who had lived and died, come and gone. They all left something behind. He had nothing to leave, he would pass out of this life unseen, unheard, unknown, like so many men before him.

‘Head a bit clearer yet?’ Diot said. ‘Know what it is yer after?’

They’d finally reached the door. The fight had gone out of Robin, not that there’d ever been much in the first place. He mused upon the futility of all his actions, from first leaving the Network, to his struggle to survive at the Edges, to chasing after Diot, and none of it making a bit of difference. There was only one thing that had always mattered to him.

‘Digs?’

‘Network took summat off ‘im, that lad, ah reckon. Signed up to run errands fo me finally. Ah send im to t’Clinics on recces and the like. Do’t know what ‘e reckons on findin’, but it an’t ‘alf bin ‘andy ‘avin’ a whippet like ‘im about these last few. Ah’d seh y’ could wait on ‘im ‘ere. But ah know y’ wo’t.’

Robin had no idea where he was or how to get anywhere, but if Digs was inside the Network that was where he needed to be too.

Bryth followed him down the stoney path.

‘Look, mate, y’ goin’ wrong way if y’ask me,’ Bryth said. ‘Stay. We’ve plans. Big plans. Well, D has, but y’ can be part of it.’

‘Ah’ve never been interested in owt Diot’s ‘ad to offer,’ Robin answered. ‘Ah y’ sure you should be?’

‘Y’ do’t even know what it is yet,’ said Bryth.

‘Nor do you,’ said Robin. ‘Ah do’t just mean whatever it is she’ll ave y’ doin’ now. Ah mean after. Know what it’ll lead to, d’y’? Not just ‘what’, but ‘what next?’’

Bryth shrugged, hands in his pockets, just as when Robin first met him.

‘Can’t be worse than it is now, can it?’ he said.

‘As ah said, no clue, believe owt,’ said Robin. ‘Ah do’t know if it’ll be worse. Do’t really know ‘ow bad it is now, to be fair, never mind ‘ow bad it could really get. Keep hidin’, see. Hidin’ from Diot, from t’Network. Blamin’ everyone else. Diot wan’t so scary after all, so mebbe t’Network’s not so bad either.’

Bryth gave him directions to the Lister Tower Dropoff, still the nearest one for miles, and three hours later, and town after empty town, growing more and more pillaged and Cleaned-up the closer to the Network he came, Robin finally saw the ancient tower rising in the distance. The Dropoff was a hub on the Orbital Autoroute and the Orbital circled around the outside of this monument to Man’s industrial past. So this teetering, crumbling erection was technically within the Network, one of few constructions of this type outside of the York-Arc still pertaining to the past.

Robin sat on a seat at the rear of an Autoroute carriage and removed his shoes. The blisters on the sides had rubbed raw and the soles of his feet were cushions of fluid. His mouth was dry, and his head throbbed from a lack of water and the bruise that was spreading over his entire face. The carriages were white and bright, cold and hard, clinical and clean. They smelled like the Boys’ House. He couldn’t exactly describe the smell, except that it was the exact opposite of the smell of his life in Hebblebeck. The Network was as sanitary and ordered as he remembered it. From the Autoroute Terminus, the towns and the single path that connected everything, spiralling closer and closer to the Core from which the Network operated. The wide, smooth path, as pale as the walls of the uniform buildings that rose from it, was monitored at all times by the Network. It was one thing to leave, fresh-faced, appropriately dressed and having lived at the Core all his life after who-knew-what happened to his parents, under the watchful eye of the Network while they were on the look-out for undesirables, it was quite another being rather evidently one of

those undesirables trying to get back in. Then, he and Digs were just about under the radar. Only just. As a slow developer, he'd not had the Treatments that changed the other boys from bright, cheerful, vibrant lads to subdued shadows of their former selves. When he asked what happened to them, they all said the same thing, 'It keeps us healthy, safe, y'know. It doesn't make any difference at all really. It's better. You'll understand when you're older.'

Other people began to filter onto the carriage but, on seeing him, gave him a wide berth. Citizens of the Network didn't like Edge folk; vagrant and dirty, with funny ideas, people to keep away from and best left to the Bobbies and Cleaner Living Clinics to deal with.

'Excuse me,' said one lady, however. Tall, dressed in Network-New clothes, well-groomed ash coloured waves tumbling onto her shoulders, she held a gloved hand under her nose. 'Are you lost?'

Robin knitted his brows and shook his head as the carriage began to move silently away from the platform again. He knew it wouldn't be easy. Knew he'd have to learn to blend in again.

'Do you know where you're going?' she said.

'Yes, ta,' he replied.

'Have you paid?' she persisted, indicating the Reader with her eyes.

Robin sighed, removed the card he still had from his pocket, walked over to the Reader and pressed the Brass Adam had given him against it. It buzzed and the words 'Registration Not Completed' glowed from it. He tried again with the same result.

The lady raised her eyebrows.

'Times have changed,' she said. 'Brass is being phased out inside the Network in favour of P.C. to those registered.' She gave him a thumbs up sign.

He remembered the man in Shaf's shop. It had been a while since he'd been inside the Network, but everyone who'd lived there was registered. Would he have been deleted, assumed dead? Would they come after him, if he reappeared after all this time?

'Digit Entered,' the green lights of the reader glowed.

'Thank you, Mr. Amis,' said the Autoroute Voice, reminding him of the House Matrons he grew up with. 'Where would you like to go today?'

'Elmet,' he said, breathing a sigh of relief. But it was short lived.

'You have no Personal Credit. Please disembark.'

Robin returned to his seat.

'No P.C. means no ride,' said the lady. 'I suggest you return your shoes to your filthy feet and use them to take them back to wherever you came from.' People in the carriage gave her looks of admiration.

'Is that right, Mrs. Bailey,' he said, pulling his shoes back onto his painful feet. He knew coming back wouldn't be easy. But it couldn't be any harder than living at the Edges had been.

The lady looked around the carriage, to see if anyone had heard him.

'Bossy. Nice and quick, but tight. In both senses o't' word.' Robin continued. 'We've met. Y' well known round my way, love.'

She smiled around the compartment; rattled, but only momentarily.

'You think to shame me? How quaint of you. Instead, 'your way' just lost a source of income, 'love'? There are plenty more where you come from. That's the real shame.' They stared at each other for a moment.

'That's real,' he said, sticking his feet up on the seat opposite. 'Ah'm between jobs anyway.'

He watched the lights of the Inner Circle slice the dark evening.

The Gilling Edges were mizzled and grey. Limestone bleached the patchy grass, so it appeared more silver than green whenever it was bright enough to see any colour in the landscape around them through the continuous mantle of mardy sky that hung low overhead. The bright circle of the sun moved behind the grey by day, and the sometimes-bright disc of the moon, when it was full, moved behind the grey by night. Not that day or night mattered in Brewer's Woods. The way of life was simple enough; wake whenever you were roused, eat whatever was going, call with whoever was brussen enough, work your shift, then drink yourself to sleep again. Barrels and bottles, salvaged from who knew where anymore, filled the Booze Mines, brick built caverns from hundreds of years before, the slow blip blip of fermenting spirits echoing in the dark as though dripping into the beck below and flowing far away. There were blashments like elderflower and elderb'ry, then wortsmead and lingmash, and, for the old gaffers, taatiebrew. The whole community went about ensuring there was always a mash on the go, the old gaffers overseeing the overall manufacturing process, instructing, correcting and keeping a fire burning, the younger Tykes learning on the job and sent out to forage ingredients from the landscape around them. Chitting taaties would be buried once the land had glockened after the long, dark, deein'-days, and traps were set for fresh meat; the bobbing white meadow-worts and elderflowers would be picked in the leet-days and the taaties dug; the small shiny elderb'ries, fragrant, woody ling, spongy moss and bilb'ries were picked at the backend. Cadging-parties would take the daylong trek to Cod Beck for sugars, yeasts and flours. They were sometimes gone for a week or two at a time, while they staked out the endless laithes and bastilles. Cod Beck seemed to grow more vast and the security tighten on every nifle, but the Brewers were patient and careful, only taking as much as was needed, never greedy enough to draw attention to their ways-in or favourite ingredient stores. What



mattered was that there was bread and brew enough for all during the deein'-days, months spent in the dark trying to stay warm and alive among the bottles.

They said the mashing got rid of the sickness, and what wasn't killed off by the boiling, was got by the spirits. These were the ghosts that haunted the Booze Mines but who kept the Barghest away. At night, when everyone was asleep, he would hear the ancient footsteps of those running through the beck trying to escape the Great Falling Out, their sorry screeches echoing through the darkness like the stories he had been told about the Bother that he played out in his mind. He imagined the burning flesh and smelled the scorching fat, sickly like pig skin, saw it blister and pop, turning from pink to red to brown to black, peeling and curling back to burn the bones below. This was easy because when Old Broomhead died, they burnt him, as was their custom, tied to the metal stang on Stang Top, feet on the earth, head to the sky, just like those from the Age of Man who died on their feet looking to the skies when there was nowhere else to run.

Years passed in Brewer's Wood without intrusion. No Attercops made the trek up the steep track and the Brewers were careful when out trapping or cadging. When they stumbled upon a young Tyke of around harvest-age, or one stumbled upon them, they were brought into the fold. Some of the old Gaffers might take them under their wings to prevent them being snatched by the Barghest, and before their soft Network-grown skin hardened up to the elements, their clean hair became luggy and their fresh faces became ruddy from the brew. Once they'd toughened up and some of the shine had worn off, they were put out to dig taaties, because no-one else would bide the cleggies or the headaches. Wymond had grown here in the woods, a 'Brewer from birth,' his dad had always told him, so he'd never been under a gaffer's wing. It had been his dad that taught him to scrap and wallop after he'd received a braying or two from Cola and some other Tykes after they'd finished off a new batch of wortsmead. After some unwanted attention from one of the Gaffers, his dad said, 'No 'arm done where the's no 'arm meant nor minded, lad. But you don't 'ave

nowt tekken that you don't want tekken, nor d' y' tek it off some other bugger that's not wantin' it tekken neither.' They started to sleep outside when the weather allowed on account of his dad's headaches. He said the fresh air helped clear his head after breathing in the spirits all day; it helped him to sleep better. Wymond wondered if that's why he and his dad were clearer minded than the others, because they didn't let the spirits in like them. Sleep came much easier outside without the spirits running around and causing mischief, there were less shouts and screams from the Brewers, less shaking and seizures. Some of them seemed to spend whole days gipping and vomiting. Anyone who had the skitters were sent downstream to the muck oil a long way off, to clean up or not come back. Many didn't.

There were no lasses at Brewer's Wood and so, as a bairn, Wymond didn't know of them and never knew to ask about them, nor about his mam who he didn't know had existed. Later, when he did know of lasses, because Lumby told him about them and the way they chopped off lad's dicks because they didn't have them and were jealous and scared of them, he chose not to ask. Nor to ask why they would be scared of them. Before he died, his dad had told him, 'The's nowt wrong wi' lasses, Wymond, just as the's nowt wrong wi' lads. Y' mam were reet enough wi' me, an' I wa' reet wi' 'er. An' that's all there is to it.'

'What 'appened to 'er,' Wymond asked him,

'Deed, lad,' his dad answered, before deeing himself.

Wymond's newfound interest in lasses, particularly his mam, stuck in his head for many years after. He would linger a little longer while out cadging at Cod Beck, watching the comings and goings of the Network officials and workers. There were lads and lasses working together and Wymond wondered what on earth was so terrible about that.

'One o' these days, young Wymond, the' gonna cop you gawpin' at 'em an' chop yer knackers off,' said Gaffer Braith'et.

‘Why’d the’ do that, then?’ Wymond asked.

‘Sickness, in’t it? So the’ seh.’

‘What is?’

‘Bein’ a fella, the’ reckon,’ he answered.

‘Ah do’t feel sick. Is that what’s up wi’ t’other Brewers, then? A’ the’ sick?’

Wymond persisted, even though Gaffer Braith’et had set off at speed for home. The Gaffer stopped but didn’t turn around when he said,

‘Oh aye. Sick to death.’ And then he carried on his way.

Wymond watched the Brewers go about their daily lives; the eldest Gaffers laid up with their swollen legs and bulbous toes, blue skin and black gums, and their young Tykes fetching and carrying for them, feeding and watering them, cleansing and coddling them. The youngsters liked to sneak a sip of the mash, pulling faces at the strength of the brew, each daring the other to sup some more, until the first passed out and got a thrashing from his Gaffer. The elder Tykes came and went from the peat bogs and taatie fields, clarted up and clemmed, reaching for a brew the minute they got back and not dropping their pot until they dropped down first.

In contrast, the lads and lasses at Cod Beck were clean and healthy looking, not dropping down and sleeping where they fell, not emaciated or swollen, or smittled with sores and bashed faces. The fellas didn’t scrap and belt each other and none of the younger lads appeared to be under the wings of anyone. The lasses, while as bossy as anyone had ever told him, never once, in the whole time Wymond observed them, yelled or belted a lad, nor did he see any dick or knacker-chopping taking place. All Wymond could see was that, over there was more to life than digging taaties and boozing until the day you fell off your perch. There were buildings, new ones, and others being built and extended all the time, shiny even in the dim daylight, not decrepit old brick caves with dark spirits that made you ‘sick to death’.

While out on his last Cadge before he came of gaffer age, Wymond decided to take a good last look around. He understood his life was at a crossroads. As a Gaffer, he would stay in Brewer's Woods and work in the Booze Mines. He'd earned this right for a rest and to not get caught by the Attercops. He wouldn't nip-out on nifles any more and this would be the last time he would see Cod Beck and all the places in between. Born and bred a Brewer, he hadn't questioned his existence there. That's what he did. That's what they all did. He realised that, as he'd been out cadging all these years, travelling back and forth through woods and fells, he'd never worried about being stuck there, slowly bloating and breathing in the spirits until they finally got you. Now, he wondered if he had a choice. Whether he could walk into Cod Beck and join them, walk around, build something, or unpack crates, or herd animals, or water plants. Would they notice if he did, or would he blend in as if he'd always been there? Peering into a giant greenhouse, he saw men in white overalls, walking up and down spraying long lines of plants. He could do that, it didn't look too hard. He was sure he would find a white outfit and mask to cover his grimy face and grizzled hair. But they were smaller than him and rounder. He would stand taller than them and maybe the outfit he found wouldn't fit. He moved on.

There was a small field with metal towers and white discs surrounded by fencing. It looked old and abandoned, except for the few people dismantling the structures. The fellas seemed a bit bigger, stronger, maybe he could help there. But there was also a stronger presence of Attercops here than at the greenhouses. He wouldn't get passed them unnoticed. What would he say to them if they stopped him? He'd never spoken to a lass before. He'd only ever seen them from afar and they made him feel funny. He didn't feel scared of them, a little wary, of course, but not scared. He noticed that sometimes, when he watched them for too long, his knackers would tingle and his dick harden like it did sometimes at night and go off on it's own if he didn't hold onto it. He didn't want to be the kind of gaffer that took young lads under their wing, but as he'd got older, he at least had an understanding as to how it might come about and how also it came to be reciprocated.

His dad had said, there was no harm done where none intended or taken, but sometimes there was harm done, he was sure of it. He still didn't understand was why no lasses lived at Brewer's Woods, but wondered if it was on account of this harm. He also didn't understand why the Brewers had come to hide themselves away as they had, stuck there doing the same thing, day and night, not ever leaving or changing. Was this because of harm too? His dad had said that lasses were alright, if you were alright with them and they all must have been around lasses at some point in their life to have been born. All the Tykes he'd ever known talked about how they didn't want their knackers chopping off, but that seemed to Wymond to be Gaffer talk. He realised that most of the Tykes who had been brought to Brewer's Woods didn't talk about knacker-chopping much at all until they'd been there some time. Some of them even cried at first, wanting to go back, until the Gaffers explained that they were better off being a Brewer. But what had happened to all their mams? And their dads for that matter? What was the point of all this talk of knacker-chopping? Was it real? Did it matter? What difference did it make? He realised there was so very little he knew and understood about things and thought better of his grand ambition to blend in at Cod Beck. He was a Brewer, from birth, his dad had said, and so that was where he belonged. Maybe he needed to become a Gaffer before he could understand things. Perhaps he needed to take on a few more spirits before he could know the answers to all his questions.

By the time he had returned to Brewer's Woods that evening a fire was raging high with a sheep burning on it and barrels of wortsmead had been rolled out to celebrate Wymond's reaching of Gaffer age.

'Feels as though Wymond's allus bin a lad,' called Gaffer Braith'et over the crackling flames and rising spirits. 'Youngest Tyke ever come to Brewer's Woods, ah reckon'd on deein' afor ah'd ever see 'im Gaffer.' The others laughed.

'Me dad said ah wa' born a Brewer,' said Wymond.

Gaffer Braith'et nodded.

‘If ah wa’ born a Brewer, me mam musta come to Brewer’s Woods an’ all?’

The Gaffer didn’t respond.

‘Well did she or din’t she? Me dad said she deed.’

‘Aye lad,’ said the Gaffer. ‘Everyone dees soon enough.’

Wymond nodded at him and took a swig of his wortsmead to the rising cheers of those around. Through the cheers he just about heard Gaffer Whinery, a bilious and bulbous man that Wymond had spent his life steering well clear of, muttering to those around him,

‘Aye, an’ if we’d a known she’d deed we wunt a kept gettin’ on ‘er fer as long as we did. Bin dead yonks an’ none of us knew. Med no ends though ah reckon, we’d’ve still carried on even if we’d’ve known.’

Wymond felt a surge of anger he’d never felt before. A strong feeling in his chest, like something that had been missing in him until now. He heard Gaffer Whinery chuckle as he told the others,

‘Nowt up wi’ ar dicks wa’ the’ lads? She nivver did get ‘round to choppin’ ar knackers off, did she? Din’t get chance!’

‘What about me dad?’ Wymond asked.

‘He were nobbut a whelp,’ said Gaffer Whinery. ‘What about ‘im?’

Wymond heaved a burning branch from the fire before he realised what he wanted to do with it. The heavy limb had turned molten at one end. He seared it into Gaffer Whinery’s large dancing, flaccid belly, ramming it further with all his force deeper and deeper into the Gaffer, who screamed for help from his immobile position as his blood poured and his guts spilled.

‘You meant ‘arm!’ Wymond bawled as the other Gaffers piled in. ‘You! That war ‘arm done. ‘Arm on ‘er, me dad, on them Tykes. Well ‘ere’s ‘arm for you. What’s it like?’

They pulled at his arms, at his hair. Blows at his ribs. Claws in his eyes. He held tight to the bough, pushed his whole weight onto it, driving it deeper, until he felt he must have gone right through the old man whose wide awfish eyes he did not look away from.

Tykes were called in to join the fight and Wymond was finally wrenched from his weapon. He scrapped for as long as the anger in his chest would allow. He let it go to his head and blind him to the skelps and blows he received from the others who were piling into him long after Gaffer Whinery had stopped screaming. They hauled him up from the floor above their heads and carried him to Stang Top. He resisted and struggled against them, they fumbled and dropped him, changing captors and carriers often so that as he grew tired they remained strong. First they burned Gaffer Whinery as they did with their dead and he thought they were going to burn him too. But instead they left. They left him tied to the stang with Gaffer Whinery still smiting him from the smouldering ashes blowing around him and the scorching bones at his feet. He had been there all night, his face hurt, his head, his stomach, his ribs, and they hurt the more for lolling from the stang to which he was bound with his arms behind him, his knees buckling beneath him.

‘Why a’ y’ tied to that?’ asked a voice that came from someone he couldn’t see. A young voice, he thought, but his ears were swollen and there was a constant ringing that he couldn’t shake. It came from behind him, below somewhere. His eyes were swollen and his vision blurred.

‘Ah can get y’ down, if y’ want it?’ said the voice again. Wymond tried to speak but his lips were swollen and matted together with blood. He felt with his tongue that teeth were missing and his whole jaw seemed to jut forward more than it had before. He felt small hands easing at the rope around his wrists and ankles, little fingers wriggling through the knots and tugging them loose. He fell from the stang in a heap on the floor.

‘Y’ can come wi’ me, if y’ want it?’ said the little person, crouching over him and putting a small hand on his shoulder. ‘An ah catch’d tea. Y’ can eat some an’ all, if y’ want it?’ And the little person helped him to his feet.

‘A scrap of a Tyke,’ thought Wymond, lifting his head. ‘To be wandering around the moors alone.’

‘Where’s y’ dad?’ he slurred from his broken mouth.

‘What’s a dad?’ the Tyke replied.

‘Who looks after y’?’

‘Eh?’ laughed the Tyke. ‘Y’ can sleep where Non used to sleep, if y’ want it?’

‘Who’s Non?’ asked Wymond.

‘No-one now,’ the Tyke replied. ‘She took ‘ersen off to dee an’ sed ah wa’n’t t’ sue ‘er. She sed ah’m Dod.’

‘Dot?’ Wymond said, mishearing. ‘Wymond.’

They walked for some time, taking it slowly at first while Wymond’s head cleared bit by bit, stopping and starting while he figured out which parts of his body were functioning properly enough to keep going. Wymond didn’t really know what to make of little Dot with grubby brown skin and tatty white hair and large blue eyes and the brace of rabbits hanging round the youngster’s neck. The wiry Tyke chuntered on about all and nothing, about Non, who had always been really old but had gone now, but who had clearly taught Dot skills to survive alone at the furthest Edges. As they reached the topmost of the Gilling Edges and the PEEKs came into sight, Wymond slowed to look around. There was still nothing for miles.

‘Dot,’ he said. ‘Where you tekkin me off to?’

Dot replied pointing at the PEEKS, ‘Ah’m bahn to *TAN L NN*.’

Dot took hold of Wymond’s hand and led him right up to the PEEKs themselves.

The Dead End.

‘Don’t tek fret, Wymond,’ said Dot. ‘Ah’ll tek care on y’, if y’ want it?’



Taking a small card the colour of the Booze Mines floor and reaching high to push it on its edge between two panels, little Dot took Wymond through the newly formed opening to the other side.

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‘Ah’m reet sorry I am, Dot,’ said Wymond from his seat on the floor in front of the fire at Hen Pecked House, the other Tykes fast asleep. ‘Fer tekkin’ y’ to t’Attercops when y’ were a lass.’

Diot leaned into him and rested on his arm to reassure him as usual.

‘Never mind. Ah wun’t o’ known what ah wa for otherwise, would ah?’

‘An’ now y’ do?’ asked Wymond, still needing reassurance after many years.

‘An’ now ah do,’ Diot answered. ‘We’re in good graith.’

‘Do y’ mean ‘arm, Dot?’ said Wymond.

‘Not ‘arm, Wymond’ Diot replied. ‘Betterment, if y’ want it?’

Bryth liked to scavenge. Among the rubble and dilapidation, he liked uncovering treasures from the past. To him, lifting a flattened piece of wall and finding tattered posters on the other side was a window to the world before the Bother that nothing in the VLE could ever show him. In the VLE, pictures were clear and immaculate, could be zoomed in upon. You could ask for it to be hung in any of its known locations from the centuries before and feel as though you were looking at it there. At any of the York ARCHIVEs you could even walk around the galleries and libraries of the past. Choose a year and see what was on show. Be told about the work and their artists. Walk in circles around paintings, sculptures and statues; see them from all sides. Feel like you were there. To a point.

He'd done it a lot when very young. Before his twin sisters were born, his Reeve mother took him regularly, telling him all she knew. He loved to listen and felt as though she were pouring her brain, her wonder, into his ears, filling his head with curiosity and his chest with a longing.

'Look at all these things, Bryth,' she would say, her soft hand around his, leading him in those earliest, tentative steps. 'Can you imagine what it might have once been like? What it might be like out there now?'

'Close your eyes. You are an explorer. What have you found? What does it smell like? What does it feel like? What can you hear? What have you learnt?'

'It's cruel,' said Rose, his other mum. 'You shouldn't talk to him like that, he'll only be disappointed.'

'He's our son,' said Layla. 'There's no need for him to be disappointed. He can be whatever he wants to be.'

'In what world, Layla? You wanted the boy. I tried to talk you out of it. Your mothers tried to talk you out of it, even Mahla. You said you understood what it meant. The main thing is he's safe. The important thing is everyone stays safe.'

When his sisters were born to Rose, his Granny-Emer retired from the running of the Girls' House, where they all lived together, and Rose took over. When his Granny-Mahla died suddenly, Layla cried for weeks. Granny-Emer and Rose tried to cheer her up but she turned instead to her work as a Reeve, taking extra shifts at all hours of the day, so in the months and years that followed he hardly saw her and they no longer took trips to the ArchIVES.

As he grew, the girls in the House liked him less and less. Those that used to play with him, that once called him cute and dressed him up like a dolly, ignored him now as they strode and stretched and towered above him. When new younger girls arrived, they were fearful of him and ran away. Eventually, Rose said it was probably best he stopped trying to play with the girls altogether.

One night he woke to hear his parents arguing.

'You leave him here and go to work!' Rose yelled. 'What on earth am I supposed to do with him? He finishes his learning in the VLE and then just follows me around asking things. I have work to do too, Layla, with the girls, and it's not appropriate for him to be there. Do you know how much he's grown in the last few months? He's seven, Layla, we need to register him with the Clinics so they can chart his hormone levels. If we leave it too long, well,'

'Well what?' said Layla.

'Your mother told me about what happened the last time there was a boy in the House.'

'She had no right,' said Layla. 'If Mahla were still here...'

'Well she's not. Emer said you both had an unhealthy interest in the matter. Guilt, she thought, but honestly, if I'd known about it before, I would never have agreed to you having him.'

A door slammed somewhere. Bryth tried to sleep. His mothers' angry words echoed around a hollow he realised had been there for a while, deepening with every rejection. So he set off, before the rest of the House woke, to seek something to fill the emptiness, and caught the Autoroute to the York ARCHIVES.

He spent the morning looking at projections of artefacts he'd seen before. Some, they said, had been lost forever in the Bother, washed away in flash floods, crushed in bombings, pillaged, and eventually burnt in the firestorms of the Great Falling Out. Those items that could be saved were looked after by the Network, kept under lock and key deep in the Historic Core, away from those who might want to manhandle and maul the past, or see something different from the prescribed view should they look too closely or handle it for themselves.

'Hello, I'm visiting from the Harrogate-Arc and wondered what you could tell me about the Harthill-Howden Transition?' Bryth overheard a visitor speaking to one of the old ArchIVE guides. 'I bet you're asked that a lot?'

'Not much anymore. Must be four, five years old now, I think?'

'Yes, I think you're right.'

'Back then there was a lot of hubbub about it, but when nothing came of it, it was soon forgotten.'

'Have you ridden it?'

'What, go to Pardoe?' The guide puffed out a long breath of air. 'Not for all the Brass in Brigantia. If you ask me, we're close enough where we are now.'

'To the PEEKs?'

'Well, those. But I meant the Johnson Flyover; I know it was cut off after the PEEKs went up, but why keep it? It's still there, hanging in mid-air, like the Gjallarbrú to Hel.'

Bryth edged closer. He'd learnt about the Johnson Flyover in the VLE too, with it's highspeed rail line, the predecessor of the Autoroutes, that had helped deliver the PEEK panels safely across the Uncothlans from where they'd been made in the secure compounds of the First-End.

'I never fully understood either,' continued the visitor. 'Though I suppose they can't fully pull it down without going out of the Network, and who'd want to risk that?'

'Precisely.'

'What many of us in the Harrogate-Arc don't understand is why was the new Transition was built at all? It's too close to the Peatfields and all the filth they soak up from the Uncothlans for housing, or for expanding the provisions of Cod Beck; we've all seen those Peatfields Industrialists in their yellow sort-suits to protect them at the plant. So far as anyone I know is aware, nothing has been done with the Transition and no one knows why it was built in the first place.'

'Look, I probably shouldn't say, but doesn't it say it all that there was a change of power not long after it was built?'

'What? The introduction of a Materfamilias?'

'A change to the whole Matriarchal structure. We at the York-Arc have always been pretty cynical about the so-called advances of Leeds, so it was a shock to us when the old York Mater allowed for the building of a Transition out to the Edges of our Arc with no clear explanation. We believe she was taken advantage of, she was unwell, reclusive, and no one knows her hand in the building of the Transition except that she must have agreed to its being built within the York Arc. Do you not remember the unrest at the time? I believe it was this that set in motion the whole Matriarchal Structure change that took place so suddenly. She died, not long after, and the old Leeds Mater maintains it was York that set it all in motion.'

'The structural change was just timing, surely? Maters tend to be generational, as their Foremothers before them. Handovers have taken place synchronously in the past.'

‘Yes, but projects started under one Matriarchy are usually continued in the next. Not with the Transition though. It’s a ghost line. With no purpose I can see.’

‘The Maters must have had a reason for it. They always look after us.’

‘Yes, but I can see no clear reason. And York have a Committee now, so...’

‘Meaning?’

‘Well,’ the ArchHIVE guide lowered her voice. ‘The Committee isn’t exactly renowned for its speed and ability to make decisions. They’re more thorough and theoretical in their approach to problem-solving, lets say, so it means York’s influence within the Network has waned under this new Materfamilias, and deliberately so it would appear as she doesn’t seem keen to appoint a new Mater. She favours Leeds and their ‘advancements’.’

‘Leeds have always been progressive. That’s their job.’

‘Yes, but there’s progress and there’s progress. And have you noticed the increased numbers of Reeves in York recently? They’re heading out with Clinicians in vans and no one within our Arc seems to know why. We’re pretty sure the entire Committee is in the dark. You’re Harrogate. Do you know?’

‘No, but you think it’s related to the Harthill-Howden Transition?’

‘I can think of no other reason, can you? Roaming Edge trolls have probably found a way out because of it. Or have started coming into the Network without being Treated. There’s definitely something going on, but... Erm, young man, can I help you? Who is supervising you? Where are your parents?’

Bryth smiled politely and walked away as he always did when spoken to by a Network official, silently pointing in the direction of the exit.

‘I suggest you catch up with them,’ the guide said.

He wasn’t followed. Nor was he stopped when he boarded the Parisi Autoroute outside the Art ArchHIVE bound for Pardoe. It was all within the Network, and that was allowed. His mothers always said that; stay within the Network, don’t go off the

Autoroutes. But the fascinating sounding places he'd just heard about *were* on this new Autoroute, so he wasn't doing anything wrong. Maybe the old buildings still stood there, with original stones and windows, chimneys, decorations even, from a time before the Bother. He would be able to see for himself why some things had to be changed and Cleaned and not left as they were?

He dismounted the Autoroute alone and stepped into the shadow of the old Johnson Flyover. The dirty concrete structure soared high above his head. Cut off from the ground it looked more like a launch ramp for old planes used by the eponymous pioneer. The brittle piers holding up the severed end of this iconic structure inside the PEEKs were like geriatric legs making a last stand for days past. Were they to give-way, the flyover would fall onto the boundary and crush it.

'That goes out there,' he thought, standing by the piers. 'Into the Uncothlans.' He looked at ways he might climb, but his hands were too small to grip the pitted sides and the concrete crumbled beneath his boots where they grazed. He craned his neck skyward, backing away, reluctantly deciding instead to explore where he was, before inevitably having to go back. The Edge town was a setting more enchanting than anything he'd seen in the VLE. Faded white facades. Small square windows within windows, glazing long since disappeared from their black, peeling frames. A roofless bandstand stood alone in a deserted square, its pillars no longer supporting anything, reminding him of larger VLE images of ancient times. He reached out to touch one of the pillars, stopping short for a moment, not really knowing what to expect. Would his hand go through it like it did at the Acropolis or Forum? Would it feel like any other stone, the smooth walls of the House and everywhere else in the Network, or would it be different? He pulled his hand away. Scared. Though what of, he wasn't sure. Scared to break something, push it over accidentally. Or scared of disappointment? He moved on. Becoming lost didn't enter his head, until finally he came upon straight rows upon rows of identical redbrick units, so different in appearance to anything he had seen before, and yet strangely familiar in their uniformity.

He approached a door. He didn't choose it especially; there was nothing special for him to choose from among the chunky white plastic set within the red brick boxes. He just made his decision, walked up to the nearest one. And pushed.

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'Ay-up, Bryth-lad, what's tha laikin' at dahn theree?' Wymond broke his childhood contemplations. He was leaning over a gangway above Bryth, inside the belly of a great glass dinosaur. 'Sun's comin' up. Time for off, afower it gets too light. You've not kipped, ah suppose? Forget, did y', in all your sightseein'?'

'Sorry, Wy,' said Bryth. 'Ah've allus wanted to come 'ere and, well, brilliant in't it?'

'Aye, it's real. An' now y've bin. And we're all rested up, so y' can sam up y' trinkets an' souvenirs an' what-not. Not so much, mind, we've to crack on an' ca't be luggin' dead weight when we've gold to find.'

'Diggin' fo' gold! Real gold? Ah ca't believe it! Is it far?'

'Less callin' ar Bryth, ah'm brekkin' me shins up 'ere.'

'Awright, old fella, be up in a tick,' Bryth called back. This was no time to push his luck if he wanted to keep anything he'd found.

He let Wymond go and waded through the dark, foetid water back to the items he'd been stashing. Plastic palm trees stood sentinel at the foot of the dismantled mechanical staircases, their pots dry inside like tiny desert islands. In them he hid his findings. Buried treasure. The others trailed over the slim pickings inside the old shops on the dry upper floor, rails empty like bleached bones pecked at by vultures, as though the Offcumdens would have left anything of worth behind in their exodus, having left behind so much themselves. The others didn't want to paddle through the swampy mess below, but Bryth knew it was where he'd find good stuff.



‘Where the’s muck the’s Brass,’ D always said, but only Bryth ever paid attention. Sometimes he was just excited by what he found, like an explorer from the GOD, seeing new lands for the first time. Rows of mouldy books with plants and other life growing from them, pages rotting away to mulch. Tiny yellow plastic men with square heads living in bright brick houses, some of the only things to have not degenerated over time, unlike the tattered mess of bears and dolls. Blank faces of mannequins peered at him from behind shards of broken glass, through tangles of greenery and twisted metal, some smudged with black bacterial growth like soot, some with melted faces, some cracked. Bodiless heads face down in the sludge. Dislodged arms reached out from underwater grasping for help. Headless female bodies laid prostrate.

He’d salvaged an assortment of metal bats and clubs from an old sports shop and a great number of long sharp knives from kitchens. ‘Made in Sheffield’. That was written on some of the knives. He took his favourite map book out of his bag, the first thing he’d ever found, nothing like those used in the VLE. It had no trace of the Network as he knew it within it. It was something you had to hold, really hold, in your hands, and figure out how to use it for yourself. Not walk your fingers mid-air into the blue lined ether while the VLE told you where to go. A magnificently ancient-looking dog-eared book with a red leather-plastic cover, all scuffed and faded and slightly sticky. And a date, 1970. He couldn’t even imagine how long ago that was. Each page was covered in black lines and symbols, pinks and blues and greens. He could hold it to his face and smell the crumbling paper and fading ink, the deterioration of all the years between its production date and that day, the hands of all its owners. York and Leeds and Harrogate were just small words on a page with red patches nearby, with lots of other place names all around that no longer existed; not the sprawling Arcs he knew. And the Core, the place where everything was known, where everything came from and went back to, the Primary ArchIVE of every thought, idea, struggle and creation, was then just an insignificant village called Thorp Arch. A few fields with a river running by. This map was useful for scavenging at the Edges,

unexplored territory where there were no new routes for the old places he stumbled upon, but it was fragile, the pages stuck as carefully as he could manage when they tore or fell out.

‘First-End. Here, where I am now,’ he said, sliding his finger over the page. ‘This used to be called Sheffield.’

He looked down at his haul. It was too much. Wymond wouldn’t let him take it. It wasn’t what they’d come for and Wymond had only agreed to bring him along if he did as he was told and caused no trouble. He picked a couple of watches, but left the cheap jewels and ornaments he’d discovered. The medicines he thought might be useful in a crisis were probably not; anyone who needed drugs could get them from D. The bats and balls he’d found, that the other lads at the House would have loved, were too bulky for a two day hike with no one to help. They’d not come for this, they’d come for real treasure.

He threw a couple of the Sheffield knives in with his map and watches and slung the bag over his back.

A shout came from above. More followed and bright beams flashed swiftly overhead. Bryth stopped in his tracks. No noise, no bright lights. Those were the rules. Silhouettes broke the beams. Bulky shadows ran across the landings above him, darted between pillars, squatted behind barriers. The Reeves’ pointed Fizzers crackled and his friends fell with shuddering limbs and shocked cries, like a muted thunderstorm brewing overhead while he stood still in the water waiting for lightning to strike him too.

He made to move. He’d stood still for too long and was stuck in the thick sludge. It sucked his feet to the ground. The water was up to his shins and sloshed as he stalled and slid in the silt. He was sure they would hear him. They would hear the water splosh and plunge. Then they would surely see him and stun him. He didn’t want to be stunned again. His stomach turned queasy, easily recalling how it felt when he was seven. The loss of control he felt over his body. The numbness that rippled through him, shuddering to the floor. The inability to move and the blankness he had felt momentarily until he came to his

senses and he tried to stand and they hit him again. They had hit him because he was at the Edges, without a family. They had hit him because he was a boy. They hit him because there had been a trial, Reeves Treating Tykes at the Edges, in situ, mobile Clinics prescribing a one-time-only cure with no follow up appointment needed inside the Network anymore. The perfect way to treat lazy Edge Tykes who carried disease. It had been the last time he'd seen his mother. Working with her fellow Reeves. Her voice as she muttered his name. Her shocked face turning away as he fell. The back of her, her dark plaited hair, walking away, as he blacked out. But D and Wymond had saved him. Smuggled him out of the Bobbies Van while others lads were Treated. They had saved him, but not the others. Because he was so young, they said. Because there were only the two of them that day, and so he was all they could manage to get out. All Bryth remembered of being inside the van was being stuck with a needle while his body was still outside of his control, by someone dressed in white that looked a lot like D. He woke later in a dark place, cold stone beneath him, a fierce wind howling through the gaps in the broken walls, Wymond sat beside him, eating. Chomping on torn meat and flat bread. He offered Bryth a bite. He told Bryth not to worry, that they were miles from where he had been captured. Miles from the Autoroute. Miles from getting home. Wymond had carried him. The hairiest man he had ever seen. The biggest man he had ever seen. Chomping on torn meat and flat bread and offering him a bite.

‘Ah brought y’ stuff fo’ y’,’ he said with his mouth full and nodded to the open bag at Bryth’s feet, the red map and the other book, the one with no cover he had found on the shelf in that first ever house, spilling out.

‘Why’d y’ pick them up?’ Wymond asked.

Bryth shrugged. He was nervous of the giant man.

‘D’ likes pyenots,’ Wymond continued. ‘Ses that pyenots are reet clever. Allus interested in stuff. Car’t seh ah’ve much call fo’ stuff, but never reckon’d ah wa’ that clever neither.’

Bryth picked up his two books and held them to his chest.

‘Don’t worry, lad,’ said Wymond. ‘Ah wo’t tek y’ beauks. Ah car’t read a line of em.’

Bryth considered the man. This man who appeared so much more than he was. So much more than any man he had ever seen.

‘Are you a Rhubarbarian?’ Bryth asked.

‘What’s one o’ them when ther’ at ‘ome?’ Wymond replied.

Bryth held up one of his battered rescued books. The man’s thick eyebrows furrowed as he tried to focus on the tattered page in front of him.

‘If y’ not eatin’,’ the man said, taking another bite of his bread. ‘Would y’ mind readin’ me a bit?’

Bryth looked at the yellowed paper in his hands. He had no idea who had written it, it wasn’t even a whole book, just a middle bit with pages pulling away, the old binding brittle and worn-out. It had seemed to him such a fragile thing when he’d found it, easily broken and lost forever. He read the words on the first page and found them interesting. He didn’t recognise some of them, but liked the way they sounded when read aloud as he formed them with his mouth. Some were the words and sounds of the Network, clean and safe for VLE learning, but they were mixed with others that read like the Edges sounded. Old voices with strange words and sounds, yet here, with this man, suddenly familiar and real. He’d never held a real book in his hands before. Never turned a page. So he’d wanted to keep it. To own it. To be able to return to it whenever he liked, to know it was there, that it was his, when he called it to mind. He’d shoved it in his bag when the Reeves had entered the building and found him. He’d stayed too long. So caught up with what he’d found, trying out old tongues, he’d stayed just a bit too long. But here he was now, with his book. Both saved.

He looked back to Wymond who nodded encouragingly.

‘Go on, lad,’ he said. ‘What’s it seh?’

Bryth lifted it closer to his face to better see it in the dark and began.

‘These glottals glugged like poured pop...’

Where was Wymond now?

Bryth reached a broken structure with plastic pipes and nozzles sticking up like a spiked barricade. He cowered behind a red sign with a white sweeping swish peeling off like grazed skin, pleading for the churning waters around him to stop. The cold water seeped into the seat of his trousers as he crouched.

More shouts overhead, muffled female voices calling out instructions. Searching and flashing light. More crackles and slumps and crashes as friends collapsed and scabbled in their attempts to keep moving. He wanted to help. He should be trying to help them, like they had once helped him. But instead he was crouched in fear, paralysed as though already hit by the Reeves’ Fizzers.

‘Is that all of them?’ called one across the empty space above him. ‘I’ve never had a live shift before.’

‘Can’t be any more,’ echoed another from the other side. Her voice sent a shudder down his spine, stirring the distress of the last time he was caught. ‘The others have gone to look for any that got out.’

‘There’s too many exits to cover in this fucking place.’

‘Don’t worry. Core Services said only a small group was tracked out this far, five or six at most. We’ve five outside. I’d say we’re done.’

‘Let’s move them quickly and get out of here. I hate Flyover shift. Instead of wasting Brass on patrolling it they should just pull it down.’

‘Not sure they can. They say Core Services keep the this place, just in case.’

‘In case what? Isn’t the point of the Network that there is no ‘other case’ to be concerned about?’

‘If that’s true, why keep the PEEKs?’

‘Fair point. Where are the removers? Tell them we have a monster up here. Don’t know if they’ll have a stretcher big enough. I hit him five times before he went down and then had to sedate him in case he recovered quickly. He’s down now. Best do those outside too, just in case, but we’d better get moving before any of them start waking up.’

‘If they do, give them more. It’s justifiable.’

‘Do you really think they were trying to leave the Network?’

‘What else would they be doing out here?’

‘Core Services reported seeing them last near Hepworth yesterday, next minute gone. No one even knows how they got from there onto the Flyover and down here without being seen.’

‘Exactly, we can’t wait for them to actually leave. They’ll put us all at risk. What if we miss it next time? What if they get out before we can stop them? No. Best to just nip it in the bud.’

‘Yeah, I see what you mean. Just one look at this big bastard, no one will question it.’

‘No one will care. Last thing they want is to be overrun with hairy monstrosities like this. It’d be like the Bother all over again.’

‘Testosterone take-over?’ she sniffed. ‘Not if I can help it. Bloody removers, where are they?’

They moved on, their voices receding along with their dwindling lights. Bryth stayed hidden. They would be back with stretchers soon and he wouldn’t be of any help if he were caught. It was his fault. He was allowed to go pretty much anywhere with anyone, but never with Wymond when D sent him cadging. This time, when he saw Wymond set off with a small group, he sneaked after them, following them for miles and miles, catching up just in time to see them actually *go through* the PEEKs. He didn’t have time to wonder how they’d managed it, running, nipping through, before it closed again. By the time Wymond realised he was there, it was too late to send him back. He’d not been

pleased, and barked at the others to keep a close eye on Bryth while he led them all to the First-End, going nowhere near the Flyover. They'd only stopped in this place because Bryth had asked. Wymond only agreed because he thought Bryth was tired.

He had to get back to D, for help. But even with his map he wasn't sure which way to go, or how to get back through the PEEKs. And who knew what the Reeves would do with Wymond before then. He peered from behind his barricade, shivering violently as though he'd never be warm again. Not until he got moving anyway. He was back on his feet without a second thought, across the water to his island. He pulled a heavy wooden bat from his abandoned stash and headed up the mechanical staircase. Back bent, he kept his head below the continuous black handrail holding on tight with his free hand. With the footplates missing, he stepped carefully up the metal ridges like rungs on a ladder. The underside was missing and as his feet slid upon the narrow rails, he could see drips falling from his clothes into the muddy water below.

At the top, he stayed down and listened. Voices travelled back to him from the exit along the corridor to his left. Not that way. He had to find another way out. They said there were other ways out. Couldn't possibly cover them all. He had to be quick. They'd be back soon.

Bryth scampered along the walkway to where he had heard the first Reeve's voice. She had been talking about Wymond, he had no doubt. He also knew Wymond would be a dead weight but he had to try. Through the crisscrossed rails along the walkway he saw a dark mass upon the ground. He approached cautiously. He peered around the corner checking each abandoned unit with quick glances and ran over. It was Wymond, slumped on his side, big face slack and drooped, saliva hanging from his open mouth. Bryth shook his shoulder, grabbed his face.

'Wy,' he rasped. 'Wymond, wake up. We've to shift.'

Wymond didn't move. He was still out. His head lolled back to the side. Bryth pulled at his arm, barely making an impact, like trying to lift a lump of millstone grit.

Footsteps. Bryth turned, bat raised ready to swing.

‘I’ll help,’ she said, quickly. ‘But we have to move fast.’

Bryth froze to the spot. She was lifting Wymond by the arm, heaving him around her densely suited neck where a discarded mask hung heavy, back bent over, legs pushing up, struggling with the weight of him.

‘Are we doing this, or do you want to wait for the others to return?’ she said more urgently. His mother. Older than when he’d seen her last. Silver streaks threading her dark plaited hair. Tired lines around her beautiful green eyes. Voice lower than he remembered, or had blocked from his mind, the one he’d heard earlier. Definitely her.

He shoved his bat into his backpack, arms shaking, leaving the handle stuck out high. He heaved Wymond’s other arm around his neck at the other side and the two of them pulled the giant man together, his legs trailing behind. The walkway seemed to go on forever. Long and straight. Daggers of broken glass hung like stalactites in places reflecting their plight like the many pitiful tableaux he’d seen in the VLE: orange vases with black drawings; tapestries with blue and red thread; paintings of glorious battles; statues of fallen warriors. The efforts of doomed heroes from the past, ancient images to remind them of the failings of Men, warnings that had always been there but never heeded. They killed large beasts. They killed each other. Tore down trees and burnt the land. Bleached and emptied the seas and blackened the skies. Men, spreading Bother until there was nearly nothing left.

They finally turned a corner and a vast concrete space opened up wide in front of them. If anyone was watching, they would be seen instantly. Layla flung an arm out across him. They paused on the threshold. Bryth listened hard, but gasps filled his ears and his heart hammered in his head. He swallowed them down. He peered at his mother, tired but strong, holding Wymond up. Why was she helping them?

There were voices but seemed far enough away. She nodded towards some trees to their left, they could head there. With one look behind to check they weren’t being



followed, Bryth stepped forward. There was a crunch. Boots on shingle to his right. He let go of Wymond, whose weight felled his mother, pulled the bat from his bag and swung as hard as he could without looking. He didn't have time.

The bat connected with the black suited arm of a Reeve reaching for her Fizzer. She cried out and held her injured arm, but the alarm in her eyes hardened quickly and she reached for the Fizzer again.

Bryth aimed higher the second time and connected with her head sending blood splattering onto the inside of her plastic mask.

He hit her because she was after them and they had to get away.

He hit her while she was on her knees, in case the first wasn't enough, her mask smashed off her face.

He hit her a fourth time so she couldn't call for support.

He hit her again, because they'd hit Wymond, like they hit Tykes, like they'd hit him, all over the Edges, for just being there.

Because he'd never see the others if he didn't.

Because they had to start hitting back, didn't they?

It would never change otherwise, would it?

He hit her because fear and anger compelled him. Fear and anger spread like fire in his body, hot in his head and searing through his tensed muscles, his pained body, like a fever, like disease.

His mother grabbed his arm hard before he could hit the Reeve again, the sudden interference a shock, bringing him back to himself, remembering who he was with, breathing hard through gritted teeth and snot and tears.

She pulled him into a tight hug, letting him sob for a moment, before pushing him aside to attend to her fallen colleague.

‘I’ll move her,’ she said, bending over the collapsed and bloodied body, lifting her by her arms and dragging her back inside. ‘With any luck she’ll blend in with the dummies.’

Bryth wiped his nose on his arm, bat still in hand, covered in blood, hair. He dropped it. The Network was right. Look at what he’d just done. How he’d acted. He felt sick, clammy, his stomach cramped. Was this the start of it? Was this how disease began? But she would have got them. Wasn’t that always the excuse, though? Get or be gotten? Wasn’t it the excuse the Network used too?

‘Bryth,’ said his mother, back again, picking up his bat and putting it back in his bag. She shook him by the shoulders. ‘We really can’t hang about.’

‘Tek me in,’ he said, his arms held out imploringly. ‘To t’Clinics. A fower it gets wo’se. Ah do’t want it to spread. Ah do’t want it to get badly.’

‘You sound just like them now,’ she said, glancing with pity over his puffy face. ‘And just as superstitious. Didn’t take long, did it?’ She pulled him roughly back to Wymond. ‘Now pull yourself together and pick him up. I haven’t wasted all these years for you to end up in the Clinics after all.’

He did as he was told and they dragged Wymond, staggering with his dead weight on their shoulders, towards the trees. They didn’t speak, it would cost too much energy, too much breath. Bryth felt instinctively they were moving in the opposite direction to the PEEKs. He didn’t know where she was taking him or if he could trust her. Maybe she would abandon them. Leave him to the Reeves like she did before. But he kept his mouth shut as they stumbled further into the sparse woods, the trunks too thin, too young, to hide within. When he began to falter, he realised how much weight his mother had been taking all along.

They eventually reached a dried-up riverbed where vegetation was thick. His mother pushed Wymond over the subsiding edge, before jumping down herself before he slid too far. But Wymond’s mass was too much and she started to buckle beneath him,

disappearing among the undergrowth. Bryth scrambled down to help, but the weight slowly pushed him into the mud, making him lose his grip. He tried to keep his face up out of the bog, his foot caught on a root, thorns scratching through his clothes. What if it was all contaminated? Out here, so far from the safety of the Network. What if they were caught? What would happen to them all? He hadn't thought about any of this when he left the House all those years ago. He hadn't thought about his Mothers. He hadn't thought of anything when he tagged along with Wymond other than it would be fun to finally see the Uncothlans. That Robin-bloke had been right to say he knew nothing. D had been right to never let him go with Wymond. He'd let everyone down. His breath shortened, but his mother found strength enough to lift Wymond and pull him aside, so Bryth could wriggle loose and roll out. Wymond slid off and Bryth's lungs filled again.

'I'm not supposed to be here. I haven't got long, I have to catch up to get back in and where I'm supposed to be,' said his mother, mud smeared on her face. 'As for your friend, they'll think he woke up again and escaped and it'll scare them witless. If they find Moll, or when she doesn't turn up at least, it will confirm their worst fears and they'll have to alert Core Services. I have to be back inside when they do to pick it up and deal with it. Noone knows you were there. Wait here til he wakes up.'

'But...' She was leaving him again. Out here. Alone. What if Wymond didn't wake?

'No buts, Bryth. We are who we are and we all have our parts to play.'

'But you're my mum,' he said, grief filling him as it had as a youngster.

She smiled sadly. 'And I am very proud of that,' she said.

She left him without another word. He sat quietly crying, as the morning crept slowly upon his hiding place like maturity, which was always going to find him one day. A lifeless daylight leaked between the branches and leaves and he covered his face to stay in the dark a little longer.

Eventually, Wymond blinked awake, his eyes flitting from side to side, his head not moving. He saw Bryth.

‘Attercops?’ he said.

Bryth nodded.

‘Just us?’

Bryth nodded again.

‘Best frame ussens then. Job still to be done.’

‘Ah do’t think we should be treasure-untin no mower, Wy,’ said Bryth pitifully. ‘It’s my fault we’re in this mess. D’ll go mad.’

‘What y’ mumblin’ at?’ said Wymond, freeing himself of the foliage that pinned him down. ‘The’s work to do and D’ll go mad if we go back wi’out what we cem for.’ He nodded towards the bat in Bryth’s bag. ‘What did y’ think? That we’d come aht ere for a quiet game o knur an’ spell in’t moonlight?’

Bryth was snapped from his despondency by this recollection of the night he’d first read his poem to Wymond. It was a call to arms.

‘Thought ah’d forgot, din’t y?’ said Wymond, shrewdly smiling down at him, pulling himself back up the bank, carefully peering over the top before standing up to get his bearings. ‘Bout time ar voices were ‘eard, lad, in’t it?’

Bryth followed him up the crumbling sides, though his feet were shredded and his muscles pleaded for rest.

Wymond pointed over the canopy of trees to an arrangement of square steel GOD-like buildings, the word MIDAS spelled out on each.

‘Gold,’ Bryth whispered, barely able to contain his excitement.

‘This is where D ses it’s kept,’ said Wymond. ‘And wants us to fetch it.’

‘What’s D want wi’ gold?’ said Bryth.

‘Ses it holds t’cure fo’t’ Disease. An end to all t’Bother, once an’ fer all.’

‘An’ how does it end it?’

Wymond shrugged.

‘In shiggery, randling or mercy, like all things, no doubt,’ said Wymond.

‘Meanin’?’ said Bryth.

‘Y’ can never rightly know til it ‘appens,’ said Wymond and he strode off powerfully down the bank like a superhero from a film he’d watched on the Tosh Ba at Hen Pecked House, the Bobbies’ stuns and drugs shrugged off, like a well-needed nap.

(Diggory)

The gash on Diggory's thigh puckered and blood began to ooze from it. Dark and thick, it immediately congealed around the tear in his trousers.

'Yer awright, lad. Not an art'ry,' said Wymond, crouching down in front of him to have a better look. Diggory could see each particle of dirt clinging to the mist of sweat across Wymond's face; where he had smeared it across his forehead; where it gathered in the hollows and wrinkles. He knew few people this old and had never been so close. He saw the weather-beaten landscape of the Edges in every line. Years of survival in every pore and pock-mark. Weariness in the curly greys that snuggled among the thick black hair on his head and face. He didn't know how old Wymond was. Twice his age? Three times? They said that Edge dwellers didn't make it much past sixty, so younger than that he supposed. Shaf was pretty old too, he thought, but still managed to shuffle up and down the Lister Old Road well enough, but that wasn't the real Edges, not like out here. And not like the Uncothlans.

After hearing what happened to Wymond and the lads in the First End, he had to admit that doubts about ever leaving the Network had wriggled their way in. He'd always felt instinctively that the Uncothlans meant freedom to him. He could recall glimpses of fire and the feel of fabrics, smells and sounds that weren't anything to do with his life in the Network, from a time before memory. Faces flashed like phantoms of warmth and, love, he presumed. When Robin first brought him to the Edges it seemed to him a familiar darkness; that moment before falling into deep sleep where you start to chase dreams. But the dreams never came and he was stuck in noctambulist twilight. So he sought other ways way to chase them. But Spogs from Tykes were often scavenged, weak muck made from false hope and cheap illusions. He never blamed Robin for how things turned out, GOD knows he'd always tried to take care of Diggory, tried to save him from being Treated, fed him, clothed him. He paid all his debts for little in return and found him wherever he ended

up, before he could die of exposure, or whatever else. Except that one time. Only once. When he was wounded so badly, he'd slinked so far from sight he was surprised anyone found him at all. He hadn't intended anyone to. He'd never meant to be ungrateful. If Diggory could have found a way to be content, Robin would have been happy. But Diggory always needed more, even though he didn't know what it was or how to get it, so instead chose to let the Spogs eat at his unknowable loss, leading him to nearly lose all.

Then came Diot. He'd heard what she sold was life-changing, fresh, strong, not the hit-or-miss spoggy-shit dug up from the GOD. Most said to stay away, that she couldn't be trusted, another of *them*, from the Network, come to wipe them out. Superstitions grew among the addle-minded that she'd been seen to walk through walls, a ghost from the GOD angry they'd all survived the Bother; or a fairy playing tricks and stealing them away to a faraway land, and such delusions only added weight to rumours that she could go into the Uncothlans as she pleased. He'd always assumed it was all the same Diot bullshit that went around the Edges, which she'd probably started anyway, but deep down he'd wanted to believe it. And the time came when he could no longer avoid her. She found him, slumped in a doorway, septic and corpselike, and raised him again. The drugs she administered burrowed deep into his head, gouging out his memories, scraping out his thoughts as though to leave nothing else. He didn't know where he was when he eventually woke, perhaps he was he still lost in dreams, a soft pink light upon the low vaulted ceilings he passed under, weathered stone blocks blushing like chapped skin between crisscrossing arches, a bright light, as if at the end of a tunnel, growing bigger and more brilliant.

Robin found him again eventually, of course, wherever he'd been left. Angry at how long he'd been away, at how he was always getting lost with no thought to how it affected anyone else. But, as always, grateful to have found him, safe, in one piece. This wasn't true though, and he had the scar to prove it.

He tried to stay away from Diot, but it really was too late and futile to resist. His head felt clearer, but ravenous for more. She wanted him to join her. Work for her. But he

had no interest in archaeology or anarchy. And he tried to think of Robin for a change, who was afraid of Diot and would never come. But it was Robin who paid after all in all the years that followed.

He'd never meant him harm.

'Y' want all t'benefits wi' no consequences, you,' Diot said when he protested at her hounding of Robin. 'If you do't accept 'em, the' just get passed on to t'next poor bugger who will or 'as no choice.'

That last batch had him out for days. He pictured the scrubby hillsides as he was held aloft among terraces of trees from which he picked small and bitter fruits. Apples sliced with a fractured blade and placed onto his tongue. Fields of small flowers in long grass that smelled strong in the wind that blew in from the sea. The sea. Dark and grey under a heavy sky that was mostly the same as it was in the Network. But not every day. He remembered how the sea sparkled some days. Glints between frothy waves. Shafts of light breaking through the cloud, warming his skin and drying the tears on his face as he took a freshly picked purple posy from the little girl with dark eyes and scruffy dark hair, her bare skin marked, as his was being, with scratches, sticks and pokes to his shoulder. 'Shh,' she said. 'Don't cry. It dun't hurt for long.' He woke with the scarified stamp on his shoulder throbbing as though newly imprinted.

He'd nearly got there, gone back, seen them, the people. Family. If he could just have more he'd be able to find them, find himself. His real place in the world. He was frustrated with being blocked every time he got close. So he returned to Diot and told her alright, if she'd leave Robin alone, if she'd give him something stronger, alright.

'Ah'm not gi'yin' y' nowt no more. Y've 'ad all there is to 'ave fo yonks an y still no nearer to what it is yer really after. What is it?' Diot had said. 'Do y'even know?'

'I want out. O' Network,' said Diggory intuitively. 'I 'eard y' knew 'ow.'

'Ah know 'ow,' she said. 'Y' just want to mek shewer what yer askin' for is what yer really after, 'cos' two of em a'rt allus same thing.'



So he promised. This would be the last time. If she left Robin alone. If she would get him out. He promised to do as she asked. So she took him to an ancient building, the vaulted arches blushing as he passed beneath them, just as he remembered from before. But now awake, he saw the beds, all empty but for one, whose occupant was clearly fast asleep, the white sheet wrapped round her like a cocoon, rising and falling with each slumbering breath.

‘Y’ve brought me to t’Clinics?’ he said, scared. This was where he’d been brought after having been dumped in the streets by the Bobbies.

‘Do’t worry,’ she said. ‘None in t’Network come ‘ere.’

‘Do’t fib. The’s lasses. Ah just saw one. Why’ve y’ brought me ‘ere?’

‘And y’ll just ‘ave to believe me when ah seh none from t’Network come ‘ere. Ah’ve brought y’ere cos the’ll be times when ah need someone to come mind t’place when ah ca’t be ‘ere. That’s to be you. Y’ do’t need to do owt special. Ah’ll show y’.’

‘And that lass? What about er, if she weks up an sees me? What if someone comes for ‘er, to Treat ‘er, like?’

‘That lass in theyer is on er last legs. T’last o’t’ folk oo wa’ brought in ere a long time since, left to stew in the’r own minds fo’ too long. Trust me when ah seh, the’s none that come ‘ere that ah do’t mean to. Tha’s nowt much to do wiyer other than check all ah’ve set up keeps runnin’. Meks shewer she’s clean an’ calm when ah ca’t be ‘ere. An to let me know if owt changes.’

‘Ah’m not lookin after lasses,’ he said. ‘The’ve not looked after me. Oo is she to you, this lass? Yer mam o summat?’

‘She’s nowt to me,’ said Diot. ‘But, if y’ do as y’ told, she is yower way out if tha truly wants it. Meks no odds to me.’

So again, he did as he was told, not telling Robin that he was spending days at a time doing nothing but keeping an eye on the solitary occupant of Diot’s strange keep within the Network, just as she’d shown him. He wasn’t to touch her dressings; Diot

herself changed them when she returned, wounds on her arm, sores on her back and legs, he supposed, but had no wish to see. He was only to move her from time to time, and make sure the drips and feeds that entered her body functioned as they should. He would sometimes walk around, among the passageways with its many locked doors, and out among the grass covered ruins, this place within the Network but remote from it. Forgotten it seemed, or deliberately ignored. Sometimes the old lass woke from her heavy slumber and he would move her as Diot had shown him. He'd never looked after anyone before, it had always been him that needed to be watched or helped. He found it strange at first, but soon knew the routine, and found an unexpected sort of pride in making sure everything that needed doing was done. And she would watch him with sad, reproachful eyes, he thought. 'Why is this Tyke touching me?' he imagined she thought, but when he felt her bones beneath her bedclothes, and she seemed to wince with the pain of being moved despite whatever drugs she had been filled with, he felt something he had never felt before. Pity. For someone other than himself.

He told Diot when things changed. The readings she'd shown him to watch. The lass's heart rate, her breathing, her temperature. And suddenly there was a flurry of action at Hen Pecked House. She sent Wymond and some lads into the Uncothlans. Diggory wanted to go but Diot impatiently said it wasn't his turn and that she needed to send Tykes who intended coming back. She disappeared for a couple of days while they were away and, even though she hadn't asked it of him, he returned to Fountains each day to check on the lass, who it seemed was finally on her way out.

When the cadgers returned to Hen Pecked House, Diot was waiting for them as though she knew exactly when they'd be back. She'd been furious at Bryth for sneaking off with them. Her anger at him, her concern, was curious to Diggory. She wasn't as concerned about those who had been taken by the Bobbies. Her reaction reminded him of

Robin was with him. Of how he reacted every time he'd had to clear up one of Diggory's messes, knowing he would do it, unquestioningly, eternally.

'You,' she said, pointing at Diggory. 'Y' seh y' want out of this muck ole? Time's come for y' t'earn it. Wymond, tek 'im wi' y', while ah tek this other gaumless nobby to Fountains to check 'im out. Ah'll meet y'at Scout 'Uts up on 'twenty foweth clime in a few days. We'll 'a' to do it there.'

'Ah'll manage on me own,' said Wymond.

'No, y' wo't. This is us last chance for a long while an' if owt goes wrong ah want to know the's back-up. It's already brekkin' down. We do't 'ave long. Ah ca't tek it wi me. We'll loss it aflower it's done us any good,' she said intimately, clasping a golden block, thicker, but not much bigger than Brass, into his hands, holding it there a moment, her slight frame childlike against his shadowy bulk, but her stronger will evident in her meaningful stare. 'Two dickies wi' one thunner-staan, mind?'

He rested his head on top of hers and took the golden stone.

'Go wi'y im,' she ordered Diggory.

'Where we off?' said Diggory.

'To prove yersen worthy o't' Keys to t'Kingdom,' she said before leaving with the younger lad. 'Go feight fire-breathers. Go slay giants.'

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The brittle metal wire in his leg had snapped off a longer piece that ran along the top of the wall. A sharp pain shot through Diggory's body as Wymond yanked it out of his leg. Wymond ignored his cry, pulled off his dirty shirt and ripped it along the seams. He pressed a wad onto the wound, leaning onto Diggory's leg who could feel his own dense, dull, heartbeat throb underneath. Another scar to go with the other.

'Y'll live. F'now,' Wymond said, wrapping left-over strips of the beige and brown material around Diggory's leg, yanking them tight, tying knots.

‘What d’y’ mean f’now?’ said Diggory, rising awkwardly to hobble behind Wymond who’d set off again at pace.

‘What ah said, lad,’ replied Wymond, not slowing despite Diggory’s injury. ‘Y’ll live f’now. As will I.’

Diggory didn’t pursue the question. In the week he’d travelled with Wymond through the northernmost Edges, there had been little talk. There had been little of anything; sleep, food, water. There had been lots of silence. And walking. Long, hard walking. Though they’d kept mostly to the low paths through the valleys, the terrain was tough and craggy. They followed old roads and rivers, passed dried out tarns, sheltered in caves and ruins. He tried to imagine the derelict buildings in their original state from their roofless towers, their wide and pointed, glassless windows. Some were of the same yellow-black brick as buildings he knew, but less of them, spread further apart, disintegrating at his touch, having been forced together over time, compacted and formed, now eventually breaking down into their original individual components of dust and sand with little resistance. They may have survived Repossession, but not time and gravity. Further north the landscape turned white and smooth, almost like the Network. Stones here were not reduced to grit, but continued to be formed and shaped by the world and the harsh weather. Worn with pools and burrowing holes, ripples and ridges, they reflected the wider landscape, forming and changing, diminishing only to the extent that they became something new; a hollow for water to gather; a gryke for plants to grow; stepping stones through a bog or beck; a place to lean your back. There were signs that other people had, at times, passed through; old fires, bottles, charred animal bones and carcasses, a shoe. But no one stayed it seemed. Not for long.

He’d hurt his leg climbing over a style. The stones were loose and he’d lost his footing coming down, snagging his leg on the old, fleece covered wire. It throbbed. The brown barbs crumbled between his thumb and forefinger they were so old. Diggory

wondered if there was still some in his leg and what Wymond meant by he'd live for now. He didn't ask again.

Wymond eventually slowed after another couple of miles. Diggory was glad of the reprieve, but soon saw it was not out of consideration for his injured leg. In the distance was smoke. He could smell food and hear voices.

'Now, see 'ere, lad,' said Wymond. 'Ah don't want you lettin' on, so ah'll be doing' talkin' fer starters. These 'ere fellas, well, the' may not be so pleased to see me, or else, they may not know me at all, supposin' 'alf o't' Gaffers a' deed, but the' may well be some left. If anyone asks, ah'm y' Gaffer, reet?'

'Well, y'are,' said Diggory. 'You are t'Gaffer at t'House.'

'Aye, well, 'the's Gaffers and then the's Gaffers, so just mind yersen. Ah'm y' Gaffer, reet?'

'Y' me Gaffer,' Diggory repeated.

'Na-then, the's a great many young lads like yersen 'ere, younger too. Once we're in and t'Gaffers are all mindin' me, ah want y' to get callin' to them lads. Some'll be Attercop-born, more'n likely, y' might well know 'em. What we need is mower lads like you. Y'll know em when y' seem em, cos it'll be like looking back on yersen.'

'What do we need em fo?'

'We've a cure fo' t'Bother,' said Wymond. 'For all t'sickness and disease that's plagued folk that's ever lived. Now ah do't pretend to know much about these things, but Old D' does an' ses y'ave to expose folk to what ails 'em if y' want mek em stronger.'

'Sounds like summat' Bobbies'd seh, f'y'ask me,' said Diggory. 'More Treatments. How's it come about that Tykes're 'elpin' Bobbies?'

'Them Attercops do't mek folk better. The spetch Tykes up is all, rubbin' dock-leaves on a nettle-rash. But t'Bother remains. D calls it summat, 'placebo' ah think, ses

what t'Bobbies do only hides it, stops inflammation at best. Supposedly, what we 'ave now is t'real deal an', like patience-dock, works better from t'inside.'

'What's it to do with them Brewers? Why not just tek it to t'Network an' 'ave em start using it instead o't' stuff the' use now?'

'D ses t'Attercops do't want it to work, not really. Else the'd'e done it emsens bi now. An' these Brewers a' fair smittled wi't' Bother. Past savin' 'appen, the' brains addled, sick wi' superstition an' nonsense about owt the' ca't mek better wi' booze. Scared o' ther' own shadders. But like t'Attercops, the' do't really want mekkin' better either. Rather stay sick, all of em. So D ses we mun start wi' them an' them tek 'em to t'Attercops. Foss all ther' 'ands, like. And t'rest'll follow on natural.'

Diggory nodded. He'd said lads like him. Was he sick?

'Ow'll we know it's worked?'

'D ses diseases, like this 'ere Bother, ave to be brokken down. Ses we'll know it's worked, cos we'll see it, reet afower us eyes. Brekkin down.'

Wymond supported Diggory under his arm for the first time since he fell, which helped ease the pain in his leg a little. They approached the settlement slowly.

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Wymond's blood splattered across Diggory's face. Diggory was sure the force of the punch would have knocked Wymond's nose clear off. Wymond stood solid. He didn't fall or stagger sideways. He returned his smashed face to the aggressor. He did not smile nor cry. He didn't wince or retaliate. He sniffed back the string of blood hanging from his nose.

'Y' should nibber 'a come back ar Wymond. Bobbin' off like y' did, after all t'blue murder y'caused. And back agen. Bethinks-you're a beatem of us? Y've reet sicken'd me y'ave. Y'ave. Y've reet sicken'd me. Well, y' no beatem o' me, ar Wymond.' The man with tight dark curly hair paced back and forth in front of Wymond, his agitated arms jerking around in front of him.

‘Young Diggory,’ Wymond said. ‘This ‘ere fella is a lad ah once knew. Ah recollect ‘is name to be Cola. And ah recall he were a reet feckless gomerill who knew o’ nowt but spirits.’

The man called Cola, with wide mad dark eyes, turned and thumped Wymond again. Wymond spat blood onto the floor but was unmoved.

‘Young Diggory,’ Wymond continued. ‘This ‘ere fella, Cola, is beltin’ me ‘cos ah killed ‘is Gaffer. Many a year ago.’ He turned and grinned. ‘Stuck a pike in ‘is pig belly and watched ‘im squawk.’

Cola’s fist connected with the side of Wymond’s head. A blow that would have knocked anyone else to the ground with their head spinning and ear ringing. Wymond retained his grin and returned to face Cola.

‘But by gum he’s grown up. A right Cock-o-Midden an’ all.’ He began to circle Cola. The others circled them in turn, like a pack, snarling and yelping. Diggory had never seen anything like it. The older men were dirty, oozing with sores. Their lips were swollen and chapped and their flared gums were strangely lined in black or blue below their rotting teeth. They held back from the fight, their limp limbs not holding them well enough, their slow brains not really certain of what was happening in front of their glassy eyes. The younger lads dashed around erratically, darting at Diggory and stopping short of him, pushing their faces into his. They reminded him of boys at the House when he was younger. Those ones were taken to the Clinics sooner than the rest, much younger than usual, to see what could be done about their aggressive, overexcited natures. Boys like him, or would have been, if Robin hadn’t taken him away when he did.

‘Y’ appear to ‘ave y’ wits about y’at last, Cola,’ Wymond continued, as the two men circled as though in a dance. ‘Stopped suppin’ ‘as tha? Tha seem to be less full o’ t’ Spirits. Sharper. Stronger.’

‘Aye,’ Cola replied. ‘Well summat killed off all t’owd Gaffers, so some daft bugger ‘ad to tek on.’

‘All t’Gaffers?’ Wymond replied. ‘Far as ah recall, ah piked on’y one pig.’

‘Aye, but y’ took wi’t Barghest. An’ y’ med bans wi’ it.’

‘Barghest?’ Wymond stopped circling.

Diggory was surrounded by young boys now. They were looking up at him, touching his face, his arms, his neck, his chest, his groin.

‘Check ‘im,’ they said. ‘Check ‘e’s still got ‘em.’

Diggory didn’t move or protest. There were too many of them.

‘Aye, Barghest.’ Cola stopped moving too, nodding, his eyes narrowed knowingly.

‘Ah saw it all. Ah wa’ sent to check on y’ after t’burnin’ o’ me Gaffer. It cut tha down from t’stang an’ tha med bans wi’ it. Tha sayest if it saved thee from t’burnin’, it could ‘ave us fer it’s tea. T’Barghest told us that itsen. Told us when it came, neet after neet, an’ stuck each o’ t’owd Gaffers wi’ a pike like thine an’ sucked out the’ Spirits til it wa’ fair pogged.’

‘I ‘an’t a clue what tha’s on about,’ said Wymond, true confusion wrinkling his brow. Diggory could barely breathe as the boys crowded in on him. He could smell booze on their breaths. He saw a hungry anger in their eyes he recognised, satiated at first through empty human touch, nothing more than animal instinct, an obsessive instinctive need for short-term gratification that only served to increase hunger and hopelessness. Then by Spogs, or booze, that strengthened the anger or helped to forget it. He had rediscovered his purpose now, he believed, but these lads were still at stages one and two.

‘Oh aye ah reckon tha knows,’ said Cola. ‘All shadow an’ moon eyes an’ dogs teeth it wa’. An it took ‘em all, all o’ t’owd Gaffers, one after t’other, til it wa’ pogged o’ the’ Spirits and left ‘em fo’ ket. Then off back to thee wi’ a flash o’ leetnin. Back into t’shadows, not to be found. No clue? Get ‘od of ‘im lads. Ah reckon ar Wymond ‘ere needs a bit of ‘elp mindin’.’

The boys grabbed at Diggory, his arms and his legs. He tried to wriggle loose, but there were too many of them and they held him tight. His leg throbbed and seared with



pain as they pinned him to the ground. He saw Wymond led away. The young boys pulled at his clothes. Diggory struggled, the mud in his mouth, his eyes.

‘Wymond!’ he called out, but he was on his own.

‘Check ‘im,’ said the boozy lads all around him.

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Diggory hadn’t seen Wymond for hours. He’d been taken down into a series of tunnels and pushed onwards through the dark, his feet sloshing through a beck. Lanterns hung here and there from great, slate columns, metallic grey-blues with rusting red fissures, patches and pegs, holding up ancient vaults and arches. Where the tunnels rose and underfoot became dryer, he tripped in the dark over bodies, asleep he assumed, rather than dead, and the smell of fermenting sprits grew stronger, masking the foetid stink of the sleepers. They marched him on towards a wider chamber where the tunnel forked in two directions but the passageways beyond had long since collapsed and were filled instead with barrels and bottles and demijohns. The floor beneath looked as though there had been a spillage of blood, or melted Brass, like it had passed through in a gush, and whirled around before joining the beck downstream and exiting onto the fell outside, way back down the tunnels. They shoved him roughly to the ground and left him alone in the dark with the hiccougging and glugging sounds reverberating around the chamber like belching frogs.

In the dark he listened to the echoed comings and goings in the tunnels beyond. He was beginning to think he’d been forgotten. Where was Wymond? What was going on outside? There was a flicker, way down the tunnel, not enough to light his way forward. He listened hard, barely breathing, leaned against the wall as though the distant voices would reverberate off the brickwork to his ear. He stepped forward gingerly, his whole body in pain, from the throbbing bruises on his face, to the crushed ribs, to his torn and swollen anus, to the gash in his leg which he was sure was getting worse. He followed the faint sounds, hoping it would lead him out the way he’d been brought in, his hand trailing the

wall for support on the uneven ground, kicking over bottles with a loud crash, the tinkling sound of broken glass carrying far down the tunnels. He stopped. Ahead, a small dim light, bobbing and coming ever closer, cast long shadows like puppets up the curved walls onto the low ceiling. Diggory stepped back, but there was nowhere to go beyond the caved-in chamber.

‘Y’ spilt us Mash,’ the big lad said, stopping over the breakages, candlelight illuminating sharp shards. ‘Brock us bockles an’ all,’ he continued. ‘We ca’t fill ‘em agen now.’ He stepped forward and punched Diggory. ‘Stand still, or ah’ll bray y’ if y’ brek owt else.’ He staggered back the way he came.

Diggory held his throbbing jaw and waited until the splashing steps had receded before treading cautiously forward, crunching quietly on the broken glass, trying to keep the dimly lit memory of the passageway at the front of his thoughts. It didn’t take long to reach the slumbering bodies again, stepping carefully between them, holding his breath against the cloying air, cowering in the shadows when someone moved, or breathed too loudly, just another body in the dark, blacked out from the outside world, with no needs beyond a sleeping, drinking, eating, fucking, shitting cycle that no longer even resembled animal instinct. They’d given up. All of them. There was nothing beyond the booze and how it made them feel. The fleapits around Hebblebeck were filled with the sounds and smells of resentment and despair; these holes in the ground echoed like death and reeked of decay.

He crouched. He lay flat and pulled himself along the ground. He paused and curled in a ball and then set off again on his elbows. Each time he moved, he edged closer to escape. However long it took, he was determined to leave. He wasn’t like them. They didn’t have what he had. Plans to execute, promises to keep. Maybe, even, people to find. He had more than he’d ever had before. He held onto that thread of, not hope, but of something rather than nothing, as it led him out. The cold air hit his face in a windy blast that carried along the narrow cut in the hills to the mouth of the tunnel. He smelled smoke

and saw an orange glow through the skeleton trees higher up, in the near distance. Voices just outside were loud and slurred and incoherent. He peered around the brick column and saw three lads sat on the ground swigging from bottles. They didn't appear to be speaking, just swigging and emitting unintelligible noise from their mouths as though reminding themselves they were there, they existed. One tried to heave himself to his feet, but gave up after minimal effort and fell back into the crumpled mess he set out from. Moments later, a trickle of warm fluid came running around the corner in a quickening stream, into the tunnel mouth and towards Diggory's shoe bringing a strong whiff of ammonia with it. This was the opportunity to leave. He strode out as forcefully and steadily as his leg would allow, looking directly forward, along the steep valley crease and up the hill towards the fire.

'Oy!' The lad clocked him but made no effort to rise. Diggory kept walking. Up and up he went, the smell of food growing ever stronger. He'd eaten only stale flat bread in the last few days and the smell of bacon filled him. His mouth watered as the strong, smoky sweetness flooded his nose and filled his head. It threw him back unbidden to his dreams and memories, to something older, to somewhere dark like this, but not this, with fires and people and blankets, to whole roasted hogs, and to apples dipped in dripping, molten sugar. The sweetness reached his stomach, at first almost filling him with smell alone until it cramped and made him feel sick. The smoke became denser the closer he got, now tinny, like Brass he'd held too long in a sweating palm, or of the strong liver and kidney dishes served at the House when he was little and made him sick.

And he did retch as he entered the clearing, from the hunger, and from the smell that couldn't satiate it, and from the sight of Wymond burning on a pole. He could still just see it was Wymond, despite the blackened charring of his body, and the waxen melting of his face onto his chest. He retched again and fell to the floor, his stomach heaving deeply with nothing to be sick on. A silent crowd stood around the fire, staring at the burning man

as though entranced. Bottles laid strewn around, small, blue fires dancing over spilled liquor like malevolent pixies, delighted at the slaying of their foe.

He grabbed the nearest bottle and took a deep swig. The burn of alcohol mixed with his own acidic vomit scorched his throat. He held it down, held his breath to prevent himself from vomiting again, and drank again, the warmth of the brew creeping up his neck, to his cheeks, to his ears. Perhaps this was all there was, the warmth of fire, the warmth of booze, but not of others, the isolated mess of being a man. But he hadn't always felt this way. In that dark past, there were fires, the smell of booze, but there was real warmth too. Before now, before Hebblebeck, before the Network.

He untied Wymond's shirt from his leg and poured the rest of the brew onto his wound. He stifled a cry as it stung and throbbed, bringing tears to his eyes. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and ripped the bandage some more, removing the darker, bloodier strips and tying cleaner lengths around his leg, tight, like Wymond had done. A large pointed bough lay beside him, surplus firewood. He looked at it and towards the others, still standing reverently around the fire, going nowhere. He lifted the bough. It seemed tough and strong; he could use it. He rose to his feet and, using it as a crutch, hobbled forward to the foot of the burning man.

'It'll get y', y'know,' he said, menacingly, edging his way through the crowd of quietly watching executioners. Some turned. Others hadn't noticed yet, their drunken eyes fixed in contemplation upon their burnt offering.

'It will,' he called louder. 'It'll eat y'up now. It'll get y'.'

'Who's that?' someone said.

'That's 'is lad,' someone else replied. 'What's 'e seh?'

'What's 'e on about?' others joined in.

The man called Cola stepped forward, firelight licking his face, sparking in his coke eyes.

‘Na’then lad,’ he said. ‘Y’ too femmer fer us all, so do’t be doin’ owt daft wi’ y’ stob there. Ah’ll see y’ tied to y’ Gaffer on ‘is stang, so shift yersen an’ we’ll seh no-more.’

‘It’ll get y’ now, Cola,’ Diggory continued, not looking at him, prodding the ashes with his bough, easily crunching and shattering lumps of carbonised timber with its blunt end. ‘Yer not safe now, none of y’.’

‘What’ll get us?’ said a lad, looking at Cola.

‘He’s a ranty-pole, don’t mind ‘im,’ Cola replied.

‘Barghest,’ Diggory stopped hobbling around. He leaned forward on his stump, eyes wide in the dark, looking for a glint among the cinders, the embers glowing hot on his face. ‘Y’ve maddened it now, Cola. It’ll come fo’ y’. It’ll want to know why it wa’n’t bid fer Wymond. ‘Specially as it were to mek bans wi’ y’all.’

‘Tha knowest t’Barghest?’ he said.

‘Course,’ said Diggory, looking up. ‘Well enough. Dark face an’ white ‘air? It sent us ‘ere, me an’ me Gaffer, but it’s too late now,’ he shook his head sadly. ‘Y’ve ‘ad it.’

The lads moved towards Cola for instruction, reassurance. Diggory swiped his stick through the ashes, circling the fading flames, smoke and smell stuck in his throat, stung his nose, brought tears again to his eyes. He forced them back. He didn’t look up. He had to find it. If he was ever going to get out of this, this place, the Network, he had to finish Wymond’s job. He had to get to Diot and the only way now was forward. Then he hit something hard. It didn’t crumble under his bough like the chunks of ember. He raked it towards him, bending with difficulty to retrieve it, and there it was, white hot and covered in soot. He used his sleeve to pick it up, his other to clean the dirt from it. It must have fallen from Wymond’s pocket as his clothes were burnt from him. He’d found it, but the gold had started to melt in the white heat, thin plating smeared in his cleaning of it, revealing a silver layer beneath, also tarnished and deteriorating. Whatever it was must be taken to Diot quickly.

‘It’s comin’ back,’ said Diggory, shaking his head with pity at the Brewers. ‘It’s fair famished. It’ll come an’ gobble y’all up now ah reckon. It wanted to mek bans wi’ y’, but now, ah’m not so sure it’ll bother.’

The assembly of Tykes and Gaffers began to mumble.

‘Ah’ve niver sin t’ Barghest,’ said a young lad. ‘Ave you?’

‘No,’ replied another. ‘Me Gaffer ses it’s a mutt, a reet mongrel. Rips y’ gullet out wi’ it’s teeth.’

‘No it’s like a bairn that bleats to get y’ near, then gobbles y’ up.’

‘It’s a divl,’ said Cola, knowingly. ‘A bloody divl that gets thee as th’ kip. Let’s seh ah believe th’ tale. Why would it mek bans wi’ us? If it’s fair famished, why wun’t it just come an’ ‘ave done wi’ us?’

‘It’s angry. Like it were angry wi’ yee lot, long time since. But it’s angry wi’ t’ Attercops, an’ all. If y’ mek bans wi’ it, it may well leave y’ in peace.’

The elder and more infirm were keen for a deal to be struck, the younger lads, fearful of the tales of the Barghest, agreed too. Few, like Cola, who were clearer headed, reminded them that they didn’t know what the bargain was yet, that the Barghest might set them an impossible task. More importantly, they questioned whether it could be trusted to leave them in peace afterwards.

Cola strode free of the crowd. Diggory held tight to his bough, thinking about the weight of it, whether it was heavy enough to knock Cola out if he swung it at his head, whether it would bear his weight if he needed to run. The bough was both heavy and strong enough, but Diggory knew he wasn’t and would be flattened by the others even if he did manage to put Cola down. Diggory called to mind the little of what Wymond had told him about the Brewers, their superstitions and misunderstandings about anything that went on outside of the Booze Mines. He hoped it would do. He had nothing else.

‘What’s it want us do?’ Cola asked.

‘Mek ‘em sick as ye lot.’ Diggory answered.

‘Sick to death?’ asked one of the younger lads, his hollow-eyes and boggart-face familiarly eager for purpose.

Just like him after all.

Gaffery Whinery had told Cola all about the Barghest when he was a young Tyke.

‘Fetch me brew, idle lad,’ he said. ‘And mind tha do’t upskell it or-ah’ll send fert’ Barghest.’

‘Dost tha knowest what’ Barghest does to tetchy Tykes that do’t mind the’ Gaffers and do as the’ told? Rives out the’ thropples an’ sucks up all t’ Spirits. If tha burns t’ riddlebread agen, ah’ll be fossed to set t’ Barghest on thee.’ That was another tale he told Cola about the Barghest.

‘Na-sitha lad,’ went another. ‘T’ Barghest best likes’ darkenin’ time, so as it can shift int’ shadders like an ‘agworm lookin’ to ‘anch at thee whilst the’ kips. Else it comes as an ‘ound, black as’ back o’t’ Booze Mines, an’ snuffles about wi’ it’s snout, sniffin’ out young Tykes, oo ar’t wi’ the’ Gaffers where the’ should be. The’ seh it’s naw lad nor lass, long an’ thin as a latt, an’ it ‘ant got an’ ‘ead weer it’s ‘ead should be, just a lunt, like a willy-wit-wisp, that leads thee off nivver to be seen agen. Or else it’s a babby an’ it croons thee in wi’ it’s babble and bawlin’ to mek bans an’ tek thee off to do awfish deeds afower it sucks out the’ spirits an’ leaves thee nobbut a bag o’ bones. Na-then, utch up closer lad, there’s the way, reet up to th’owd Gaffer, so as ah can mind t’ Barghest dun’t get the’.’

But the Barghest had got them. One by one, after Wymond spiked Gaffer Whinery. The Barghest had cursed Wymond and got him to do it’s bidding. Then it had spiked the oldest Gaffers one by one, for seven nights following the spiking of Gaffer Whinery, and sucked out their spirits.

And now the Brewers had burnt Wymond in the wrong order. They’d burned him before he deed. And so the Barghest had cursed them all and wanted them to do it’s bidding. But Cola knew the Barghest. He knew there would be a price for making a deal with it. The curse always carried a price for anyone who made deals with the Barghest.



The old Gaffers, afraid of being spiked and having their spirits sucked out, agreed too quickly. They were fat and infirm and their rotting, useless blue legs couldn't outrun the Barghest, so they were scared. Besides, only young Tykes would be able to make the trip. So it made it easier for the Gaffers to decide.

'Seh we don't mek bans wi' it,' said Cola to Wymond's lad. 'Spike us all will it?'

'Dunno,' shrugged Wymond's lad and said no more. The old Gaffers didn't like not knowing. But they decided they preferred not knowing what might happen to a few lads, rather than not knowing what might happen to all of them.

Wymond's lad had a problem. Because they had burned Wymond, he didn't know how to take them to the place the Barghest had said to go.

'Which place is it?' asked Cola.

'Wymond wa' to climb to t' Twenty Foweth,' said Wymond's lad. 'To summat called t'Scout 'Uts.'

'Aye. Ah know it,' said Cola, nodding. 'Burial Bricks,' he said to the others. 'We do't go there no mower,' he continued to Wymond's lad. 'Too close t' Attercops.'

'Well now y' do,' replied Wymond's lad and said no more.

So it was decided that Cola should go along in Wymond's place to make sure the lads got to Burial Bricks. Deliver them to the Barghest himself.

At first light they left like any other cadging party. Cola and Wymond's lad walked ahead of the small gang. Wymond's lad said to leave the youngest ones, who neither use nor ornament, which made the Gaffers happy. And they left those so full of the Spirits they couldn't even stand, let alone manage the trip. The lads that were left, those that came, were turning black and blue in body and mind.

'Them's 'em,' said Wymond's lad and said no more.

Wymond's lad struggled with his bad leg. He leaned on his stick throughout the long winding walk downhill, but kept up, and Cola could see his face was hard set. Now and then he would glance at the others. Cola guessed that maybe some or all of them had checked him the night before, and the way he looked at them unnerved Cola. Wymond's lad didn't like or trust them, it was clear. Sometimes he looked pleased, other times uncertain, sad. He checked his pocket compulsively for the shiny box he'd dug out of Wymond's ashes, no bigger than an airlock on a demijohn. A keepsake of his Gaffer, he supposed.

'We'll not 'ave tha pity, lad,' said Cola.

'An' ah shan't gi' y' it,' Wymond's lad replied and said no more.

It was a full morning's slog in the freezing drizzle to Burial Bricks. They passed through old villages he'd not seen for years. He didn't like the empty buildings. He didn't like anything above ground, exposed, easily torn down or worn down. They only took the higher route to Cod Beck and back these days, through the woods and over the tops. Tougher terrain, but you were less likely to see or be seen. Cola thought about how this wasn't one of those trips. He had a feeling they would be seen. That they were probably meant to be.

He eventually stopped at a large lonely building in the middle of otherwise empty fields and led them inside to shelter momentarily from the endless sheets of drizzle. The lads drank lingmash to warm themselves up. The sickly smell of warm, satisfied breath hung in the air like ling-filled clouds, as the bottle was passed around. Only Wymond's lad didn't drink. He shifted about uncomfortably staying a step away from the others, shivering. Cola took in his surroundings. He'd never set foot inside the place before. The high walls were older than Cola could imagine. Older than the Booze Mines, even. There were stairs too, but they didn't belong with the walls. Newer. Not Cod Beck shiny-new, but newer than what they were fixed to. He stepped cautiously onto the first step; with no

rails to hold, the wall looked as though it would fall over with one wrong touch. Moskering metal, creaking and banging, twisting off the brittle bolts that were screwed into the weather beaten stone. The ever-thinning pins moved in and out of the widening erosions with every step he took. Wearing each other out. Neither were natural. Both had been made, fashioned by human hands, forced together, made to fit. Their job, to try and hold this whole structure together. But after hundreds of years it finally looked as though it was all coming apart.

‘Ah’m awright,’ he heard Wymond’s lad say behind him.

One of the lads tried to assist him, tucking his hand under his arms as he mounted the stairs, but Wymond’s lad shrugged him off. ‘Ah said, ah’m awright.’

Cola continued to the top of the tower. He looked out over the green land all around. Greener here than at Brewers Woods, thicker grass, more exposed. He didn’t like it. The drizzle settled on him forming momentary crystals, then melted away into the already soaked clothes that stuck to him, cold and scratching at his skin. His feet were cold, encased in thick clods of mud. His nose ran.

‘What’s this in aid o’?’ Wymond’s lad said, coming up the last few stairs. Cola could see the strain in his face. It was white and wet. The sinew in his neck strained tight and proud from the effort he was putting into standing. The effort of keeping his head up.

‘Just gettin’ t’lay o’t land,’ said Cola. ‘Ah’m not in t’abit o’ getting’ caught by Attercops an’ ah mint keep it that way.’

Wymond’s lad came to stand beside him. Cola pointed the way in which they would be going.

‘Burial Bricks is ower yonder,’ he said. ‘We’ve to mind we don’t tek wrong turnings. Don’t want to end up ont’ Main Road.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Wymond’s lad.

‘Summat’ outcumlins used int’ GOD. Tha can set off from t’PEEKS at Brokken Scar an’ walk reet down, reet throught’ Core, so the’ seh,’ Cola answered. ‘Well ‘appen

tha can. Nivver bin messen. Any road, tha's best to watch out fer't Attercops is all ah'll seh. The's a bainway the' use, just off, to tek the' goodies off from Cod Beck. The' mind it keenly.'

Wymond's lad looked towards the distance. He didn't seem too worried.

'So, tha's bin out o' t'Musweb, then ast tha?' Cola said.

Wymond's lad didn't understand.

'Thine brand. On th' shoulder. Sitha,' said Cola impatiently, turning Wymond's lad roughly and prodding with a stubby black finger at his shoulder, bare where his stretched jumper hung loose from his stick frame. 'This 'ere's an old map o't' Musweb, so as y'll allus be let back, nivver mind where tha's galavanted off to. Not that them Attercops pay it much mind no mower.'

He traced the outer circle of the old, grubby white rose scratched out on the bony lad's pale skin.

'Them's t'PEEKs wi' nowt ayond em,' he explained. 'And all t'wavy innerds 'ere is all what's within em, but still out, like where we are now and all that's all about us.' He drew the next outline in, then the next one, 'Them's are allt' bainways med by t'Attercops,' then he jabbed the very middle, the heart of the rose, his contempt projected with that one stab. 'Middle o't' Musweb.'

He fingered each radial thoughtfully. 'Aye, t'Attercops 'ebbled together a fair strang Musweb, reet hamely like, and we've all bin catch'd good an' proper one way o' t'other.'

Cola was brought out of his thoughts by the searching look on Wymond's lad's face.

'Thissen,' he continued to explain. 'Or rather, thine from long since, wa' sent off yonder for an outin'. This were all long afower, when t'PEEKs were going up. Bellwethers sent off to fetch wittins or witterin's of outcumlins back to t'Attercops, see if the were owt left after t'Bother, an' the' were branded wi' a mark like thine so'ast' Attercops'd know

'em fo' ther' own kind. The were to do t'same fo' the' kin down t'lines, so'as't Attercops'd know the' wan't just outcumlins come back to mek mischief. But when no Bellwethers cem back quick, t'Attercops took fret, an' reckon'd tha mun be all deed. Or else'd only come back smittled wi't' Bother to mek mischief avin bin outside so long, an become uncoth thissens, and so mun be left out there.'

He sighed. 'Long time since. Me owd Gaffer 'eard about it 'issen as a lad. An' then 'e tell't me. Yet 'ere tha stands, third o' fourth in't' Bellwether line, ah'd say. 'Ere tha' stands.'

'Gi' ovver,' said Wymond's lad. 'It's nowt is that, nobbut a fleck ah've allus 'ad. Ah've no clue what it means an' nor do you.'

'Oh aye. Me owd Gaffer told me good an' all. Dost tha not think it fremdly? Dost tha knowest not thine own skin? Wouldst tha be cap'd to know thine own Gaffer Wymond comes from Bellwether stock?'

Wymond's lad shook his head dismissively.

'Wymond wan't marked like this. He'd a' said,' said Wymond's lad.

'No mark,' Cola shook his head. 'An 'e wun't a known it if 'e saw it, ah reckon, bein' nobbut a whelp when 'is dad deed. My owd Gaffer told me t'tale o' Wymond's mam an' dad that come to Brewer's Woods from far off beyon't' PEEKs, intent on tellin' t'Attercops of the'r outin's. But she'd not figured on geen birth to Wymond reet in t'Booze Mines. Show'd t'owd Gaffers 'er mark like thine, thought it may save 'er appen, but they ad no wish o' Sud-Roadsters like 'em oppenin' up t'PEEKs for all to come an go as the' pleased. Me owd Gaffer allus said to look out forrem if ever the' come to Brewer's Woods again. That the'd bring us no good, these Bellwethers, sent by t'Attercops to burn us fingers t'lot of us, or else bring t'Barghest on us. An' 'e wa' reet an'all. Tried to stop 'em issen, but 'e wa' reet.'

‘Appen if Wymond’s mam and dad’d been let be, and Wymond too, mind, t’Barghest’d’ve let you alone an’all. ‘Appen y’ve brought it all on yersens?’ said Wymond’s lad.

‘Aye. ‘Appen we ‘ave,’ said Cola, resigned.

‘So, you reckon ah’m from t’Uncothlans then?’ said Wymond’s lad. ‘That the’s more like me, out there?’

‘Ah do’t reckon nowt other than what me owd Gaffer said,’ said Cola. ‘And that these Tykes won’t follow a Bellwether, so keep it covered if tha want’s ‘em to keep doin’ as y’ bid.’

Wymond’s lad looked far into the distance, staying there long after Cola had returned to rest with his lads.

The many great mounds of Burial Bricks loomed out of the murk. It was said that, way back before the PEEKs, when the first fences went up and no one could leave, they brought the diseased dead here and buried them deep. Then they piled the red bricks from the buildings that once stood there on top so no one, human or animal, could dig them up, and mounted the old signs around them for barriers, a ring of red roses, Muswebs drenched in blood, garlands for the dead. They made their way to the the only building that remained, cordoned off with tape and flags that the Attercops had put all around Burial Bricks. Though the flags had faded in the rain and wind and sleet and snow and time since they were first put there, it was still possible to just about make out three greying blades against patchy yellow backgrounds.

They were met by someone cloaked in a thick black suit with gloved hands, his head covered with a large hood, his face just about visible through the foggy panel. Cola had only ever heard of Attercops around Burial Bricks with such gear on before. The Gaffers said they prodded at the ground with long sticks, dumping more bricks on top where old

ones had eroded away, and putting up more flags. Cola wondered how this other chap had Attercop gear. Perhaps he'd cadged it off one of them. Or maybe it was his, someone who worked for the Attercops, doing whatever it was they did here. He was of slight build, so seemed femmer right enough to have had his knackers chopped off as well. Knackers or not, this chap was the one to watch, thought Cola.

'Awright?,' said the unknown chap, his voice filtered densely through his mask, patting Wymond's lad on the shoulder. He didn't acknowledge Cola or the other Brewers. 'Where's Wy?'

Wymond's lad led him away and spoke quietly to him.

There seemed to be nothing said between them for a while, Wymond's lad watching the other chap with caution. The masked figure finally turned toward the Brewers, the younger lads hurkling behind Cola as though avoiding a chill wind. Cola felt it too but stood tall. He would see him, this chap, whoever he was.

'What about us gold?' the chap said eventually. Wymond's lad handed over his Gaffer's keepsake.

'It's brekkin' down,' said the chap, urgently leading Wymond's lad away. 'Y' need to come wi' me sharpish. An' a'll do summat about that leg an'all.'

The Brewers didn't follow them.

'Raeburn, y' sackless saimy-arse,' Cola ordered one of his own with a pointing finger. 'Go shift tha'sen ower to yon bricks and watch fo't' Attercops.'

He and the others sat on the floor drinking themselves to sleep.

Cola woke, wet through and cold. A large old pot and lumps of bread had been left for them. He patted the side of the pan. Still warm. He lifted the lid and a waft of meaty stew filled his nostrils. He nudged the others awake including Raeburn who hadn't managed the watch after all and they ate greedily. It was heartier and tastier than any food they ate at the

Booze Mines and was gone in no time, lads scrapping over the last wipings of the pot with their bread, before boozing again back to sleep with their bellies full.

Cola tried to keep his eyes open in case it was a trick and the Barghest decided to pike them as they slept. Once, he thought he saw a flash of white, a guttering flame, flickering, and then extinguished. He sat up and his heart thumped. He felt sick and clammy. He didn't see it again.

And then morning came quickly. The harsh steel daylight invaded his heavy eyelids, peeling them back, spiking his eyeballs, boring into his head, making his nose run like dawn-dew. Not like inside the Booze Mines where you could sleep and never see a morning for as long as you wished. Wymond's lad hobbled towards them across the damp grass. No longer wearing the blood stained trousers he'd arrived in, he looked much fresher and healthier than when Cola had last seen him. He gave the Brewers more bread smeared with dripping to eat and some water. The youngsters tore through the loaves as though famished filthy gobslotches, guzzling their drink after each salty mouthful. Cola, still feeling as sticky and drawn as he did through the night, didn't eat.

'Where's t' Barghest,' Cola said. 'It were 'ere. Ah saw it.'

'Aye,' said Wymond's lad. 'It were 'ere, but it's gone. Ah told it y'd help. Even though you burnt Wymond and it wanted yer guts fo' garters, ah said y'd 'elp an' it said it'd leave y'. Fer now.'

'Fer now?' Cola said.

'Oh aye,' said Wymond's lad with a smile, before wrapping a thick scarf around his face, against the bitter morning air, against the sickening smell of animal fat and the first-light flatulence of the Brewers. 'Y' can't gi' backword now, Cola. Best foot forrad.'

Cola took a large glug of water before leading them away from Burial Bricks. The faded warning flags clapped and flapped like strings of streamers, waving them on their way; the diminishing black blades against the sickly yellow, like the wide horrified eyes



and desperate gaping mouths of the rotting corpses deep in the ground over which they now strode.

He took them to the Main Road, wider here than where he normally crossed. Its crumbling black surface was pitted with holes flooded with murky water. Winding metal and stone and ivy grew, twined together, forming dark arches over the road with the encroaching trees. Wymond's lad, more agile this morning, his leg easier, his fever gone, chucked his bough over the metal barrier before climbing over himself and setting off down the road.

'Let's see if does go reet up to t'Core like y' seh,' said Wymond's lad.

The Brewers looked to Cola for reassurance, but he couldn't give it. His stomach churned with fear.

Barghest or Attercops?

He didn't like his choice, but decided the lads were better off without their knackers than without their Spirits. And so he followed the Bellwether. And the other lads followed him.

Some time down the road, as they left behind the open lands where the unkind wind whipped around their heads and made their rotting teeth hurt, old buildings began to grow out of the ground again, and Cola's lads began to fall ill.

'Ah've t'skitters, Cola,' said one, having returned from behind some bushes at the edge of the road. 'Ah do't feel reet at all.'

They continued to walk the best they could. One lad was sick a few times, others began to gip with nothing coming of it. Another dashed back and forth between bushes and structures, but eventually stopped worrying and let the shit run down his leg when it came.

'This i'n't on,' called Cola. 'We can't feight off t'Attercops laike this. We can't d' nowt to 'elp t'Barghest wi't' skitters.'

‘Ah.’ Wymond’s lad dismissed him with a wave of his hand and continued to walk. ‘Do’t you worry Cola, y’ doin’ just as well as t’Barghest intended.’ He laughed. ‘Just let it all out.’

‘Na’ then,’ said Cola, getting angry. ‘Mind ah don’t belt thee, now. Barghest o’ not, just mind thassen.’

Wymond’s lad smiled, just as lights flashed on from behind a building at the roadside.

‘Shift thassens!’ yelled Cola, grabbing the shoulder of the shitting boy and pulling him behind some trees. The others ran too, behind bushes, beyond the reach of the light. The sound of retching echoed in the darkness. Only Wymond’s lad hadn’t run.

Cola peered from behind his tree.

Wymond’s lad shrugged submissively and pointed to his bad leg.

‘Can’t leg it, can ah?’ he shouted.

Cola pulled back to hide himself. Wymond’s lad calling out like that would show the Attercops where he was, where they all were. His stomach turned over again and he could feel sweat running down his back. The smell coming from the boy beside him began to make him retch. He bent over, his stomach heaving, but nothing came up. His throat croaked and spluttered like a grouse call. He started to shiver violently. His head split. Were the Spirits leaving him?

‘T’Barghest,’ he managed as he choked on his vomit, his worst fears confirmed. ‘Got us after all.’

‘Oh dear,’ said the Attercop, shining her torch on him. ‘Let’s see if we can’t make you all better, shall we?’ And she hit him with her Fizzer.

Cola woke in a room without windows. It was bright white. He was laying in a large chair with only a thin shroud over him. He wondered if he was dead. He certainly didn’t feel too well.

He tried to sit up, the shroud falling soundlessly to the floor as he gave a negligible jerk, straps across his arms and chest restraining him. Curls of his dark hair fluttered onto his face as his head snapped back. He shook them off, but more fell in their place, shadowy clumps left on the chair either side of his head. The room began to spin. He grabbed the chair arms to stop himself from falling. There was no way he could fall.

He could feel things, sharp inside him; the tops of his arms, in his thighs, his buttocks, his testes. Above the chair was a tube that appeared to be pouring liquid into the chair itself. He began to shake as cold crept through him. His arms were red and patchy. Between each of the straps, he could see it had spread to his chest and down his trunk, his skin shedding like old edder-skin.

He closed his searing eyes against the pain in his head and opened them again when it didn't make a difference.

Wymond's lad wasn't there. He was alone. His bowels began to empty.

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Guytrash

*A minded Wymond at TAN L NN. Kept im warm an fetched im is tea but e wa down a fair bit, an dowly a while after. It war an age afower e war on –mend, a took im fo mekkin-after Non into –ayont, til e talked agen at last.*

*‘Am a deein, by Gum?’ e sed, all cronky, is een suddenly flickin round all flayful, but not movin is ead for is body war all twangled an nesh. ‘Ast spirits come for me at last?’*

*‘Y not fo –bucket yet,’ a sed. ‘We’ll get y fit agen.’*

*‘Why y’elpin me, Dot?’*

*‘Non sed a wa to bring folk to emsens or to –ayont. Y dint seem to me to be ready for –ayont. An I appen thought y din’t reightly know yersen neither seein as y wa faftin wi them Fellas.’*

*‘Y not wrong there. A do- know where it is ah belong.’*

*‘When Non fust went to –ayont, a dint know mesen,’ a sed sniffin back a snivel. ‘Ad gone into –Stints to look for summat. An found you. So appen, fo now, we belong together.’*

*‘Fo now?’ e sed*

*‘Aye, fo now,’ a sed. ‘Nowt lasts, Non sed. But it’s ok cos when it’s gone it on’y brings summat new.’*

*In time, Wymond grew strong agen.*

*A took im to –tarn evry day to teach im to play ducks an drakes til it wa dosky. Then, when e war all worn out an fast akip, a went, as ad allus meant, into –Stints to dout them offaldment Fellas, so the cun- come for no one no mower. When e wa fit, a showed im ow me an Non ad lived all them years in –Fellon lands an ow we’d come by us Backdoowr Key into –Stints, an e wa blowed by all a lernt im. We lived appy enough, like me and Non ad done afower, except Wymond liked to traipse further than Non did an we oft found*

*ussens kippin out in –Stints avin strayed so far. We found other Backdoowrs, but the wa so far off TAN L NN, a war flayed to use em should them Fellas catch up wiyus atween trips. We war allus glad to come back to TAN L NN though, an us fire, allus brusslin low. An we allus played us game o ducks and drakes on -tarn til it wa dosky.*

*‘-Gaffers allus sed the wa nowt ayont –PEEKs,’ Wymond sed one neet, stood proud at –top o –world, cloddin checkstones far into –cold murk waters wiya plip an a plosh. Is fuzzy air blew like -bent moors around im. ‘Ow is it you cem to be where the’s meant to be nowt, Dot?’*

*‘Non sed a wa put out like rubbidge,’ a sed.*

*‘By oo, Dot?’*

*Plip, plosh.*

*‘Jealousy, Non sed. But av nibber met er, so a do- know why. Ast tha met er?’*

*‘Iyant ever met a lass, so appen not. A do- know much o lasses at all, do you?’*

*‘Non war a Lass. She sed it meant nowt good could come of er.’*

*‘Me mam war a lass. If a cem from er, what’s it mek me?’*

*‘Nowt good,’ a sed.*

*‘So –tsames to be sed of us all?’*

*Plip, plosh.*

*‘-Gaffers saw to me mam, so she cun- chop off the knackers,’ Wymond carried on.*

*‘Did Non chop off Tykes’ knackers?’*

*‘Appen not if the kept giyin er dead babbies.’*

*Plip, plosh.*

*‘Ow is it y cem to be at Stang Top, Dot?’ e sed. ‘That day y cem to be –saviour a di-nt know ad need?’*

*‘Ad come to see off them Fellas, for seein Non off to –ayont,’ a sed, joinin im in –is game, for a war a master at ducks an drakes. ‘Am not flayed o them Fellas, Wymond.’*

*Plip, plip, plosh.*

*'An am not flayed o that Jealousy, neither.'*

*'Aye, yr a brave en, reight enough, Dot,' sed Wymond. 'Av on'y ever known to be afeard. O Gaffers an lasses alike, just as a war allus told. Up to that neet, when –Gaffers told me what append to me mam. Reight got me back up did that, tho a do- reightly know why, tell –truth, an all a war afeard o afower dint matter no mower. What ad bin told, all a wa meant to be, all cem to nowt. All a knew wa me own self an –pluck o me own 'art. It seemed on'y reight ad dee that neet.'*

*'Do y mean a should o left y swingin off that pike?' a sed.*

*Plosh.*

*'Appen y should. It might be –on'y brave doo-ment I ever chieve.'*

*'Is that what y want, Wymond? To be brave an true?'*

*'What mower is the to be?'*

*Plip, plip, plip, plip, plosh.*

*'Dot, sitha. Thas sent them ducks erplin off in a freet wiyall y fancy skimmin. Iyope tha wa-nt meanin em for us tea toneet?'*

*A led im, traipsin on -hippin-stones ovvert –beck, while them moorhens waffled off, wheekin an tootin in a reight scurry, nibber mind a want after em at all.*

*An there, in –middle o their jumbled thatch of a moored raft, an ark to mind em from –bogfloods that cem an went, war a meagre lafter o two little freckled eggs that a whipped up in me ands to shew im.*

*'Two dickies wi one thunner-staan, Wymond,' a sed.*

*'Well that's a scranny tea, Dot. We'll not be filled on them eggs.'*

*'A do- mean to eat em, Wymond,' a laffed. 'A mean to save em from bein etten by –fouses afower the get chance to be oo it is the really are.'*

*Above us a fair soff an rummle blew in sharp.*

*Me red-watter fust cem at same time as them chickies hatched. Wymond thot a wa deein o course, an e bunged me up wi duds an seckins an selvidges all-in-bits, an fretted for a week while it cotteder up an stemmed.*

*'Well that gev us a freight, din't it, Dot?' he sed, as a fed –peepin twins in a box by -fire. 'A reckon'd tha war a gonner then.'*

*-Month after e fretted worse n last time.*

*'Do-t fret so, Wymond,' a tried to assure im. 'Non ad red-watter anall, all o –time, an she dint dee til long since after.'*

*'Red-watter? Tha's bleedin, Dot. Why did Non bleed?' E asked.*

*'Cos, when it pashes and pelters down, -moors get red-watter, an after we drink it, it passes reight through us anall. But I ant ever ad it afower, cos Non said a wa-nt one.'*

*'Wa-nt one o what?'*

*'Bitchdaughter,' a sed.*

*'Not a lass, Dot?' sed Wymond, more flayed than –month afower when e thot a wa jus deein. An e knew e ad to tek on. Whether a war deein, or a Lass, the wa nowt to be done fo me at TAN L NN, an it wa-nt like we could go to –Brewers for aid in us need, war it? If a wa deein, or if a war a Lass, the war only one place a could be reight enough, so he thought.*

*E took me to Cod Beck wiyit bein –on'y place e'd ever eyespied a Lass awfower. Clarty an cotteder up to -eyeballs, e left me outside a great gliskin bastille.*

*'Where's th-off to, then?' a sed, for e'd not be back to TAN L NN wiyout me an me Backdoowr Key. 'Not back to them Fellas shewerly?'*

*'Not back, no. Am no Brewer it seems after au,' he sed. 'Av a mind to tramp an traipse owwer yonder.' E nodded is ead ayont Booze Mines, then cast is een down. 'Am reet sorry iyam, Dot, t'av to bring y to –Attercops.'*



*'Do- tek on so, Wymond,' a sed. 'Am not flayed of em, just as a want flayed o thee when a dragged thee off tha pike. An appen all meet wi Jealousy at last. Ere y'are, though, tek these will y?'*

*From inside me duds a pulled out a reight penny pair o fliggers, tweepin and chirpin.*

*'Tek em somewhere that suits em,' a sed. 'The not meant to be up on moors, so high up, all cooped up on ther own. A reckon the mam an dad av no doubt been etten up by -fouses. S'time the found more o the kind, an lernt to tek care on emsens.'*

*It wa yonks afower a saw Wymond agen. An a nibber knew what appened to them chickies, but a wa-nt meant to. It wa-nt really -point. The's on'y so far y can tek anyone afower they av to see to emsens.*

*'Oh dear,' sed –fust un a met at Cod Beck. 'Who are you?'*

*'Am a Lass,' a sed.*

*'Right, well, you're in a bit of a state aren't you? Wherever have you come from?*

*Who let you get like this? Your mother? Don't come in, I'll have someone collect you.'*

*A di-nt go in. A waited til –Attercops cem an carted me off, far off from – Backdoowr an TAN L NN, from Non an Wymond, an all a knew afower.*

*'Dot?' sed –fust un a met at –Clinic. 'Dot? That's your name?'*

*'Non sed a wa Dod. Wymond sed a wa Dot,' a sed wiya shrug.*

*'Well it's not much of a name for a growing girl, is it? You're not a baby any more after all, dear me. Is it short for something? Do you have a big-girl name too?'*

*A di-nt know what she meant so di-nt sey owt.*

*She med me tek a pew in some othersome ous, that picked me backards-way and left me liggin wi me noggs aloft, while she prodded an poked round me Dod, an piked me arm. She med red-watter pour from me arms into –chair like it wa gobblin me up. She wafted er ands through –air, through a farley assortment of flashes and sights to beyold like ad nibber seen afower.*

*'Peculiar,' she sed, peerin at me fashious-like, appen reckonin a war a bit frosty an frowdie, but a could tell she wa getting reight wherked up ovver summat. She ad me Backdoowr Key in er and. 'Your Brass doesn't work. There's nothing in the VLE about you; where or who you've come from, it's totally blank. You're both O neg and AB pos, which is very useful from a sharing point of view, but not when you're a double 46-er as well. How did you slip through the Net, little chimera? You've been well hidden, that's for sure. And no wonder. You're quite a riddle and I'm looking forward to figuring you out.*

*I'll look after you now, Diot.' An she smiled an it wa bonny, mindin me o Non, but instead wi all er gliskin pegs and no pockbrocken rine. 'Do you like your new name?'*

*A smiled back.*

*'Why don't you have hair?' sed –fust un a met at –Ouse, a Lass who wa -tsame size as me, reight cumly like, wi long brown air, pigtail all in ribbins, an een as green as lamb-sucklins.*

*'She docked it,' a sed, weetin me scalp fo new bristles, young shearin that a wa.*

*'What do you mean?' sed this Lass.*

*'She docked it all off,' a sed, showin what a meant wi me ands. A saw er lovely air though, an caught on quick why a'd been scauped. 'It war all luggy an lippy annyrooad, so it dun't matter.'*

*'Who cut it?'*

*'That un who let you in,' a sed.*

*'My Mother?' sed this Lass. 'She wants me to be your friend. Don't you have any friends?'*

*'Iyad Non an Iyad Wymond, but not no mower.'*

*'Were they your parents?' she dint wait fo me to seh no. 'My parents are in charge of this Girl's House. The one that brought you here, the other girls call her Ms Keys, she's a Clinician. My other Mother runs the House. The others call her Ms Isaac. They both help people. You'll like them, they're good mums. One day I'll be just like them and help people too.'*

*'An what do –other uns call you?'*

*'Layla,' she sed. 'And you?'*

*'Non sed a wa Dod, Wymond sed a wa Dot, Mizkeys sed a wa Diot,' A shrugged.*

*'Do you want to play in the VLE?' she sed.*

*A shrugged agen. Layla laffed at me. Reight bonny she wa.*

*'Don't you know how?' she sed. 'Come on, I'll show you.'*

*She took od o me, mekkin me feel flushed, an led me into a room that war all dark.*

*'You'll need this,' sed Mizkeys from beyind us, oddin me Backdoowr Key in er and. 'I've registered you in the VLE properly so you can access it, Diot. You're just like all the other girls now.'*

*An so a grew alongside Layla an them other Lasses. An Layla wa me friend, jus as Mizkeys asked of er. She gev me some ribbins when me air grew, though it dint grow down long like ers, instead fuzzy an white, like a gimmer. She lernt me ow to cope wi me red-watter when it cem, cos she got it too. When it stopped comin fo months an months, she din't tell, specially as them other Lasses wa-nt so keen on me. The sed a war a Lad cos a stayed scranny as a latt, while they all bloomed about me.*

*'Am no Lad,' a scrawked at em, beltin an brayin all oo sed so. Lads come to be them Fellas, an a want avin that.*

*'Are you mad?' sed Layla, one o them times. She pulled me off em an saw to me bust lip. 'You'll only prove them right by fighting. Be better.'*

*So instead o bein boorly, a woekd ard at bein -best a could be. Mizkeys'd med me Bakdoowr Key into a Frontdoowr Key, tekkin me into -wondrous lands o -VLE where a woeked ard an lernt quick. Mizkeys took me to -Fountains, where she worked, for tests every month. She once sed to me that -Arrogate used Fountains as a sanctuary, for oo, an from oo, wa never clear, she just sed it best suited them that -Southeil head folk cu-nt fix. The wa-nt that many folk in there and, -few that wa, just looked like the wa catchin up on a lot o kip. The wa little to do fo these folk it seemed, other than to keep toppin up the medsuns. The wa this one Lass, about -tsame ages as Mizkeys ad seh, oo instead o bein akip like all o -tothers, allus follered me wiyer een whenever a wa near-to, like er ead wa too eavy to lift up. She looked sad, an a felt sad for er, an all -rest of em, fo no one else ever came near, no famly, no friends, no unexpected visits from -Network, which suited Ms*

*Keys an gev er plenty o time an space to work on me. She ad a special Treatment room 'far from any prying eyes' she said, and war allus chuffed wiyall a did an all that she saw in me.*

*'That's great, Diot,' she sed to me. 'You're so adaptable, such a quick learner. I suppose you had to be, all that time wandering the Edges alone. Good to have an inquisitive mind.'*

*A recall feelin proud o mesen. So glad a med er appy. But there war allus summat not quite right, a could allus tell.*

*'Ms Keys,' a sed, lernin to talk reight, like Layla. 'All these tests y' doin on me? What the fo?'*

*'I'm looking at your cells,' she sed.*

*'To see if am a Lass or a Lad?'*

*'Sort of, but it's a bit more complicated.'*

*'But Iyam a Lass, ar- a?' a sed. Bein there ad med me so flayed to ever be a Lad.*

*'A mean, y'av to be wrong in yer ead to want to be a Lad, do- y?'*

*'As I said, Diot, it's not that simple.'*

*'Is it cos I an't ad me red-watter agen?' A sed. 'Do- say am a Lad, Ms Keys. Am a Lass. Am goin to go to -Athena an do what you do, Ms Keys, elp folk. S'all a want.'*

*She smiled er lovely smile.*

*'Don't worry about all that,' she sed. 'You just keep learning and growing as you are, Diot. I want you to help too. And you will, I promise.'*

*An a promise is a promise.*

*But she wa spot on, it wa-nt that simple. A wa-nt really listenin to what she wa-nt sayin, war a? A wa just enjoyin that for -furs time in me life a dint av to scrounge on -moors fo berries an set traps fo critters. A wa glad fo not avin to stay well clear o them Fellas, now a war a Lass like Non an Layla an Ms Keys an them others, cos Fellas ere wa-nt like them*

*that'd rived Non apart; the wa quiet an slow, an di-nt seem to want to gi dead babbies to anyone.*

*Course, a missed Wymond anall though.*

*Nowt lasts. A should a minded that.*

*Annyrooad, ad bin at –House a year or three or so a reckon, when it appened, when it changed agen, like it war allus goin to.*

*'What do you mean, Mahlah, that it's not that simple?' sed Ms Isaac to Ms Keys. A wa bringin em a drink, like I allus did when Ms Keys got ome from work. A thought it wa – least a could do, seein as the'd tekken care o me all this time. 'You keep saying it, but it's very plain to me,' she sed.*

*'Emer,' sed Ms Keys to Ms Isaac. 'I told you at the time...'*

*'You told me she needed somewhere to live, that she had no family, nothing, that she'd been wandering the Edges for who-knew-how-long. I thought you felt sorry for her, that you wanted her to be safe. Not that you wanted to hide her from the Reeves. Not because she's an experiment.'*

*'That's not fair, Emer. She could be important. Her blood cells could be banked to save many lives. Her reproductive cells could be important for future screening, for genetic manipulation, for new Treatments. Do you know how difficult it is to find such variation these days? Most cells I get to work on are too Clean, too perfectly engineered. There's nothing new to work from. There are no imperfections or mistakes. I could be the one to find it, Emer. I could help everyone.'*

*I a-nt seen Ms Keys so wherked up since that fust time a met er.*

*'But there'll be no chance if you tell them,' she carried on. 'They'll take her away and Treat her, if they can figure out a way. I'm not even sure what they can do, to be honest, I just know they won't see past the XYs. You know what it's like at the moment? Zero tolerance. You know how much trouble I'll be in? Why would you want to tell them?'*

*'Because she is a boy, Mahlah,' sed Ms Isaac.*

*'Listen to you,' laughed Ms Keys. "She! She is a boy', says it all!"*

*'One of the girls told me, Mahlah,' sed Ms Isaac, not findin it funny. 'While we were all at the Lido. I found out from one of the children rather than you. One of the younger ones in our care. I doubted her, Mahlah, you know how Kate lives in her own world, but she was right. She told me there was a boy that needed to be taken away, led me to where she had witnessed it, and I saw for myself. You kept it from me, and I will not have you bring disease into our House, risking the girls, risking Layla, our own daughter, every day, while you experiment in secret on that ghastly mongrel.'*

*A di-nt ear much of owt else that wa sed. Not after Ms Isaac sed a war a Lad an a menace to folk, to Layla. Not after that. A think Ms Keys sed summat about a mistake. An it not bein simple agen. An Ms Isaac shoutin. A ran. A think a dropped -drinks on -floor. A ran to tell Layla and she wa flaysomer than I war, a reckon. She roared an gev me all me bits an bobs from us room, an told me to run away so -Attercops wu-nt get me. So a did. A ran an she stood in -way of er mams, not lettin em get by. A ran an Ms Keys tried to follow me but a wa too wick for er. She called out fo me to stop, but a just ran, an kept runnin though Iyad no idea where to.*

*'Want some Spogs, lad?' sed -fust un a met at -Edges, some Tyke oddin up - blanket ad found to kip under, after days roamin, clemmed an nousty, a right belderer, goin off-at-side. He let a blast o cold in. A grabbed it back an gloared at im. 'Warm y'up. Mek y'forget y'troubles. Do- worry if y've no Brass, we'll get od o some fo y'. Y' new round 'ere? A can 'elp y'. Ah'm Adam, what's your name?'*

*A scrabbled back agent door, bowin and creakin, away from this lanky young Lad.*

*'Ey-up,' he sed. 'Yer a lass.'*

*'No,' a sed, yankin me ribbins out. 'No, am not.'*

*Adam addled a livin by sellin Spogs to other Tykes who ad nowt else to do wiyemsens. Not needed nor wanted. Just mucky Tykes. But it war awright, cos so wa we by all accounts, not like them Bobbies that Adam sed we'd to watch out fo.*

*'We'll just call y D,' sed Adam, reckonin we'd all be best off if a lopped off me air and kept me name short anall. 'Sounds like the's nowt to tell, so nowt to ask. We've all got stories about ow we ended up out ere, some med to live like lasses, jus like you wa, but the do- like to talk about it. Ardly any of us are proper Edgies, mostly born in –Network, an one way or other we've ended up outside. Du-nt really matter ow.'*

*Adam'd been brought by is dad, e said. One neet e woke Adam up, shushin im to not wekken up is mam, a bag packed full o close an suchlike.*

*'A wa nine,' sed Adam. 'Me dad said we'd live free, out ere at –Edges. But e wa soft from bein in –Network so long an from avin been Cleaned up. Soon enough is Treatments started wearin off an med im unwell. Sweats an shivers an visions an anger e cu-nt control. Gev me me -fust beatin I ever ad, me dad did. Fust and worst.'*

*'What appened to im,' a sed.*

*'Left,' sed Adam. 'E wan't fit. Ad to go back an get Cleaned up before –sickness got any worse. Sed e'd come back. Course, e dint. So a got in wi this lot. We look out for each other. Do- let each other down.'*

*Adam reckons a let em all down.*

*We spent yonks whooin it up all round –Edges, clatterbangin about like –Guytrash we wa, dodgin Bobbies an findin Tykes an giyin em what we thought the needed. We allus ad plenty o Brass. Network-folk war a bit lapse, it seemed, wi summat a deemed to be a precious thing, droppin an lossin em, o 'giftn' em in exchange fo bits an bobs the cu-nt get*



*in –Network. The wa nibber much on em, an not bein registered to any of us, could on’y be used once an chucked after. Not that the wa many places to spend us Brass once we ad it though, to be fair. We di-nt trip on –Autoroute for fear o –Bobbies, an it wa-nt like the war undreds o shops just waitin to accept us ill-gotten gains round –Edges. The war enough to keep us fed an clothed, just as long as they a-nt bin stopped by –Network afower we got chance to use em at all. All in all, a felt as though a wa still doin as Non sed. Them Tykes that wanted Spogs an to be let be, wa giyem, an we let em be. Them that wanted to come wiyus, cem wiyus, an us merry band grew bit by bit. Everyone got what they asked fo.*

*It war Adam, oldern most of us, oo first started to be at whethers, to think it wa-nt on, what we did. That we should stop.*

*‘What we do i-nt good,’ e sed. ‘We should be tekkin care of us own, not elpin em go downill. A reckon –Bobbies let us get away wiyit cos it saves em –trouble o cartin Tykes off to –Clinics.’*

*‘We’re on’y giyin Tykes what ther askin fo,’ a sed, cocky wiya new swagger ad picked up from them Tykes. ‘Not up to us what folk want. If the want Spogs, who’s to seh the shunt av em?’*

*‘Y must see it i-nt good for em?’ e sed.*

*‘The can allus seh ‘no’,’ a sed.*

*‘Easy as that?’ e sed.*

*‘A concede that what folk ask fo, an what the need ar- allus same thing. But ow a we meant to know, if the do- know emsens?’*

*‘The may never know at this rate. We shu-nt giyem any.’*

*‘Y gev em me,’ a sed, an e knew a wa narked.*

*‘Aye,’ e sed, sadly. ‘An am sorry fo that.’*

*We dug fo scraps from –Age o Man, stuff that, we thought, belonged to us. Us. Us Men. We found bits ere an there, but the wa-nt a lot left, what a-nt bin tekken by –Network wa*

*brokken up or burnt, not to be used again. But fate an fire's fickle, tekkin an leavin what it wants. We found a fair few alf-burnt an moth-eaten beaunks, but –Tykes soon got fed up wi findin mouldy pages o stuff the could ardlly read, so when a cem across En Pecked Ouse, a knew a war onto a winner.*

*'Struck gold, yav, D', the sed to me, them Tykes.*

*'We can live like kings of old ere.'*

*An the did. Bane-idle, liggin about, watchin 'DVDs' the found, on summat called a 'Tosh ba'. It war a bit like –VLE a suppose, smaller, slower, an y cu-nt flit around to other stuff y wanted to know. It on'y shewed one thing at a time. An what them DVDs shewed us war ow -Age o Man used to be. Wiyus, Men, in charge. But not like –VLE shewed it.*

*An them Tykes'd nibber sin Fellas so triumphant afower, even when the wa for –bucket. Nibber sin Lasses so diminished or cryzome. But Iyad. For –furs time, the saw all sorts o lasses from all sorts o times in –GOD. Them that got ther eads lopped off, ther eads an the maideneads. Them that wa peshed an drubbed. Then the wa them that wa fine so long as the traipsed after Fellas and ad babbies it seemed. Them Tykes cheered an jeered an thought no more on it, other'n reckonin these DVD Lasses got no mower than what the deserved. An it minded me, finally, o Non an all she ever told me.*

*'Ey, if –Network's run by Lasses, mebbe –Uncothlans are run by Lads,' one o them Tykes said.*

*'Mebbe –GOD still exists out there, just like on them DVDs,' sed another.*

*'Yeah, mebbe it's not empty.'*

*'Mebbe ther int no disease.'*

*'Mebbe it's all been lies.'*

*'Mebbe it du-nt matter,' sed Adam, is back up. 'Cos it i-nt like we can get past –PEEKs is it?'*

*'What if y could?' a sed. 'Would y go?'*

*'Yeah,' sed them Tykes, gettin all wherked up. Adam eye-spied me suspicious like.*

*'An if it wa jus like them DVDs, out there, y'd want it to be?' a sed.*

*'Yeah, the do-t call it Good Old Days fo nowt, do the?'*

*'Is it what y really want? All o y?'*

*An the did, all except Adam whose thoughts thumped louder than owt e sed. A could see it in them others though, ear –violent need to be not be where the wa now, or oo the wa now. An a could ear Non mindin me o me purpose.*

*'If it's what y want,' a sed. 'A can tek y.'*

*En Pecked Ouse wa-nt so far off –PEEKs, half a day trekking on –craggy moors, past two brokken towers, an up to –top. We wa nowhere near TAN L NN, but in all me trekkin wi Wymond a knew –PEEKs went far an wide round –Network wi moren one Backdoowr. Y wu-nt spy a Backdoowr unless y knew what y wa lookin fo, a chink in Jealousy's armour, a mere brek in –wall, jus bigger than –others for me Key to fit. It took ages, but we found one, an a slid me Brass key into –crack, placin me and aside it.*

*'Y never said y could do this,' sed Adam, watchful.*

*'Y nibber asked,' a sed.*

*Iyant done it since a war a youngun, back wi Wymond, afower –Network, an afower ad ever bin on –VLE. So when –panel lit up under me and, a saw it proper for –furs time. It wa jus like –VLE, if not –self same thing. It lit up like I allus knew it to, but a could read it now, an it wa-nt me name that come up. Me Network name, 'Diot Mahla Keys' wa gi me by Ms Keys like a war er own bairn. Instead it wa some other name a di-nt recognise.*

*'Who's this Aphra Burgric y swiped Brass off?' said Adam.*

*'A di-nt nifle it,' a shrugged, wondrin mesen if it wa me nemesis at last.*

*Well, this door mu-nt a been oppend for ages cos it barely shifted. Creaked a bit, just enough to slive through. On –other side, –PEEKs war as pock-marked as a knew em, wi dents an shallow oles, spattered out. A put me fingers on em an felt em all bumpy. It*

*war a while since ad bin out o –Backdoowr an ad nibber bin out this way afower, but it felt jus -tsame. A reckond thed find wha the wa lookin fo sooner o later, a jus a-nt reckond on it bein so soon.*

*Them other lads were blowd to be out in –Uncothlans an took no notice of owt a war up to. It war all new to em an off the ran, like mad-alicks, a reight pack of ounds, blotherin on about ow the wa free, that thed come ome, an ow -GOD wa back. Off the went wiyan op, stride an loup, all –way down to an ouse, like TAN L NN but bigger an more spread out, an it wa then that second thoughts weeded into me ead. These Tykes may av sed this wa what the wanted, but it di-nt mean it wa –tsame thing as what the wa really after.*

*‘Ang on!’ a shouted, but it wa too late. The din’t mind me. Thed got what the wanted, so far as they could see, an cu-nt ear me for -wind rattlin an owlin round us, an –durdum o ther own dust.*

*An then, out the cem, them Fellas, one by one, from –Big Ouse, an Bang!*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

*And -Tykes fell,*

*pup,*

*pup,*

*pup,*

*one by one, down-ill toward –Big Ouse. The rolled an tumbled in eaps and di-nt move again.*

*Them fellas a-nt seen me, still up by -PEEKs, so a ran fast as a could, to –furs lad. He peffed a fair bit, but cu-nt speak no mower. Another wa face down in –mud. Another war on is back, red watter pouring from is face, back into –moor, back to –buckets.*

*Adam wa crouchin in a grype not so far off, clutcin is arm where e'd fallen on it badly, but e cu-nt get back else them Fellas'd see im, an them Fellas wa comin, to check on -Lads who were all for -bucket except Adam and me. So a ran -foil, scutterin seer-ways to get them Fellas after me an away from Adam so e could mek it to -Backdoowr. They gev a whoo-up when the spied me, but a wa too wick forrem an gev em -go-by, drawin em off so Adam could get issen through -smoot-oil, an ome safe.*

*When a cem to En Pecked Ouse, later-on, Adam wa bruzzd, but fit enough. A wa glad he war awright, but e wa sicken'd an gnatterly.*

*'Why'd y tek us there D?' e bawled. 'Ther all dead now. Gone. We wa reight enough ere where we wa, why'd y tek us into -Uncothlans?'*

*'The sed wanted to go,' a sed.*

*'The thought the'd be safe!'*

*'The di-nt think owt o -sort,' a sed. 'The thought the'd be Fellas out there, an the wa reight. The wanted it to be jus like the saw it on them DVDs they enjoyed so much. A'll not tek -blame for it bein jus so.'*

*'Did you know about em, then?' e sed, peevish. 'Afower y took us.'*

*'Aye. Course a knew the'd be them Fellas in -Uncothlans.'*

*'An y di-nt think to seh?'*

*'What's to seh? The's Fellas in or out.'*

*E med to thropple me, but stuttered back on issen when e saw what ad brought back from -Uncothlans, what ad tekken off them Fellas after ad done for em all, like the'd done fo them Tykes. He tripped ovver -bloody DVDs, pashin down arserd.*

*'A y goin to pop me off anall, Diot,' e said, usin me Network name for -just time in yonks. 'Once a Lass allus a Lass, eh?'*

*'What? Wi this?' a sed, puttin -Fella's wapen down careful. 'To tell -truth, a do-know what to do wi you. A know y di-nt want to go into Uncothlans wi them others. An a*

*know y do- want to stay ere wi me no mower. Y once wanted to gi Spogs to Tykes, then y di-nt. Y wanted to elp em but di-nt know ow. Do y'even know what y want anymower?'*

*'The's nowt y can gi me, y bloody menace. Jus leave me be. A do- want nowt from y other than to be left alone,' e sed.*

*'So long as y sure,' a sed.*

*An e stumbled up an away, to go on as e intended.*

*Well, avin -VLE out on -PEEKs war a revelation a can tell the. Wi me Backdoowr Key stuck atween -big white winders, a could see owt that war afforded to this Aphra Burgric, who Iyant forgot about. Though, a seh -VLE, but soon codded on it wa-nt really, instead it wa summat latched to it, like a sheep tick or a toad eatin lick-spittle. -VLE at -Ouse wi Layla an them Lasses, war all about us lernin stuff to get good marks, presumably so as when we got big we could work in -Network. An games, the wa some fun games anall. But these PEEKs wa different. They ad other stuff on em. These PEEKs actually sed summat worth knowin.*

*So, traipsin back an forth for ages atween -beauks an DVDs an displays at En Pecked Ouse, an them PEEKs, a lernt all a could from both, about -GOD an ow it all functioned afower it started to brek down in -Bother. Ow factions cem to maister nations, on'y to brek em back to regions agen, toddy little wharles in a big engine once more. While these tribes, easier for -Gaffers to manage than -masses that'd started floodin their seeminly shrinkin world, war isolated from one other agen, the thought to reclaim all the thought'd bin lost to em, voices, customs an such like, as a matter o survival, while lack of allegiance wa spied wi scorn an suspicion. Difference cem to be a fremdly thing once more, not -cause fo celebration it'd briefly bin, til -Bother, all out o control, consumed em all, leavin -Network to rise like new shoots from besum ash.*

*Yet what could be said o -Network that a-nt bin sed about -GOD an all other times afower that? For all a could see in them istry beauks, an all ad sin mesen, there wa-nt owt to tell each set o folk apart from -tother betweenwhiles.*

*To stay at En Pecked Ouse, Iyad to lern quick about bulbs an plugs an gas an watter an suchlike. It med me wonder where it all cem from, cos it wa-nt from -Network, that wa shewer. A graved a trench one day an found pipes an wires all buried deep, connected to*

*summat from –past ad nibber find agen wiyout gravin –entire Edges. So my enquiries war at a dead end. It war evident that –Edge-folk got nowt that –Network di-nt want em to ave, an yet, there they all wa, copin on whatever scraps ad bin left forrem from –GOD. No wonder Edge-folk av this notion that what went afower, whatever it is the reckons bin lost to em, is some skimmery dream to od on to, summat to try an win back.*

*So a did a bit o diggin of another soowrt, out at –Backdoowr. A felt shewerly –Network di-nt all run on fresh air, yet appen it did, in part, as -PEEKs shewed me all about Peatfields Power Plant, a –swankin place built out in –Osgold Edges, furs run off some white windmills, put up along –Peat Fields some time back in –GOD. It war appen blowy enough back then to giyem all the needed to set up shop, but not so much to do all the meant now. So the set about burnin –Peat Fields emsens, so as the could set the store out proper.*

*But nowt lasts.*

*As Non allus sed to me,*

*‘Dod, tha’s allus to keep this ere fire, allus brusslin low. It keeps us warm from –bitter cold wiyout. It aids us in us cewkin of us tea an in us boilin up us brew to rid it o –bugs. Av no longer –means to start it up agen if it goes out, avin used up all what a brung wi me from afower, so tha must allus keep it brusslin low. An low is best, mind, lest tha runs out o twigs fast.’*

*‘What if we run out o twigs?’*

*‘Then tha must brussle ling.’*

*‘What if we run out o ling?’*

*‘Then tha must brussle moss.’*

*‘What if we run out o moss?’*

*‘Then tha must find another ouse to live in where ther is summat tha can brussle, Dod. Cos tha’ll not be long for –ayont if tha ca- keep -fire allus brusslin low.’*



*But a needn't a worried. Fo them Network lot war a reight shiners an ad it all figured out. See, peepin in through them big white winders on –Network, as a did, I eye-spied a map that shewed –Network, like a precious egg wiyall it's contents, it's Arcs an bainways, an –Core reight in –middle like a yolk full o goodness an strength, like it war all that wa needed, kept safe an out o sight by -ard white shell a wa stood at jus now. Yet just outside o this egg wa this summat called -First End, all in red, like a big button waitin to be pushed, wi some kind o red pipe reight up to –Peatfields. Course, a still a-nt enough lernin back then to know what it meant. All it meant wa –Network mun av another fire to brussle, but it wa curious to me that this fire war out in –Fellon Lands, where –Best Beasts di-nt dare to go. An why would the, when they ad all the needed inside the bonny little nest egg. Like me.*

*A mean, Iyad –best o both worlds. O y could say Iyad nowt o neither. Ma way forrad wa yet to be sided. Ow war a meant to do all Non sed a wa for, stuck out at –Edges on me own, but when the wa nowhere in –Network a belonged.*

*Cos a war a Lass.*

*Cos a war a Lad.*

*Non sed a wa to be whoever it war a wa. But after she went to –ayont, ad been told who a wa, an who a wa-nt, by all, both at same time, just as she sed'd appen. In spite of all ad lernt in them passin yonks, a still knew nowt o mesen other than what other folk ad med of me.*

*In –limewashed winders o –PEEKS, a saw every day a strange figure wiyout a face gloumin back at me. It wa like all them many me's, tall an dark an indistinct, past an future, wa blurrin into one gastrid shadder. A wa-nt Diot Mahla Keys. That war another me, med up by Ms Keys like a war er babby yonks ago. An experiment, Ms Isaac sed. Non sed a wa Dod, med up of all er dead babbies come back to er from –ayont. A barghest to bring all to emsens. Sent ere to muddle an meddle. Fo betterment o worse. A Lad sed*

*Wymond an Adam. A Lass sed Wymond an Adam. A saviour. A menace. Appen a war all, med up o summat fremd, an appen summat farley, wiyall bits an bobs of all the reckoned a wa. A mongrel, sed Ms Isaac. Mongrels a fair lish an cute, med up of all soowrts, Best an Fellon Beast alike.*

*An unlike.*

*That wa what med em uneasy. All anyone wants to know is where the belong, an oo –tother belongs to anall. Meks it easier to know oo to be flayed o. Meks it easier to know oo to ate. Best off alone appen after au.*

*A reckoned on, titter o latter, findin mesen bahn for TAN L NN, an doin nowt no mower o what Non sed, oo a reckoned mun be wrong about me. See, ad tekken them Tykes to find what the sed the war after in –Uncothlans, on’y to see it wa-nt a very pleasin point to mek after all. The wa no betterment to it. It wa, to me, an act full of emptiness, hollow an dirty as a midden-pant, deep as a pot a cu-nt climb up out o.*

*So I appen thought it wa best all round to leave -Stints, away from -Best Beasts oo di-nt really want no mower than what they already ad, no matter what the sed out loud. What other folk learnt o di-nt lern wa-nt really my concern. Wa-nt nowt to do wi me if folk were appy to stay gaumless.*

*An yet ere a wa, still not gone.*

*Still skirtin round –Edges like a wa nobbut a lost Tyke. A knew it wa thoughts o Wymond an thoughts o Layla that kept me from leavin –Stints altogether. But the wa no betterment in mopin about either, not able to go one way, nor wantin to go –tother.*

*An, o course, a still reckoned on a showdown wi Jealousy that munby to come.*

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Offcumdens

*At first the were a light.*

*Then came darkness, and mess and muddle follerd.*

*One by one lights went out and tellies went off. The wa no internet and not even us radio workd after a bit. It were a total blackout. Sky wa thick wi smoke and dust all round and finally blockd out sun. Darkness were total. Not riven into day or night no more. Just night. That were in int first week ot Bother.*

*The were hell on. Everything were arse about face. Up wa down. Y din't know what were Heaven and what were Earth no more. That were int second week ot Bother.*

*And whent seas rose up, flooding allt low land, it wa so slockd wi parny allt trees and grass and crops drown. It were a bad do all round. That were int third week ot Bother.*

*And out ot darkness and muddle, Offcumdens came.*

*Waif and straif teemed out ot South, creeping forrad, slow, like becks trickling uphill like summat peculiar. Folk, clarted up and nithered and in need o mindin. The wa fossed to flit ther houses. No bugger knew where the belongd no more. That were int fourth week ot Bother.*

*So we took em in. Gev em keks if the wa baht any gear and looking lost and starved. Gev em a brew and the dinner and somewhere to lig and mend. The were absolutely jiggered. Already flagging after lugging what the could salvage from ther houses, some deed afower we could do owt for em and we reckond it were all that gallavanting that'd done for em. And allt while, folk kept coming Up North til we wa brustin at seams. That were int fifth week ot Bother.*

*Others seemd to perk up and frame in ar care.*

*But we an't reckond ont sickness coming wi em. Sickness that'd tekken od long afower and spread round world like a ling-bonn.*

*Then came Great Falling Out.*

*That war int sixth week ot Bother.*

*Shafaquat Firdaus*

*Writ Int fifth year aftert Great Fallin Out*

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The Kebab Shop Owner was known by many names. His wife, Raniya, used to call him Samir because it was her favourite among his long, family-endowed name and because of the many hours they used to spend, before she had children and began to worry about material things, just sitting and talking into the dark evenings and throughout the night, about everything and nothing. She used it, from time to time, on less discontented days, but she mostly kept it simple and literal these days and called him *Sheoher*.

His youngest daughter, Tabassum, called him *dada*, because she was still young and beautiful and cheeky and because she couldn't understand why her dad was so old; whilst his more serious son, called him *oaled*. His eldest daughter, Isra, barely called him anything at all these days, as she spent less and less time at home going who knew where, though he imagined it was somewhere between *soowr* and shithead, and more likely the latter.

His friend, Aadheen, Raniya's father, called him Zaman-Zaahir Al Sha'er after hearing about his family book and authorial lineage; an attempt, he supposed, to make him seem more appealing, more romantic, more cultured, to his family of young daughters who wanted nothing to do with the short, balding, bow-legged, shami-seller from the Edges. The Bangash family was an old one, like his, from the GOD. Aadheen Bangash told him how lots of the other old families had gone 'Home', just like they'd been told to, throughout the Bother.

'Where is this 'Ome'?' he said. 'In't this it, where us fam'ly is?'

'Seemin'ly not,' said Aadheen Bangash.

'Who told 'em the should go?' he said.

'Everyone,' said Aadheen Bangash.

'How come ar lots din't go?' he said.

Aadheen Bangash shrugged. 'Happen there wa' so many places the'd been, down t'line afower the' got 'ere, there wa' just too many to choose from.'

Originally from the Edges, Aadheen visited the shop many times after that, but his wife, Waaliyah, soon tired of his gallivanting and stopped him, worried he'd become sick. Sure enough, the Clinics told Aadheen they'd caught it just in time and he needed a strong course of Treatment to overcome it. His friend visited Aadheen inside the Network and brought him *Khoresht Gol Kalam* that reminded him of his childhood, and to help him get better soon. But Waaliyah didn't like him traipsing around her house. Behind his back, she

called him Naazir in disdain at the way he quietly observed them all, not liking the way he looked at her youngest daughter, while Raniya's elder sisters simply called him short-arse. Perhaps Raniya felt the same way at first, but she liked to listen to the tales he told her father, becoming more captivated the more he said. When Aadheen's sickness was finally brought under control, she missed her father who became withdrawn, a side effect of the Treatment, and so she sought in her husband what she thought she was missing. It had now been many years since he'd heard their names of antipathy and scorn. Raniya's family moved deeper into the Network, where he didn't go, and their main contact with them was in the VLE, which he didn't use.

The people in his community (though 'community' was a bit of a loose name too) also knew him by different names. The young boys, who lived in the snickets and doorways and broken buildings near his shop, called him 'Mr Kebab', or 'dad', or, if they'd known him a while, Shaf. In the colder months, they eagerly devoured the great tin pots of his wife's leftover *chelow* and *kūbide* and he would cover them with the old blankets his children no longer used. In warmer months he would hand out *naan* with *chapli*, or *shami* and jugs of water.

'What right do y' ave to give away ar food, ar things?' Raniya used to say to him. 'What about ar family? Y' need to provide for us afower every Tyke that winds up at' door from who-knows-where-the'-belong.'

'The' famished, love,' he'd reply. 'An' it's only a couple o' butties gone 'ard an' past the' best, that ah wu'n't a bin able to sell anyway.'

'Y'd be able to sell 'em in' Network, and more,' she'd say. 'We could buy lamb rather than 'angin mutton round' 'ouse an' braisin' it to death. We could buy nice cuts o' beef an' sell it to folk wi' Brass rather than gi' it away. Don't *we* 'ave a right to nice stuff? Don't *ar* kids 'ave a right to a good education, and a nice 'ouse near to' Autoroute so's the' can go out?'



Then he'd know she had been speaking to her sisters and mother again in the VLE and would take her in his arms and give her a warm hug.

'Let's not talk about rights, Raniya. Only love.'

Raniya stopped berating him for giving away the food from their mouths, Brass from their hands and clothes from their backs and instead filled the pots with an extra cup of rice and washed the old rags ready for him to take out on his evening walks. But he saw her less and less as she retreated further into the VLE.

The Network controlled the VLE from the Core. Only Bobbies came out to the Edges. They were always polite when they visited and called him Mr Firdaus. They would buy food from him while on their rounds; ask him if business was good and how his family were. They would ask how the children were getting on with their education, if they found the VLE easy to use and whether they had been experiencing any technical difficulties. They would explain that any disruptions to service were due to their location at the Edges and that they would have better connections inside the Network, with more technicians on hand should they ever need to call someone out. They left brochures for the newest Cleaner Living developments with their shared facilities, multi-faith rooms, community centres and shop/restaurant facilities just ready and waiting for new owners with exciting goods and services to provide. And then they would talk to him, again, about his health, and hand out leaflets about the endless effects of HFD, Hereditary-Fallout-Disease, on individuals and those who inherit genes that hadn't been checked and treated at the Cleaner Living Clinics.

'Think about your son, Mr Firdaus,' they would say. 'Think of his future.'

'I think about it every day,' he would reply with a smile. 'Thanking you for thinkin' about it too, though.'

'And other people of course,' they would say. 'We have to think of other people too. There are many people who might consider your unwillingness to attend the Clinics

selfish, Mr Firdaus, and we understand you have trouble, at times, with attacks on your premises, which may have to do with exactly that.’

They would look around his shop as though looking for such signs of terror and abuse, but would only see clean walls and sparkling windows, spotless floors and neat, orderly workspaces.

‘Nothing we can’t ‘andle,’ he said. ‘It all washes.’

And then they would leave. The officials would go back to their offices. The Bobbies, driven by their need to keep a tidy house, would go scour the streets of the Edges for dirty Tykes, to restore them to the Network and clean them up, no doubt. Though, he knew, they also liked to make a mess of their own, all over his windows, while out on his deliveries, or sometimes during Salah, which he would clean up himself afterwards.

The kaylai-sellers were a strange bunch of people and he had an uneasy relationship with them. They were traders, like him, but he didn’t like the goods they proffered. He provided sustenance and warmth; they, he thought, took it away. He would discuss this with them over cups of tea and *aloo chaat*, arguing over the diverse types of nourishment, agreeing that food for the body was not enough, disagreeing over the best ways to achieve illumination and contentment. There was one who often came to enjoy such discussion and glasses of *sharbat-e rivas* made from the rhubarb he forced in the loft. Like him, she appeared to have indefinite names and roles that shifted depending on the opinions of other people. He identified with that, but there, he thought, the similarities ended. He had always known who he was, irrespective of what those around him thought of him, his place had always been fixed, no matter how the world revolved and evolved, whereas her identity seemed as unstable and conflicted as her ideas.

‘What would you do, Peer?’ she asked him one day whilst sat at his counter, picking up Bobbies’ leaflets that had been left, the soft pink liquid of her drink reflecting

off his clean counter and in her shocking white hair. 'If y'ad all 'power. What would you do?'

'Ah do't 'ave power,' he replied. 'Are y'after food an'all? Ah've med a batch o' *Khoresht-e Karafs* wi't' left ovver mutton and us celery that's just come through. Meks nice stews does celery.' He dished some up.

'Lets not get knaggy ovver what power we each think you do or do't 'ave, sha' we? A'm asking what y'd do if you had *all* o' power,' she said between mouthfuls. 'Power to mek a difference to *all* folk? Knowin' that what you could do could change things for everyone?'

'Ah'd think on whether this change wa' really goin' to mek things better, or wo'se. An', if y' really askin' me, ah'd seh it ca't be managed. What's good fo' one int't allus good fo' t'other, is it? What's t'point in flipping backads and forrads to suit one or t'other?'

'So, y'd do nowt? What if it meant the' din't ave to be no 'one or t'other' anymower? If y' could change that, then what would y'think?'

'Y'll 'ave a job on changin' folk's minds, is what ah think. We are oo we are, an' the's none of us alike. That's 'ow it is. The's nowt'll change that.'

She wiped the last of her stew with a piece of barbari bread, before reaching inside her heavy leather coat and removing a battered wallet. Inside were a great number of cards as usual. She was never short of Brass.

'Now, Peer, ah'm off trippin' for a bit, so ah'd like y' to pack up 'rest o' that stew please, an' some bread an'all. Ah'm tekkin on like you, see, Peer. The's some folk in need of a decent meal, reckon it might even be the last, an' some decent grub's least ah can do forrem.'

He was impressed at this seeming change, a more charitable outlook towards other people. It was a start.

'Thumb o' Brass?' she said, as he went to dish up the stew into an old pot.

‘Better Thumb it,’ he replied, knowing she could. ‘Fert wife.’

The kaylai-seller replaced her wallet and thumbed the Reader with eyebrows raised and a wry smile. The words ‘Payment Accepted. Thank you Ms D Burgess,’ flashed momentarily upon the reader.

‘Ah’m not so sure anyone’s quite as fixed as y’ reckon they are, Peer, even you,’ she said, taking her food. ‘An oo sed ah were on about changin’ folk’s minds?’

Thereafter, the Kebab Shop Owner took to questioning his motives in all that he did. Though he continued going about his business in the usual way, no one knew the internal battle that played out daily in his mind. His whole life, he had been sure of the path he’d been set upon and was content he was living the right way, working towards right things, avoiding Network folk with their begrudging words and envious deeds. But now, instead of only heeding his own convictions, he found he was listening out for news among the Tykes of the Bobbies and the kaylai-sellers, eavesdropping on his wife and children’s conversations in the VLE, to learn more about their wider world and what effect this could have on his, and his family’s, place within it. All the while wondering if this was the work of Shayṭan, whispering in his ear, suggesting doubt and disrupting his family path, the one he’d always thought wise and true, able to withstand all calamities. He worried he was beginning to forget, his youthful memories of family, his birthright and obligations, diminishing like the streets around him.

His mother called him *qurrata a’yunin*, of course, but his father and his grandfather had called him by his full and proper name, Zaman-Zaahir Shafaquat Samir Khalid Khayyam Firdaus, named for all his fathers gone before and his mother, a naming convention he in turn passed to his son.

‘It’s barmy,’ said Raniya, soon after giving birth and feeling fractious from lack of sleep with a colicky baby and keeping up with an outspoken six year old. ‘I don’t call *you*

‘Uncle Tom Cobley an’ all’, so don’t expect me to call it ‘im either. Ah’ll call *him* Samir, instead o’ you, seein’ as ah spend most nights up wi’ ‘im now.’

It was upon the birth of his son that he really felt the weight of all his father and grandfather had told him, given to him and passed on to him. Not only a name that stretched back in their family, as far back at least as the GOD, but also the shop, a family business passed down the generations, with ancient recipes from distant lands that were said to no longer exist, from father to son to share with family and community; a way of living and beliefs that had been welcomed and spurned, had caused great comfort and conflict, in equal measure, over many centuries; languages learnt and voices adopted, mixed and used, spoken and written, heard and read, all survived now, in him.

Then there was the book. He often considered what his contribution to the book would be. So far he hadn’t written anything. Not a word. He mused for endless hours over his forefathers’ words, the gravity of responsibility heavy on him. He fingered the calligraphy; old, spidery handwriting from the last century or two, faded and blotted, pencil and pen. Slanted and scruffy here, rounded and large there. Different shapes for different times, individual graphologies for individual personalities, particular idioms for particular understanding. He studied the slopes and spikes, the cramped curves, the infantile finger-gaps, the rhythms and patterns if they were present, or the arrhythmic jerkiness when they weren’t. He scrutinised how hard the pen had been pressed against the thick, homemade paper, and tried to read remnants of old print, written fragments from the past, some circled for emphasis, or written over, blotted out, by more recent authors. ‘Power’, ‘Loss’, ‘Terror’, ‘Crisis’, ‘Enemies’, ‘Worldwide’, ‘Meltdown’, ‘Fear’, repeated in sticky-out angles amongst the bumps and lumps where the paper had been soaked, remoulded and pressed, the truth squeezed out of every page. The catastrophes that led to the dark days of the twenty first century were evident in the way they lived now, but what actually happened back then was never totally clear, having become so lost in falsehoods

and propaganda, specs of dust adding to the dirt that was already there, burnt afterwards like everything else.

He placed his book, first started by his Great-great-great Grandfather during the Bother, back into the locked metal box that had kept it safe for generations. There was nothing above the word of Allah for providing divine guidance and direction for how to live now and forever, but this tatty hand written book, was the history of Zaman-Zaahir Shafaquat Samir Khalid Khayyam Firdaus and his family and how they lived under that guidance in times of chaos and disruption, exclusion and misunderstanding. Nothing from the GOD remained of his family other than the nebulous memories of those who survived and wrote in this book. It was the responsibility of the eldest son to keep an honest account for future generations and to teach their sons to do likewise. They had not relied on others to keep or tell their stories. They'd had no technology and had endured. But times had changed and surely lack was now again a thing of the past. He wondered about his ancestors' choices and whether they had been made out of necessity, or pride and obligation. And so Mr Firdaus vacillated on his rocky, uncertain path, feeling lost, while the people and places he thought he knew merged and became a mass of intangible phantasms.

*Uncle Adil said we were to mind us families and to look on us neighbours til time come when we could do nowt no more. So I filled me trollie wi sacks of rice and flour and lentils, bags of herbs and sugar and salt, all the tins, meat, fish, chickpeas, beans, peas, fruits, loads of UHT milk and cream and juice, pineapple, orange, mango. I cleared out lightbulbs and battries, a full shelves worth of seed packets and took trays and tools and bags of compost from the gardening section. Everyone else left that kind of stuff, but they arnt thinking forrad. Noones thinking forrad anymore. Not far anyway. I kept going back and back and filling up it til I heard the Adhan and had to stop. Then we prayed.*

*Zaman-Zahir Firdaus*

*Written in the year of the Great Falling Out*

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The trolley needed constant maintenance. Another heirloom that needed care and attention and time. Painted a number of times to prevent rust, it often peeled revealing its many layers of colour beneath. It was cleaned, dried and covered up each evening, locked up safely in the outhouse to be used again the next day. The small wheels squeaked sometimes and he used fat or grease to lubricate the joints. The rubber around the wheels had worn greatly, patched over the many, many years, possibly replaced at some point, he didn't know. He would have to try and remember to find some himself, but they weren't things you came across easily. Not as a full set of four anyway. So he tightened the nuts and bolts and did his best with it along the cobblestones.

His Great-great-great Grandfather, Zaman-Zaahir, had an uncle who owned businesses during the GOD, warehouse sized shops named 'Adil's Cave', where anything you wanted in the world could be bought for very little cost. According to his ancestor's writings, the first years of the Bother had been a fraught time of discord and disorder. Mr Firdaus knew all the early passages well. His father read them as bedtime stories when he was a child and he in turn had read them many times to his own children, as reminders of their duty to family and community. Windows smashed by angry mobs, businesses stripped by thieves. The benevolent uncle kept his stores safe as long as he could, but Bother spread and escalated; houses and places of worship burned, public places bombed, curfews imposed, deportations and corporal punishments became the norm, capital punishments eventually restored. The aging Adil, no longer able to keep his dwindling business going, bestowed a trolley upon each head of household at his mosque, with the request that they should fill their trolleys once with whatever supplies were left in his stores, to help see their families through tough times without having to rely on extorters and black market salesmen. It was an operation that took place under the cover of darkness, just before Fajr; too late for the looters, too early for the opportunists. That complete, he then asked his immediate family to return and take as many trolley loads as they could manage, in order to support the community around them as well as they could without putting themselves at risk.

Old Zaman-Zaahir wrote of how he filled his house with supplies, hiding it away before sunrise. He halved the menu in his shop and slashed the prices to give a front of house appearance of thrift; nothing much to sell, but what they had, they would stretch, for little in return, and for a short while the grateful neighbours found warmth and amity upon the tiled floor, around the steel counters and heated glass cabinets. During the Great Falling Out, the shutter had to come down and stay down. After some time, after the world outside had changed, after some of the neighbours had left for who knew where, after strangers arrived and passed through their streets, after people started falling ill, while



fences and walls were built to keep some out and some in, Zaman-Zaahir's son, Shafaquat, still a boy when his father had died, took to walking around his neighbourhood once a day after Isha, delivering free food from his trolley.

Mr Firdaus pushed the ancient trolley down the streets of his neighbourhood. Soon the familiar scrapes and squeaks of his metal wheels attracted a following of Tykes. Boys as young as ten, as old as thirty or more, poked their heads out of black holes, shuddered out from under blankets and rubbish. They didn't speak much until the food in their bellies enlivened them and they would thank him genuinely. If they wanted to talk he let them, but many didn't, and he never asked about their lives, where they'd come from and what had brought them here. Mostly, he didn't feel the need. He'd read stories of abandonment, hopelessness, of loss, of fleeing, in his book. There had always been someone fleeing something somewhere. His job wasn't to question these Tykes, it was to give them food and a feeling of belonging, if only for a short while.

Today they did want to talk, to him, to each other. There were rumours of Tykes going missing, friends who hadn't returned when expected, some for days, weeks. They talked about the kaylai-sellers selling dodgy mash and Tykes dropping like flies, but some said no, the Bobbies had got them, nicked them off the streets and taken them to Clean-up, while others were adamant the missing Tykes were those that worked the streets and had been picked off by risky punters.

Don't buy from kaylai-sellers; don't sell to Edge prowlers; don't give the Network reason to say you need Cleaning-up. Advice swirled in the mind of Mr Firdaus, but he didn't offer it. He worried about all the Tykes. They all did things that, in his opinion, caused them harm, but it wasn't his place to say, or within his power to give them the help they needed to stop. They had their reasons. Escape and survive. He could only try to help a bit with the latter.

‘Aww, s’it all gone?’ a voice called through the murky evening as Mr Firdaus made his way home. It was Robin, who sometimes had Brass and would come to the shop to buy as much food as he could and then go for days without anything at all.

‘Come to t’shop,’ said Mr Firdaus. ‘Ah’ll get y’ summat there.’

‘Nah, y’right,’ said Robin. ‘Tar anyway. Ah’m lookin fo Digs, y’ant sin ‘im ‘ave y’?’

Mr Firdaus shook his head. ‘Not for a day or two,’ he said, feeling worried. ‘Would ey’ve gone ‘ome.’

‘Ome?’ Robin laughed.

‘It’s what y’ call ‘ome in’t it?’

Robin shook his head. ‘It’s what ah call a shit’ole,’ he replied.

‘What’s ‘ome if it’s not what y’share wi’ fam’ly? No matter where it is an’ what state it’s in.’

‘Aye, ah suppose y’r right, Shaf, but we’ not all as lucky as you an yair lot. Mind, sayin that, ‘ant seen your lass much these days. Dun’t want to ‘elp feed us mucky Tykes no mower? ‘Ad a better offer?’

‘Isra?’ Mr Firdaus felt sad at the mention of her. He missed her in the many ways a father misses his daughter. ‘Just growin’ up like they all do,’ he said. ‘Have to find ther’ own way, do kids. Ca’t tell ‘em.’

‘Aye but it’s tekkin t’piss when the’ not even yer own an the’ still tek y’ fo granted, int’it? Ahh. Do’t mind me, Shaf, ah’m just fed up wi’t same old shit every day. Ah wa’ just sayin’ to Adam, nowt changes, does it?’

‘Well, y’d still best be checkin’ e’s awright. The’s bin ‘ell-on ‘ere. Tykes all wherked up about folk goin’ missin’.’

‘Aye, ah’ve heard all about it,’ said Robin dismissively. ‘Digs dun’t woek like me though. It’s me should watch mesen. Ah’m one oo goes to woek, to keep ‘im in Spogs.’

‘Aye, well, that lot wa reckonin’ it could be t’kaylai-sellers as much as anyone.’

‘Bloody Diot,’ said Robin, his voice resigned. ‘Just about to get er off me back an’ now y’ seh she’ll be after me for mower? We’ve no chance ‘ave we? Between t’Network and Diot, no chance at all.’

Mr Firdaus considered this for a moment, his hands upon his trolley. He thought of his ancestors who had pushed it up and down the same streets, providing the same charity to strangers, ghosts that came and went, without ever making a difference. There had been no change. He saw no improvement.

‘If we all keep doin’ t’same things, day in, day out, ah suppose y’right, nowt’ll change. Not unless it’s fossed upon us,’ he said.

‘Aye, well, ah tried mekkin changes before, an’ look where it got me,’ said Robin, his arms wide, waist twisting, indicating the gloom around them. ‘Mebbe a just keep mekkin’ t’wrong choices, eh? Mebbe ah’d’ve bin better stayin’ in t’Network, doin as ah wa’ told. Cheers, Shaf. Y’ right, best ‘ead back, see if ‘e’s there, though ah dread t’sate e’s in.’

He waved his hand and walked away.

Mr Firdaus returned home with his trolley and knew it couldn’t stay like this forever. He considered the empty buildings and unused space, the materials that could be re-used, improvements that would eventually come to the area if the Network expanded. No rubbish, no vermin, no need for the Bobbies to keep poking their noses into other people’s business. Change could be good. Maybe families would return to the area, maybe there would be more work, more opportunities, even for these boys. Maybe the type of community that lived in the very depths of his mind, in his imagination, would return. The warmth and smells of friends and families to the shop. All the things Raniya said could be achieved by moving into the Network. Isra might be less restless if she had more outlets, more people, more direction. His younger children would benefit from being among people that belonged somewhere, rather than those who were constantly running away.

Robin was right, why would you choose to make your circumstances worse? By moving in, by taking his family into the Network, they would have opportunities they had never had before, and those opportunities would necessarily spread out, reach further, help more people, improve the Edges. He could see how this might be true.

But as he neared home, all that was his and had been in his family since before the Bother, all that had always been important to him, swelled and bubbled in his throat and pricked at his eyes. It wasn't that bad, was it? They were all warm and fed, safe and loved. These were important things and, as the children grew, they would come to know this and understand why they lived as they did. They had to come to it themselves, as he had. He remembered when, as a boy, there were still other families on the street and how they used to visit his father's shop and eat and talk together. It was a small community, but community nonetheless and they had all looked out for each other. Or, he now wondered, did they? Was he suffering from nostalgia of a time that had never really existed? How many people were in this community? He didn't know. He couldn't remember individual faces, just clothes and legs and voices of people he thought of as family and the smells of his father's *ghormeh sabzi* and jade-studded *zamarod palou*, and the *tahdig* that used to stick to his newly-grown milk teeth. He didn't remember names outside of those that were in his book. Nor did he remember them leaving, just that he suddenly felt the shop was emptier. People stopped coming. He didn't know why or where they had gone. He remembered that his father stopped making big pots of his favourite dishes and began to retreat more and more into the *musallâ* that he wasn't allowed to go inside. He'd stand outside and hear his father's voice reciting words, over and over, and long silences. His father would pray and then write and then eat with them only once a day. One day he asked his mother, while she was cooking the *dal* that had become their staple diet, why his father no longer cooked for them. She turned from her boiling pulses, placed her hand upon his cheek and smiled sadly.

‘Because your dada asked ‘im t’ do summat afower ‘e deed, an’ so ‘e’s t’ do it,’ she said.

‘What’s that, then?’ he asked.

‘Important woek,’ she replied after a small hesitation.

‘Can ai ‘elp?’ he asked.

‘One day, *Qurrata a’yunin*,’ she replied.

‘An’ will ‘e mek us dinner agen then?’ he asked.

‘Mebbe, love,’ she replied and returned to the stirring of her musty-smelling pot.

That day arrived when he was seven. It was a Friday afternoon and his father first took him to the bathroom and guided his hands in the washing of his hands and arms, face and hair, and feet.

‘Whatever t’world chucks at y’, lad, just wash it away. When folk belittle y’, or come at you wi’ lies an’ venom, wash it away. Do’t let it lay heavy on y’, don’t let it gather. No good ever cem o’ that. Just wash it off an’ start afresh.’

He showed him a second time and asked him to do it himself a third time before washing himself similarly. He then led him inside the *musallâ*. It was tidier than any other room in the house, empty but for a small wooden table with two books upon it and two rectangular rugs on the floor. They were both a little worn in the middle, but woven in the most wonderful red and gold, into what looked to the young Mr Firdaus like a picture of a doorway at the bottom and a window at the top.

‘Today,’ his father said. ‘Y’ll just ‘ave to watch.’ And he guided him to kneel on the first rug. He then took his place in front of him and raised his hands to either side of his face, speaking the words the young Mr Firdaus had only ever heard before from the other side of the bedroom door.

Mr Firdaus blinked out of his mournful reminiscing and saw his fatigued reflection obscured by fresh smears across his shop window.

His resolve hardened again as it did every night. These were not improvements. This was not what people did when they wanted the best for you. Their insults were the same words his ancestors heard, the same threats, the same lies. Perhaps the kind of community he craved, the home he so fondly recalled, was long gone. But if the Bobbies thought this was the way to convince him that their way was better, to take his family to live among people like them, they would have to try harder.

This was nothing, it could be withstood. This would wash.

*And wen t Great Re Pozeshun started, Tykes ad to od fast the geeyr, the cars, ther ouses. Offcumdens sed all wa needed fot bildin of a nyew liyf, a fresh start. The sed it wert tiym to moov forrad, to a Re Jeneraashun. The sed we ad to Re Assembul, sharpish-liyk, afowert winter caam on an order brok down totally. We sed The were Reet Addled.*

*Weyd aaded these fooaks in the need, an now the wa tryin to tek off us wat were owers. We eld fast to wat we ad, allus reckonin that evrywun were after summat fo nowt. But wiyle we wa miyndin ussens, we never thot The'd tern The backs on Ther own kin.*

*Ferst girth d gon up, yonks sins, when a were a lad. Chaanlink cadged from evry skoowel, factry, closed up pit an steelwerks, topped wi coyls o razors, wa strung out overt moors an cuttin throught towns an citis an closin off sea. Unkered faces gawped in throught gaps from outsiyd, liyk cleggies on a frosty mussweb, wiylt weather soon turnt backendish wi a biytin cold. Them that were out wi the skin flayed an raw wi blisters an ulcers waasted away. Fingers grasped at metal, too neshed to cliym. No wun called fer elp cos God elp em if the triyd. Awfish fooaks, donnin Bother-tiyms masks an geer, brayed em wi asps or, failin that, shocked em wi The fizzin rods an*

*bashed em wi bricks or whatever the cud find. Faaylin that a shot to ther eds oft did for em.*

*An we said it want on. It ad to stop. The were ell on. An them Offcumdens sed we ad to choose cos the wa nowt to be dun fer evry wun. Y can keep yer ouses, weyll only tek wats left wats forsecken or wats brocken or wat wa never fit int ferst plaas. As thanks fo yer elp aftert Bother weyll let y choos.*

*In ere wi us, or Out Thayer wi them, said They.*

*But the wa no Out Thayer wi them. Fooaks who ant deed afower, wa too jiggered an lame to mend. Heaps of em wi brokken bones an smittled wi sores. We took em parny an pop at ferst an pushed em threwt chaanlinks, but the wa too far gon an piyn-bow-legged. No yuws feedin fooaks that wa deed anyway, The sed. Soon enuff Out Thayer becaam Uncoth an started to reek o diseez an deth an we ad to stop.*

*Ovvert last fowerty years o this Great Re Pozeshun I av watched ferst girth rust an breck down int arsh winter the sed d cum, just like watchin foak wi allt brittle bonds that we yuws to od us together but never last long wen burdend an keakd wi summat stronger.*

*Liyk feer an ate.*

*So now They sent this second girth in fromt Fust End to put up, a massiv fat plastic obstical. Too tall to cliym an too thick to*



*see proper out or in. Bilt in ar old foundris wi all ar stuff Thed  
nickd, an it looks liyk its bin bilt to last.*

*Zaman-Zahir Samir Firdaus*

*Rit int fowetieth an second yeer aftert Great Fallin Out*

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‘This is our new VLE room,’ said me proud mam in ‘er bonny Network twang, showin’ us round er ouse like visitors oo an’t been before. ‘We moved it to the lounge to accommodate the new upgrades. We spend all our time in here. Your father enjoys the Lawn Bowls, don’t you, Aadheen? There’s much more for retired men to do now. It’s very good. Genteel. Doesn’t get them all worked up or worn out.’

‘That’s right good, *Baba,*’ ah said to me dad, but ‘e said nowt as normal an’ shuffled ‘is feet back to ‘is chair away from us all. He looked fit enough, but ah think ‘is depression wa’ tekkin’ ‘od again. ‘Least y’ do’t ‘ave to trail too far to see folk?’

‘Raniya!’ Chanda whooshed into’ room like she allus did, new clothes billowin’, three of ‘er five impeccable lasses breezin’ in beyind ‘er. They walked straight past all of us into ’VLE room wi’out a sideways glance. ‘How lovely, you brought the family, we rarely see them. Tabassum, how’s your nasty cough? Getting better?’

‘She’s been drinkin’ plenty o’ hot lemon. Ah thought we’d nip an’ get some *shehad* while we’re ‘ere,’ ah said, me little ‘en tryin’ to cough politely wi’y’er mouth shut.

‘For goodness sake, Raniya. Honey?’ Chanda laughed. She allus did that when she thought she knew better. ‘I’m sure the Cod Beck apiarists will be thrilled to know their bees are more qualified than the Clinicians. Why don’t you ‘nip’ to a Clinic instead?’

‘It’s what we allus ‘ad as kids. It’s only a cough,’ ah said, not ‘avin’ ‘er say ah’m not looking after ma little lass well enough.

‘You should stop living in the past and have it checked properly,’ she commanded me. ‘Isra. Returned to your studies yet?’ she moved onto me eldest. ‘I saw you the other day, Sharman Flight, anti-clockwise. Going anywhere nice?’

‘Erm, York-Arc,’ said ar Isra. ‘I quite like looking at stuff from the past.’

‘Since when?’ ah said, but she din’t answer me. Ah shoulda said summat to ar Chanda about not sayin’ ‘ello to ar lass when she saw ‘er instead o’ tryin’ to catch ‘er out now, but ah din’t. Easier to go after ‘ones y’ closest to, int’it?’

‘Ah, History ArchHIVE? If you’re interested in that kind of thing, Naailah’s the one to talk to. I doubt Core Services will have anything for you, but she still has her links with York and Leeds. They don’t need graduates for everything. I’ll get her to contact you, shall I?’

‘Ah can ring ‘er later,’ ah said. That were another o Chanda’s tricks. Mek out she could do stuff I cun’t.

‘Yes, of course you could,’ she smiled. ‘It’s just tricky to catch her in a free moment; you might keep missing her. But she always makes time to drop in here. I’ll mention it next time she does, Isra.’

‘Oh, right,’ said ar Isra, tryin’ to look grateful. ‘Thanks, A’nty Chanda.’

She ignored Samir as usual, fussin’ over one of ‘er mute lasses who evidently wanted summat but refused to say owt in front of us.

‘Samir,’ ah said to me lad, pushin him gently in’t small of ‘is back, encouragin’ ‘im forrad. ‘Tell Chanda Khala ‘ow well y’ did in yer maths.’

‘Level Nine-Plus, A1.1,’ he mumbled.

‘That’s marvellous,’ said Chanda. She never wa good at ‘idin’ ‘er jealousy. ‘Those are top, top grades.’

‘A’ they?’ ah laughed. An ah wa’ never good at ‘idin’ me timorousness. ‘They allus seem to change it, so ah never know what’s good o’ bad these days. Y’need a beauk just to tell y’ what it all means.’

‘Oh,’ said ar Chanda, distracted, twindin’ ‘er ring round ‘er finger while’t VLE flicked through all it could offer, ‘er voiceless kids mimin’ what the’ did or din’t want on. ‘They’re really excellent results. The twins were always getting grades like that before they went to York.’

‘Just like you and Naailah,’ said me proud mam again.

‘Yes. Boys tend not to go to Athenas once they grow up, of course’ Chanda added. ‘Shame. You should still be pleased, though. He’ll be more than capable to help you out in the shop and eventually take over without you having to worry.’

‘Actually, we wa’ just lookin’ at them units, up near Cheap Shot,’ ah said. Ah din’t plan on bein’ stuck at ’Edges forever.

‘Near Peatfields?’ She pulled a face.

‘It’s not that close,’ ah said, tryin ard to not be deterred. ‘Kids’ll be able to get where the’ need. *Sheoher* can still ‘ave a shop.’

‘You’ve registered everyone with the Clinics, then?’

‘No, but,’

Chanda laughed agen in that infuriatin’ way.

‘You can’t put your name down for a unit until you are all registered and Treatments are underway. Just like we did before we moved into the Network. You were fourteen before you had any inoculations. Naailah and I were sixteen. Can you believe that? We were lucky. Father, particularly, was lucky, as you well know. It’s a bloody miracle your husband is still alive. Quite frankly I’m shocked you continue to risk your children as you do. It’s irresponsible, Raniya.’

‘Ah dint laike them ‘ouses, Mummy,’ said ar Tabassum, allus ’fust to come to me aid when ah wa deflated. ‘Ai laike mai ‘ouse.’

‘I thought the’ wa’ brilliant,’ said ar Samir. ‘Just like this ‘en. All clean and t’same as what other people ‘ave. Ah ca’t wait to move.’

'I laike that mai 'ouse in't same,' said ar Tabassum scowlin', 'er daily battle wi' 'er brother brewin'. 'I laike that mai 'ouse 'as got black bricks. Ai laike us us chimley that us fire goes up. An ai laike us garden wi veg in it. An ai laike mai bedroom that's got mai drawin's.'

'Y' daft lass,' Samir glimed at 'is sister. 'Y'd tek y' stupid drawin's wi' y' or do new ens.'

'Pack it in, you two,' ah said, dyin' the'd showed me up like this. Even Chanda's aloof lasses pulled the'r 'eads out o't VLE to 'ave a nosey. Why did ah put messen through 'trauma o' comin' into 'Network? Ah war allus 'poor relation, what wi' ar Chanda wi' 'er fat 'ead an' loud mouth, an' ar Naailah wi' 'er long legs an' big brain, ah drowned in all their achievements an' expectations. Me an' me noisy rabble. 'We've a long walk back 'ome, so best get off before it's dark.'

'Say 'ow-do' to my old friend,' said me dad, fust words since we'd arrived, unravellin' issen from 'is chair, 'clo'se crumpled, eyes tired. He gev me a big 'ug. 'Tell 'im 'e's doin' a grand job and ah miss 'is stews. Ah know that shop means a lot to 'im.'

Did 'e know what meant a lot to me? If 'e did, 'e never said.

We got on 'Autoroute, Samir tekkin' charge o't route and Isra gettin' all wherked up that 'e wa' choosin' 'long way 'ome. Ah din't mind. 'E din't get to see 'Network so much an' were allus thrilled when we came visitin', so wanted to soak up as much as 'e could whenever we came. Isra wa' t'same at 'is age, tortured ersen for years, but reckons she's turned 'er back on it all now, as if by not looking, it in't there, it dun't matter.

The' war a Tyke ah recognised on 'Autoroute. E din't see us at first, keepin' 'is 'ead down, but ah knew 'im even though 'e wa' tidier an' cleaner than ah'd seen 'im before. But ar lass were seemin'ly on first name terms wi' 'im an' collared 'im when we changed at Skyrack.

'Robin?' said ar Isra.

‘Oh awright,’ ‘E said, a bit tekken aback. ‘What you all doin’ ‘ere?’

‘Could say t’same,’ said ar Isra. ‘Look at y’all spruced up, in y’ new gear.’

‘E were abashed lookin’ down at ‘is new togs.

‘Y’ look very smart,’ ah said.

‘Aw ta,’ ‘e said, but it wa’ clear ‘e din’t want to cal.

‘Is Digs wi’ y’?’ said ar Isra lookin’ round.

‘Er, no,’ ‘E said.

‘Is ‘e awright?’ Ah’d not seen ma lass concerned like this before. Ah wan’t sure what to mek of it.

‘I ‘ope so.’ ‘E shrugged.

‘Where you off?’ Isra said.

‘Work.’ ‘E obviously din’t want to seh.

‘Really? Doin’ what?’

‘Isra, leave the lad alone. It’s none of ar business,’ ah said. She wa’ far too familiar fo’ my likin’.

‘Oh, it’s awright, just Brat-work mainly.’

‘Cleanin’ fo’ Network folk?’ she said.

‘Better than doin’ other stuff forrem. And ‘Brass is better would y’believe?’ he said, settin’ off. ‘Nice seein’ you all.’

‘You too,’ said Isra, but ah could tell she wa’ confused. ‘If ah see Digs, shall ah seh that ah saw y’?’

‘Aye,’ ‘E said. ‘Mind, ‘ope y’ave better luck than me. Ah’ve not seen ‘im in days.’

We watched ‘im on ‘is way, off down ‘walkway into ‘Core.

‘See,’ said ar Samir. ‘He works in ‘Network.’

‘Oh aye,’ said ar Isra, boardin’ next ‘Autoroute. ‘Wi’ that big brain o’ yours, ar Samir, y’ll mek a grand job o’ cleanin’ bogs.’

‘Now, look ‘ere,’ ah said. ‘It wan’t long since you wanted ‘self-same, lass, so just beyave an’ leave y’ brother be. That lad seems much better than when ah last saw ‘im. Looks like ‘is Treatments’ve done ‘im a world o’ good. Med a sensible choice fo’ once.’

‘Mum, ‘e an’t ‘ad Treatments, ‘e were only in’t shop ‘other day.’

‘It must’ve bin another Tyke.’

‘No, ah saw ‘im an’ all,’ said ar Tabassum. ‘When ‘e war angry.’

‘When? Angry wi’ your *dada*?’ ah said.

She shrugged. ‘Monday. Tuesday. Ca’t remember.’

‘Well then it’s workin’, whatever e’s doin’. Med a good choice leavin’ that fleapit.’

‘Hmm.’ Ar Isra wan’t convinced. ‘E wun’t leave Digs. Summat’s not right.’

‘Mebbe ‘e decided enough were enough. Sometimes y’ave to do what’s right fo’ you, never mind what other folk want.’

‘That what you’d do, is it?’ said ar Isra. But ah wan’t inclined to get into a barny wi’y’er on ‘Autoroute wi’y’all them Network folk watchin’.

An’ as we trekked ‘ome, ah remembered all ’times ah’d walked up an’ down ’Lister Old Road, pregnant, or else draggin’ a couple o’ young uns wi’ me in ’freezin’ cold wi’ everythin’ fallin’ down round us ears, only to get into ’Network to find summat else ‘ad changed again. Everythin’ movin’ on wiy’out us.

An’ then we war ‘ome agen. Twenty year ah’ve lived out in this *jhonpari*, wi’ all ’muck about us. Isra pulled ‘shutter up, knowin’ ah struggled wi’y’it, rusted an’ ‘ard to lift an’ a right ‘azard. Some leaflets’d bin pushed through’ grills by some Bobbies. *Sheoher* dumped ‘em straight in ’bin when ‘e saw ‘em, ‘is only aim in life to do what ‘e’d done for years, like ‘is dad afower him, an’ ev’ry bugger else before that. ‘E wanted ar Samir to do t’same. But Samir’d bin mitherin’ to get back into ’VLE ’whole time we wa’ walkin’ back, an’ we wun’t see ‘im agen all night. ‘E ‘ad no interest in ‘is dad’s shop, or trolley, or that daft beaok. Ah flicked through ‘glossy white pages full o’ lovely ‘omes wi’ nice new

furniture an' smilin' folk, 'avin' the' dinner together an' playin' games in 'VLE. An', like normal, once ah'd 'ad me fix, ah put 'em away, keepsakes just fo' me. Ah snapped open 'brittle lid off a big old white tub ah'd rescued from 'shop, an' it wafted it's old smell, plastic mixed wi' a vinegar from whatever'd been pickled in it before.

It wa' like me, that tub. Old an' plain an' useful, brittle, ready to brekk at any time, chock full o' dumped aspiration, clouded ovver by a strong whiff o' some bugger else's.

'Mum.' Samir eventually emerged later on, while ah wa' choppin' a tonne o' turnips to mek *Gogji Rajma*. 'Aunty Naailah's in 'VLE. She wants Isra an'all.'

Ah called 'er to come quickly to us mek-shift VLE room in 'pantry under 'stairs. *Sheoher*'d moved 'is jars an' chutney's to mek room for it years since, a couple o' buffets for us to sit ussens down. Isra squeezed beside me and pulled 'door to to mek it dark, but not shut so it wa'n't stiflin'. Samir 'ung around.

'Shunt you be in bed?' said ar Isra, an' 'e went off in a sulk.

'I haven't got long,' said me sister, as though she wa' sat right in front o' me, joinin' me in 'pantry for a cuppa, steam risin' off it like ah'd just gi'y'it to 'er. She wa' top to toe a professional, dark suit, laced up shoes, 'air scraped back, sleek like silk. Sharp as 'er cheekbones. We used to look alike, me an' ar Naailah. I oft' wondered whether ah wa' lookin' in some twisted mirror when ah talked to 'er. A different me. Like, but unlike. An' ah wondered if she thought 'same when she looked back at me. In me jumble, 'air like wool. Soft as me puddin' chops.

'Well ah'm right busy too, Naailah, we'll be oppenin' 'shop soon as *Sheoher* gets back from 'is deliveries.'

'I need an assistant,' she said, straight to business then. 'Chanda told me Isra was looking for work and I have an opening. It's a real opportunity for someone like her. She'll likely not get such an offer again.'

‘Well, in’t that uncanny?’ ah said. Ah knew ma sister prized ‘er educated-lot so ther’ ‘ad to be a catch if she wanted ar Isra. ‘What is this project that’s a real opportunity?’

‘I can’t discuss the details of it with you, Raniya, as I’m sure you can appreciate, but the work is significant for the long-term wellbeing of the Network’

‘An’ where will she be based? York? Leeds? Core?’

‘We’ll be working in a number of locations.’

‘Edges, then,’ said ar Isra, not daft.

‘Ah’ll not ‘ave my lass gallavantin’ at ‘Edges, round all ‘jhuggis an’ oppen sewers, wi’y’all them feral Tykes, so as yee do’t ‘ave to send one o’ yair precious lot.’

‘If you’ve finished,’ said Naailah. ‘She wouldn’t be on her own. She’d be with me the whole time. This sort of opportunity is normally reserved for Athena graduates, you’d be foolish to not let her participate. Chanda said she was interested, otherwise I wouldn’t have offered.’

Ah looked at ar Isra who wa’ giyin’ nowt away. Fust ah’d ‘eard o’ this *interest* wa’ that cock an’ bull story she’d gi’ to ar Chanda when she’d bin caught out on ’Autoroute. This last few year she’d danced ‘er way back an’ forth, one minute wantin’ in, next minute out. In ‘er last year o’ schoolin’ she wanted to be in ’Network, allus on my side o’ argument agen ‘er dad, sayin’ she wa’ missin’ out on all that ’other lasses ‘er age were up to. She missed ‘er place at an Athena by a couple o’ marks, an’ raged at us fo’ weeks fo’ livin’ so far away from everything an’ ‘avin’ rubbish VLE an’ fo’ bein’ so poor. *Sheoher* tried to get ‘er interested in ’shop, but it wa’n’t til she went out on ‘is rounds wi’ ‘im that she settled down an’ got into a routine of ‘elpin’ where she could and reckonin’ that we should all stay as far off from ’Network as possible. When she wa’n’t workin’, she were out wi’ who knew who, til all ‘ours. *Sheoher* said ah wa’n’t to worry, but ah reckon’d she wa’ gettin’ in wi’ wrong ‘uns an’ it med me want to get us all into ’Network all the more. An’ yet, now, by all accounts, she’d changed ‘er mind agen; wantin’ in, wantin’ to see ‘ow t’other ‘alf lived.



‘Well, lass,’ ah said to Isra. ‘What d’y’ reckon?’

Isra nodded. ‘Sure,’ she said, ‘if you say so’.

Ah wa’ never goin’ to seh no. She needs direction does that lass, an per’aps Naailah’s one to set ‘er on’ right path. Ah reckon she ‘as that same addled brain o’ mine, not knowin’ which way’s up or whether she’s comin’ o’ goin’, but mebbe she can be part o’ summat, rather than summat o’ nowt. Mebbe she’ll go forrads, not backards, or nowhere at all.

*We tuk a trip in todaay, fust tiym ont nyew traaans all shiyny an noo. Ar lass donnd er best togs. Sed she dint want to be shown up wi allt Netwerk fooak an that. She war a ded bonny lass annyrooad, but todaay she wa brussen an she glowd wi er babby bump just risin an startin to show.*

*Them Bobbies d done a reet job on us tho coddin us on we d not be let down by all the cud offer a nyew famly just startin owt liyk us. That if we went to see fer ussens, we d see the wa nowt to feer no moowr.*

*At ferst she wa blowd by all ov it. Er een glassy liyk er blinders d bin tekken off ferst tiym in er liyf. An a cud see wy an all, wi allt shops an nyew ousis. Fooak traapsin rownd in bran nyew geer, not just the best togs baht moth oles in em. The wa liyk faary-fooak the wa an this wa theyer Land.*

*Carrid away wiy it all, she spiyd a frock an so tho we ad nowt she went to get it not nowin owt better. But she wa no sooner in than owt agen.*

*Did it not suwt luv?*

*Wev no Brass.*

*Weyll get sum.*

*Yav to rejister fo Brass.*

*Weyll rejister then.*

*Yav to av them jabs. I ant ad babby checkd neether the  
sed. Y cart rejister fo Brass til wev all bin checkd fo  
sickness an wev all ad us jabs so as we cart av no mower  
babbys unless the se so.*

*But thes nowt up wi us or us babbys. Shewerly its up to us what  
babbys we do an dot av. Not them.*

*But er een wa dulld downcast agen so we went no ferther an let all  
them faarys be. The could keep the bonny Land an all the bonny  
things.*

*An int munths wiyl that babby bump gruw into a massiv mowntin er  
mood chung liyk sops to a hi seet thretnin raayn. As did ma resolv  
to tek caar not to let ar eds to be turnd agen by fals oraashuns an  
badjerin o them that peddl Brass coverd cack an then gi back word.*

*Zaman-Zahir Shafaquat Samir Firdaus*

*Rit int fiftiyeth an fith yeer aftert Great Fallin Out*

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Samir raged when ‘e ‘eard ar Isra wa’ to be workin’ wi’ Naaliah.

‘What’s she workin’ fo’t Network fo’? She dun’t even like ‘em!’ ‘E yelled. Ah  
tried to explain that it wa’ just ‘cos Isra were older, that ‘e’d get chance when ‘e wa’ big  
an’ ‘ad finished ‘is schoolin’.

‘No ah wo’t! Not if ah’ve not ‘ad me jabs,’ ‘E said, an’ a knew ‘e were right. But there wa no way o’ changin’ *Sheoher*’s mind. An’ what need did ‘e ‘ave of ‘is jabs, if we were only ever goin’ to be stuck out ‘ere anyway?

‘If y’ still feel like this when you’re older,’ ah said. ‘Y’ can register wi’y’a Clinic yersen an’ ‘ave ‘em done, ca’t y’? Like that lad we saw at ‘Core.’

‘It’ll be too late then!’ ‘E were inconsolable. ‘The’ wo’t let me go to ‘Athenai when ah’m a full grown fella whose only just started ‘avin’ jabs.’

Ah reached out to ‘im, to calm ‘im, but ‘e wa’ right again. It wan’t that lads never went to ‘Athenai, a few did, even Chanda said ‘er twins’d been in a class wi’y’a couple at York. But the’ never med it to ‘end o’t first year, she said. Chanda said it wa’ because the’ minds wan’t up to it. Too strenuous fo’ lads. But ar Samir wa’ right bright. A right brussen tup who ah wa’ sure could be different. First of ‘Firdauses to attend. First lad ever to graduate. But not while ‘e wa’ stuck ‘ere. An’ not wi’y’out ‘is jabs.

‘E shrugged me off an’ were about to go back in ‘VLE.

‘Ah think y’ve ‘ad enough today,’ ah said. Ah knew ‘ow addictive it wa’. Next best thing to bein’ there.

‘Ah hate you,’ ‘E said, stormin’ off.

Ah din’t see ‘ide nor ‘air of any of ‘em all evenin’. Ah’d put ‘*Gogji Rajma* on a low ‘eat, left to bubble down in’t shop while *Sheoher* came back off ‘is rounds, cleaned up a bit in’t back kitchen, med a cuppa tea, but still the’ din’t come down. It were unusual. The’ wa’ normally mitherin’ about wantin’ food or a drink, or goin’ in ‘VLE an’ stallin’ goin’ to bed. Ar Isra’d gone out, no doubt, to find ‘er dad or wherever it wa’ she went. But it wan’t like ‘young ‘ens to be so quiet, so ah went to check on ‘em. Samir seemed to be asleep, bundled up in ‘is bedsheets, but Tabassum wan’t in ‘er room.

Back downstairs, ah looked in ‘VLE in case she’d snuck in, but it were empty. Ah wandered to ‘front, into ‘shop in case *Sheoher* were ‘ome and she’d gone to see ‘im. Ah

din't like 'er bein' in't shop when 'Tykes came in at night. But 'light wa still off, as ah'd left it earlier, an' *Sheoher* wan't back. In't dark ah could smell me turnip stew, cookin' down nicely, and ah could 'ear ar Tabassum, singin' to ersen between snuffles and coughs.

'Tabassum?' ah said, puttin' 'lights on. 'What y' doin' in 'ere in't cold?' She went quiet. Beyind 'counter ah supposed.

'Now, what y' laikin' at?' ah said, peerin' over. She flung ersen ovver, 'unched up, folded over, arms under 'er chest, breathin' loud through 'er mouth.

'What y' got there.' The' wa' torn bits o' paper on't floor next to 'er.

She cocked 'er 'ead up to' side, peerin' up at me from beneath 'er fringe that wa' stuck to 'er flushed face. 'Er eyes wa' swollen an' 'er nose wa' runnin'. Full o'cold. Maybe ar Chanda wa' right. She were runnin' a fever now.

'Now, *beytey*, y'look like *unnaabi* wi' y' face all red an' squashed like that.' She blinked an' 'er 'air got caught in 'er long lashes, while ah came round to 'er. 'Come on ah'll mek y' some 'ot lemon an' then it's bed.' But she wun't budge, 'er arms clamped tight round 'er knees.

'What's it y've there, Tabassum?' ah said, gettin' stalled. 'Now, y'd best not a've y' father's beauk. 'E'll 'ave y' guts fo' garters, so you'd best gi'y'it over.'

'Ai an't got 'is beauk!' she yelled. 'It's in 'is room, y' can look if y' laike!' A bubble came out of 'er nose in 'er temper.

'Well, what 'ave y' then?' ah said, calm as ah could when she wa' bein' such a mawk.

'Nowt,' she said. 'Y'll tek it off me.'

'Well, ah might, or ah might not. It depends what it is an' 'ow silly y'are, dun't it?' Me mind wa' racin' through what it might be. What 'ad she found? What wa' she squashin' underneath 'er? Ah remembered 'box o' dead snails ah'd found once under 'er bed.

‘Come on, show us,’ ah said, getting’ down on’t floor wi’y’er, teasin’ out ‘er arm. She let it slide out slowly from under ‘er, legs still bent, ‘ead still on ‘er knees. But fer ‘er arm, ’rest of ‘er din’t move, like a ragdoll. ‘Er hair flopped more over her face. Ah recon she let it so she wun’t see whatever she thought me reaction might be. ‘Er arm eventually flopped outstretched, clutchin’ a handful o’ brown paper bags. On each of ‘em wa’ words. Words that she’d written. Big bits o’ scrawl, an’ attempts at smaller ones, neater ones.

‘What’s all this then?’ ah said.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her face still covered. She started breathin’ through ‘er mouth an’ took a deep wet sniff as ah peeled through each page.

*mi naam is tabassum bangash ferdaus*

‘Writin?’ Ah said. ‘A’ y’ writin’ like y’ *dada*?’

*I liv in an ous that me dadar as livd in an is dadar an all the dads*

‘Ey, it’s good is that. Your dad’ll be right suited when ‘e sees it.’

*I luv mi ows*

‘Samir can ’elp y’ wi’ y’ spellin’,’ ah said.

‘No!’ she sat up an’ pulled it all back out o’ me ‘ands, quickly bendin’ ovver it all again. ‘Samir in’t writin’ this. Ai am!’

‘Ah din’t seh ‘e should write it, ah just said ‘e could ‘elp spell.’

‘Ah don’t want ‘im to,’ she said. ‘*Dada* ses spellin’ dun’t matter. *Dada* ses, in ‘is beauk, the’ just did it ‘ow the’ lernt off the’ dads, and ‘best the’ could do wa’ good enough.’

‘Aye, well, that’s all well an’ good, lass, but it din’t get ‘em anywhere ovver’t years, did it? The’ve bin stuck in this pit ever since all’ Bother, wi’ nowt to show forrit but that beauk.’

‘*Dada* ses we ‘ave loads o’ stuff. ‘Is ‘ouse an’ ‘is shop an’ us lot.’

Ah pushed ‘er ‘air out of ‘er face, all puffy an’ shiny.

‘But we ‘ave ’VLE an’ all now, do’t we, love. We do’t ‘ave to just mek do wi’ bits of old kilter that no one else wants. Come on now, off that cold floor. Bedtime.’

Ah pulled ‘er from ‘er bundled up place an’ she slid on ‘floor, sloshing summat onto me knees, spillin’ it everywhere.

‘Tabassum,’ ah said, budgin’ ‘er aside so ah could pick it up. ‘What ‘ave ah said about leavin’ cups on ’floor? Go get a cloth.’

But it wan’t a cup. It war a big white plastic tub with parny right up to’ top. *My* plastic tub, wi’ me leaflets all soaked through.

Ah lifted it an’ picked one o’ me leaflets out. It stuck to two o’ three others, its soggy weight rivin’ it away from from me thumb an’ forefinger. The’ wa’ sodden. All of ‘em. All stuck together an’ useless. It pulled away an’ slopped back into ’pot.

‘Ah’m tryin’ to mek some paper,’ she said. ‘Laike in *dada’s* beauk. Laike us Grandad’s did, cos the’ din’t ‘ave ther’ own paper. Ai do’t ‘ave any paper.’

Ah put me ‘and in, forcin’ me fingers through all’ sodden leaflets, mekkin’ a mush an’ pulp wi’ a fist. Squeezed out all ’parny. All them dreams, wrung out and squeezed into one misshapen, meanin’less lump.

‘Ah din’t want to get told off fo’ usin’ *dada’s* shop bags, an’ then ah found them,’ she said.

‘Y’ though the’ wa’ rubbish?’ ah said, an’ she nodded.

‘Aye, ah keep findin’ that more and more,’ ah said, forgettin’ me poor little lass were only six, pickin’ up ‘er pieces o’ paper she’d been practicin’ on, an’ puttin’ em in wi’ mine to chuck out. Chuck em all out.

‘We ‘ave loads o’ stuff?’ ah laughed. ‘This shop, that beauk, that trolley. It dun’t belong to me, Tabassum, nor you lass. What do I ‘ave other than other folk’s cast-offs? Well ah do’t want it, none of it, if this is all ther’ is. Ah wish ah’d never set foot in this place. Ah wish ‘Network’d dozered it all down like everywhere else. The’s Brass enough

about it seems, enough for all but us, lumped in and left to scrat around wi' them mucky Tykes who a' good fo' nowt.'

'Isra ses the' not all mucky Tykes.' 'Er eyes wa' fillin' up watchin' me. 'She ses it's wrong. 'Bobbies think the've med everyone all better, but they an't.'

'Isra? What does she know about it? She an't finished 'er schoolin', not lived 'er life yet, she dun't know owt about nowt.'

'*Dada* ses we're different to' folk in' Network.'

'Aye, we are. We're bloody poorer than em for a start.'

'*Dada* ses we' not poor.'

'Well, what about what I seh?'

Ah wa' stood up by now. Ah'd gathered up all 'er scraps o' paper an' screwed 'em up. Little brown paper balls, misspelled words, short lines, 'er infant thoughts in big letters on scraps, round my fat, squidgy ball of other folk's words, clever words, them mysterious contented words that ah sought, off their shiny, glossy paper.

'You seh y' love *Ammee* and *Baba*,' she said between snotty hiccoughs. 'You seh that *Ammee* and *Baba* wa' both wrong an' the've changed an' y' do't know 'em anymore. Ah do't want y' to change. Ah do't want *Dada* to change. Or Isra or Samir. Or me. Ah do't want to not know us. What if ah forget? Ah do't laike forgettin'. That's why ah want to write in *dada*'s beauk. Laike they did. So ah do' forget owt.'

Ah kissed this little lass, who minded me of who ah wa' to 'er, an' who she wa' to me. Ah wiped a tear off 'er cheek.

'Ah forget mesen, love. Ah do't recall ever seyin' any o' that sort o' thing to y',' ah said.

'Y'din't seyit to me. Y'said it to yersen. Y'allus talk to yersen when y' think no one can 'ear. When *Dada* is out, an' Isra is out, an' Samir is in 'VLE. When y'mekkin' food, or cleanin' up. You think no-ones listenin', but ai am.'

Ma poor little lass. Worryin' about me. Ah'd done this to 'er.



‘*Ammee* and *Baba* were already changin’ before the’ moved,’ ah said. ‘All folk do. Pay no mind to me, ah wa’ probably mitherin’ about summat o’ nowt when y’ eard me prattlin’ on, whatever day it was.’

‘An’ Chanda Khala?’

‘Aye, an’ Naailah Khala too,’ ah said, nodding. ‘Ev’ryone and ev’rythin’ changes all ’time, love, even if y’ stay still. It in’t summat y’ can stop. Stuff goes on wi’out y’ sayin’ so. Y’ can only mebbe nudge it a bit.’

‘Which way?’

‘Y’ never know. Y’ can only ‘ave a bash.’

And then came ‘crash.

Just after ah’d give er back ‘er bits o’ paper I an’t squeezed up an’ ruined. Just after ah said ah’d get a cloth to wipe up.

She wa’ stood next to ‘cooker.

When that bin got chucked through us winder.

When it came smashin’ through, sendin’ splinters o’ glass down on ‘er ‘ead. When it disgorged it’s muck down us clean counters. An’ when it clouted me turnip stew, spillin’ it all ovver us floors and down me little lass’s bare legs.

And then it wa’ quiet. Just for a second or two.

An’ then ‘glass tinkled an’ shattered. An’ *Gogji Rajma* slopped out o’ t tipped-up pan. An’ ‘great metal bin rolled an’ clattered an’ finally came to a stop in’t middle o’ t shop floor. An’ ma little lass started wailin’.

Ah scooped er up, out o't scaldin' stew, an' stood 'er in't sink, cold tap on full pelt down  
'er legs, 'oddin' 'er in me arms while she sobbed.

Ah do't know 'ow long we stood there like that.

Could've been an eternity before I oppen'd me eyes an' realised *Sheoher'd* come 'ome. 'E  
war out there on't street, lookin' in at us, as though he were in 'VLE watchin' summat  
awful from 'Bother. Through 'great jagged hole, where 'e expected to see 'nightly  
daubin's and graffittis, an' 'is nightly chores, an' 'is routines, an' 'is obligations to all 'is  
dead fellas. Instead 'e finally saw us.

'E took er straight to 'Clinics that night. Din't say a word. Just took 'er from me and  
carried 'er all 'way down 'Lister Old Road to 'Network.

'Where is everyone?' asked ar Samir, findin' me scrubbin', on me 'ands an' knees.  
'What 'appened?'

Ah cun't speak. Dumb wi' guilt. Guilt o' what ah'd said. Guilt at what ah'd wished  
for. Careful what y' wish for. That's what ah wanted to say to 'im, careful what y' wish  
fo', Samir. Allus mek sure it's what y' really want. Cos change, do't change. No matter  
'ow much y'do o' do't do yersen, it 'appens about y' anyway. Y' can stay stock still an'  
some bugger'll come an' chuck summat at y'. Or it'll rain. Or' wind'll blow. Even if nowt  
else 'appens, y' body ages wi'out y' sayin' so.

Y'air grows. Y'lungs breathe. Y'heart beats.

*So Thed Re Assembuld an Re Jenerated just as The sed The wud. An The caam fromt Libry at Thorparch wayr Thed unkerd down all these past yeer. The caam an took owt the sed cud be yusd to tern on em, a wapen taak The sed, just liik ov old. That the wunt be needid no moower by nowun. An then The bluw up Jonsons Brigg so the cud be no moower Offcumdens.*

*The caam agen wi ther andouts an intimidaashuns. Three tiyms a week The caam.*

*Its a canser, The sed. It as to be cut out.*

*Thell be no cuttin o nowt, a sed.*

*If y stay ere yll starv, The sed. Join us Netwerk. We ar a big famly is wat we ar. Weyl keep an aye on y, keep yall saaf, keep y famly fed an provided fo.*

*They ar fed, the provided fo, a sed. We ar saaf.*

*Ah but, how long fo? The sed. Fooak a leevin thees lands at Edges ov it all to cum to us, y mun see its truw? Y cart surviyy aart eer aloan wiyowt fooak, wiyowt aad. Int Netwerk its cleen an we av clinics for if yer sickly. Yll not av to scrat round fo y food, nor tek risks wi owt dug up from untendid soyl. Int Netwerk, yuw an y famly can go to scoowl, to lern.*

*Lern wat? a sed. Me dad lernt me to reed an riiyt an av lernt me son anall an e in turn ll lern me stuff. Us food an miy cookin mun be saaf enuf seein as am stood eer callin to yee lot today. A can tek caar ov us well enuff. Wat moor is the to lern?*

*Owt y want, The sed. We av this thing y can lern owt there is on. Fooak hoo liv int Netwerk yuus it allt tiym an the doat even av to go owtsiiyd ther oon ohms if the doat want. Keeps em saaf, keeps the kids saaf.*

*What is this marvelous thing? a sed, that meens y doat av to ever go owtsiiyd. Sounds like moower walls to me or els a trap to catch us fast in.*

*No. Its no wall. Wev calld it V L E. Wev put all yll ever need on it.*

*Ow abowt fooak? A thot y said that fooak mun av fooak? A they on it an all?*

*Wen yer int V L E, The sed. Y wi fooak all ot time. Ther all thayer, callin like yer int saam room, all at saam tiym if y want. But its safest ther ever wa. No risk. No arm. A vurtuwal livin enviroment for everywun. Its reel.*

*No, ah said. It int.*

*Zaman-Zahir Samir Firdaus*

*Rit int fiftieth an ferst yeer aftert Great Fallin Out*

*\*\*\**

Me Aunty Naailah's pretty important. A could tell from -minute a went in er office. A say office, but really it wa bigger than us shop and all -downstairs of us ouse altogether. A mean, ah'd seen bits of it before when we'd spoke on -VLE, but never -whole thing, not proply. Every wall were a VLE projection. They used em for meetins, wi folk from every Arc fillin every wall. Sensible. Better than em wastin time on travellin. An one day, if ther all really lucky, no one'll want or need to go anywhere.

They av these rings. Fiddle wi em. Speak to folk. Send messages. Watch summat. Listen to summat. Work. Whatever teks the mood really. And these rings they av let em do it. VLE at the fingertips. And when the finished, click o the fingers, gone. Magic. Like it'd never bin there.

And this room wa –same. When Naailah left, it'd be like she wa never 'ere at all, and that anyone else could be. It wa just a box that could be wiped clean for whoever came next. Nothin permanent. Nothin personal.

A wa surrounded by watter. On one side, behind Naailah's great glass desk, or rather, now a touched it, plastic like everythin else, war a waterfall. An it wa massive, fillin -entire wall, top to bottom. Water fell and fell, dropping silently into -gushin river below, flowin round -long walls either side, and out to sea on -opposite end, -east wall a suppose, where –sun wa just comin up. A sat in er chair. So this wa where she spent most days, -sun risin like none of us see anymore, warmin er throughout –day as she slogged er guts out for –Network, remindin er to go ome when it dipped beyind –waterfall at –back of er. A wondered if she spent nights workin under –moon and stars an all. Me mum allus said that Aunty Naailah wa dead clever; knew about numbers and science and organisin stuff, war allus readin and researchin and knew loads of pre-Bother stuff, but, me mum said, ad no clue about -real world. It wa dead quiet in ere. So quiet, like –silence itself ad swollen to fill such an unnecessary space. It wa like a were on an island somewhere far away, long before all -Bother, or else in a thick glass case sheltered from owt outside. Definitely no real world / knew of.

Cos it in't like that at -Seaside. A'm not so sure it ever wa round ere, but it definitely in't now. It's not sandy and pristine, it's muddy and sludgy, from all that died after –Bother probably. And -sea's not blue, it's thick green, strangled wi weed that just seems to grow and spread for miles. You ca- really see -sea at all to be honest, but y can ear it, somewhere, under -weed, wooshin quietly back and forrad. Sometimes, you ca- hear

it at all over -dronin flies that must live entirely off that weed. It smells like rottin veg and eggs gone bad; weeds and flies livin and dyin off one another.

Network-folk reckon y' can catch -Sickness from bein at -Seaside. That if y go y'll bring it back and undo all -good work the've done to keep us all safe. It in't nice at -Seaside, to be fair, but I an't caught owt in all -times a've bin and, far as a can tell, I an't gi owt to no-one else neither.

'Oh good, you're here,' Aunty Naailah said, when she finally turned up. 'Let's go.'

Everyone knew Naailah and she knew them. Everyone we passed said 'mornin' and she said it back. Must've easily been fifty people before we got to -door, and she knew em all by name. When a were a kid, it wa summat I allus thought a'd've liked about livin in -Network; knowin loads o folk and them knowin you. When a wa schoolin, I ad mates through -VLE and we chatted. But they lived in -Network and went to -Lido together and did other stuff, while I wa stuck at ome waitin for em to come back to -VLE and tell me all about it. A wan't allowed to go into -Network on me own. 'Too young' for a long time. Then we cun't afford -fare for me 'to be trippin off' forever after that.

'Why do y' think a never see *Ammee* and *Baba*,' mum used to seh to me. 'Y'll av to use -VLE, like me, and just mek do.'

A hated her for that. At first a cried about it to me dad. But he din't even use -VLE and his answer war allus, 'Come elp me in -shop, love,' or 'Come elp me wi me trolley. Y want to meet folk, y'll meet some reet interestin folk if y come out wi me an me trolley.'

But a din't want to meet them kind o folk. A wanted to meet my kind o folk. Kids. Lasses and lads my age. Them that talked about -Lido and how ace it wa. Them that went to -Leeds Arc and bought loads o new stuff: clo's, shoes, things for the rooms, food. And -food they et! The'd stay at each other's ouses and talk to me in -VLE wi huggins o food ah'd never seen before. Y could av pretty much owt y wanted as long as Cod Beck supplied it, which the mostly did these days. Ah'd only ever et -kebabs, stews and flat

bread me mum and dad med. A told me dad about all this other food and he fried me some onion rings, and the wa -best thing a'd ever ad. But a soon got sick of em when he kept mekin em fo me. And once, on me twelfth birthday, mum brought out a white plastic tub full o summat she'd med, called kulfi, like ice-cream she said, but it wa just like a thick cream really, or custard, not properly frozen, thick and sweet. A took it into -VLE to show me friends and they laughed. 'That's not proper ice cream,' the said. So a told me mum a din't like it and she din't mek it again. A din't mean to be a cow. But a wa, fo years after.

Anyway, for a long time, -VLE did exactly what it wa meant fo me. A lived in it. Through it. Often only cos of it.

Over time, -few folk a did know got older and stopped botherin wi me. Lasses went off to -Athenas. Lads lost interest and dropped away once the'd started goin to -Clinics and gettin jobs.

But I ad nowt else. So a stayed and learnt a fair bit while a wa there. Whatever the wa, wherever it took me, one pearl after -other, one breadcrumb to -next. But after a bit a came to dead ends, like stuff wa'nt connected after all. It seemed unfinished and one-sided. A knew more about -Bother, a realised, from me dad's bedtime stories than from -VLE, so started goin out wi him after all. And a started to meet real folk and all -issues the cem wi em.

'Good morning, Naailah,' another person said.

'Good morning, Cara,' she answered. A started to notice that, even though she spoke to everyone, she actually din't seh much at all. Hello. Morning. Fine thanks. Thank you. Polite but finite.

'Ah ca- believe y know all these folk,' a said.

Naailah looked at me. 'I work with them,' she said. 'I don't know them.'

It's all dead efficient in -Network. How it's organised, a mean, it's all connected. The's -Spiral Walkway that connects -Core to -Inner Circle Autoroute, from -Primary Point at

Keary. From there you can go round to whatever Dropoff you need, in whichever Arc; or tek a Flyover, or a Spoke, straight through to -Orbital that borders –entire Network. It were only three Dropoffs to Derventio where Naailah kept her car. Outside o -Orbital, is -Edges, where I live. But -Edges are big and sprawlin and hard to travel round, and -land's o different sorts from one end to –other, so it teks ages to walk anywhere; y can walk for miles before y'veven get to a Dropoff, so most folk from -Network do- bother. But if y from -Edges, y'av to learn to shift yer legs if y want to to get anywhere.

'A've not been in a car before,' a said, gettin in, sittin wi me ands under me bum, not wantin to touch owt in case a broke it. A do- know ow to describe it to be honest. It smelled weird. Wrong. Clean, it wa clean, like -Network a suppose, but old, like –Edges. 'Is it yours?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'I don't use it much.'

Cars ar- allowed in -Core so the'r only useful at -Edges. But Edge folk do- ave em. We might *see* a car from time to time. But if the's a car in -Edges, it's not normally there for good reason.

'Why d y'av it then?'

She shrugged.

'It's useful to have,' she said eventually.

'So do y'actually drive round –Edges?'

'When I have to,' she said vaguely. She din't seem er normal self. Agitated. She allus seemed so slick, but this mornin she wa ruffled, distracted.

'When d'y'av to?' a said. Why wa she bein so cagey? '-Only folk who drive round ar way are after Tykes fo' summat or other, and y not a Bobby.'

She shot me a look.

'I use it to travel to Cod Beck and the Harrogate Caverns,' she said, matter o fact. 'Keeping an eye on water levels. They're low and dropping. It's why this visit was authorised.'



‘How come?’

She sighed. ‘Our water sources were pre-Bother constructions only intended to serve local populations in periods of drought. During the Bother, the Network Foremothers covered and sealed them to protect the stock from contaminate ingress, which, considering the Great Falling Out, we’re lucky they did. It’s a limited source that has to be carefully managed. During Regeneration, the underground reservoirs of the Leeds Caverns were used only to preserve the Core.’

‘Good plan,’ a said. ‘It’s a wonder anyone else survived.’ A din’t need -VLE lesson, but Naailah only talks when she’s tellin folk stuff she thinks they do- know.

‘Yes it was a good plan. It meant those who had the ability to quickly devise the ways to restart our society were safe. Without that plan there wouldn’t be anything at all. But now we need a new one. The caverns are low and there isn’t nearly enough rain yet to replenish them.’

‘So we’re goin’ to -Peatfields, then?’

‘We’re not. The marshland levels are insufficient. My argument for some time has been that we will be required to pump sea water.’

‘Them Network folk’ll go berserk! In’t sea watter supposedly spoiled.’

‘It’s a strong possibility, but, depending on the levels of toxicity, we might still be able to clean it enough, desalinate it, and use it.’

‘And if we ca-?’

She shrugged. ‘There are other sources I can try, but this is our best option in terms of speed and long-term sufficiency. It’s pioneer work.’

‘So we’re off to –Seaside?’

‘Yes,’ said Naailah.

It wa weird seein -world from a car. Even -Network looked different cos we wan’t tekkin - Autoroute or any signposted paths we wa normally expected to tek, all different bits I an’t

seen before. Naailah stuck close to –Orbital at first, clearly not wantin to spend too much time in Edge towns she'd no need to, but turned off at Parisi.

‘We’ll have to use this archaic thing now,’ she said, tuttin and fiddlin with some knobs between us. A screen lit up, a sort o mini VLE wi a map to foller. A voice started to speak, but she hit another button and it din’t seh no more.

We passed under –first leg o that Harthill-Howden Transition. The wa no folk around. A saw a Bobby Van drive slowly down one street, lookin for Tykes, as usual. Pardoe’d become a funny place where -Network met -Edges met -PEEKs met -Uncothlans met -Seaside. A knew this area better than a wanted to let on to Naailah. Y din’t see no Network folk out this way, other than Bobbies and –odd thrill-seeker tekkin -Transition, where -Autoroute gets so close to -PEEKs the think the’ll be able to see ovver -top of em. You ca-, o course. But them folk stand up and crane the necks, tryin to see what’s in -Uncothlans, *if* the’s owt in -Uncothlans. But -PEEKs a still too high. Only thing higher than –PEEKs is –Johnson Flyovver.

‘This is as close as we can get,’ said Naailah, pullin up near to -PEEKs. ‘We have to walk the rest of the way.’

Not far off wa what wa left of a sorry-lookin old windmill a knew well enough, stood like a trunk of an old tree that’d been felled. A’d spent a stormy night shelterin in it once. The wa scrawlins and scratches on –walls, some like maps, others like pictures o plants and tools. The were instructions on ow to grind grain and ow to fix –sails if the wa brokken. It seemed to’ve bin well used for a long time by whoever, mebbe Tykes, mebbe folk like me mam an dad. Either way, the wan’t there now, and –windmill wa brokken up, it’s long arms ripped off, wi no sails to turn. Owt worth tekkin’d bin tekken.

‘Me mum reckons this place is a load of old shit,’ a said. ‘A’v told er it in’t and –Network must av plans for it else the wun’t a built ‘Transition all them years back. She dun’t believe me.’

‘What do you know about Network plans?’ she asked, as though a cun’t possibly know about owt much at all.

‘Y’ mean other than us bein ere now?’ a said, just as tart back at er.

‘Your mum is right, in a way, though,’ she said ignoring me and sniffing a sarcy laugh. ‘The original name of this place, well, who knows really after all this time, but one possibility is *Shit Dwelling Place*.’

‘It’s not funny,’ a said. ‘Folk’ve lived ere. It might not be spotless like –Network is, but it wa worth summat to someone once. What is it wi Network folk? D’y’av to lose all respect for owt that’s not –same as what yee lot av, along wi yer ability to question owt?’

She stopped bein so pleased wi er own cleverness but raised er eyebrows as a went on.

‘Y’all seem to reckon anywhere that in’t where you live is shit. Ar ouse. This place. Me poor mum’s allus ad it in er ears, an’t she? No wonder she sounds like –rest o y.’

‘I don’t recall saying it actually was shit,’ she said, glossin over what a wa saying. ‘I said its original name implied it.’

‘Whatever,’ a said, bored wi er facts. ‘A reckon it’s a shame –Network scraps stuff that dun’t allus need it. Not everythin as to be Cleaned-Up and med different. Some things could be kept and med better.’

‘Like what?’ she said. ‘What from before is worth keeping?’

‘That windmill ovver there were awright til -Network scrapped it. Did what it wa meant to.’

‘That crumbling hulk?’ she said, squintin at what wa left o -black column wi it’s cap knocked off. ‘A dirty relic that worked badly for a few people, keeping them in the past. We need to move on from that. Whatever we took will be re-used to benefit more in better ways, if you need such justification.’

‘It’s not me needin it far as a see. A’m just wondrin whether or not –Network only shift this benefit y speak of to -folk yee lot think should av it? In’t that supposedly ow –

Bother started? Y ca- call it 'better', if all y doin is –same again an fo no apparent reason. “And wi oose spoils we shall begin to mek ar fortunes; fo this is righteous warfare, and it’s God's good service to sweep so evil a breed from off -face o -earth.””

She studied me a minute before gettin out o –car.

‘It’s a shame you didn’t get into an Athena,’ she called walking round -back. ‘Some of that thoughtfulness might have been put to better use.’

‘Aye, well, a know -words even if a do- allus know -tune,’ a said followin er.

‘Yes, but it could have been developed, helping you to do good things to impact upon those others you say you’re so concerned about.’

‘No -Athenai wanted me when a could’ve done wi them; an now, well a’m not sure a want or need em anymore. A’m ere, after all, ar- a? Same as you,’ a said. ‘Why am I ear exactly, Naailah?’

‘To help me collect samples,’ she said, tekkin a large case out o –boot and puttin it on -floor before reachin in for other stuff. ‘We’ll visit a couple of extraction sites, assuming we find any, and take what we have back for further testing. It’s a short walk to the PEEKs from here and I’ll need you to help carry the kit.’

‘No, really?’ a said.

‘Chandha said you were interested in working with me and I thought that was great. You’ve been aimless for too long and if I can help get you back on track, then it’s the least I can do for both you and Raniya.’

‘What, like a mentor? Come on, Naailah, a wan’t born yesterday. Bit late fo family loyalty in’t it? Y not bein straight. A can just go y know. A know exactly where I am and ow to get ome.’

‘It’s a long way,’ she said.

‘A’m used to it,’ a said, stuck me ands in me pockets and set off.

‘We have to go into the Uncothlans,’ she said.

‘A’d figured that much out mesen.’

‘I wasn’t authorised to bring anyone.’

A stopped. ‘Why not?’

‘Because I’m not even meant to be here.’

A went back to where she wa. On –floor next to -case wa some wellies, black overalls and masks.

‘Bit ovver –top in’t it?’ a said. ‘Reckon it’s that bad, do the?’

‘I wasn’t keen to take the chance. We don’t know what it’s like out there or how quickly conditions can change.’

‘And me? Think a’m disposable, d y?’

‘No.’ She looked at –floor. ‘I just didn’t want to go on my own.’

‘Ow come the lettin you go, then?’ a said, startin to feel sorry for er, liftin a pair of overalls wi me toes. ‘If the reckon it’s that dangerous still?’

‘They’re not. I found I had an unlikely ally, willing to help me with something that I feel is too serious to ignore,’ she said. ‘Or else she knows my boss wants rid of me and hopes this project will do it, one way or another.’ She slammed –car boot shut and stepped into er own overalls.

‘Seriously?’ A cun’t believe it. Clever, successful, Aunty Naailah wa bein given heave-ho, eh? Out, and by -back door at that! ‘And y just lettin it appen?’

‘Yes. Because, like you, I have questions. The Foremothers must have known resources were limited. Surely they expected us to seek out solutions when the time came, not just lock ourselves away forever. I believe the old Maters tried, but were halted.’

‘By oo?’

‘The rest of us.’

We suited up and walked a short way to –PEEKs. An alphagraphia appeared out o nowhere when she held er and flat to a panel, just like in –VLE, and she spoke her name, whispered it, lips almost touching it, while tappin in a long string o numbers. It wa -most

Network-ish thing a'd ever seen so far from it. This great ulk o plastic then started shiftin its great mass by itsen, mekkin a small crack, enough to get through. That easy. If only a'd known before.

'Ave -Network allus been able to get through?'

Naailah nodded. 'I think the Maters have always had the capability.'

'And the've never bin in -Uncothlans?'

'Don't forget the power of fear,' she said. 'For all their advances, for all the things they think they know, for all the things they have, or think they have, achieved, they're superstitious about it. Still afraid.'

'What of?'

'The things they don't know,' she said. 'Of what they can't control. Put your mask on,' she added, puttin ers on. We both sounded like we ad colds.

'So why bother bein able to go through?' a said. 'Wun't it a been easier just to build a wall and be done wi it?'

'That's kind of my point. I believe the Foremothers must have hoped, one day, they could be opened again. Once the Network was strong and the world outside was Clean. More, certain. Safe.'

'Well that's ridiculous. The ca- ever achieve that. They av no control ovver -world outside. Nowt's certain or totally safe.'

'And that's why the PEEKs remain. Secure and inviolable. The Materfamilias has overall control of the PEEKs. She's the only person in the Network with that power, since the reform of the Matriarchal structure. Noone can open the PEEKs without her say-so.'

'Clearly,' a laughed, noddin at -openin she'd just med, blowed by 'er inability to not spout Network crap. 'So if she in't one who said y' could come, and what y' sayin's right, 'ow is it y've just done exactly that?' A wan't sure ow much of it wa Naailah not tellin me, and ow much of it were er not knowin.

She touched -PEEK once more and a different screen came up fillin up -whole panel wi a picture of a waterfall, her waterfall, from her office. She typed on –alphagraphia again. But it vanished agen before doin owt else. She sighed and did it again. But it went blank.

‘Bloody ring,’ she muttered, still not answerin me, puttin her hand flat on -PEEKs and keepin it there, typin wi her other hand like she’d done before and, eventually, the were a map.

‘A ca- believe –VLE’s, out ere, on -PEEKs’ a said, standin back to tek it all in.

‘Strictly speaking it’s a different system,’ she said. ‘The PEEKs were built to protect the Core and the early Network. It’s an older system, pre-Bother technology like the Brass cards, which allowed Reeves stationed around the entire perimeter to communicate with each other and access the PEEK database while on duty. The two systems were linked eventually, through the Autoroutes at Hild and Marsh Primary, allowing the Network to expand quickly.’

‘Which came first? -Chicken or –egg?’ a laughed again.

‘The Network would maintain that the Core is Primary; the master system that took control of the defunct PEEKs system once the link to the Core was established.’

‘But y’ reckon it in’t?’

‘Up until a day or so ago, I didn’t even know the PEEKs system still existed. PEEK access was rescinded when the Core took over surveillance.’ She looked about, tekkin in ow bleak it were out ere. ‘I can’t imagine having to have worked out here back then. I think it would have been miserable. Hard work. The Core Reeves who watch the perimeter now from the comfort of the Core don’t know how lucky they are.’

‘So, this ally o’ yowers,’ a said. ‘Ow is it the’ve managed to bypass all these safeguards? ‘Ow do y’ know we’re not goin’ to be carted off by –Bobbies –minute we get back?’

‘I don’t.’ She shrugged. ‘We’ll just get our bearings and go, shall we? We can’t use it once we’re outside.’

‘Din’t y just bring a normal map? Surely -Network ave em?’

‘Probably,’ she said. ‘But I don’t have access to them.’

A shook me ead but din’t say owt. For all er supposed knowledge and seniority, she knew as much -rest of us and ad as much power. Wish me mum could o seen er like that.

‘The sea used to be about two hours from this point, according to these old maps,’ she said, scrolling down with her finger. ‘After the Great Falling Out they feared the water would keep rising, like it did throughout the Bother, so much so they thought even the Network wouldn’t be safe.’ She splayed er fingers, typed some more, and a vague blue outline o -Network overlaid -old map. ‘The PEEKs here, south of the York Arc,’ she slid er finger round, indicatin –where we wa. ‘Pretty much demarcates the line to which the sea rose. There were real concerns it would breach the PEEKs.’

‘It obviously din’t though.’

‘No. It’s thought that levels receded as rivers dried out in the first winter and the rapid weather sequences immediately after didn’t allow them to fully re-establish. We’re not completely sure, as the Foremothers were all locked down during that time, but it’s been modelled as the most likely reason. Low-lying marshes already inside the PEEKs were avoided until they could be put to good use, like Peatfields Power. Everything else outside the PEEKs was considered dead or dangerous.’

‘Friendly,’ a said.

‘Practical,’ she replied. ‘There are times where lines have to be drawn. Anyway, as there are no official reports or maps of what’s out there now, I’m not sure what we’ll find or how long it will take us. It may have receded back for many miles for all I know.’

‘It an’t,’ a said, it wa clear she din’t know as much as she thought she did. ‘It in’t far. A can tek y.’



She din't say owt at first, just followed, though a wan't sure she would at first she looked so shocked. But she did, mebbe cos a'd done it so casually, confident, walkin through -PEEKs like it wa just any other door. As soon as we stepped through, a could tell ow scared stiff she actually wa. The wa no way she'd a done this on er own. She flashed er torch left an right, like summat might sneak up on er. A stuck close to -PEEKs until we were somewhere a wa more familiar wi, -Johnson Flyover overhead. She stared up at it and across all -weed that were in front of us, spreadin out fo miles.

'I'm so angry with you,' she said suddenly. 'I'm appalled at how you have put yourself at risk. And others, within the Network. Just like your mother, not thinking about the long-term effect on you or anyone else.'

'Ang on a minute,' a laughed. 'Ow's that? A'm nowt like me mum for a start. All she cares about is movin into -bloody Network and keepin you lot 'appy.'

'The Uncothlans, Isra? It's a boy, isn't it? Some Tyke your father feeds? He brought you? How many of you have got out? This is why you were asking about security isn't it? How do they do it? Bypass the Network?'

'A Tyke? They? Eh?'

'Your mother used to sneak off without a word to our parents and they wouldn't know where on earth she was. Do yours even ask where you've been? Who you've been with? Or do they let you roam like a cat at the Edges?'

'We're not bloody animals, Naailah!' A wa so angry wi er, talking like that about me, about me mum. 'We're not all at -mercy o -some base nature y reckon we all av. Why so obsessed wi lads? You've never ad one, far as a know. What meks y think I do?'

'Because you're like...'

'I am not like me mother!' A said. 'I am like me. A do things fo me, not me mum, or me dad, or some lad, and certainly not fo -Network. What about you, Naailah? What you doin this fo? Can you even seh?'

'On your own?'

‘Aye,’ a said, narked she din’t reckon a could ave an original thought in me ead. ‘My idea. If y’actually took –time to get to know any Tykes y’d soon find out most a just as nesh as –rest o’y and never actually go anywhere. The just trail round –Edges opin summat’ll appen that day that’s not shit.’

‘And you? You got here, how?’

‘Climbed up and jumped down,’ a said, vague.

She screwed er eyes up, studyin me. She looked up at -Flyover again and then down at -weeds that hid -water underneath.

‘Jumped?’ she said. ‘What a bloody stupid thing to do.’

‘Well a din’t av an ‘ally’ to oppen this damn wall fo me, did a?’

She walked forward to see better, but the ground wa boggy underfoot, suckin at er feet, holdin fast to er boots. She retreated quick, back to -PEEK wall, clawin at its flat surface as though she could grip it to stop ersen sinkin.

‘How did you climb?’ she said, whippin round when she wa back on firm ground.

‘Ladders. Old ens. Looks like the’v bin there since –Flyovver wa built.’

‘Ladders?’ she said shinin er torch around frantically again. ‘If you can climb, others can.’

‘Now she’s catchin on,’ a said.

‘You’d better show me exactly where. I don’t believe your nerve, Isra.’

‘Ang on, a din’t put em there. *I* din’t build –bloody Flyovver, did a? An y’ave to ask why the din’t build PEEKs further away from it, after the’d cut it off? An ow much y bettin’, just like oppenin’ up –PEEKs, wi –right authorisation y can just set off ovver it and go wherever it teks y?’

‘You need to stop Isra.’

‘Why? Ca- we ask questions?’

‘You’re not even meant to be here with me now.’

‘But we *are* both ere, ar- we?’ a said. ‘So, what y goin to do? Tell –Network on me for figurin out the’ve been comin out into Uncothlans an not tellin folk? I do- think so.’

‘Noone goes into the Uncothlans.’

A laughed. ‘A still ca- tell if y not tellin me, or y just do- know! The’ lettin’ you out ar’t the? In’t –Flyovver in –Uncothlans?’

‘That? The Reeves have a Flyover patrol, everyone who works in the Network knows that.’

‘And why is that?’

‘To stop people like you, it would appear.’

‘A thought today were about you wantin to do summat more than what y thinks been done so far? Mebbe if you asked sort o questions y should, ’ve you wun’t be so blind. Mebbe if y wan’t so scared of everythin, –Network wun’t be runnin out o water.’

‘All progress still has to be managed, Isra,’ she said.

‘Controlled, y’ mean. By an fo them that can, at –expense of everyone else. That progress for you, is it? Like a said before, y ca- say it’s better when it’s all that’s ever been done before.’

‘We can’t have people leaving and doing as they please. Who knows what it will lead to? We don’t know what or who is outside. What could come back.’

‘What if the’s nowt to worry about? What if the’s no disease left? What if the’s no one to bring back?’

‘Isra, the disease never left. It’s kept under control by the Treatments we provide. If people leave the Network, now, unmanaged, there’ll be no bringing it back under control. We lose what we’ve achieved so far.’

‘So y’admit it then?’ a said. ‘That all we learnt from –Bother is ow to control people better?’

‘I think it’s best we abort this,’ she said, her voice gettin higher, er professionalism ruffled. ‘You’re so naïve. It was a bad idea to bring someone so inexperienced and reckless. I should take you home.’

‘A do- think so.’ A walked away.

‘Isra. Come back.’

‘Mebbe it’s you that’s naïve, y’ever thought o that?’ A strode, confident, towards - deeper watter, plungin me feet into -marshy ground underfoot, lettin it splash high up me boots. ‘An y just narked that someone in –family knows more about summat than you.’

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘To get them samples, like we wa meant to.’

Naailah actually followed me. I led er through -marshy bits where -watter wan’t too deep and wun’t go ovver er boots. She trod where I trod. Stopped suddenly at ev’ry unknown sound. Wafted -flies away constantly even though the cun’t get through er mask. She ad no experience ere, no knowledge. This wa my neck o -woods, I were in charge.

‘So, why so fascinated wi watter?’ a said.

‘I told you, the caverns...’ she began, wobbling while tryin to step carefully into each imprint ah med in -weed wi me boots.

‘No, a mean, waterfalls, rivers, sea. Your VLE?’

‘I’m a hydrologist. I study it. That’s what I did in the Leeds Arc after leaving my Athena, to understand and develop our water supplies. I knew then there was a problem.’

‘So why wa nowt done?’ a said. ‘Y’ant worked at Leeds since a were a kid. A remember cos y’actually used to come see us back then. Y’ant bin near us since y started workin in -Core.’

‘At Leeds I had no influence. Cod Beck was expanding and the focus of the old Leeds Mater back then. One day I received a request from the York Mater to carry out

some research into the caverns. It was unusual, but as an ex-York Athenai I was honoured I'd been contacted to do the work.'

'And?'

'And nothing,' she sed. 'For me, at least. But Leeds were suddenly diverting building resources from Cod Beck to commence the Harthill-Howden Transition. The whole Network had a crisis moment. People panicked because they didn't know why suddenly this route was being built. I suspected it could be something to do with my water research, to use it to channel water from outside, in. But the Head of Core Reeves halted the work and had the Leeds Mater removed from her role. Noone in the Network knows why it was halted, nor what it was for in the first place. The old Leeds Mater maintains that she had been acting under instruction from the York Mater with agreement from Harrogate. Harrogate hadn't a clue.'

'And York?' a sed, begrudginly intrigued by all this dramatic Network istry.

'Already dead when the Reeves were sent to find her. Officially, it was said she was attempting to strengthen York, to extend its reaches beyond that of the other Arcs, wasting Network resources to become a self appointed Philosopher Queen, but that the stress of leadership had evidently become too much. It enabled the Network to establish a new central power at the Core, with the Arcs running from it and answerable to it, maintaining balance across the Arcs. Unofficially, she was an alcoholic who lost the plot and eventually killed herself with drink.'

'And you know this because?'

'My boss, the Materfamilias, was the Head of Core Reeves. She created the Materfamilias role above the Arc Maters, and is the daughter of the deceased York Mater.'

'Wow,' a said pointedly. 'Famlies, eh?'

She said nowt.

'And now,' a said. 'Well if y work for –Big Boss y must o brought it up wiyer? Y shunt ave to be sneakin out if the's a problem. –Network should be looking to fix it.'

‘I suspect they have enough to keep the Core running.’

‘And ev’ryone else can go to Hell?’

She didn’t answer.

‘You know, us Edge folk ave been livin off more than –Caverns’ supply for years, do- y? We’d a bin dead long since if we adn’t.’

She still didn’t speak.

‘Oh. -Network reckoned on it to, din’t the’? Nice people you work fo.’

‘It’s not about being nice or not nice. I told you, in difficult and troubled times, those in charge have to be practical, draw lines.’

‘No,’ ah said. ‘The do-.’

‘What would you have done?’

‘A’d’ve come out ere long before now,’ ah said. ‘A wun’t o waited to see if -guinea pigs at -Edges dropped dead before thinkin it might be awright to drink from owt other than y’ precious tanks.’

‘Well, we’re here now aren’t we? Before now, I had no authorisation to leave the PEEKs.’

‘*I wan’t authorised. I managed.*’

‘Yes, well, I’m not sure I have your head for heights,’ she said.

And then she laughed. A genuine laugh, not a sarcy one. It med me laugh too. As we walked on, she seemed to relax. She wa less unsteady on er feet. Worried less about -flies. She even began to look around properly. Seein -world fo -first time as it wa now, wi er own eyes, not a Network authorised version in -VLE.

*Ah reckon evrywun ov us oos red this ere beuwk mun av askd us  
dads wat appent all them yeers sins an all got saam anser.*

*Fooak deed.*

*The wa nowt to be dun forrem.*

*Wen we wer lads we mun ov thot the wa summat cud be dun  
forrem shewerly. We dint beleev us dads oo we saw allus elpt  
fooak but then sed nowt cud be dun an all.*

*But now we ar dads ussens we see ow ard it is to choows oo shud  
get yer elp mor en anuver.*

*Thes only so much yav to giv.*

*An foke dee.*

*Zaman-Zahir Shafaquat Samir Firdaus*

*Rit int niyntiyith yeer aftert Great Fallin Out*

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We collected us samples. A took Naailah to places a knew, kept to -shallows, still near enough to –PEEKs to know me way back. She war in awe, mainly at -all -weed, kept sayin she'd never imagined it'd be like this. A laughed and asked if she really thought it'd look owt like er pretty VLE pictures.

'No,' she said defensively.

‘A’m surprised -Network even lets anyone see that sort o thing,’ a said. ‘If the keep idealisin -Uncothlans, whether folk think it’s ow it wa before -Bother, or ow the think it still is now, surely it could mek em want to find out for emsens? Leave -Network a mean?’

She shook er ead.

‘People don’t want to leave,’ she said. ‘Too ‘nesh’ as you might say. They have what they need where they are. That’s the point of the VLE; be wherever you want, whenever you want to be there. Work with colleagues, tea with friends, visit Arc-HIVEs, lay on a beach. Much of it can be done without ever really having to leave home. There will come a day when that’s how it all works.’

‘But it’s fake,’ a said.

‘Is it? No one is being fooled into thinking that what they are seeing is the real thing; they know they’re in the VLE. Do you know,’ she said, suddenly distracted by er work, gesturin wide wi er arm. ‘I’m almost certain this is Ulvaceae.’ Fear lost in excitement. A pioneer again.

‘Seaweed?’ a said.

‘Technically algae. I’ll have to check the type.’

A rolled my eyes.

‘It can be used for so much,’ she said, oppenin er case and tekkin out a large sample pot. She scooped some in, tightened -lid more than wa necessary.

‘It can be eaten,’ she carried on. ‘Used as fertilizer, burnt as fuel, as long as it’s not toxic. I’ll have it all checked when we’re back, but it makes sense. We’re in what used to be an estuary, the Canacidæ...’

‘What?’

‘Beach flies, it all adds up. It’s quite exciting.’

‘Well if we wan’t wearin these masks we’d be fallin ovver from -smell and drownin face down in it all.’

‘Smells like bad eggs?’ she said.



‘Really does. Meks y go all funny if y stay too long.’

She nodded. ‘Hydrogen Sulphide. It will affect the water toxicity process, but it’s not insurmountable. In any case, we’d better start making a move back.’

‘So this is good?’ a said, mekkin sure I ad all er stuff packed up safe. ‘Sort o thing y wa lookin fo?’

‘Some good, some bad,’ she said. ‘Hydrogen Sulphide is not good. And this amount of weed suggests high levels of UVB. Also not good.’

‘But it’s allus cloudy,’ a said. ‘And, y’know, winter.’

‘Which only concerns me more. The clouds and water must have reflected large amounts of UV throughout the summer period to produce this amount of weed. We’ll notify the Clinics, they can watch for symptoms, send out notices.’

‘And gi folk even less reason to go outside?’

‘For their own good,’ she said, tellin me. ‘But this is all certainly very interesting. It could be very useful and it’s more accessible than we could have hoped. The Network will want to know more. It’s definitely progress.’

A shook me ead and started eadin back to -PEEKs. Old Aunty Naailah wa back, only concerned wi ow clever and important she were in –Network an ow to keep them doors well an truly shut.

We’d criss-crossed more than a’d realised, and so further out than a’d meant. A knew roughly where -PEEKs wa, so eaded in -general direction, knowin we’d come across em soon enough, wi em bein so bloody big and obvious and that.

She jabbered beyind me all -way. Not payin attention at all to where she wa walkin now, all fear gone. A din’t say owt. What wa the to seh? It seemed she’d got what she came fo, which a reckon wa finally a way o getting one up on er boss and not really owt to do wi progress an savin Network folk at all.

But what ad I come fo?

A din't av to come. Coulda said no, told me mum a din't want to. A din't want to work fo –Network, did a? I ad no interest in mekkin it better for them and worse fo -folk like me mum and dad at -Edges.

But I ad wanted to come. Why wa that?

A remember that first night clear as owt, -first time a set off on me own, after elpin me dad deliver food to Tykes. A'd spent many evenins like it, round -dustbin fires, poppin and spittin out whatever wa burnin, flames lightin up eyes and teeth in –darkness as Tykes told tales about fancy cars and steamed up winders and fat Network flesh. The din't talk like that round me dad, only when he were out of earshot. A used to think, stupidly, it wa cos the trusted me, cos a din't look down on em, like me dad might, fo what the did to mek some Brass. I ad no experience at all o wha the wa talkin about. Obviously, the wa stuff in –VLE, but all for educatin folk in –Network, tellin em to attend Clinics like good lads and lasses, where the could find out more, an o course, a never did. What these Tykes talked about a'd never eard before, and at first a wa roused by what the said and found mesen back again to ear more, wiya silent giddy thrill a'd not felt before. But -more a listened, the got more darin the got wi what the said, wi tales more graphic, more vicious.

'That's awful,' a said finally, that particular night, appalled at what them Network lasses med and let em do. 'Y shun't do owt y do- want.'

'Ah, but,' said one, sidlin up beside me. 'A do want to.'

'Yeah,' said another, chucklin through is mouthful o food. 'AND get paid for it.'

Another came at me from –other side. 'Look at er, lads. Bet she's gone red. Y've never done owt like it, av y', love?'

Another'd bin lurkin in –background, eatin is köfte quietly while –others went into all –gory detail. He peered ovver me shoulder, mekkin me go stiff, all me nerves prickin at once.

'We'll gi yer a freebie if y like,' he whispered. 'Show y'ow it's done.'

‘Nah, sod that,’ laughed another. ‘A ca- afford to gi it away. Mates-rates, seein as y dad’s such a top fella.’

A left em quickly. Back ovver to where me dad wa wiyis trolley. Left em laughin at me ovver -fire, eatin –food we’d brought em, that me mam and dad’d med for em.

‘Y’awright, Isra, love?’ he said, clockin summat wan’t right straight off.

‘Them lads,’ a said.

‘Pay no attention to em, love, the just daft.’

‘No, the not nice. Why a’ we elpin folk who ar- nice?’

‘We ca- only elp them folk we like, Isra.’

‘But a we even elpin?’ a said. ‘Or a we just mekkin it easier forrem to stay ‘ow they are, carry on doin what the doin?’

‘Ah ca- answer that, love. –Way I see it is, the’ll carry on doin what the doin whether ah give em a butty or not. Least this way the do- starve.’

‘But why’d anyone want to live like this?’

‘It’s a matter o choice, love. Them that choose to live int Network av to av them jabs. Them that choose not to av them jabs, do- live int Network an fettle as best the can at -Edges.’

‘It dun’t seem like much of a choice. Is it really that bad in –Network, that this is better? Are -Clinics that horrible? Why’ve we never bin to a Clinic, dad? What’s so bad about em if everyone in –Network thinks the good?’

‘It in’t as straight forrad as good o bad,’ said me dad. ‘As a seh, it’s about us choices. We should av –right to mek em for ussens. Y’ve read y’ grandads’ beauk. Av read it y since y were a young en. All ah know is, since –Bother, fellas’ve bin rounded up and med to av these jabs, an it in’t right that them that run –Network’ve mower right ovver us, than we do ussens.’

‘But lasses av em an’ all, not just lads,’ a said. ‘Even before –Bother, more than lads. Y’ learn about it in –VLE, ow it elped get rid of all sorts o diseases that used to kill

folk all -time. This in't no different, is it? Why would the do it if it wan't good for us. In't it to keep everyone safe?'

'The tinkerin, lass,' said me dad startin to push is trolley back ome, like he really din't want to talk about it no more, a tone in is voice a din't often ear. 'Tinkerin where the shun't be tinkerin. Whether anyone as kids int up to them, whether we live o die, int up to them. Allah decides it for each of us.'

'Well, it int a choice at all then, is it, dad?' a said.

He called after me as a walked away from im. -Way I saw it, either -Network wa tellin me ow to live in there, or me dad an all 'is dad's before 'im were tellin me at -Edges. And then the wa them Tykes. The'd right wherked me up. A'd bin med to feel a lot o things growin up at -Edges; embarrassed, jealous, but never like the'd med me feel that night. Scared. I admit, a felt scared by what the'd said, and ma first thought wa to head straight for -Autoroute and just sit there, safe, where them Tykes cun't get me. A'd lived round them streets all me life, wi Tykes comin and goin of all ages an backgrounds, but a'd never bin talked to like that. A din't know whether it wa cos these Tykes were different, the wa definitely more of em about, goin about in gangs, or whether it wa cos a were older now, and mebbe looked no different to any other Network lass. It wa like the thought the could seh them things and the wan't owt a could do about it. What would theya done if I a'd not bin wi me dad? The din't mek Network lasses feel like that, a bet, so why did the think it were awright to do it to me. It med me feel worthless. That these lads saw me as less than other lasses. These lads saw me as less them emsens.

A figured the must be another choice, summat different, a real choice, one that only *I* could mek for messen. A din't want to retreat into -Network, told what to do, ow to think, sucked in, just to feel safe again. And a din't want to be stuck at -Edges anymore, limited in other ways, for other reasons, by other people. And after all that reasonin, a found mesen on -Harthill-Howden Transition, gettin off to go right up to -PEEKS, to see

nowt more than another great barrier. A'd not been up close before. Never been out this far. Never allowed, never tekken, and'd never thought to bring mesen before that night. But now i ad, and this were it. Still as far as a were allowed to go. No choice. No choice at all.

Then the came. Bobbies. A ducked out o sight in –scrub and watched as a van pulled up under –Flyovver, it's lights shinin right next to where a crouched. Four of em piled out o –back, in massive hoods and baggy britches, torches shinin off ther eads, waving to -driver. The squeezed, one by one, among -scratchy bushes into –tight gap between -concrete leg o –Flyovver and –PEEK panel aside it. And then the vanished. Gone.

-Van wa still there so a stayed put, almost not breathin in case –driver saw breath risin, or –bushes shudderin. Then from where them Bobbies'd vanished, four came back, one by one from beyind –Flyovver leg. A din't know if the wa' t same lot or not. Mebbe the'd stopped for a wee. Til one of em took the'r hoods off and said, 'Glad that's over for another shift. I still think a day a week is too much. I expect we won't know how much we've been exposed until it's too late.' The others mumbled in agreement as the piled into –van and it drove off. A snuck out, quick. Tiptoed over to where the'd all been and saw a plastic panel, exactly like –PEEKs, still oppen a sliver. The'd gone into –leg o –Flyovver. An that wa me chance, so a took it.

It wa pitch black when -panel shut beyind me. No light inside. A stood stock still in case them Bobbies wa still around but –only sounds came from a long way off, distant scuffles and clangs and mumbles. A put me arms out and slid me foot forrad, careful, slurrin dust and grit underfoot. I edged a bit more til a touched cold metal, round and long, upright. A gripped it and felt up and down, ma fist hittin top and bottom against what felt like steps on a ladder. This is where the'd gone, them Bobbies. Up this ladder.

A climbed wiyout thinkin what a'd do if the' were at –top. A climbed wiyout thinkin it might be brokken, or where it even led to. A felt scared, but not like them lads'd

med me feel. *They'd* med me feel that way, *I* wa mekkin mesen feel like this. A kept me ead up, and felt one step after –other in –dark. Me legs shuck wi fright and excitement. It were a long way up and a wa pleased a cun't see –bottom, but then a started to think and to worry. What if it wa blocked at –top? What if I yad to climb back down in –dark? What if a fell? Sick swept ovver me. Me stomach churned and a could feel sweat on me back, on me ands, slick on –metal. A kept goin, it ad to end eventually. And then a wa there, at –top. - Poles kept going up, summat to grip onto, while –steps ran out. A stood on –top step, not darin to step forrad, fists grippin tight, heart bangin in me chest. A breeze drifted ovver me face, coolin me, dryin –sweat off me forread. The were a way out then. Mebbe, finally, this were it. A tightened ma grip even more, tensin me arms, and put a foot forrad, sweepin it on –ground it hit, to mek sure the wa plenty of it, and then stepped off -ladder. A kept od wi one hand til a gathered mesen. Pantin, a wanted nowt more than to sink to –ground, me jelly legs tired and achin, adrenalin still slickin through me mekkin me sick to -stomach. A let go and shuffled towards –breeze, the wa no light to speak o, bein night, but it looked to be a way out, a door appen. And there it wa', not shut off like –PEEKs, an old door, easy to push, wooden framed and thin brokken glass at -top, kept together wi criss-crossed metal mesh through it. Not med by –Network that. Old. Edge-like. Uncoth-like.

-Wind took me breath away when I oppened it, whippin me 'air in me face. A stepped out, fully, finally, on top o –Flyovver, giddy, grabbing od o –railin to –side as though a could fall at any time.

There wa -PEEKs right under me.

To me left, a could see –lights o Pardoe Dropoff not so far off, an Autoroute, empty, peelin off -platform, back to –Network. And to me right, endless night.

–Sky wa massive, ah know that's stupid, cos obviously it's massive, but a'd never seen owt so oppen in me life. So much space, so empty, wiyout restriction. A storm flashed silver and gold, mebbe a million miles away, gettin smaller and smaller, far away, goin wherever it pleased. Bundles o clouds rushed by unrestrained, so fast it tumbled and

cracked and a wa sure a saw –night sky above for –first time in me life, stars sparklin like pearls and jewels. Underneath it all, on -ground, a cold light spread out below wiya eerie glow a do- think a could ever really describe well enough to anyone. A thought a could see movement among it, fast movin shapes, stretchin and collapsin in on emsens, but then gone again just as quick, like a glimpse to another world. And it swushed, as though whisperin secrets, fillin me wi summat a'd not felt before. Knowledge. That a wa me own person, wi strength to do as a pleased. And so a passed out ovver that last boundary, high in –air as though flyin. A'd spent me life allus feeling like a wer on -Outside, that came wi bein from - Edges, but that wa -first time ever a din't feel contained.

And then came -voices. A do- know how long a'd been stood starin out, but too long it seemed as a wa soon to be joined by others climbin up beyind me. A cun't go back down. A looked around –Flyovver to see if there wa somewhere to duck out o sight, but the wa nowt near enough. A could only tuck beyind –door, but knew a'd easily be seen there. A little tree grew up from a crack in -concrete near to -railings, too spindly to offer enough cover. The wa large bulky objects –size o cars, further up on –Flyovver, if a could just get to em. But beyond em a could see torchlight bobbin toward me. Another changeover? A wa stuck.

What would theya done if the'd found me? A do- know, cos a din't want to find out. A din't ever want to go back to feelin –way a did before. Cooped up. This were it, as far as a wa concerned, the wa no goin back. So a turned and faced out ovver -Seaside, wide and sprawlin wi no end, as a dim and murky mornin sidled up behind -clouds, pulled mesen up, usin –branches o that tough little tree, over –railins, and jumped.

A ca- tell y'if I expected to land or not. Either way, din't matter to me at -time. I an't thought beyond -impulse to jump. A certainly din't know the'd be so much watter underneath. Ah just let me body fall. Me arms flew out to –side. –Wind caught me coat, flapped like a cape, so a pulled me arms in, held em across me tummy, oddin mesen tight. A let gravity pull me. Let it tek ma breath those few seconds before feelin like a'd it a wall,

then plungin, like a'd never touch -bottom, shocked at me new dark and tangled world, wonderin whether a'd ever breathe again.

And so a still ad me thoughts.

And me first and main thought wa to breathe, to live.

And so there a wa still.

A pulled mesen up, fistful by fistful, blood pumpin in me ears, pressure under me eyes, down ma face, ma neck tight, lungs fightin to tek that first gobful of air in this brand new world.

A grappled ovver to -side, up onto -bank and sat quietly catchin me breath, chest tight still, gulpin. Bruised but not brokken. Awake and alive.

A began to shiver and soon -smell o freedom started to smell a bit rotten. A felt sick. A pulled me jumper over me nose and chin. A knew a cun't stay, not this time, soaked through and unprepared as a wa, and ad to find a way back. Torchlights crossed each other up on -Flyovver. A cun't ear owt that may o may not've been said between -Bobbies, and clearly the'd not eard nowt from me, my night's journey notable to no one but me.

Funny ow things turn out. Ow that one night started out wi me feelin right pointless and selfish and alone, but ended wi me feelin powerful and hopeful. It learnt me ow to live again and to look forrad. It helped me to start questionin me own ideas o right and wrong, and o -difference between fear and ignorance. Med me brave. Brave enough to wade waist deep in freezing weedy watter to -next Flyovver leg and find another ladder by crawling through a crack in its concrete. Brave enough to climb up it, even though it wa nowhere near as sturdy as -first en, rungs missin, bowin and creakin. Brave enough watch for another Bobby changeover so a could follow em back down again. Brave enough to keep comin back. Once, a nearly walked all -way down Flyovver to -First End, where car after car ad been left, like skeletons in a desert picked to -bone, ther owners avin evaporated on



–spot in –Great Falling Out it seemed, or mebbe, avin just ran out o fuel and walked –rest o- way. A din’t get to –First End. Flyover wa crawlin wi Bobbies, and a wanted to know why.

So mebbe I ‘oped that Naailah’d ‘ave them answers fo’ me. Or ‘appen a’d wanted to come wi Naailah to finally show someone what *I* knew. That *I* could be useful. That, wiyout –Network, or me famly, tellin me what to do, *I* could do good. Or mebbe it wa just that a still thought a needed permission after all.

A saw -PEEKs ahead and wa glad. It wa gettin late, plus all -eavy gear a wa wearin wa mekkin me too ot and sickly. Or were it -weed? It’s stink finally gettin through this steamy, sticky mask? A turned towards -PEEKs so we could walk back along it to find –Windmill oppenin again.

‘Stop. What are those?’ said Naailah, catchin up wi me and pointin towards –PEEKs up ahead. The wa these small, dark mounds dotted along -PEEKs, a bit too far to see from where we wa. A shrugged.

‘Do- know,’ a said. ‘I an’t come out this far before.’

Naailah scowled at me.

‘Perhaps we should go back the way we came?’ she said.

‘You can if y like,’ a said, tired. ‘Watch out for deep pools and that. I reckon y’ll be much safer if y come wi me up to –PEEKs though, where -ground’s a bit firmer underfoot.’

‘I really don’t like the look of them,’ she said.

‘It’ll be nowt,’ a said. ‘Bushes or trees or summat. It dun- allus ave to be worst thing y can think o Naailah. If we go left now, we’ll end up bogged down and knee deep in weed and watter. It’ll tek longer. A’m knackered and ot wi all this gear on. Y do what y like but a’m goin straight on as planned.’

A set off and she, after a bit, reluctantly followed.

As we got closer, them dark shadowy lumps started to ave colour and form. Obscure growths turned into slumped heads and bony shoulders. Pointy angles were elbows and knees. Long thin branches, turned into outstretched arms, hands clutchin at chains and -crumbly old fence beyind.

‘No,’ said Naailah. ‘Stop.’ She grabbed my shoulder.

‘What?’ a said, spinnin round.

‘We shouldn’t go near them,’ she said.

‘The tied up.’ A turned back and pointed. ‘Shackled. What the goin -o do? Run after y?’

She took a deep breath.

‘They may be infected,’ she said. ‘Probably why they’re cuffed. Some barbaric method of keeping them away from other people so they can’t infect them.’

‘Barbaric?’ a said. ‘If folk out ere are as savage as y reckon, where’d they get them chains?’

‘I meant the ‘what’ not the ‘how’,’ she answered. ‘Whether or not those people over there are infected, they’re clearly dangerous, otherwise they wouldn’t be chained. We should stay far away and report it as soon as we get back in.’

‘Ar- y’even curious?’ a said. ‘These are -first folk we’ve seen outside, ever. First folk, as far as we know, that anyone’s seen outside o -Network since PEEKs wa built. What if the can talk to us? Do- y want to know what they ave to seh? Do- y want to know what’s goin on out ere? Ow they survive outside in -Uncothlans?’

‘No,’ she interrupted me. ‘Isra, I don’t know what you think you are going to find out here. Everything anyone needs is within the Network. The Network is safe. The way it’s organised. The way it’s structured. It’s all designed to keep you and everyone else safe. Those ‘things’, whatever they are, are not ‘surviving’ out here, clearly. There is nothing

out here but pain and suffering, disease and uncertainty. Why would we seek that out?

Why would we allow it in?

‘But the’s people out...’ a began.

‘And what about the people inside?’ she pointed to the PEEKs. ‘They feel safe. They *are* safe, after having been let down for generations. You think you are hard done by because you grew up at the Edges? You were never really at the Edges. There’s always another Edge somewhere, and someone worse off than you. That was the world in the Age of Man. You think it’s bad for people at the Edges now? Open up the PEEKs and watch the Edges grow. And then disease and disorder will reign again and the old cycle of self-serving destruction will take hold until the only way to end it is to drop more bombs, kill more people. So, no, Isra. I am not curious. It’s a well-trodden road that leads nowhere.’

She turned off left, stepping carefully where -mudflats sucked at er boots, away from -bodies. A started to follow er. Who war I to put folk in danger? A knew she wa right about others bein worse off than me. Course a did. Me dad showed me it most nights when we took -Tykes the dinner and the wa clarted up to -eyeballs in -shit the lived in evry day. And now this. These folk, carcasses left to rot on a fence, strung up like rabbits. Prey. She wa right. What sort o people did that? Why would we want to put that worry on -folk in -Network when we’d come so far from the nowt that -Age o Man left beyind for us? Why would anyone want to invite it back?

‘No, ang on,’ a said, annoyed at bein so easily swayed. ‘If -Network’s so bloody marvellous then why shunt it elp other folk? If -Network works so well, there shunt be reason to be scared, should the? If y’ve sorted all -problems o -past out, shunt it be shared about?’

Ah began to walk over to -fence, Naailah callin me back, screamin at me to not go near em, not talk to em, not touch em.

A sped up.

She wa wrong. Y do- mek world better by keeping -best bits for yersen and -few folks that y like. Me dad. No, me mum, showed me that. Me dad only did all he ever knew. But me mum chose it, and ad to keep choosin it evry day, even tho evryone said she wa wrong, even though *she* allus thought she wa wrong.

But even if y only mek it a bit better, it's still a bit better than it wa before. Y ca- pick and choose who should get -better stuff and shut y door to those who y think do- deserve it. That wa -problem in -Age o Man, that's what med all -Edges everywhere and caused all -Bother.

It wan't -folk at -Edges mekkin it worse for emsens all by emsens, but Network folk allus mekkin it better for a few and oddin it tight to emsens like a precious jewel that ca- be cut up and shared else it'll never be perfect again, whilst coddin on to -Edge folk the knew what wa -best forrem.

'Listen to us,' the' said, 'look this way, not that.'

'Watch out fo them Offcumdens,' the said, 'the'll tek all y've.'

Well the did. Cos *they* war -Offcumdens anall when it came to it.

We're all Offcumdens to someone somewhere.

So it dunt matter who's in charge. -Faces might change, but -ideas are -tsame. -Age o Man ant ended at all, a'm not sure it ever will now, a reckon it's all we know and can ever know. The just keep figurin out ow to mek bigger and better fences.

'Isra,' Naailah yelled. 'Isra, don't go near them. You'll catch...'

A din't ear what she said then.

A think a may av screamed.

Or else blacked out for a second.

A knew im, soon as a saw im.

Even tho his face wa drawn right down to -bone and his cheeks were hollow and his eyes sunk into his skull, fearful, peerin up at -sky for one last look, one last hope, one last wish.

‘Naailah, help,’ a yelled, eyes and nose runnin into me mask as a ran over and fell on ma knees in front of im. A pulled it off me face when it steamed up and a cun’t see no more. ‘Help me. The not from -Uncothlans, Naailah. It’s a Tyke that comes to –shop. Adam. He lives near me.’

Naailah dint come. She stayed far away.

‘Isra,’ she said. ‘Don’t touch them. We have to go, now.’

‘They ant got owt!’ a yelled, angry at her. ‘Just like you an’t got owt.’

A reached out. A do- know why. To touch is face a suppose, but stopped. A dint want to feel his dead skin. Dint want to feel it cold and hard and thin and lifeless. ‘It’s Adam, I only saw him...’

Weeks ago. Longer? Who knew. People allus came and went from –Edges. Passed through. But Adam’d been around as long as a could remember. Not a daft young lad. Older. A fixture on –Lister Old Road like we wa.

‘Naailah,’ a said, lookin up now at all -other bodies slumped along -fence, lined up, one after -other. ‘What if someone’s bringin em out?’

A looked left and right of Adam. All lads, strung up in a line, each one a few metres away from -next, more than ten probably, a din’t bother countin. Them to -left wa more dead than them to -right, some skeletal and dried up, some bloated and oozing; an illustration showin different levels of ow dead a man could be. Adam looked to be somewhere in -middle, is air thinnin and fallin out, is mouth sagged oppen wi teeth loosenin, skin drawn thin over is face and frame, ribs and shoulders pokin through, dried blood, crusty and gone manky down is legs.

‘Fuck,’ a kept repeatin over and over.

Wa them on -left already dead when -next one got ere?

Did the see what wa goin to appen to em?

Bones collapsin under dead weight. Maggots feastin. Summat else’d ad a knaw at em an’ all by -looks of it.

To -right of Adam wa fresher victims, each a bit meatier than -last, but parched and startin to peel, oozing sores the fresher they got along -line.

Ah choked back bile in me throat, covered me nose and mouth wi me hand. A wan't really cryin, a do- think, but me face streamed wi tears as a realised, one by one more obvious than -last, that they ad a gapin bloody gash between the legs, -meanin o which dint need to be spelled out to me.

A cough.

'Fuck, fuck,' a said, runnin over to -last lad in -line. He war alive, just.

'Y'awright?' a said stupidly, stumblin over me own feet, fuckin stupid, course he wan't awright, he wa badly. A fumbled in one o -bags a still ad round me shoulder. Most o -watter from -bottle'd gone, but the war a drop. A put it to is lips, but he dint move, his lips stayed still, no flicker of is tongue even to catch a drip. His dry eyes wa fixed on me.

'Robin?' a said. 'Fuck's sake.'

A stood up to try and pull -chain that ran from is arms to -fence. It wa thick and shiny and new, the wa no way o brekkin it wiyout loppers. A cun't leave him though. A felt round is bony wrists, cut and bleedin from where he'd been pulling and trying to get is ands through; bite marks even, but too far up 'is arm and not deep enough, not rageous o wild enough. I eaved on -chains, leanin back, but, even though -fence bowed and pulled, the dint come loose, threaded through -woven rusty metal many times like a runnin stitch, to 'is other arm. A picked and pulled at -fence. It wa brittle and felt like it might brek eventually. But eventually wa no good forrim. A dint ave time to pick and pick and pick. Quicker to go back in and get some loppers. Go back wi Naailah. She could drive me somewhere. The'd be somewhere close we could get elp.

'Fuck,' a said again. 'A promise a'll come back.' A stumbled up, me legs ditherin, grappled on -floor to push mesen up, no feelin in me woolly arms. We wan't even meant to be ere. How would we get him to a Clinic in time? What would we say when we got him there?

'Naailah,' a called, annoyed she still wan't helpin. She worked for –Network, she'd know what to do. She ad a car. She could sort it.

But she'd gone.

*Some went o ther own accord, o course. Folk, like us, oo ad all that the could want fo. They ad ther ouses. They ad the famlies. They ad close on the backs an food in the bellies. What more wa the to be ad?*

*But the went allt same. When the were bid, the went.*

*Ant wife fretted.*

*'An what if the reet?' she said. 'Maureens lot as gone, y know. An even Ajit as gone wi is lads. The se its nice. The se its clean.'*

*'What if the right?' she said. 'The se its likely what got y father int end. He war right one minute an gonet next. Sha we loss ar lad anall to it? Shall a loss you?'*

*Ah reckond we were lost one way ort other.*

*We id int loft, amellt rhubub nt celery, when the came for us lad. Twife said we were out. Visitin. On us way ussens tot Clinic. Owt thatd get em to sod off. The said e needed is fust check up. Seven year on from when ad fust shown im is prayers. Seven year on from when a read ar beauk to im and showed im is famly. Seven year o pushint trolley round town. The said e war of an age whent sickness wa likely to start showin. That we wa to nip it int bud afor it took od.*

*Trhubub wa just bare stumps when we fust id. Bald eaded little fellas, shiny pink stubs pikin up, just startin to oppen up. We*



*watched evry day as it grew, an its small curly leafs spread out, an  
it finally pushed up wi its hard straight tuskie ready fer pollin.  
We thought the 'd never sod off.*

*Zaman-Zahir Shafaquat Samir Khalid Firdaus  
Writ int niyntieth year aftert Great Fallin Out*

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'Digit Entered' the screen flashed as Samir's father removed his thumb.

'Thank you Mr. Firdaus,' said the Autoroute Voice at Lister Dropoff. 'Where would you like to go today?'

'Sparrow Clinic,' Samir answered, pushing his face up to the screen. His father always let him talk to the Autoroute.

'Credit available,' the Autoroute Voice answered. 'The nearest station is Lancet. Direct Route: Orbital from Lister to Busky Dike. Spoke to Lancet.'

'Recommended Historical Arc Route:' she continued. 'Orbital from Lister to Busky Dike, then Burnford Journey taking in the sights of the outer reaches of the Harrogate Arc Triumphant, including the outstanding Fountains Spa, the Southeil Specialist Sociological and Mind Clinic, and finally, all clinical needs and purchases can be met within the confines of The Stray. Please choose your journey.'

'Direct Route,' Samir answered again.

'Thank you, Mr Firdaus. Payment accepted. Enjoy your journey.'

Samir pitied his father. At fourteen, he was now nearly as tall as him. There was little he said that interested him, little he did that filled him with pride. He was ashamed now to be

stood with him aboard the shiny Autoroute on the way into the Network, both in their best but still threadbare trousers and hand-me-down shirts.

Hand-me-downs were the curse of Samir's life. From the clothes, to the shop, to the trolley and the book; everything his dad had been given by some dead relative, had been given in turn, or was destined to be given, to Samir. Whenever he wore through a jumper, or grew out of a pair of shoes, his father produced more from the bulging black bin-bag in the loft, stuffed up there with the rhubarb and celery in the dark, the plastic itself deteriorating and shedding in sticky black flecks. It was weeks before the flecks and foistiness were properly washed out. Samir hated the way he and his father stood out in the Network; against all the sleek white of the Autoroute carriage in their peculiar attire of reds and browns; the way his ill-fitting trousers flapped at his ankles when he walked. He knew it made him different from the people in the Network and, from the looks they gave him, he knew they noticed the difference too and he longed for that to change, to blend in. Like his mother and sisters.

His mother had no clothes of her own to pass on to his sisters; she mostly bought bland Reprocessed clothes, the clean, reconditioned clothes of the Network, but never Network-new which were expensive. He delighted in the times they were short of Brass and the girls had to experience the same hand-me-down shame he suffered his entire life. Their Aunty Chandha took great pleasure in digging out some of the best Network-new items she had afforded for her children, letting his sisters dress up and parade around in frills and smart suits, until she decided she couldn't possibly part with them; this one held too many memories for her of the time they attended such and such event and this one cost so very much at the time, and so on, until finally his mother left with a small bag of second-hand Reprocessed clothes that meant little more to her than that her children had clothes that fit and she was grateful for it.

'The'd'a bin a waste on us, wun't the girls, them fancy clo's?' he heard her say to his sisters. 'Just get mucked up where we live.'

Samir wished his Aunty Chandha had boys. Maybe then he would also have been able to wear nearly-New clothes that didn't stink with the sweat of some dead person or three. But she didn't, Aunty Chandha was too organised to have boys.

Samir never bothered telling his father about the things he noticed as they travelled through the Network, not the efficiency with which everything worked, not how clean it was kept for the people, not the simplicity of the flowing white architecture that he loved, not the progressive and the enlightened way he saw people living their lives. His father did not see it. If Samir mentioned any of those things to him, his father simply drew comparisons to their home and what they had that was just as good in his opinion. In fact, normally, his father would be reminding him now of something to do when they returned home later; always pulling them back home, back to the past. Samir had placed his hope in Isra's many years of complaining and rebelling, that it would be enough for his mother to insist they should move inwards, but he watched as they both seemed to waver back and forth, never making up their minds. It was something he couldn't understand, even though it was clear neither of them loved living at the kebab shop. He had little say in the matter, but they, they had the power to convince his father to move, or, if not, to take themselves away anyway. But they stayed. And so he stayed too. He paid little attention to Tabassum. She liked where they lived and wanted to stay, but she was just a child.

Today, though, his father was unusually quiet. He stood silently on the Autoroute, ignoring seats that became available, staring out of the window with tired eyes, but not really seeing anything in particular. He didn't ask Samir if he had done all his school work so they could pray together later. He didn't ask Samir if he had helped his mother with her food preparations, nor did he tell him what time he wanted him to help in the shop. He didn't even mention one of his many namesakes. Normally, not a day would pass without him mentioning one of his ancestors. How remarkable they had been, how resilient. What an endeavour it must have been to have worked and lived and survived and then written it

all down for them to know about it later, through the most awful and turbulent times. Samir couldn't even read it half the time. He saw no point in it at all. All historical matters were stored and made much more accessible through the VLE. Impartially written, fact-based, legible words, audio and video. Re-enactments played out in front of you as though you were there. All without having to leave home. How much you could learn, how much you could do, was up to you, because everything you ever needed was in the VLE. The VLE at the kebab shop was nothing more than a small flat image in the pokey end of the dingy pantry under the stairs. But it had been his window to the real world, not the limited world his father knew. His world, not the one foisted upon him.

He couldn't imagine his father being more out of place anywhere else in what was left of the world. A shabby relic, looking more tired and removed than he had ever seen him.

Lancet Dropoff was in the very middle of The Stray. Samir stepped off the Autoroute onto the platform and ran toward the railings to look out over the two hundred acres of Clinics below. He had never seen anything so vast. Brightly lit and spread out below was unit after unit all dedicated to one thing, medical science. The health and welfare of the people of the Network was most important above all things to the Network. Everyone said that The Stray was the safest place on Earth and could even survive Bother, not that it was likely to ever arise again. Samir loved it already; he could feel excitement humming inside as he watched Network folk busying backwards and forwards below, chatty and happy under the great glass roof. He was finally here. All the waiting was over, all the things he had said to convince his family, all the things he had done to get them here, to this point, a foot on the path towards a life within the Network, was now worth it. His family would thank him one day for his persistence. When they were all fulfilling and enjoying their lives as they should be, he was sure, they would thank him and say he had been right all along.

‘This is your first visit, Mr Firdaus?’ said the Technician. She flicked her fingers through the air, the VLE emitting from the jolly candystriped ring on her finger, looking for medical records. ‘And your son’s?’

‘It is,’ said his father, formally. He was stood up straight, to his full height, with his arms by his side. He still only reached her shoulder. The sleeves of his faded little jacket, that looked once to be the colour of mustard but was now a dingy brown-yellow, hung long over his hands.

‘Ah,’ she said, her finger suddenly jabbing in the air and stopping the scroll of letters. ‘I see. Right, we need to register you both fully with the Clinic; it will only take a few seconds to match you to the Network Registry. You are registered with the Network?’

‘I am,’ he answered, shaking back his sleeve and holding up his thumb.

‘Excellent,’ she said, making a claw with her hand that brought up a deep green space in front of Samir’s face. ‘In that case if you could just hold your thumb in the middle of the green screen, that’s it, in the very middle, and hold it still while it scans the print.’ A momentary pause as his father’s hand was engulfed in green. A second image appeared beside it, a small replica of his father’s face in the background, which she scrolled through with her left hand. ‘You are registered for P.C. only; I’ll just ensure your details are aligned. I see no treatment has been registered directly to you at all.’ She looked at him curiously. ‘That’s really quite astonishing for a man of your age.’ She smiled.

She released her claw-like grasp and the green screen disappeared. She prodded the data with her fingers and words appeared along the bottom, too indistinct for Samir to read. He watched as she worked. Unlike Clinicians who always wore crisp white, Technicians wore grey, but whatever the colour of their workwear, the symbol of the Clinic they worked for was embroidered upon it. She wore a Lapwing. Lapwing Clinic had been the first in Harrogate after the Bother, set up by the Network Foremothers when they first emerged from the Core, establishing the first Cleanliness and Care site around the still clean waters of the old Tewit Well. Lapwing provided all initial screening now, directing

Care-Required to other Clinics that had been established since. The Sparrow Clinic for men, and its sister, Cuckoo, were the largest, responsible for the Harvest and Protect programme.

The Technician smiled at Samir, seeing his rapt attention. He felt himself blush.

‘And your son, Mr Firdaus?’ she said. ‘Is he registered?’

‘No,’ interrupted Samir. ‘Not yet.’

She made another claw and the green screen returned. His excitement increased, rippled through his arms and legs. He was going to be registered. More than just belonging to the Network, this was being recognised as an individual, something more than just being his father’s son. He was officially distinct in the eyes of the Network, separate from his father and his grandfather and from all the other dead men with whom he shared a name.

‘Please raise your right thumb,’ she said. He automatically moved his left arm, but corrected himself. He placed his thumb into the middle of the green space, his hand encased in an otherworldly gateway to the VLE. The Technician then made a grabbing motion with her hand, a tight fist. ‘So now we capture the image and make a person out of you.’

She squinted, holding out her left arm in front of her, beside her right fist, and created a frame with her thumb and forefinger. Samir saw her face through the frame of her fingers as she adjusted them slightly left, right, up, down, and then pinched them together. She released her fist and the green screen faded, to be replaced with a dim image of his own face.

‘Right, we’ll complete the registration, then we can take you through to your Treatment Suite,’ she said with a smile. ‘So, full name?’

‘Samir Firdaus,’ he said quickly again, before his father could embarrass him with the full version.

‘Welcome, Samir,’ she replied. ‘If you would like to follow me, your treatment in Sparrow Clinic is scheduled to commence shortly. You’ll be in the House Sparrow Treatment Suite today.’

They sat for some time. The waiting area was clean and minimal but comfortable enough, sectioned into small, relatively private seating spaces where you could sit alone or with your family and not feel on top of the next group of people. The Treatment Suites were in rooms off the waiting area and Technicians came and went, discretely approaching individuals when it was their turn. There were many others waiting with them, more than Samir expected; Network-folk, he could tell from the way they dressed and how they sat as far away from Samir and his father as possible. One boy of similar age to Samir took his father’s fat gold-coloured VLE ring and began flicking through a range of projections that appeared to be about the Bother. Fires and floods and cracks in the Earth and fallen buildings. The boy looked bored, slumped in his chair, head resting on his hand, opposite hand resting on the other arm, his lifted finger flicking lazily through each image while the oversized ring hung loose upon it. Samir watched the images from the opposite side. His father didn’t have a ring. He looked around the room. Most of the adults in the room wore a ring, even some of the older boys. Some had a small VLE in front of them with a visual to watch or article to read. Some simply fiddled with them on their fingers, turning them round and round while staring at the floor or ceiling. No-one spoke. Samir looked back at the bored boy and saw that he wasn’t looking at the images at all, but through them towards Samir. His eyes not bored or lazy, but contemptuous.

The door opened and a Technician approached a family to Samir’s right. She spoke quietly and the man and two older boys rose and followed her towards the door. Samir followed them with his eyes, trying to peer around the door to see inside, to catch a glimpse of what was going to happen next, more white walls, clean floor tiles, and the door closed.

‘Dad,’ said the boy opposite. ‘I thought we were going to ask to be put in a different Treatment Suite this time. You said that they let too many Edge dwellers into House.’

The man next to him, a round man with a big head who had been dozing in the chair next to his son, opened one eye.

‘We’ll speak to your mother,’ he said. ‘She said the facilities were all the same for everyone in Sparrow and I’m sure she’s right.’

‘She doesn’t have to come and sit here with that,’ said the boy, nodding his chin lazily towards Samir and his father. ‘If she were here to see for herself, she would consider this a risk in itself. Shouldn’t there be separate Suites for those who couldn’t even spell Cleaner Living?’

‘It’s a disgrace, it really is.’ Someone across the room added to the exchange. ‘I don’t know why they ever stopped the Mobile Clinics. They should be kept them out of the Network until Cleaned-up to an acceptable standard. None of this choice nonsense.’

Samir looked at his father. These people were talking about them. His father simply sat in the chair with his knees together and his hands clasped on his lap. He appeared to be looking at nothing in the middle distance.

‘We’re ere for t’same reasons as you,’ said Samir, his voice shaking, taking charge if his father wouldn’t, trying to explain. ‘This is t’first time we’ve bin, so ah’m sure we’ll know what to do better next time.’

Wide-eyed, those closeby stood from their seats and retreated further away. Others reacted more angrily.

‘Disgusting.’

‘Disgraceful.’

Some left the room, others covered their mouths and noses. The angry boy had sat up in his chair and was now looking angrily at his father.



‘So you can tell Mother that, can’t you?’ he said. ‘That we spent the morning sat with untreated Edge dwellers, putting everyone at risk.’

Samir looked at his father again. This was his fault. If they had just done what they were supposed to do from the start. If they had just worn the right clothes and lived in the right places, they wouldn’t be treated like this.

‘We shouldn’t have to put up with this,’ Angry boy continued. ‘Mother is always talking about how the Edge dwellers are such a drain and danger to the rest of us. What if we leave with something? What if we start spreading something because of them?’

Samir felt sick. His face was red, his eyes watery. His father stood. The room fell suddenly silent, a dark, heavy fear filling the white room. In the distance, behind the many doors could be heard distant chatter and the beeps and whispers of clinical machines. Samir pulled at his father’s jacket, fearful of what he might say, what he might do. His father had never attended a Clinic like these men. Had never been Cleaned-up. His hormones still had their full effect on his body.

‘Come on, son,’ he said to his son quietly. ‘We’ll wait outside.’

And he walked out of the room.

Samir followed him quickly down the corridor.

‘But the won’t know where we are if the call us,’ he said to his father’s back. ‘Shun’t we at least wait outside t’ door?’

‘You still want to wait?’ said his father. ‘After all that? Can’t y’ see what these folk a’ like? Why would y’ want to be among ‘em?’

‘If we’d’ve allus done it, we wun’t ‘ave ‘em sayin stuff like that, would we?’ Samir yelled. His voice echoed down the long corridor. Startled at the volume of his own voice, he looked quickly from door to door, hoping it wouldn’t attract unnecessary attention that could have them thrown out.

‘Look at us,’ he said, quieter, but still aggressively. ‘Look at what we look laike. No wonder the’ think we’ dirty. We *are* dirty.’

His father shook his head and turned to walk away.

‘Y’ know, fo’ someone who ‘an’t bin to a Clinic, y’ really do’t ‘ave any balls.’

His father stopped but did not turn.

‘Ah know y’ve ‘ad y’ way all these years just by keeping schtum, but it’s different now. Mum’s ‘ad enough and Isra’s workin for Auntie Naailah now. Tabassum knows we ‘ave to leave an’all. So, you go if y’ want, but I’m avin these jabs.’

His father turned, but was still not angry.

‘And by ‘avin’ y’ jabs y’ reckon on it all changin’ do y’? he said wearily. ‘Y’ think these ‘ere Network folk’ll be welcomin’ once y’ve ‘ad y’ jabs? That y’ won’t ‘ave em allus tellin’ y’ what to do and ‘ow to live?’

‘Better than where we are now,’ said Samir.

‘Y’ think it’s better to live wi’ folk like them inside that room?’ his father said sadly.

‘The’ wun’t talk like that if we wan’t so diff’reent!’ Samir’s voice was getting louder again.

‘Wi’ folk that torment ‘armless fam’lies? Fam’lies that just want to go about the’ lives wi’out bein’ moidered to death? Terrorised fo’ livin’ ‘ow the’ve allus lived?’

‘The’ do’ terrorise us!’

‘The’ come ev’ry week to tell us ‘ow we should be livin’. Tell us that we put other folk in danger – us! When all we’ve ever done is ‘elp folk, feed ‘em, clothe ‘em, whoever they are, more ‘n they’ve ever done.’

‘The’ not tormentin’, ther’ advisin’. They want t’best for ev’ryone.’

‘What about t’muck I’ve ‘ad to clear off us winders ev’ry night for t’last three year? And t’mess the’ mek on t’shop floor when we pop out t’back for a minute?’ His father was finally showing some emotion. Angry tears sprung into his eyes. ‘Do y’ know

‘ow oft’ I ‘ave to say ‘no’ to t’Bobbies, and then t’ave to listen to yer angry mother? One day y’ might know what it’s like to feel unable to protect y’ fam’ly.’

‘Protect ‘em from what?’ shouted Samir. ‘What’s best for ‘em? For us?’

‘It’s best you’re ‘urt is it? Like they ‘urt Tabassum chuckin’ that bloody bin through t’winder, like ar fam’ly’s just a load o’ bloody rubbish?’

‘They din’t chuck it, I did!’ shouted Samir. ‘I chucked that bin! I ‘ate y’ stupid shop, I ‘ate livin’ there. I ‘ate I ‘ave no choice but to live there because you think it’s right and me mum ca’ mek er bloody mind up. I ‘ate that Isra can come and go and do as she pleases ‘cos she’s a lass and I ‘ave to serve all them dirty Tykes in t’shop til you pop y’ clogs and be left wi’ nowt to do but t’same.’

His father’s face remained fixed in a look of shock and terror, of upset and anger. It was the most emotion Samir had ever seen his father display.

And then he walked away from Samir.

‘If y’ want to ‘ave y’ jabs, lad,’ he said quietly. ‘You stay an’ ‘ave ‘em.’

*Art we lucky?*

*To uv lived through all that. To ue survived.*

*Blown to bits. Drowned. Stomped on. Starved. Sick.*

*But ere we are still and I feel lucky, not ard done to. Well off.*

*Well off for avin prepared fort worst. Well off for avin a roof ovver us eads. Well off for avin friends and famly still about. Its all I need now to go forrad, nowt else. The can tek owt else the want, most of its gone anyway, weyll keep od of what we can as long as weyre able. But not us friends and famly and roof ovver us eads. The not tekkin them.*

*Thems ars.*

*Shafaquat Firdaus*

*Writ Int eyteenth year aftert Great Fallin Out*

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Samir stood alone in the corridor. He didn't need his father. Consent had already been given. He was Registered. He could have the treatment without his father being there.

Doors opened and closed along the corridors. Clinicians and Technicians walked passed him, glancing momentarily but not stopping. Too busy he was sure, dealing with patients. Helping people. Keeping them well. Safe.

He slumped to the floor, his knees in front of his face, feet tucked back so as not to cause an obstruction. He let his head fall back against the wall behind him and stared at the ceiling. He would just wait to be collected by his Clinician and it would start. Once it was

started, his mother would let it continue. She wanted to rejoin the Network too now. She wanted him to be treated, so she would let him come back. Come back with him.

Unless his father told her what happened.

The only reason he was here today was because Tabassum had been hurt when he threw the bin through the window. Because his mother thought it had been the Bobbies. Because she thought this was the latest in a long line of attacks on them, forcing them out of their home, coercing them into the Network.

The first time he did it he was nearly twelve. They had been visiting Chanda Khala, whose VLE bigger than their shop. He'd stood inside it, watching his sisters and his cousins playing full sized doubles tennis. His sisters lost. They had never played before. His cousins were part of a tennis club with other children of similar ages. When their friends came to play, Samir and his sisters were asked to leave, which they did without argument. He heard his cousins laughing with their friends, as he drunk tea, listening to Chandha Khala talk about what her girls hoped to study at the Athenai in the next few years. Their opportunities were endless.

'Samir'd like to work in't 'Arrogate Arc, ah think,' said his mother, in her usual futile routine of trying to promote her son's abilities and aspirations.

Chandha Kahla smiled for what seemed a very long time without speaking. Everyone took a sip of tea.

'I believe they hire porters,' she said eventually. 'And the Brats are *very* important. More so at the Harrogate Arc than anywhere in the Network, of course, so...'

'Oh, ah think Samir'd like to be a Clinician of some sort, wun't y', love?' his mother said, trying once more for him. And, once more, Chandha smiled through her thick lipstick, but didn't answer. She poured more tea from her large red pot.

'We allus 'ave t'shop,' said his father. 'Dun't 'ave to spend 'is time clearin' up other folks' muck. Be 'is own boss and clear up 'is own, won't y', son?'

Samir didn't answer. He was annoyed that his father had planned out his entire life for him already without asking him. All that mattered to his father was the stupid name, the stupid book and the stupid shop.

That night, when they returned home, his sisters went straight to the pantry, Tabassum stood well back under the few remaining shelves at the back watching Isra trying to hit a tennis ball against a wall in the VLE, with no room to swing her arm. His mother, nerves on end as normal after visiting her family, had gone to have a lie down before the shop opened. His father went to read his book and to say Asr before delivering food. Samir went into the shop and looked around at what was to be his. His inheritance. The tall stools that stood in front of the counter, with their tatty, sticky seat pads and bits of yellowing fluff poking through. Little tin dishes under the counter that his father filled with sauces, and salads and vegetables when he had them. The faded red and yellow signs on the wall showing pictures of food they often no longer made. The ancient rotisserie that his father lovingly cleaned and repaired to keep going. The great big tin pots that sat on the counter bubbling stews and soups and sauces, like the pot of fesenjān that had been left on all day while they were out. As a treat, his mother had even bought some fresh, Cod Beck reared chicken and expensive Cod Beck grown pomegranates while they were in the Network to put into the stew when they got home.

He didn't want any of it. He was so angry that he pulled over the pot and watched it spill onto the counter and onto the floor, a thick brown goop with little red trinkets dotted through. He pushed over the stools and threw around some of the Network's leaflets that had been pushed through the door while they had been out. He grabbed a handful of the warm sauce and daubed it on the walls, on the windows, on the door. And then he smelled the thick, homely gravy and the feisty cinnamon cutting through and he cried. He went and got the cloth from the large metal sink and started to clean up his mess.

'What on earth's gone on 'ere!' called his father from the door.

Samir turned from the smeared window with tears streaking his face; his hands and the cloth covered in gravy.

‘Who did this, lad,’ he said, gathering some rags that were for taking out for the Tykes later. ‘Did y’ see who it wa’? Did the’ scare y’? A’ you ‘urt?’ He wiped Samir’s face and held his chin in his hand. Samir shook his head and sniffed deeply.

‘Don’t cry, lad,’ he said quietly, looking intently into Samir’s eyes. ‘Did y’ see ‘em?’

And Samir knew his father could never think his son capable of such things and so shook his head. His father looked beyond him, at the smeared glass, peering out, up and down the empty street. He moved over to the door. It was locked.

‘Ah locked it,’ said Samir, hiccoughing.

His father looked around at the floor, the bits of freshly cut lettuce and celery and cucumber, the stew, the leaflets strewn out. He bent down and picked one up.

‘KEEP THE NETWORK CLEAN’ read the bold, black words against a background of litter and rotting food. He turned it over, where information about how to register for a Clinic and move to the Network was provided.

‘We’re not t’ones mekkin’ t’mess a’ we lad?’ said his father and he began scraping the food off the floor with some of the rags. He walked over to the counter and shook the rags into the bin, nuts and bits of meat falling in. He pulled the large pot upright and peered inside. ‘The’s enough ‘ere for us tea ah reckon, so as y’ mam dun’t miss out on ‘er treat. She likes gettin’ odd bits from Cod Beck when she can. Costs a bomb, so we’ll save what we can, eh? Just ‘ave less to sell and give out tonight, won’t we?’

Samir nodded and helped his father to clear up, before his mother came down to work in the shop. His father told her there had been an accident with the stew. He didn’t tell her about the mess. Nor the next time it happened a few months later. Nor the couple of times after that. But when the writing began to appear on the outside of the shop, and it

was harder for him to clear up, she noticed and he had to tell her. And Samir started to see his frustration and anger turning into purpose and hope.

‘If y’ think it’s for t’best lad,’ said his father, who had returned to where he sat in the Clinic corridor, his face strained and ashen and lined. ‘What y’ really want. Then ah shall support y’.’

A Technician collected them while he and his father sat next to each other. They hadn’t spoken to each other, just sat, side-by-side upon the clean corridor floor. Samir had never felt worse in his life. Worse than when he thought he would never live in the Network. Worse than when he first messed up the shop. Worse than when he knew his father could never think his son was capable of being so destructive of the little they had. Because now his father did know. And yet here he still was, with Samir.

They walked silently to the Treatment Room. It was a cold room and so silent it filled his ears with a kind of buzzing numbness, or sucked all sound out of them, like a vacuum, he wasn’t sure. There was a long white plastic Clinic chair in the centre of the room. A solid mass, high-backed and moulded long to rest your legs at just the right angle to be comfortable, but then appeared to be a dense block straight down into the floor. Easy to wipe down. Armrests stood proud at slightly elevated angles. Along the seat were a number of perforations. Two semicircles, following the moulded buttock shape, with a slightly larger hole in the middle. Two lines of perforations lined the left and right edges within the leg rests and two further lines of holes within each moulded side of the backrest. Behind the chair was a long empty tube. The tube coiled to the right-hand side of the chair and stopped above shoulder height and entered the chair. On the left was a tall stand with a small platform supporting a half loop, as though a pen or other small object might rest upon it. But for these few things, the room was empty. Clean and blank.



A Clinician entered the room, her white suit pristine, her hair neatly packed away beneath a white bandana with a Sparrow motif. She smiled and then covered her flawless face with a white mask.

‘First time?’ she asked, her voice muffled. Samir and his father both nodded. Neither spoke.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘It’s a bit strange the first time, but it doesn’t take too long and immediate side effects are rare. You will be prodded and poked a little. Nothing more than scratches, really, but you should know that they are coming and try to remain still when they occur. I will let you know, so they don’t come as a shock.’

She indicated Samir should sit with her hand.

‘Initially, you’ll come to the Clinic every four weeks,’ she continued to explain. ‘We check your progress for the first year and regulate your personalised dose, based on height, weight, reaction. After that, you would usually only ever have to come twice a year, but it depends on whether you grow over the next couple of years. Many don’t after starting treatment anyway, so that’s great; you know your dose is set then for quite some time. Some lucky men only have to come once a year.’

Samir removed his jacket and climbed into the chair. He laid his coat in his lap. The Clinician’s eyes wrinkled in a smile. She took the coat and walked to the wall, which she pressed and a cupboard door opened. She placed the coat inside and brought out a folded, white tissue blanket, which she handed to his father. She placed her ring into the holder on the small platform to his left and the blank VLE greenscreen appeared in front of him.

‘Samir, if you could please grip the arm rest on your right, with your hand below the arm and your thumb on top pressed down,’ she said. He stretched his arm and held the chair. As soon as his thumb-print touched the arm, Samir’s enlarged, hazy face immediately stared back at him. He disappeared and the VLE began to reel off data, his full name, age, address, family information, medical history ‘none’. Then a scanned image

of his body on the chair appeared, a faceless shape in white against the green background. It measured his height and girth, calculated his weight and body mass, the body shaped Samir on the VLE pulsing with a green light moving up and down as calculations were made.

‘Scratch on your thumb,’ said the Clinician, distractedly as she watched the data unfold, and no sooner had she said it, the chair sent a momentary pinprick into his thumb. Samir recoiled his arm. Blood type, blood count, haemoglobin levels, blood sugar, clotting time, genetic disorders.

‘If you could replace your hand when you’re ready,’ said the Clinician calmly, as the VLE teemed out more results. Samir complied.

Eventually it stopped.

‘OK, Samir. Mr Firdaus,’ she said, twisting her head slightly to include his father. ‘There are a few additional medical precautions we need to take in addition to the Harvest and Protect programme.’ She turned fully to his father. ‘It is really quite astonishing that either of you have survived so long without having had any of these. And living at the Edges too, without community immunity.’ She shook her head. ‘Though with the Network so well looked after and the PEEKs protecting the Edges, I suppose risks are greatly diminished,’ she mused to herself. ‘Better late than never.’ She concluded with a mask-hidden smile.

Samir kept a tight grip on the chair, determined not to pull away again, as the Clinician tapped mid-air and her own notes appeared onscreen. She looked at the space above his head. He heard liquid filling the plastic tube behind him. It spiralled down beside him and into the chair.

‘OK, Samir,’ the Clinician said. ‘You have several treatments to catch up on, so it will need to be a full Primary, plus Protect and Harvest. I’m going to leave the room for a moment or two and ask you to remove your trousers and underwear, you may put them in the cupboard with your coat, and sit back on the chair under the blanket. Return your right

hand and thumb to the position it is now so that the chair can register you again and reassess your mass and seating position. The series will then commence and I will need to ask you to stay still until the treatment has concluded. You will experience a number of intrusions. A first, short one into your perineum, will numb the area. The second, longer one, will be into your epididymis and should only take around thirty minutes to extract your semen for storage. It can be a little uncomfortable to begin with. During this time you will also experience eight separate insertions into your gluteal muscles. Five on the left, three on the right. Those on the left will kickstart the childhood inoculations you are so very behind on. Those on your right will commence your Protect Treatment, made up of three separate agents, blockers and disruptors, we call them Diana, Minerva and Vesta. It is these that we balance, polymorphically tailored to each patients' body, to ensure the correct dosage levels for the most effective Treatments.' She took the blanket from his father who stood bemused, looking in concern towards his son.

'It's a bit much this, in't it?' said his father, walking forward. 'Is it all really necessary?'

The Clinician's eyes wrinkled a smile at Samir. She placed one hand on his knee and passed him the blanket. Trepidation and excitement burst through him when she touched him and made his testes tingle. He felt blood rush to his groin and in turn to his cheeks. He was pleased the Clinician had turned to leave already and held his breath, concentrating, trying not to let it get the better of him. This was why he was here after all, to help him control himself.

'There would have been less treatments to administer had you come much sooner Mr. Firdaus,' she chided his father, before opening the door. 'We recommend you wait outside to give your son some privacy.'

'No, ah'll stay, thank you, Miss,' he said, not looking away from his son.

Samir hadn't wanted his father to stay. He didn't know if it would hurt. He didn't want to cry in front of him. He didn't want his father to see he was scared, doubtful. But he was glad that he did.

Once he had returned to his seat, half-naked, the cold, hard seat sticking to his thighs, his buttocks, his father laid the paper sheet over him and took his left hand.

'If y' not so sure, lad, we can seh so,' he said. 'We can just go 'ome, if y' like.'

Samir shook his head.

'The's no shame,' said his father. 'And we're right are't we? She said so, din't she? Not bin ill so far, us Firdauses.'

'They all died o' summat,' said Samir.

'Aye, well, we all die o' summat,' replied his father.

'Ah just want to be able to come to t'Network and know ah'm not a menace to folk. That when ah'm older ah can work 'ere if ah want and no one can say ah ca't. Ah do't want to allus be told 'no'.'

His father nodded, but his eyes filled. He turned away when the door opened, before a tear could drop.

'All ready?' said the Clinician. Samir nodded. She tapped the VLE and the faceless green body in a chair appeared again. She pointed at different sections of the chair. 'You will be able to track the progress by watching the VLE image of your body. It will indicate where and when an insertion is going to be made a moment before it occurs, so you can prepare for it. I must insist that you remain seated until Treatment is completed. As I said, it should only take around thirty minutes in total. I will return mid-way to check the progress.'

The VLE flashed a momentary red light in the seat.

'Scratch on the perineum,' said the Clinician. Samir braced.

The Clinician had been right. It was a little uncomfortable. It was more than a little uncomfortable. The initial injections were sharp, but over quickly, but the Harvest treatment caused a strange kind of pain. Detached almost. He could feel the needle inside his testes. Somewhere inside. He felt as though he could almost feel it was extracting something from him. He recalled as a young boy watching his mother feeding Tabassum and asking her what it felt like; his mother had said it felt like she was feeding her baby, and she probably thought he was only little asking those questions that little children do, but he hadn't meant that. He had wanted to know exactly what it felt like to have some other thing taking something out of your body. Was it like this? The pulsing, drawing feeling reminded him of how he used to watch his sister, her baby cheeks hollowing with each rhythmic suck. And he knew it was happening to him, could feel something inside him, kind of hurting him even from time to time, a kind of nagging hurt, a manageable hurt, but like he shouldn't move in case it hurt properly. But still, somehow, it felt like it was somewhere else as well. Not quite there. Or like he was imagining it.

His father held his hand throughout. Although he had the armrest to squeeze when it hurt, it was nice to have his father's hand held tight around his. They didn't speak.

The Clinician returned halfway as she had said she would. Checked the VLE. Temperature, heart-rate, oxygen.

'Scratch on thumb,' she said. Blood sugar. 'All looking good, well done, Samir. Not much longer now, then you can relax while dad takes his turn.'

The door opened. A Clinician peered in urgently.

'Emergency patients,' she said, breathlessly. Clinicians and Technicians ran by in the corridor behind her. Sharp beeps echoed somewhere in the distance. 'Shelley's Treatment Suite, rooms 4 to 9. We're all needed to increase sedation and start immediate emergency procedures.'

Samir's Clinician tapped quickly into the VLE as the noise in the corridor outside increased.

‘CONTROLLED EMERGENCY’ appeared in front of him. ‘TREATMENT PAUSED’.

She grabbed her ring from the platform and left immediately without a word of explanation. The door closed and the numb silence returned. Samir looked at his father, who appeared to be trying to remain calm.

‘What’s ‘app’nin’, dad?’ he said.

‘Not so sure, son,’ he said. ‘As it finished?’

Samir shook his head.

‘It’s still in me,’ he said. ‘Ah can feel it.’

‘Ah’m not ‘avin’ this no more,’ said his father, letting go of his hand finally and marching to the door. He opened it to a flurry of activity. Clinicians and Technicians racing back and forth. Disgruntled patients walking by being told by Technicians to rebook appointments, others leaving, looking worried. His father grabbed a white-capped Clinician who appeared to have been pulled from her Treatment room as his had, still wearing her hygiene mask and escorting an injured patient, similarly masked, carrying a crutch.

‘Excuse me, Miss,’ he said. ‘But my son ‘as been left in a bit of a state wi’ a pike up ‘is backside and nowt ‘appenin’. We do’t know where ‘is Miss ‘as gone, nor when she’ll be back wi’ all this to-do goin’ on.’

‘Peer?’ said the Clinician. She pushed him back inside and dragged her patient with her. She closed the door and pulled the mask down off her face. ‘What the ummer a’ you ‘ere fo’?’

Samir’s father recoiled in recognition of the kaylai-seller. Samir saw her name embroidered into her coat, the same one that came up on the PC reader whenever she paid at the shop, ‘D Burgess’. Above it, unlike the other clinicians whose white Clinicians suit displayed the bird of their Clinic, she had a stag.

‘Ah came wi’ me son,’ his father began. She looked at Samir on the chair, looked down at the paper covering his legs.

‘Oh, ‘ell fire, Peer,’ she said, resigned. She took off the black ring she was wearing and placed it on the stand. The VLE sprung up. ‘Thumb?’ she said to Samir, who pressed his thumb back down onto the chair arm. The screen appeared with ‘CONTROLLED EMERGENCY’ still upon it. The kaylai-seller tapped her fingers into the VLE and the green bodyprint reappeared. She sucked in her lips and read the notes that scrolled in front of her face.

The boy with her, stood one-legged, leaning on his crutch at the door with his ear to it. Samir thought he recognised him too, though he didn’t remove his mask.

‘We’d best be off,’ the boy said. She ignored him as she typed quickly onto the VLE alphagraphia.

‘It’s not all done,’ she said to Samir’s father. ‘The’s ten minutes left. Ah can stop it and y’ can both come wi’ me now. Ah’ll be honest wi’ y’, it won’t all tek on as he an’t ‘ad a full dose. An’ ah ca’t be sure he wo’t be wi’out side effects, but we can deal wi’ them as needs be.’

‘No,’ said Samir, leaning forward but sitting back quickly as the needle in his testes strained at an odd angle at the change in position. ‘It ‘as to finish.’

She looked at Samir sternly.

‘Ah ca’t set it goin’ again,’ she said. ‘Cos ah’m off and ah shan’t leave me ring just so you can nichel-up. I an’t got ten minutes. And neither ‘ave you. If y’ stay, not even these jabs will ‘elp. The’s goin to be ‘Ell on ‘ere, sickness an’ all sorts. Y’ ca’t stay.’

She returned to tapping her fingers into the alphagraphia. Samir felt the needle retract. He sucked in sharply at the pain it left. His groin ached. Like sudden cold. Like severe toothache. She opened the cupboard and threw his clothes to his father.

‘Don y’ gear,’ she said to Samir. ‘And get thissens ‘ome, sharp.’

‘No,’ said Samir. He looked at his father.

‘Last ah knew, you wan’t no Clinician,’ said his father. ‘So you will pardon me if we can wait for ‘is Miss to come back and finish ‘er job.’

‘Peer,’ she said, warningly. ‘Y’ know me well enough ah think. Y’ve no time fo’ this. Y’ll be waitin’ fo’ nowt. The’s no one comin’ back.’

He looked at Samir.

‘Thankin’ you, ah’m sure,’ he said to the kaylai-seller. ‘But ah’ll stay ‘ere wi’ my son.’

She shook her head. ‘Ah do’t want to insist.’

‘And ah’ll not ask y’ to,’ he replied. ‘We’ll not keep y’.’ He took hold of Samir’s hand.

‘D’ we’ve to shift, now,’ said the young boy through his mask. ‘Ah’m not deein in this Pit. Ah want to go ‘ome. Y’ said y’d get me out. Sorry, Shaf,’ he said, looking at Samir’s father.

The boy opened the door to the growing commotion outside. The kaylai-seller grabbed her ring and joined him. She replaced her mask, took one last look back at Samir and his father, grabbed the boy’s arm as though she were escorting him, and left.

The door was left open. Samir watched as Clinicians ran around, shouting instructions up and down the corridor. One appeared outside, her white suit messed, streaked with brown.

‘He was sick on me,’ she was crying to a colleague. ‘I didn’t have a mask on. What if I’ve caught it?’

Her colleague led her down the corridor at arms length, masked and facing away, not replying. Large groups of patients appeared to be leaving now, escorted by Technicians in grey masks who were trying to keep order. Shrill cries were heard further down the hall and suddenly Bobbies came shuffling past in threes and fours at a time, rustling in loose black plastic overalls, their faces covered with larger, more serious-looking masks.

A patient in the corridor began vomiting.



‘Dad,’ said Samir. ‘What do y’ think’s wrong?’

His father shrugged and handed him his clothes. ‘Ah know today was important to y’, but ah think it’s time to mek tracks, do’t you?’

They tried to retrace their steps down the endless corridors. The normally plain white synthetic walls blemished with momentary flashes of red emergency light, bursting like blood vessels beneath the surface, and receding to erupt again in time with the high-pitch ‘bip, bip, bip’ of the alarm, like a loud Clinical monitor, an impatient but ordered marching beat insisting upon evacuation. They stepped aside, stood back against the walls, allowed rushing Network officials to go wherever they needed to go. His father tried to ask for directions, but no-one responded or stopped to help. They followed Technicians and patients, but lost track of where they were going in the bustle, following the herd, Bobbies blocked some doors, hordes of panicked people blocked others. Network folk, normally so ordered, so calm, were clawing at each other, pulling at arms, crawling between legs, crying and arguing, pushing. They began pushing at Samir, pushing his father.

‘There’s more of them here,’ one man shouted, his red face sweating and straining, yelling over his shoulder to the crowd, trying to shove Samir away. ‘Fucking dirty, diseased... more of them, fucking get off us.’

‘Dirty...’

‘Get away...’

‘Quickly...’

‘Disease...’

The voices of panic rose around Samir, echoing the same words he had heard all his life. The mob surged away from them towards the exit, at the same time pulling them along in the weight and momentum of the throng, others shoved them away, more and more aggressively, as the swelling tide of people returned back upon itself, unable to get

through the small single door, falling and stumbling over each other, fists and fingernails suddenly coming at them, a punch connecting with his father's eye.

'This way,' said Samir, dragging his father away and opening a door onto another corridor. 'We came in this way.' He was certain he recognised it and led his father down the corridor to another door, and another. He had to get his father out. He had brought him to this. Each door either opened onto a Treatment Suite or waiting area, many of which were now empty, those that weren't he avoided, retreating, going back, finding another route. He had come here to do the right thing, but was still just an outsider, not wanted, spurned, attacked. His father was hurt. He was holding his face, his eye. He had brought him to this.

'Is everyone out?' Samir heard someone say in muffled mask tones outside the waiting room they had now found themselves in.

'They're evacuating the whole of The Stray; of course they're not all out!' replied a voice of exasperation. Samir made towards the door, holding his father's hand. He should ask these people which way to head. They sounded official, they'd know.

'They're going to seal the whole of Sparrow,' said another voice, breathless, moving quickly passed. 'Clinicians are saying nothing can be done. Too exposed. Fucking stinking Edge-dwellers.'

Samir hesitated. What if they thought the same as those other people? What would they do to them? Would they be in trouble? Because they were from the Edges? They hadn't caused all of this, had they?

'What do we know so far? How bad are they?' The voices outside continued.

'As bad as it gets. Those that have stopped shitting everywhere are already Neurovascular. Clinicians that started testing detected ingested long-life isotopes, but became ill themselves before the tests could be conclusive.'

'But that's impossible, there are no reactors in the Network.'

‘The Reeves that picked them up reported finding them near the Catterick Tombs. Real dirty scavengers, carrion-eaters they reckon. Dread to think what they found to eat.’

‘Oh. That’s just fucking disgusting. You don’t think? And the Reeves that brought them in?’

‘Locked in Shelley’s Suite with them. Idiots. That’s it, you know, they’re not coming out now. We’d better get moving before they shut us down and we get stuck too. Fuck’s sake, they shouldn’t have brought them anywhere near us. Should have left them on the moors to rot in their own shit.’

‘Do we know how far it’s spread?’

But the voices trailed away.

‘Come on, lad,’ said his father opening the door. ‘We’ll just have to stay out o’ sight while we get out and get ‘ome.’

Samir and his father followed the corridor further and further down. Iago Suite. Swainson’s Suite. There was no obvious order to them. Were they just going around in circles? Was this the way? Had they taken the wrong turn? He didn’t know. Another door. Another cupboard. Another waiting area. Another Treatment Suite. Shelley’s Suite.

‘Dad,’ he said, stopping. ‘We shun’t be ‘ere. We need to go back.’

‘Ah’m not sure where back is,’ said his father. ‘Ah do’t reckon the’ let y’ out o’ this maze once they get y’ in, do you?’

‘We ca’t go any further, this bit’s all locked up, them Bobbies said.’

His father pushed at the doors anyway. They didn’t move.

‘Trapped like rats, ar’t we, son?’

Samir could feel panic welling up inside him. Curious to him that it felt almost the same as the buzzing excitement he had felt earlier in the day, the difference being the dread weight that bore down through from the top of his head, down his neck, onto his shoulders. The alarm getting louder and louder in his ears until it amplified into one continuous pitch, drowning out all other sound.

‘Ah do’t feel so good, dad,’ he said.

His father put his arm around him. They turned and left in the opposite direction.

They walked for some time. As far away from Shelley’s Suite as they could get. It felt as though they walked the entire length of The Stray and that there was no way out. He felt stupid and scared. Why did they keep going through doors that only led to more doors? Why hadn’t he paid more attention when they had come in? His father stopped, hands on his knees.

‘Dad?’ he said.

His father raised a hand. Just a moment, it said. His father was never tired. He walked around the streets of Hebblebeck, up and down the Packhorse Way, every night. They trekked the fells for food. His father was fit.

But Samir felt it too. The waves of nausea, the cramps, the sweats. The constant white, and door after door after door, was making his eyes strain, his vision blur. He sat down next to his father and put his head in his hands.

‘Ah’m sorry, dad,’ he said.

‘Ah’m right sorry an all, lad,’ he said and placed his hand on his son’s head.

*mi naam is tabassum bangash firdaus*

*I liv in an ows that me dadar as livd in an is dadar an all the dads*

*I luv mi ows*

\*\*\*

*mai naam is tabassum bangash firdaus.*

*me dadar is zamanzahir shafaekquat samir kalidkayam firdaus an*

*me bruves corld tsame.*

*me mum is corld raaniya bangash firdaus an me sistes Isra  
bangash firdaus.*

*me dada ses us naams aar important cos it ses hoow us famly is an  
us famly ist most preshus thing we av an us ows that I luv*

\*\*\*

*Mii naam is Tabassum Bangash Firdaus*

*I yam 6 an I yam a gurl*

*I yav a brove an a siste wot aar corld Samir an Isra and hoow aar  
biga than me*

\*\*\*

*Mi naam is Tabassum Bangash Firdaus*

*I no am a gurl an am not ment to riyt in me dadars bouk cos its ment fo me dadar an samir hoow is me bruve but the cart riyt in it cos ther propper poorle*

*I red to me dada wiyl e war asleep an iyop e dunt miynd*

*A fink e wo miynd*

\*\*\*

*Miy naam is Tabassum Bangash Firdaus.*

*I yam riytin in me dadas bouk and av stuk in me bits ov paaper that me mum savd fo me wen a thot she ad chukd em. But a cart riyt evri day cos we aar so bizi all o time.*

*I liyk riytin and me mum ses ahm getin ~~rii~~ riyt ~~gud~~ good at it. She ant sed a cart an liyks elpin me wi riytin and reedin. She lernt me about full stops. She ses its liyk tekkin a big breff and then y star agen wi big lettes. And a commer she ses is a litel breff, liyk this, and dunt need a big lette. She sed ow to spell sum words too that a yuws a lot. She ses a will lern allt mor a do and to keep riytin. She ses she liyks I yav summet to do wen she luks afte dadar an ~~sam~~ Samir. Wihc is all o time.*

*if ah practis it ll be good as me grandads a fink.*

\*\*\*

*Miy naam is Tabassum Bangash Firdaus.*

*Me dada woke up toodaay. E war ~~rii~~ riyt upset wen me mum sed Isra want ohm yet an that Samir war sleepin still. Me mum triyd to*

speeek to anty naaila int VLE but she want thair. she tryd to speek to anty ~~eh CHanda~~ Chandha but even she want thair. Me mum ses anty Chandha is allus int VLE so is wurrid. And she criys a lot espeshulli wen she luks afte Samir oo ant wok up yet. A red to me dada from is bouk but e sed

*It int miy bouk Tabassum. It want nevve jus miy bouk.*

\*\*\*

*Miy naam is Tabassum Bangash Firdaus.*

*Deeyot cem to see us agen toodaay. Poppd in to see dadar and Samir and giv em summat corld the wissel medsons and then torkd to me mum for a bit. Me mum askd abowt VLE and Deeyot sed it wa brokken but the war all workin ard at mendin fings. I askd if dadar and Samir wa goin to be fit soon and Deeyot sed thed be ok but ad to keep on tekkin the wissel medsons and Samir ad to sleep a litel bit longe. Deeyot cums to see us ~~evry~~ evry day. It wa Deeyot and sum tiyks oo wat wuns oo brort dadar and Samir bak fromt Netwuk wen the war ill. We ant seen dadar and Samir a fyuw days and mum wa riyt wurryd and kept standin at door seyin stuff liyk this*

*A wunde wayer y dadas got to wi Samir. And a wunde wayer that Isras got to anall. A wunde if thev all left us beti in this shop wi just them tiyks that allus want stuff fo nowt. She jus kept wundrin liyk that for a fyuw days until Deeyot brort dadar ome. A fink Deeyot will keep cumin til dadar and Samir aar fit agen. A fink so. A ~~shod shod~~ shode me bouk and Deeyot reele*

*liykd it. Deeyot sed a wa doin a gud job and dada rd be riyt suwtid a wa riytin becos am from a long liyn ov powits an tayl tellers. A sed that Deeyot cud riyt bouks anall, abowt famli an tiyks an bein me dadars frend an that.*

*Am not much ov a riyte, sed Deeyot, appen all ask yuw to riyt abowt it fo me wun day wen av summat to se.*

*\*\*\**

*Miy naam is Tabassum Bangash Firdaus.*

*I yant bin abel to riyt in us bouk for a fyuw days cos me and me mum av been elpin othe ~~fook~~ foke int shop! I yav so much to seh!*

*We yav bin riyt bizi cos thees tiyks turnd up askin abowt dadar cos thed erd e want fit. The sed the war eer to elp us int shop if we wanted em to. Mum wa riyt suwtid. Thed brort back us blankits and ad washd em. The sed the wantid to lern ow to cook and thed oppen up shop agen for us. So me mum showd em ow to mek some stuff liyk riys and bred and sum shtuws and chop up vej.*

*The yall cem at furst, all at wuns, but now the cum a fyuw at a tiym and do sum jobs wich reele elps us ses me mum.*

*Deeyot and sum othe frends cem to giv us sum food to ~~euk~~ cook. Thed cariyd it allt way from codbek the sed. Big bags ov riys and stuff that we eet.*



*Deeyot nyuw them tiyks int shop and the nyuw Deeyot too and so Deeyot gev em mor jobs to do int ousis necs dor and ovvert ~~rood~~ rode to mek em niyser so the cud liv in em.*

*The tiyks sed that dadar ad allus lukd afte them so it war only riyt the cem and med shewer we war all ok too.*

*We told dada wen he war awaayk and e wa riyt suwtid liyk me mum wa. A sed to im it wa riyt liyk storis e ad told me abowt wen e war a littel boy wen the wa ~~lods~~ lodes o ~~fok~~ foke int shop and all arownd and e cryd a bit. A sed wen y bette dada, y can riyt abowt it int bouk liyk y allus wantid and y can see fo yesen that its liyk a dreem cum truw.*

*\*\*\**

*Miy name is Tabassum Bangash Firdaus.*

*gess wot*

*ISRA CEM OHM!*

*I yam so appi to see er and mum criyd. She sed she ad bin warkin aajis and aajis cos ov ~~anty-naaila~~ anty Naailah stikin er owt int ~~uncoflands uncoth-lans~~ uncothlans. Mum wa riyt angry abowt anty Naaliah doin that to aar Isra an she criyd thinkin shid be forrit an all, poorle liyk dadar and Samir. But Isra sed the wa nowt rong wiy er and she only cem back to try get elp. She dint se hoow fo, but she sed it wa too laat now. Too laat she kept seyin but not wot fo. She torkd to Deeyot a bit wun daay. A fink it elpd. She int criyin as much now.*

*A dote fink aar Isra ll be eer fo long. Mum ses shees all torn up in toow cos of dada an Samir, but int wun fo stoppin in wun spot. A sed a dint want er to go but mum sed a want to se nowt to Isra hoow ad to mek er own miynd up wot is riyt and wot is rong for ersen. A fink mum is riyt an all, cos a sed to Isra she cud riyt abowt wot append to er in us bouk, cos it int miy bouk a sed, its all of us bouk, oo aar from this ows. But she sed*

*A probly wote. Riytin int for evriwun.*

*It mindid me ov summat Deeyot said to me dada int shop, ayjis ago befower he got poorle.*

*Bouks an that kind o fing aar all well and gud and that, but foke mun live an all. Y cart coop yesen up triyin to do riyt. Yonly end up doowin rong. An worriyin abowt doowin rongll only leed to y doowin nowt at all.*

*But thes them that luk to be doowin rong wiyl triyin to do riyt, wiyl thes them that luk to be doin riyt wiyl the reele doin rong. And then thes lots ov cwiet foke that aar doowin lots ov littel bits, but look liyk the doowin nowt much at all, and may be othe foke fink ther idel or borin. But sumtiyms wi them that aar allus bizi y never see owt forrem beeyin so bizi, its all just a werr ov bizness. Its liyk wen wind blowz leevs fo no reesen at all. Aftewoods all thats append is that saam leevs av forlen sumwayer nyuw.*

*Tabassum Bangash Firdaus*

*Writid int undred and therty niynth yeer aftert ~~Gray~~ Great Fallin Out*

\*\*\*

Bitchdaughters

*Fountains Sanctuary war as whisht as ad ever sin it, like them folk that laid inside it, ther eads thumpin wi thoughts no one else could ear, starin motionless up at it's ancient vaulted cloisters. Each room wa glassed in so as –Clinics could run a skeleton crew, to keep an eye on them that needed mindin easy enough, while they each ad a bonny view o –old courtyard in middle where –rain still fell an kept it green. Avin no one else mesen, a di-nt think owt of it afower, but on returnin, oldern what a wa last time a walked amang it's glassy ginnels, wiyall them folks laid out like dummies, a mower keenly felt –loss o them that'd once mattered to me, enough to bring me back ere to look forrem, an a wondered what loss these folk mun've ad to've brung em ere, to this place, too.*

*A hovered longer than a meant to, lookin in at one whose een war as glassy as er cell. If Non wa reight about what it wa a wa fo, ow war a meant to aid folk oo ad seeminly lost emsens so deep, the wa no way o knowin what the war after no mower. It seemed to me, in that moment, Non mun've got it wrong. A wa no different to them what war in ere, no different from them Tykes that wandered round –Edges, no different from most folk, whether in –Stints or in -Uncothlans after au. We war all lost. All lookin fo summat, wi no clue to what it is we're after.*

*An then she blinked. An a saw er lookin back at me.*

*An a remembered er from back when a wa still a Lass. Same gloarin look that ad bin too wrapped up in me own self afower, to see war an entreaty.*

*A pushed at -glass but it di-nt shift. A thin white astragal sealed –door to its windows. It war a dull white, -colour o –PEEKs an locked just tsame. A pulled out me Brass. Would it work? The wa no reason it should. A wa-nt a Clinician, a waron'y ever a patient, like this en ere.*

*An yet.*

*A pushed me Backdoowr key atween –astragal, just like a did at -PEEKs, enough space on’y for Brass, not fingers o nails, just a sliver o Brass to swush though, like Non sed about secret doowrs all them yonks since. An it oppened.*

*A stepped in an up to this Lass, wiyer dawly face all fed up.*

*‘Am meant to aid folk, someow,’ a sed.*

*She blinked at me.*

*‘But a ca- if y do- seh ow,’ a sed.*

*She sed nowt.*

*‘Ms Burgric, I didn’t expect...’ sed a voice beyind, scant o breath from er scurryin.*

*A turned an there she wa. My Ms Keys, lookin gastrid at -sight o me.*

*‘A y not goin to sey ‘ow do’ to me, Ms Keys?’ a sed. ‘After a cem all this way anall.’*

*Dumbstruck, all of em, in ere it seemed, for she sed nowt.*

*‘Ow’s Layla? Workin ard? A Clinician like you yet?’*

*Er een flicked ovver me shoulder to -patient beyind. A turned an saw she’d sat up, er uncovered arms reachin out at me, wi smudged black markins runnin up an down em, like –vines that grew all ovver En Pecked Ouse, topped wiya flower o soowrts. Er een no longer empty glass but black an full o summat smoulderin. She grabbed at me, ribble rabble on er lips like a bairn tryin out its furs words.*

*‘Ba, ba,’ she seemed to chunter at me. ‘Ba, ba.’*

*Nex thing, Ms Keys ad od o me, tekkin me out o that glass box sharpish. –Doowr swung firm shut beyind, mufflin out –wail that finally left that old Lasses mouth.*

*‘I don’t know what you did to the York Mater,’ she said, angry, er grip on me arm pinchin. ‘After all I did to hide you. After everything I did for you. Emer was right. This is my fault. I deserve whatever’s coming.’*

*A dragged me feet an pulled back.*

*'Well a reckoned on gettin a warmer welcome than that, Ms Keys, a must seh,' a sed.*

*'How did you get hold of it?'*

*'Od o what?'*

*'York Mater access. Did you steal it? What did you do with Aphra Burgric?'* she took a breff. *'Oh dear, no, what did you do to her?'*

*'Y'are kiddin ar-t y, Ms Keys? A ca- tell if y kiddin or not.'*

*'They're going to come looking for you. You used the York Matriarch's VLE access. Whatever you did to her, they'll be looking for you. You'll bring them straight here. After all I did for you.'*

*'After what? Far as a recall, y tinkered wi me a fair bit an then threw me out when a wa no good. Iyav no clue about this Aphra Burgric, but a war of a mind you might know summat of er, an a wa reight.'*

*I eld up me Brass for er to better see it.*

*'Ca- y tell, Ms Keys,' a sed. 'It's –self same Key as y found on me all them many moons ago when a wa furs brought ere to Fountains an put in your care. Y sed it di-nt work an med it so it did. Sitha, put it in –VLE an see fo thassen. It's -self same Key av allus ad, not tekken off no one.'*

*A gev it ovver to tek back to er office a knew well an good, avin sat in it often enough while she prodded an poked me all them times. She stalled a whiffle, to think on where we war at. Appen ad put er in a bit of a predicament. If she checked me in –VLE, appen –Bobbies'd be straight round. Shewerly Ms Isaac ad told em on me. But if the cem, the'd appen start peepin a bit closer at all what she did ere. What war it she wa doin, ad nibber thought on much afower.*

*'Ms Keys, a nibber intended to put thee in a parlous state, an Iyam sorry fo that. If a could just seh tata proper to them that a care fo, an that once cared fo me, a shall be on me way. But a'll be needin me Key back, if am to let mesen out an not come back.'*

*'I thought someone had caught you,' she sed, not to owt a just sed. 'It was months ago. Months. More than a year ago when I saw you, once, on the VLE. I thought I saw you because they'd caught you, found you with your Brass and checked you out. It had all been quiet before and was quiet again after. I thought you'd gone.'*

*'I looked for you in the Clinics,' she carried on. 'I thought, if they had you, I could at least bring you here. I would have had a case to do so. But I couldn't find you and who knows what the Reeves are sanctioned to do these days. I thought you'd gone for good. I had to make alternative plans, but they didn't work.'*

*'Beg pardon, Ms Keys, but av no clue what yer on about.'*

*'But you're here.' She turned wiya wild look on er face. 'You have York Mater access to the VLE,' she sed. I wa used to er allus bein so wherked up around me an talkin in riddles. 'We can start you all over again. I thought we'd lost everything but we can start again.' But a wa-nt a kid no mower.*

*'Ms Keys, the's a load o stuff av learnt while av bin away, but the's still plenty am tryin to figure out. I expect we could aid each other in whatever it is we're both after, but y'll a-to seh what it is straight, now am not yer little Lass no mower. A shall be plain wi thee if tha's plain wi me.'*

*She nodded, er een all wishy washy wi excitement.*

*'Furs, what's this about ma Key? An this York Mater?'*

*'The only people who come here, the only people who have access to patients' rooms, are the few Clinicians that directly work here and the Maters. I saw the room had been unlocked, just now. But who it was didn't come up on the VLE. Opened, but not by who, like the whole VLE was bypassed. When I approached the room, the name displayed on the glass was that of Aphra Burgric, our York Mater.'*

*'Visits ere oft, does she?'*



*'No. No-one does. You've seen for yourself. Those who are here are in Complete Clinical Care; those the Network feel cannot function without extensive Treatments. Noone visits them.'*

*'A you a jailor, Ms Keys? Would y'av me in jail alongside these other poowr raggalds?'*

*'There are no prisons in the Network. There's no need. With the right Treatments, everyone is free. These people are receiving Treatment. Some people just require an extended stay.'*

*'An what medsuns would y use on me, Ms Keys?'*

*'That's just it, Diot,' she sed, er een gleamin as afower. 'I don't believe you are to be Treated. I believe you could hold the answer to finding a cure once and for all. The right genetic balance that will negate the need for Treating anyone. If you help me with my work again, I am sure we can find a way to put a stop to this rotten disease for good.'*

*'Ar- y forgettin, Ms Keys. Am not allowed to be your Lass no mower. Ms Isaac sed. Bobbies'll be after me.'*

*'I convinced Emer not to tell the Network about you. Said she would be doing me, her family, more harm than good. I said you were gone, like so many other boys, to the Edges no doubt, and would be dealt with by the Reeves in the usual way.'*

*'An she di-nt think ad tell em about you if a wa picked up?'*

*'Perhaps she did. Perhaps she was willing to deny all knowledge and let me take whatever was coming to me if that day came.'*

*'So what now? I ang out ere wiiyall these other forgotten folk? It's not really what lyad in mind.'*

*'Diot, you have York Mater access. If I'm right, we can rewrite your entire existence within the VLE. We can write you in as though you had always been here. York controls the VLE. What people see. What they know.'*

*'An we can do this on me?'*

*'With Mater level access, I believe we can do anything.'*

*'An no one will know? The wo- come looking fo me if a use it?'*

*'I can't know that, Diot. Have you used it much?'*

*'All -time.'*

*'Well that's encouraging at least. Where?'*

*'At -Backdoowr where a found it.'*

*She di-nt no what a meant.*

*'-PEEKs,' a sed. 'A use it at -PEEKs. Where it wa furs found.'*

*Summat dawned on er then. 'You're using the old PEEKs programming. You are bypassing the VLE. It still works.'*

*'Ms Keys, ow would I av come to av this ere Key to all Doowrs? If it belongs to - York Mater as you seh.'*

*'We may never know,' she sed cuttin me short, tryin to tek charge agen. 'You have to decide, Diot. You once told me that you wanted to help people. Said you wanted to be like me. Well now's your chance to do exactly that. Up until now, life has stumbled in your way and you have followed it slavishly rather than take control of it. If you go after Aphra Burgric, in pursuit of something that may have nothing at all to do with you, I tell you now that I expect to see you back here, in the Care of the Network the minute you get anywhere near the woman. If you choose instead to make use of this gift, to work with me, and to live a life in the Network of your choosing, who knows what else you could find out along the way. So decide. I get to work on you either way.'*

*'Not if a tell em what you're up to.'*

*'Then we both lose. And so does everyone else.'*

*'An if a stay, a can see Layla?' a sed.*

*Er een cast down when a sed Layla's name.*

*'Is Layla OK, Ms Keys?'*

*'I think, for now,' she sed, giyin me back me Backdoowr Key. 'It's best we keep Layla out of this. It's not the right time.'*

*'She's not sick, is she?' A war upset even at –thought of it.*

*'No,' sed Ms Keys. 'She's fine, absolutely fine. It's just, I thought you had gone. I needed an alternative plan. To continue the research, you understand. I was running out of your cells to work on. You'd been away so long, I was running out of cells.'*

*'What's that to do wi Layla?' a sed.*

*'I thought if I could recreate your cells myself, stop theorising and actually practice all I had been working on all these past years, it would solve the problem. But nothing survived in glass. And so there seemed to be only one other option to try, you see, with those last surviving cells I still had. It didn't work, exactly. I can't use the new cells now, even if Layla would let me.'*

*'Ms Keys, what's Layla got to do wiyit all?'*

*'Layla has had a baby,' sed Ms Keys. 'But he's a boy. Nothing more than a boy.'*

*Well a wa-nt shewer what Ms Keys thought ad mek o such a revelation. Course, a wanted to see em straight off, but she sed it war impossible. She wu-nt allow Layla to be upset nor confused when she had enough goin on, she sed, an then the wa someone else to think on anall, this Rose, oo knew nowt o me, but loved Layla an worked ard for Ms Isaac in – Girls’ Ouse. An did a think Ms Isaac’d just let me walk in an play appy famlies wiyem all?*

*‘If you were to turn up now, Emer would know,’ sed Ms Keys. ‘Do you want that pressure on Layla? On the boy?’*

*‘Wo- she just chuck im out one day, like she did me?’ a sed, bitter.*

*‘It won’t be up to her, will it?’ sed Ms Keys, lookin away. ‘Layla knew that the process hadn’t worked. We knew early on. She went ahead with it anyway, despite wishes to the contrary. We could have dealt with it here, away from the Clinics, the Network would never have known. It was her choice.’*

*A cu-nt believe what a war earin.*

*‘Am not shewer a want to be part o your meddlin no mower, Ms Keys. Am not so convinced you av betterment in mind,’ a sed, stormin off in a rage. Ms Keys di-nt follow me, appen out o fear, or appen knowin ad be back, even if a di-nt yet know mesen.*

*As a left, that old Lass eye-spied me agen, an though a wa giddy, an ready to gnar wi any poowr sod, she smiled a gummy grin at me.*

*A swushed me Key atween -doowr.*

*‘A do- know what tha’s smirkin fo-‘ a crooled at er, bargin in. ‘What’s tha to smile fo? Tha’s locked up in ere.’*

*‘We, we,’ she snaveled as afower, as one oo a-nt used er tongue in yonks, er throat all whisht, er neck stretchin, tryin to foss –words out.*

*‘We, we, what?’ a sed mimicking er cruelly, young terror a wa, worldly fo such an age appen, but not so wise in -way o folk a reckoned on bein.*

*'We, we're all,' she shushed, golshin back –spit that ad filled up er gob in –long awaited use of er tongue. 'We're all locked up. All.'*

*She sed nowt no mower, but kept er een on me an er smile still beamin gormlessly, as a backed out of er cell an left er to er idle thoughts.*

*Mebbe it wa what that old Lass sed that med me go at last. To prove a wa-nt locked up. Not when Iyad a Key to come an go as a pleased, an appen ad stay gone this time. But it wa-nt til a wa back at En Pecked Ouse, when ad long walked off some o that fury, that what that old Lass ad sed started workin it's way proper into me ead. Up to er seyin that to me that day, ad allus bin under –impression, gi to me by Non all them yonks since, that - Network wa –Stints, med fo –Best Beasts. Them that war inside, wa looked after, an kept safe away from them Fellas outside. An appen it wa so, but ad not thought of it –tother way around, up til she sed it out loud.*

*A started sammin up all –gear a wanted to tek wi me back to TAN L NN, but the wa too much. Iyad a fair idea which way ad av to trek to find it agen, but no clue ow long it'd tek, an ad not manage it wiyall them beauks an blankets all on me tod. Ad managed reight enough wiyout all that clobber afower and ad manage just as well agen, a reckond, chuckin it all down, doffin mesen of all -unnecessary soss ad picked up in–Stints, but nearly knockin ovver that wapen ad tekken off them Fellas in –process. A grabbed it afower it could fall an go off on me foot. It war eavier than a remembered it bein, back when a tore it from that Fella's neeves in –furs place, while we two were in a reight shack a faw. Back then it war a need, a triflin burden to bear to get back to En Pecked Ouse, now it war a millstone, mindin me o -burden y carry from mekkin such choices. It's blairy nozzles, long an cool in me ands, wa like a long snout on some gnattery critter, all sooted up from its last use. Ad mek shewer to steer clear o them Fellas outside best a could, as a wa told but, in case them Fellas di-nt steer clear o me, a now ad this ere wapen o theyers. Ad nibber been flayed o goin into –Fellon Lands afower, but Iyav to admit to not avin bin*

*back outside -Backdoowr after ad done for all them Fellas, after the'd done for them Tykes. A reckon it war in part why a chose to go back to Fountains, rather than go back to TAN LL NN in -furs place. Cos it wa -on'y place ad bin where such threat, such violence a-nt bin so rageous. An so Iyav to admit that bein in -Stints, even stuck out at -Edges as ad been all them last few yonks, ad med me ware. Yet it di-nt ring true at all. The war a violence bein done, a just di-nt know what, nor why, nor to oo. It war a slinkin menace, a quiet violence dressed up as coddlin an kind. At least at TAN L NN it war easier to spot when it cem lookin fo thee.*

*Back at PEEKs, all ready for off, a took a glance back ovver -Edges as though ad see a glimmer o summat from -Network, or appen someone comin fo me, to stop me from mekkin for off after all. But the wa nowt o neither.*

*A placed me Key in Backdoowr as I allus did, but up cem -last thing ad bin lookin at; that eggy-map o -Network wiyits big red button that still wanted pressin.*

*'First End, eh?' a sed, wondrin. 'Why so far off from -Stints and oo keeps tha brusslin a wonder?'*

*'Ayont,' a whispered now, thinkin o Non. 'Fo betterment o worse. To the sens, or to -ayont.' Them Network folk reckoned on nowt ayont PEEKs but waste an disease. But the wa-nt. Thed bin Non, oo ad found me. An them Fellas. An this First End an all else that war outside o this ere little egg if someone'd on'y go lookin for it. So, like -young chipper a wa, a med to brek out once mower.*

*Though ad set-to to go seekin out a cause, a found –journey toward it as barren an spiteful as –land an –weather.*

*A stuck near to –PEEKs at furs, -on’y thing a knew an recognised, keepin an eye out for smoot-oles should a need to nip back inside. But soon ad to get mesen off them old Uncoth bainways to steer clear o them Fellas, o which the war gaggles at nows an thens, I ended up avin to stay up high, an only move about furs thing. Non knew that furs thing, afower –strained light o morning started slinkin ovver –moors, castin an under-breet below –clotted sky, war a time them Fellas liked least. She allus sed,*

*‘The mun be likened to a gloamin critter, Dod, up an out while them that a blind can see as well as thee.’*

*The wa little cheer to be found among them bitter fellas. On’y brightness cem from –blakened gorses, the scant little flowers tekkin -edge off me pinin-belly, for all –bunnies war iddyin underground from –searchin wintry wheeze an my thropplin reach, leavin nobbut flighty grouses, whirrin an whistlin like engines out o -ruddy bracken whenever a got too near, cacklin at me like wizened old ags.*

*‘Go back, go back,’ they warned me.*

*‘Thall not deter me!’ a called back to em. ‘The munby summat mower out ere than thee!’*

*‘Oo a you? Oo a you, eh? Oo a you?’ the cheeky beggars asked.*

*‘If a knew dost that think ad be out ere on -tops tellin thee?’*

*A mun’ve traipsed a couple o days, afower a finally knew ad av to come down. A wa dwinin quick an knew if wa to lay down once mower up there, wiyout aving etten a proper tea and wiyout avin found shelter that wa fully fast o –wind, Fellas o no Fellas, ad soon be fo –bucket.*

*Ma legs dithered all –way down ’ill but a wa pleased to suddenly find mesen among –shelter o trees. The war even some mushrooms to pick an, pine bowlegged as a wa, Iyet em too quick an gev mesen a belly ache.*

*A follerd a beck, a mere trickle of a thing now, but that, from it’s high wharfs, looked as though it belonged to a much wider an faster flowing flodder, once upon a time. Soon enough this leafy lane led back towards what looked for all –world like ad just strolled back into –Edges an not bin away. Iyad to tread careful now, the wa likely Fellas all overt–shop, so a jumped down under –wharfs an follerd its windin ways, under bow-briggs an tin-briggs, passin by tumbled down wastes o red bricks and grey bricks an flattened tin boxes, duckin down in –brere an breekins whenever a thought to ear the Uncoth sound o them Fellas. A started wi –sweats, me belly all gripey. Them mushrooms mebbe wa-nt such a good idea. The gev me a sickness that bruised me ribs a long while after, an left me feelin emptier than afower. Iyad to find proper shelter soonern later. Somewhere wi clean watter to drink, a thought, me mouth sloshin wi sickly spit. A scrabbled up on –bank, stayin low o course, an lay there, belly to –ground like an ag-worm til a wa certain of it bein safe to ave a good look about. A finally eye-spied summat gliskin, still a fair alantum-off. Appen ad got puffbaw dust in me een an a wa blind an on’y seein what me own malarkin mind wanted me to. Or appen a wa ravin from –lack o dinner altogether. But a could swear it war as gleamin as a recalled Cod Beck to ave bin, wiyits sprawlin glassy green limbs an high-up winders. Appen the’d be food in there, somewhere a could lig away from them Fellas an -pryin wind. Clean up a bit, sowrt mesen out. Or else a could find mesen in a worse state still. But a wa wankly an worn out bi now an the wa no going back, so forrad it wa.*

*The mun’ve bin cracks in –glass ere an there, as –wind wheezed an whistled igh-up among –glass winders to –sky. It war eerie a tell the. Square glass boxes lined up side bi side inside what look for all –world like empty alcoves that mun’ve once eld ummat ighly*



*revered in this ere vast cathedral. Its walls war as white as –Network, as though folk’d be fooled into reckonin on it bein a place o peace, summat natural, that ad bin formed ovver many years, like flowstone.*

*Peerin overt –side the war a boggy mess below, an oasis it seemed wi exotic trees that di-nt grow nowhere ad ever bin. It seemed as though that old beck ad follerd all –way ere, ad managed to deposit itsen inside this ere cave an ad formed a darkenin pool, wiya soft swushin that suggested it flowed a little still to oo knew where. Appen ad found me way to –river o woes. Appen ad bin so long fo –bucket ad not even noticed, draggin me poowr worthless soul to its banks to ang about for a lift to –ayont that mun nibber come, fo not avin chosen one way o -tother. A stepped reight ginger on –metal treads that led down into its splashy shores. If no boatman wa goin to come fo me, appen ad av to swim.*

*Mind, it war a reight cave o delights down them steps an no mistake, wi jumbles o stuff all overt-shop. Upstairs, unsullied by -swirl o watter that mun’ve come an risen up through this vestibule once upon a time, ad bin stripped of its treasures an left an empty reverent space. Downstairs, truded in sludge an slop, war all that no one wanted no mower. The war all soowrts which them scavengin Tykes a once knew’d’ve tekken a great likin in diggin up. As fo me, worn out an nithered to –bane, all a war after wa summat warm to wear an somewhere dry to rest, away from any harrishment. A cem upon a pile o bodies, all tumbled up on one another, the blank painted smiling faces belyin -abuse that ad bin played out on their moulded bodies. They looked to av ad on gowns at some point, though the’d rotted away once watter an –mud ad subsided, leavin nobbut shreds to cover the modesty. Stood tall howsomeevver, a little way back from all them poowr dollies, war a spectre, hollerd out, on’y an outline, a mere suggestion of a person wiyits contents unseeable. It war ung wiya dark heavy cloak, a mare loomin ovver them forever sleepin bodies it ad used up an chucked out. A tightened me grip on that Fella’s wapen. A tilted me ead aside to better eye-spy this ere ghoul, but it wa nobbut a metal frame in –shape of no one, neither Lad nor Lass, it’s dark cloak nobbut a grand coit o some tough ol animal-ide,*

*dubbed up, an drained of them Ellish-watters that ad once filled up its floors. A carefully put down that Fella's wapen while a disrobed that hollerd-out figure, and flung it's weighty swathes around me diminished frame, instantly feelin its warmth an protection, like ad just grown a second skin.*

*Plunge.*

*A di-nt mek no sudden moves. Appen a wu-nt be seen in –shadders, me new cloak to shield me.*

*Drip, drip drip, drip.*

*Plunge.*

*Drip, drip, drip.*

*Plunge, drip.*

*Plunge, plunge, plunge, cem –sound o sodden footsteps beyind, comin toward me, avin ad to o seen me bi now. Appen it wa –boatman come for me after au, avin med such a trek away from civilisation. O, mower like, appen them Fellas ad so assiduously steered clear of, drubbin mesen to mere banes up on –tops wi nobbut them bleedin grouses to frump at me, ad eye-spied me an follered me in. A grabbed up that Fella's wapen an, as ad done upon it's prior owners, let fire.*

*'A th'ungry, lad,' sed that Fella a later cem to call Peer. A shirled away from im as far into doowr as a could get, just as ad done from Adam afower, avin spent many a neet up on –tops away from them Fellas an on'y just back inside –Network at furs opportunity.*

*'It's awright,' e sed, oddin summat out at me. 'Ere, tek this butty an a shall leave y be.'*

*A took it from im, famished as a wa, and et wiyout giyin im no thanks.*

*Nex day, a still a-nt moved.*

*'Ere y'are, lad,' e sed and gev me a gluk o watter, afower addlin on wiyout wantin no mower of me but to tek is bread.*

*Nex day, e cem again.*

*'Would y'offer it me if a war a Lass?' a sed.*

*'Ah'll not av no one go ungary if ah can elp it. The's not much ah've to offer folk. But it's what y do wi't little y'ave, in't it?' e answered, an left me, wi mower to chew on than a chapatti. After giyin blast to that plungin encroacher in -Uncothlans, a wa gi mower to offer folk than a think a wa ready fo just then.*

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*'Get help!' yelled another, comin up beyind my now snirlin sneaker-upper, back there in that shopfloor tarn. 'Biddy's bin shot.'*

*Other voices, all of em Lasses, echoed down to where a wa, stood above this ere Biddy, an Old Lass an all it seemed wi long, cotteder grey air, not a Fella after au.*

*'Av med it,' a thought. 'Am in –First End.' An then a panicked that these mun be Network folk, an ere a wa, for all –world a Lad avin just felled one of ther own wiya Fellas' wapen.*

*She di-nt mind me at all though, this other Lass, instead she went straight down to this ere Bidy, rippin off er shirt to tend to –snick ad med in er arm, wi no thought o what a may o may not do. An she di-nt look much like no Attercop neither, skinny in er mismatched gear that looked like it'd bin pulled off one o them dummies. Er air war all shaved off, an she ad welts an scars on er ead an worn out wrinkles cross er face.*

*'She's been shot in er arm,' this other Lass ollered to er pals. 'It's awright Bidy, we'll get y back and sort it out, do't worry.' She looked up at me, fierce. 'There's lots of us, an only one o you. Try owt an we'll ave y.'*

*'A thought she wa one o them Fellas come to get me,' a sed, reight off, for a wa-nt avin er reckon a war a Fella mesen.*

*'Where'd you get that gun?' she said, pointin at me wapen.*

*'A wrangled it, yonks back,' a sed. Them other Lasses suddenly bowled up. She put er arm up to stop em from runnin straight at me. Lots? The war on'y five of em, an one of em wa laid out on –floowr at that. The war all of em older n me. This ere Bidy on –floor wa far older n Ms Keys, an –rest of em war at least er age a reckoned, but none of em war as refined an clean as er or Ms Issac or any of em from –Network.*

*'Oo are y?' she sed, this Bristle-ead, like a ruddy grouse.*

*'Diot,' a sed, automatically usin me Network name, me Lasses name.*

*'Where y' from, an ow did y' get ere?' asked another Lass wi Brassy colour air. It fell overt side of er face that war all cut up an scarred.*

*'Out o –Network. A walked ere. A cem lookin fo –First End, fo where –Network lot keep another fire brusslin. Is this –First End?' a sed, opeful. Them Lasses all looked to one another.*

*'It's impossible,' sed one.*

*'They locked it,' said another.*

*'Maybe they've opened it again?' said old Brass-ead.*

*'Iyav a Key,' a sed, scrabblin to show em it. Iyeld it up an the war all a bit startly.*

*'Av allus ad it. Since a war a mite.'*

*'It works?' sed Bristle-ead. 'You got out with it?'*

*'Out an in,' a sed.*

*'Where did you get that Brass?' sed this Bidy, sittin up, avin come to er senses a bit better, oddin er arm which ad blasted a slug in. It wa bleedin but not pumpin, smearin red among er already black scrawled arm, old faded marks an dots that'd clearly bin there yonks. An atop it all war a pointy flower. All scarified an lost amang all er many other markins, but there it wa.*

*'What's that mark mean?' a sed, noddin at it. 'Av seen one afower.'*

*Well, that did it forrem. They oisted me up by me new thick black cloak an led me away from them slimy shores to –ayont, away from Non oo ad av liked to av seen agen, an off to summat new, as war allus -case.*

*The took me a fair way off from that glass cathedral, to a blue box filled wi silver pipes an knobs an levers, an glass cases wi blobby black gloves inside, machines wi dim flashin bulbs an a soft burrin sound that sat deep in me ears like a war ummin to mesen in one long flat note. The'd tekken me wapen off me, but a kept tight od o me Key, knowin it wa that the wa really after. The gev me some watter an a golshed it down, parched as a war after retchin on them mushrooms.*

*'I asked you to tell me about your so-called Key?' sed this ere Bidy, appen in charge. She wa lettin old Bristle-ead pike at er arm to tek out –slug that wa still stuck in it. She winced at nows an thens, but di-nt pull away. Both er arms wa covered in them black marks along wiyother scars.*

*'An Iyasked about that there mark,' a sed, not giyin up all Iyad straight off. She shrugged er shoulder forrad an peered ovver at it wiya scowl.*

*'Stop still,' sed Bristle-ead still pikin.*

*'This? Means nothing,' sed Bidy, skimin.*

*Brass-ead sniffed a laff. 'Our Mams thought it meant Home,' she sed.*

*'Which wa?' a sed.*

*'Where our Mams came from,' Bidy sed. 'There were nine, nine at first, that set off from inside the PEEKs to see what was on the other side. Reeves that once guarded the Network from disease and Bother. Yet the only Bother they ever saw was inside. Outside, all was quiet.'*

*'They told the Maters the most Bother they ever saw at the PEEKs was from those trying to get out,' sed Brass-ead. 'So the Maters sanctioned greater force and more Treatments. But our Mams all went back to work, still wond'ring for oo this wall'd been built. Oo they wa guardin. Oo the wa keepin safe from oo. See, that wall isn't so insurmountable, were there will enough, were there such apparent Bother enough, to want to breech it.'*

*'And that was what did for them,' sed Bidy, tekkin back er tale. 'They asked too many questions, and, having spent so much time at the PEEKS, others listened and turned to the Maters for answers. They said they didn't know, but asked the nine Reeves if they would be willing to look outside, on behalf o the Network, to do this courageous thing for them all. A big fanfare was made of it, so our Mams told us, of the brave Network women, taking such a risk, so that others might dare to dream of a life outside the Network, when the PEEKs would no longer be needed. They were each marked with a rose, identifiable as Network kin, to be let back inside whenever they had news or need.'*

*'And the did, di-nt the?' a sed, excited. 'The found this ere –First End? And what else besides?'*

*'The found nothing but what was always said to be here,' sed Bristle-ead.*

*'The munst av gone far enough. Shewerly, not all from –GOD is lost?'*

*'-GOD?!' barked Bristle-ead. 'Out here it is the GOD. It's all GOD and nothing else.'*

*'So the's nowt to be done?' a sed, thinkin o Non, an all er dead babbies oo seemed to av come to life reight ere afower me. '-Network ar-t fibbin after au.'*

*'They're not telling the truth either,' sed another Lass oo a-nt talked yet, wi scraggy black air flecked wi bits o grey like dust. Her face war all sallow, er banes stuck out at all angles.*

*'Truth o what?' a sed.*

*'Maters,' she sed. 'Those so-called guardians are nothing but prison guards for those that've always been in charge. Keeping watch over a small army, manipulating and softening them up, lads and lasses alike. Making it so noone ever thinks o leaving again, whether by flattery or force.'*

*'Shewerly not,' a sed, already mindin what that Lass at Fountains ad sed to me. Thinkin about er in theyer, wi Ms Keys. Ms Keys war a jailor after au, but appen di-nt know it. 'Best Beasts,' a cu-nt elp sayin out loud. 'What cem of em, y mams? After the set off?'*

*'They split up, north, south an west. Our mams went west and at first found nothing but what the Maters always said they would. Wasted space for miles and miles. Pockets of Bother. Gangs of lads scrapping over nothing worth scrapping over, only to lose it again to other gangs, and then came us, with brothers and sons that left with the gangs, and sisters and daughters who died too soon or were taken.'*

*'Tekken where?'*

*'Nowhere good,' sed Bidy. 'If you're not marked already, you might be kept by a gang, or given to another.'*

*'An if tha's marked?'*

*Bristle-ead stopped pikin an looked ovver at Brass-ead, sadly.*

*'They take you to the Big Bosses,' sed Brass-ead.*

*'Not if you break their necks before they get chance,' laffed Bristle-ead. Brass-ead smiled at er.*

*'Big Bosses? Oos them? What fo?'*

*'We didn't stay to find out,' sed Bristle-ead, back piking at Bidy's arm.*

*'These roses mark us out as those who must be silenced to keep their secret. They don't mean Home, that idea withered and died long since. They mean nothing more than sorrow and loss.'*

*'What about them other mams that went elsewhere?'*

*'We never heard anything of them,' sed Bidy. 'We assumed they must be lost. Dead. Taken. Until you said you had seen our mark inside. Someone got back in. You got out.'*

*'Yeah, how is that possible, when we were locked out?' sed Scraggy-ead.*

*'Locked out?'*

*'Brass doesn't work from the outside in,' she said, gettin ratty. 'Least not ours. Once our Mams left –Network the wa-nt allowed back in. But your Brass lets you out and in. How come your Brass still works? And you say you've seen markings like ours on another inside. Is she your Mam, what's her name? And why was she let back inside while our Mams had to bring us to hide here, living only a half life among GODs reactors and rems.'*

*A looked about their shelter wiyits lights peepin an tootin an it's glass cases an mechanical arms, me ead thumpin wi what the wa sayin. Could that Lass really be me mam after au? But we wa nowt alike, so appen not.*

*'No,' a shuck me ead, avin worked it through mesen, tekken aback at feelin a twinge o regret. 'She's not me mam. Av no clue oo she is, an this i-nt er Key.' A war about to seh oo it did belong to, but thought on it a bit. A di-nt know these Lassses from Eve, so wa-nt to know what the war after. What if the wa fibbin to me? What if the meant to bring*



*this ere Bother back upon –Network, on Layla an er lad, on Ms Keys, an Wymond an Adam, an all them in –Network that thought the wa safe enough? Appen it war on’y them that wa locked out. Appen that Lass at Fountains wa-nt on’y one got back in. Oo else war at Fountains ad not tekken notice o? Or else oo war iddyin amongst Edge folk, or in –Network itsen, not iddyin at all? Could my mam be somewhere still?*

*An then a thought o Non oo wa-nt no-one. None o these folk, neither in nor out. So appen the wa summat in what the sed after au. Besides, the still ad od o me wapen, an a wa-nt goin nowhere wiyout that.*

*‘Ow is it y can be ere at –First End wiyout intrusion o molestation?’ a sed, tekkin a good look about agen, opin the’d forget about me Key.*

*‘Because this was the first place,’ said Biddy. ‘Where the Network Foremothers agreed to be kept while the Network was built and the PEEKs were put in place. It works just the same outside the Network as it does inside. The Big Bosses scare folk out here with stories of disease and waste, that if they come anywhere near this place or the white walls of York, they’ll all turn into the sort of lasses that must be locked away. Our Mams came back hoping it were true. To be sent back. But no one ever came. The place is empty. We were never sent back to the Network because they run this place from inside, and it, in turn, runs the Network. Our Mams died before they found a way back and it looked as though we were to follow them, until you arrived. And now we have another chance. Maybe be our last.’*

*A liked this ere Biddy, Iyav to seh. It occurred to me that, like me, allus tryin to figure out me purpose after what Non sed a wa fo, these ere Lasses war on’y tryin to do –self same thing. But if what the sed wa –case, the’d be nowt good to come o just blarin back in, –six of us, wi one wapen atween us. We’d all end up at Fountains no doubt, or else sent off to these ere Big Bosses the reckond wa sed to exist.*

*‘Y seh thine roses av all shrivelled up,’ a sed. ‘But a reckon the’s life yet. Tha’s been cut off, but it’s med tha mower hardy, like –breear, ramblin soowrt that can nibber be*

*quite got rid o. In-t it true that roses revive after avin a clippin, an appen that summat new comes of them clippins?’ a sed, thinkin o me own that ad bin med from bits o me wiyout ma knowledge or seh-so. ‘In-t it ow -best survive –cold winter, not in -ot-ouse when at furs sign o frost the wilt?’*

*‘We’re way past our blooming years,’ laffed Bidy, joinin in me floral likenin, while Bristle-ead finally dug out that slug an pumped some kind o clear jelly into Bidy’s oppen sore. ‘All we want is to finish what our Mams started.’*

*‘An in that a reckon we can aid each other,’ a sed.*

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*‘Y lewkin much brighter, a must say,’ sed that Fella a later cem to call Peer. ‘Y lewk ready to fettle-on, but appear to be in two minds, appen?’*

*‘Ow dost tha know if what tha’s to offer folk is for betterment o worse?’ Iyasked im.*

*‘Y car-t never reightly know such a thing,’ e sed. ‘Y can only know yer intent.’*

*‘What if it causes arm to some folk? Even if it in-t your real intent?’*

*‘Then ah suppose it depends on yer real intent,’ e sed an trundled off wiyis trolley.*

*It war a fine day, one o them rare days wi no mizzle nor spiteful spurts nor seepin scotch mists, on which a found a mesen in –middle o three ways once mower. Bainways ad travelled afower, one led to –Tykes, another to –Lasses, while -tother, -longest road of all, led to –ayont, into –Uncothlans, aye, an further still a reckon’d. An yet, a wa nibber once one o them folk a met along –way, neither one nor –tother. Allus atween, like a cundie forrem to creep through, whether ingate or out, away from what wa now, to what mun be. War a just to be a tenter on other folks goins-on? Darkenin me bets over them lives a once knew? To what end? Wi what intent? Nowt lasts, Non ad sed, an ad tekken er at er word, findin it to be moren less –case, joinin folk partway on the trampins through life til*

*no longer wanted nor needed, or until we mun meet agen nex time. But summat lasts after au. A lightenin in each an every one of us, like we've each bin med a promise an in turn promised summat ussens. An though we call it by different names, an come to it ar own way, the's on'y one thing we're each of us after in -end. An in that, a chose to be a marrow; a companion, one of many, in -middle of all, to aid em on their way to their own journey's end.*

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## The Land That Rises

1.

(Cyn)

‘They used to say that hindsight was a powerful tool, but I always set much more store by foresight. Hindsight was manufactured. A tool for men to excuse themselves of whatever needed excusing, as if nothing could be predicted, extrapolated, avoided. That’s why I love my job. It’s my job to be forward thinking, to envisage life for the better, to calculate risks and to use whatever is in my power to minimise them, to listen to those hunches and forebodings, which were more often than not proven to be right in the past. In short, to promote and act upon women’s intuition.’

The Acton Assembly Theatre twinkled with the dewy wide-eyed stares of a hundred new aspirants. I couldn’t see their faces with the spotlight on me, dazzling and direct. They listened in rapt silence to my annual 4Site Network Graduate Recruitment speech, their first, my tenth. Three months of selecting the best minds from the Athenas to put them through the intellectual and physical rigours of ‘Fit to Work’ training, medical, psychological and aptitude tests, leading to one make or break day where they will find out whether they have been selected. Some will become Archivists or Industrialists, some Cleaner Living Clinicians, and a few, a select few, will become one of the elite; a Core Services Reeve. More than half will likely be sent home.

‘For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Cynthia Burgric, Materfamilias at 4Site. The 4Site Family Network had its beginnings in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when the time-old fissures of the Age of Man showed signs of permanently rupturing. Little evidence remains of the founders’ early plans as many were made in the lost capital, during the Misinformation Era at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We are aware that our historic Core was built, here, around that time, before the Bother became out of all control, and was to be at the forefront of the preservation and management of information so that, by the middle of that century, as the fault lines continued to fracture communities and countries, the vast majority of the world’s knowledge had been safely stored. Just in time. When the

Age of Man finally cracked, the 4Site Foremothers retreated to the Core and locked it down. For the aspiring Clinicians among you, the world had gone into coma and we were protecting the brain. Then, just as a coma patient who awakens into an unfamiliar environment has to remember the past and how things were before, to know and learn who they are now and who they want to be, we were there to provide that information in a controlled and appropriate way, so it could be absorbed properly and used appropriately.

But the patient also needs support from those it can trust in order to recover to full health and life. Our objective is clear: to create a safe, ordered society, where our family can prosper in peace. Our job at 4Site is to teach, to provide medical help, emotional support and nutrition, to protect our family from further disease or injury, and above all to provide safety and structure.’

I stepped away from the lectern and smiled into the darkness.

‘I once sat where you sat. Nervous and excited, wondering when the speeches would end and we could get on to business. When does the training start? Am I in or out? Because, that’s what matters. Right?’

Mumbles of agreement. Sniffs of brief hidden laughter.

‘I won’t lie to you, if I hadn’t been selected, I would have been devastated. My personal journey was a determined, single-minded effort to put right the wrongs and inequalities I believe endured in the peripheral expanses of the Network, and, more importantly, to be worthy of the leadership role passed down the matriarchal generations that would eventually be my responsibility. We needed to extend the Network’s aims, to widen the family circle and reach out to all those still living at the Edges, those who had been left for too long to cope without aid or structure or community. And that personal journey continues to this day.

But it hadn’t always been the case.

As most of you will know, I grew up in the York-Arc with my late mother, Aphra, the last and longest-serving York-Mater, surrounded by remnants of ancient texts and

specimens from a world that no longer existed. The Archivists among you are our teachers, there to inform, guide and inspire us; my mother certainly helped me to gain perspective of what we had lost and how, and that we should do everything in our power to prevent it from happening again. But sitting and analysing the past was too passive and retrospective for me. Interesting and useful, don't get me wrong, as custodians of the VLE, our Archivists provide us all with education, communication and entertainment in a safe, responsible way. But I sought change that only the future could bring.

At sixteen, I was selected to attend the Leeds-Arc Athena to specialise in Cooperative Enterprise. I was privileged to have been educated by those who had lived through the extraordinary Regeneration era, themselves having been taught by the last of the early 4Site pioneers. These great engineers built the spokes and spirals that connected The Orbital to the Inner Circle and to the Core, bringing many lost and fragmented people within the Network's matrifocal embrace. At Leeds, we were taught to be resourceful and self-sustaining, reusing and recycling our limited resources continually, with nothing allowed to go to waste. And when the PEEKs were finally connected to the Core, an initiative driven by Leeds, the VLE could finally become the resource our Foremothers hoped it would be; an inclusive and all-encompassing living and learning environment rolled out to every Home, not just limited to those at the Core or as part of a visit to the York Arc.

It seemed to me, in those early days, there was little else to be done. I was wrong, of course, but it is only through experience that one develops vision, so I did not immediately enter myself into the selection process for Graduate Recruitment and instead spent time travelling around the Arcs-Triumphant looking for the future I belonged to.

I spent time in the Harrogate-Arc with the Health and Welfare Clinicians, who were still trying to control the ravages of Hereditary Fallout Disease. It was there I learnt how our approach to the screening and Treatment of young men was saving countless lives throughout the Network. But I could also see how Clinicians were underutilising the new

VLE, and that by devising and rolling-out a simple but extensive education programme, the Network could reach more people than ever before and bring about a more rigorous genetic resourcing and vaccination schedule, more consistent with Matriarchal aims. It became my first project, managing one of the first major cross-Arc-collaboratives, and the success of Harvest and Protect over the last thirty years led to the establishment of Reproductive Management, maintaining steady population growth, while continuing HFD decline.

This was certainly the progressive path I had been seeking, so I volunteered to join the outreach teams that travelled to Edge Communities; those outside The Orbital, living in the shadow of the PEEKs and the Uncothlans beyond. We visited some of the most deprived communities, where people were living in the detritus of out-dated modes of living. Here, truly, was pioneer country, where Reeves worked hard to support and guide lost and forgotten people living too close to a misremembered past. I experienced first hand the unsafe infrastructures that either didn't work or delivered polluted services, but, more challenging were the distrustful people with a resistance to change. And of course HFD was rife. I personally experienced the dangers we still face, through the abuse I received and attacks I experienced while working with the Clinicians and Reeves. The last time I was attacked at the Edges was significant. It galvanised all I had learnt in each of the Arcs and my desire to prevent such harm being inflicted on anyone else. I finally enrolled on the Graduate Recruitment Programme. I sat in one of those seats where you are now. I went through the weeks of testing and training you are soon to embark on. The CPD Programme confirmed my alignment to Policy and Policing and I became a Core Reeve, able to out my passion into practice, building a strong Network where all the Arcs finally work together as one, not the separate entities they had once been under divided leadership. And I stand now in front of you all today.'

I returned to the lectern and took a drink of water. I could hear the shuffle of numb bums, the switching of positions, the crossing and uncrossing of legs. Time to wrap up.



‘But there is still much to be done. For all our work over these many years, we still haven’t reached everyone. We need to inspire the Industrialists to find innovative ways to use our limited resources to expand the Network beyond The Orbital, to ensure we flourish, not stagnate and fail. Support the Clinicians in their efforts to eradicate HFD, helping those at the Edges reach these vital services. Assist the Archivists in bringing the VLE into every Home, educating those still living under the same tarnished customs and old assumptions that destroyed the very world they came from, that there is a better way and opportunity for all.

That is where you come in. The 4Site Family Network is just that: family. There are no divisions in our family, only unions, so, no matter where your ‘Fit to Work’ path takes you, we all work together for the healthy, intelligent, progressive development of the wider Network family. Our success is measured only in the continuing health and progression of that family and the love and safety it provides.’

A hundred tense shoulders relaxed. Stemmed blood flow released through the clapping of hands that rung in my ears. Their impatient applause telling me they were ready, let them get on with it. I smiled one last time and stepped back into the shadows.

2.

(Kate)

The heat of the shower is almost too much to bear, but I remain immersed under the scalding beads of water. To disinfect or punish I'm not sure.

There's new soap to use, an unblemished bar, newly unwrapped and left for me, a gift that smells of Parma Violets, though I cannot remember now where I have smelled Parma Violets or how I know about them, specifically, at all, outside of the synthetic. The memory of them flirts in and out of my mind like the delicate scent itself, suddenly strong one moment with images of fields that seem to fall off the end of the world and tiny blue heads bobbing in a breeze, scattered and nestling like children playing *hiddy*, whatever *hiddy* is or was, in grasses taller than me, only to be lost to my senses once again like it had never been there at all.

Time slips and I'm not sure how long I've been stood there. Days, weeks, it's all the same. The shower is running cold.

3.

(Cyn)

Candidates encircled me. From inside the control room of the Currer Assessment Unit, their decisions, their reactions, their hesitations, their personalities, their prejudices, their mistakes were all laid bare to me, each trial following their individual trackways in the VLE recruitment programme using live data. Developed over many years, building on the theories and techniques originating in the Age of Man, the Core Personality Denominator Programme assesses temperamental variances, decision-making processes, success rates and reactions to outcomes to the nth degree. With hundreds of different possibilities to follow, each candidate is free to choose their individual tracks for processing the problems they face. Of course, when I say free, I mean to say there are enough choices for them to be able to choose the trackway their brain has been preconditioned towards choosing, what their unconscious will perceives and plans before conscious thought moves their hand. The CPD programme's inbuilt Qualia Control takes account of any experiences felt by the candidate, read by their VLE Rings, adding Response Extrapolations to the programme mix, heightening those feelings to arouse a truer response to the given situations and to see how well they are controlled.

Or not. Every now and then a set of unseeing eyes flickered from behind their VLE projections onto the one-way glass between us, revealing insecurities and inquisitive natures to my unseen judgement. Those twinkling, fresh faced youngsters from only a couple of weeks ago were now jaded and grey, their enthusiasm dulled and confidence sapped by the rigorous demands of our expectations.

Alarms sounded. Red lights over seat 78 indicated a prolonged shock phase that required immediate treatment. Not unusual at these later stages. Technicians rushed in to close the CPD programme before any further RE could be generated. Clinicians were on-hand to take the candidate for immediate Acute Stress Reaction assessment. Thankfully,

severe ASR cases were rare since I'd brought in stricter monitoring. I was all too aware of the long-term effects when early signs were missed.

'How many out now?' I said.

'Twenty nine,' said my assistant, Naailah, looking up from her personal VLE. Not a wearer of jewellery, she found her VLE Ring irritating to wear and had taken it off again, placing it on the desk in front of her, holding it to enable connection with the tip of her finger. Some people had elaborate designs, but Naailah's was simple; small, no design, no stones, no big statement. I knew the worth of pure titanium, even if no-one else recognised it in its lack of fanfare, but I also knew what a poor conductor it was, the paramagnetism weak and prone to failure, eventually having to be replaced by a more malleable, responsive material.

'It's not bad at this late stage,' she continued. 'It's the highest level of stress tolerance we've seen in a group for a long time. Last year we lost nearly fifty percent during first-stage assessments alone, and those with borderline psyche passes broke within the first hour of the CPD. Do you think we've made the ASR Safeguards too inflexible?'

'No.' I didn't. 'Last year was bad, but not totally unexpected. They were the last batch to have been schooled during the early defective years of the Improvement Programme. I'm not about to put the Network at risk by allowing those not 'Fit to Work' to slip through the safety net I implemented.'

'I have nieces schooled during that period, so I understand your circumspection. What happened to the old Groundwork Programme we were schooled in?'

'My mother stiffened the syllabus in the years after my graduation, before leaving it to ruin while she declined.'

'Was there no one within the Matriarchal Pool with the ability to take over before it had gone too far to pull back?'

‘There were nearly twenty years of it filtering through before anyone saw the effects, Naailah. By which time those affected were already in established roles within the Network and my mother had died.’

‘But moving away from the Matriarchal order to a York-Arc Committee brought in the IP. They retreated too far, the IP too passive, like the generation it created.’

‘It was also the Committee that then found it to be defective.’ Naailah’s desire to lead York was always so evident. ‘They rectified it, reintroducing Groundwork elements, the fruits of which we are seeing now, wouldn’t you agree? Your family is still relatively new to the Network, Naailah, I thought you would welcome a York Committee that isn’t based on leadership solely from the 4Site Matriarchal Pool?’

She remains silent. She knows the committee would be her only chance of leadership within the Network, but also realises it’s power is diminished through its lack of Matriarch.

‘A solitary York-Mater like my mother would have obsessively insisted upon making it work, or hid the problem,’ I continued. ‘Comparatively-speaking, the IP was caught within the first five years, allowing us to go about rectifying the programming sooner.’

‘I agree there have been improvements. My elder sister’s girls have rallied under their York-Arc tutelage. My unfortunate younger sister lives at the Edges, however, and her eldest continues to be lacking, full of contradictions, and ill-prepared for the real world. If she carries on how she is she will have nothing to offer the Network, like her mother.’

Naailah was unforgiving in her assessments of others. She despised signs of weakness of character; lack of ambition bewildered her and lack of purpose angered her. Ours was a commensal relationship. She was a great assistant because, though York, and indeed my own job, could never be hers, she was always on the lookout for the cracks that might give her a way in, which meant I had to be smart and do my job well, which I did,

which made her a great assistant. But she wasn't infallible; you just had to know which buttons to push.

'Perhaps all this unfortunate niece of yours lacks is the right guidance. I imagine her isolation at the Edges has left her void of notable peers and adequate Network services. Didn't you hear my Graduate Recruitment speech? It's exactly those kind of people we should be reaching out to Naailah, bringing them inside, not pitying them for staying out in the cold.'

'Who's void of notable peers?' A voice from the door.

'Certainly not us, Ms Burgess,' I replied, turning. 'How are things out West?'

'Wild, as ever. We just can't be contained.' Diot Burgess greeted me with her usual sharp, white smile. She really was startling in appearance. Dark as the York Medusa, but with flame blue eyes and hair the colour of a nuclear detonation. She was stunning to behold. Slight build, but strong and full of vigour. Clever. Astute. I admired her immensely, yet never pursued her. Unlike many others, I hadn't wanted to possess her. I wasn't sure I even could. Her family line was branched generations back with mine it transpired, and my fondness for this familial link, flimsy as it was, was dearer to me than anyone in the Network could know. The fear that, as such, she was also a threat to my Materfamilial position, was quickly allayed by her devotion to work. Her eye was on that alone, not me, and I rewarded this accordingly. She might even have been the only person I had respect for.

'We don't normally see you so close the Core,' said Naailah. There was no love lost between my closest colleagues.

'No, it's a rare treat,' replied Diot. 'It's hard to fit in social calls when you head-up two Arcs, constantly travelling between the two.'

'Isn't it why we have the VLE?' said Naailah. 'And your marvellous Rings? To preserve and better use the valuable time and energy of busy people.'

‘The Rings were developed in mind of those for whom VLE Rooms were still a luxury. A simple, basic Ring made from existing Brass to make knowledge accessible to all. More egalitarian.’ She absently rolled her own Ring around her forefinger, Jet with the orange of her Brass chasework threading through it. Her bright smile returned. ‘But yes, you could say they also help those unable to juggle multiple responsibilities. I rather like to be hands on though, you know. At the coal-face so to speak.’

A polymath, good at everything, she had worked around the Arcs like me, but rather than join the Reeves she settled on Leeds. Structures interested her, she said, how they worked, how they broke, how they were rebuilt. She rose quickly to Mater. A quick mind, and quicker learner, she reminded me of Kate, almost of the same mould I’d say. Almost. Except that Diot knew when to hold back, as well as when to act with alacrity. Emotionally controlled. That was the difference. It made all the difference if you were to succeed in the Network.

We’d developed many things together; the Rings were the first, her idea to improve access to the VLE, compelling the York-Arc Committee to relinquish their iron grip on some of the information she believed should be shared. She helped me design and build the New Stray and forged along with the technology needed for my Cleaner Living Treatments to work in the rapid cycles needed to show quick results. I liked her. Upon completion of our improvements to The Stray, she was made Union Mater over all of Leeds and Harrogate Arcs, a role she relished, spending time with Clinicians, learning their craft, working in their labs. Though young, like everyone else around me it seemed these days, there was so much she wanted to achieve; she directed the improvement of the molecular structure of the crops at Cod Beck, cleaning up the feed for the animals, before moving onto the animals themselves.

I’d only ever had to halt her progress once, over a proposal to introduce gender reassignment treatment. The Harvest and Protect Programme relied on the fact that men remained men and producers of male sex cells in regular cycles. Reproductive

Management scrutinised the genetic makeup of cells and filtered unsuitable donations out of the store prior to any possible union, thus ensuring that all conceptions, of either sex, were healthy and desired, and so any need for termination negated; my ‘Pre-selection Negates Abortion’ manifesto had proven very popular among the conserving Network society and certainly helped facilitate my rise to Materfamilas. They didn’t realise that, piggy-backing off it, I also amended the Network Foremothers’ redundant ‘Restocking’ dictum, to finally allow for selective termination in cases of uncertain paternity and outcome. But reassignment? No. I wasn’t about to risk future generations, or my position, so carefully cultivated, just to allow men to become women. Where would it end? Soon they’d be working alongside us, taking our roles, making decisions, undoing all we had achieved. Wolves in sheep’s clothing. We couldn’t have that. She understood fully, of course. I liked her a lot.

‘Have you analysed our Clinical results? What cross-section do we have so far?’ I intervened on their latest bout and returned my gaze to the current crop beyond the window. Naailah expanded her VLE projection with a starburst of long fingers so I could see. Lists of numbers appeared, which she scrolled through mid-air, grabbing them and dividing them into batches. I didn’t wear a ring. They say having little time for new technology was a sign of getting old.

‘The data I’ve evaluated so far suggests we have a high number of traditional materialists that would make good, sensible historicists or else, really quite useful economic support workers,’ said Diot, the barest hint of mockery in her tone. ‘A good haul for York again.’

Naailah ignored her while continuing to scroll. She was proud of her York-Arc education, having spent her formative years there among the centuries of dust. The dust gets everywhere; particles from decaying buildings, old books and turgid people get into your whole being so you are permanently weighed down by the burden of the past. Personally, I would toss all the Epimethean drones into the North Sea with all of their



depressing judgements that are always a little too late, but I have found use in their services, if only to act contrarily to advice.

‘Anyone else of interest?’ I asked.

‘Idelle Devi,’ said Naailah, pulling up a live image of a young woman working through the CPD programme. Idelle Devi’s fierce concentration was evident in her dark unblinking stare, fast thinking and fast fingers as she made her decisions swiftly. The VLE showed steady stats and the RE merely extended feelings of achievement and gratification of a job well done. Skin the colour of smooth, fired clay, hair as dark and glossy as her eyes. What clever parents she must have to have put her together.

‘Promising. Profile?’

‘Mother is Radha Devi, a Clinician.’ Naailah pulled up the statistics. ‘Scored well across the board, pretty evenly in fact, all high 80s, except in her power aspects which are pretty high.’ She zoomed in. ‘Average of 96 across Theory, Reason and Logic.’

‘Quite impressive,’ I said.

‘Yes, I thought she would be of interest to you. You mentioned succession planning last week. She has the right background. Could be a real asset to Harrogate. Someone with relevant experience.’

Return fire at Diot. She was right though, I had mentioned succession, but she was barking up the wrong tree.

‘Let’s see what her final scores are. She might be worth a look.’ She was certainly worth a look. Those that were to be Core Service Reeves were to attend one final interview, ensuring no time was wasted on sending them down the wrong path. And there was no denying the fact she was simply worth a look in the flesh.

An alarm sounded again. Idelle Devi remained focussed on her task. Naailah diminished the projection to her personal view, so we could once again see fully through the window. Technicians and Clinicians had returned to the room but appeared to be having problems, struggling to remove the candidate from her seat.

‘Seat 45. Another fail. What was she working on?’ I asked.

Naailah looked up the information.

‘Batch termination of cells from unsuitable donors,’ she said, fingering the aura of quantitative and qualitative data in front of her. ‘She made the decision to terminate cells based on the facts presented to her, but the stress readings went off the scale when she checked the post-termination report.’

‘Genetic reasoning?’ Diot asked. Naailah scan-read the report.

‘Yes, total hereditary eradication.’

‘Shame. Even some of the best rationalists can be foiled by personal derailment factors.’

‘Score?’ I asked.

‘Pre-ASR?’ Naailah switched to a different data set. ‘60s and 70s.’

‘Well, as you said, this is a high-tolerance year and time’s almost up. There’ll be enough 60s and 70s whose sentiment doesn’t undermine their pragmatism.’ I started to pack away my things. I’d had too many overnights and had told Kate I would be back that day.

‘Good night, ladies. Don’t stay too late,’ I said, heading off.

‘Something’s wrong,’ Naailah said, her fingers moving quickly through the spectral numbers in front of her. ‘Stress indicators are rising rapidly in all candidates, look.’ She pointed at the projection as their stats scrolled higher and higher. ‘They’ll all hit their ASR triggers at this rate.’ She walked over to the window.

I joined her to see Clinicians struggling to deal with the failed candidate, who was now in a state of combative stress. They had successfully removed her from the seat, but appeared incapable of restraining her. She screamed words I couldn’t hear through the glass. Candidates around her were now completely diverted from their task.

‘She needs sedating,’ I said. Diot left to take charge of the Clinicians.

Another alarm sounded. And another. Around the room seats burst their scarlet alerts as more Technicians and Clinicians flooded the room to try to calm the situation. As more lights erupted on, Seat 45 freed herself from her inhibitors and tore around the assessment centre breaking VLE connections, unhooking candidates from their seats, yelling into their faces, ASR indicators rising rapidly at the violent interruption to this final test they had worked so hard towards. I slammed my hand over the voice controller.

‘Get her the fuck out of there!’ I yelled, my voice taking over the room and stopping everyone in their tracks. Seat 45 turned and fastened her stare at the one-way glass between us, as though she could see exactly where I was. Her face contorted as she ran at the glass, the impact causing little more than a muffled bang. She heaved herself at the glass again. Achieving little, she launched herself over and over at the glass in front of me, slapping the glass with her hands, her mouth wide with words I couldn’t hear or read in the contortion of her face, over the fogging of the glass with her hot breath, or the smears of tears and nasal mucus on the glass. Diot reached from behind and injected into the wide throbbing vein on her neck and in little time she slid down the glass, allowing them to finally remove her from the room.

‘How many down?’ I asked.

‘Over half with severe ASR, but almost everyone exceeded the allowed stressor limit. I’m sure we’ll be able to take circumstances into account. They had less than half an hour to completion.’

‘Take little into account, Naailah,’ I said, staring at the continuing calm evacuation of the room. ‘The fact it wasn’t programmed makes it all the more important. The things that truly affect us are always outside of our control. They don’t happen in the comfort of a seat in an assessment room. We can’t let inefficiencies and incompetences transgress into dangerous hysterics. Allow for that and you will set us all back centuries.’

Naailah nodded.

‘Anyone we don’t have to scrutinise manually?’ I said.

‘Idelle Devi,’ Naailah said. ‘She completed the assessment ahead of time. Final overall score 91.4. Her ASR never budged.’

4.

(Kate)

I'm ignoring her. Pretending her voice is being absorbed into the deep, white sand. It's not like I can act as though her voice has been carried away on the breeze. There isn't one for another three and a half minutes. She can wait.

The endless sea-image reflects a wide, vibrant moon-image in its waters. It looks as though it goes on forever and ever, that you could swim and swim and never find another shore. But everyone knows it's a mirage, projected by the VLE to enhance our Lido experience; make believe you're at the beach. And not just any beach; your *ideal* beach.

But if they've never been to a beach, what do they use for comparison? How do they know it's ideal? It never rains and has a constant temperature of 29.444 degrees with only the smallest but freshest of breezes passing through at regular intervals. The water is always warm, clean and calm. You are always safe. No-one has ever drowned at the Lido. The water is never any deeper than 1.68 metres and there are monitors everywhere, so if anyone did get into trouble, help is immediately at hand. The only tides are those controlled by the VLE; peaceful ripples that never come too far in or out, not ferocious rips that could pull you under never to be seen again. No-one has ever been eaten by a shark or stung by a jellyfish, no-one has had their picnic attacked by ants or wasps or seagulls, because there are none. They are all stuffed on mounts or suspended in jars inside the York-Arc, only seen by us through more images in the VLE.

Once, I swum and swum and found that the lie ended at only seventy-five metres. I hit a wall and set off an alarm. It wasn't even that far. It didn't have to be. I had my feet on the floor when they pulled me from the sea, dangling from a ceiling harnesses like their limp doll, the few people on the sands applauding my rescuers as they swung me through the wide open sky-image and deposited me ashore.

I was rescued because they thought I was in trouble.

Weirdly, she's standing over me, waiting for me to notice her. How long will she wait?

How long is comfortable? Comfortable for her. I can ignore her all day.

'Hi Kate!' Not long. 'I called to you, but you were miles away.'

Not miles. Just seventy-five metres.

'Sorry, Lori, I didn't hear you.' I don't care if she doesn't believe me.

'Daydreaming? I know. It's so easy to get lost in thought here. So peaceful.' She sighs, wistfully, she must think, and gazes over the water as though to some far horizon, mirroring me, I'm sure, to help us synchronise; that if she shows empathy we'll somehow assimilate and be able to talk like, presumably, normal people. 'I've been here all day, topping up my Vit-D. I really hate this time of year outside, it's even more drab and dreary than normal. Don't you?'

'Not really.' It makes no difference to me. Nor to anyone really. Each day is like every other, day comes, night comes, invariably grey.

'They say the climate is changing.' Lori is still talking like it's something we normally do. Her voice is as loud and hopeful as the clothes she's wearing. Sunshine yellow swimsuit. With frills. Cyn buys me Network-new like I'm a doll, but I prefer to wear the stains of those who have come before me. Unprocessed. My massive white-but-yellowing T-shirt has an aged and faded green-brown smear. It rises up my back, like a corporate slogan from the past, from where I sit on it to somewhere below my shoulders; the ghost of it's ancestor's last shag, perhaps, or the shadow of when they shat themselves during the Great Falling Out.

'Apparently we're finally up a degree? And they say we can expect further rises in the next decade?' She's not telling me, but looking for an answer. 'Has Cyn mentioned anything to you?'

'We don't talk about the weather.' I've made her uncomfortable. She can't tell if I'm being serious, but is laughing anyway.

‘No, I realise that, silly. I just mean to say that it’s a good thing, right? That it’s warming up again?’

‘Who knows?’

‘Do you think we’ll ever see it as it used to be?’ She’s sitting down. Perhaps she needs a friend, or thinks I do. Perhaps she knows Cyn hasn’t been Home. It’s the sort of thing everyone seems to know. Perhaps she’s left behind at Home too and thinks we’re alike. ‘Before the Great Falling Out?’ she persists. ‘On the VLE you can see how lovely it used to be. Well, like it is here, really.’

‘Before the Great Falling Out, the Bother made the world hotter and hotter in some countries, and colder and colder in others. Some places drowned under weeks of rain, others burned until only deserts remained. A climate in which the Bother festered and grew with no-one willing to help another, fighting to control the bits that were still OK. So, how do you mean lovely?’

I’ve startled her. She’s not comfortable with me staring at her. I should probably back off. But she did ask, so I’ll continue.

‘Forecasts were the folly of the Misinformation Era. You know, they even tried to calculate what conditions would be like after an event like the Great Falling Out? This was in a time when they couldn’t accurately predict the expected outcomes of the countless plebiscites and popularity shows they rammed down the throats of their people, like geese, so the powerful could continue to gorge on rich offal. They couldn’t predict the weather over a week; they could barely get it right on a daily basis for fuck’s sake. I think they were only about forty years out on the first real signs of stable recovery. And it’s taken another fifty-odd years of the sky clearing and clouding over again for the climate to two-step its way up to where we are now. So yes the climate is changing. All the bloody time, like it always has, and yes, we will affect it, like we always have, with our tinkering and meddling. Just think yourself lucky it stayed this cold for this long and you haven’t had to

negotiate the firedamp shitstorms that would have been, and could still yet be, the alternative.'

But I'm preaching to the wrong person. They're all the wrong person in here.

I need a cigarette, but it will set off an alarm and shock Lori no doubt. And then she'll tell the other normalised clones. And then they'll tell Cyn. And then Cyn will be mad. She'll be mad that I can't just be nice to people. Mad that I'm smoking. More mad that I'm clearly seeking out and paying high prices for actual cigarettes, and even more mad that I am smoking them in public. She'll be mad that I can't just be normal. Be happy and content that I want for nothing. She'll be mad that I didn't go to my appointment, again.

Fuck it.

'Cigarette?'



5.

(Cyn)

‘I’m Home,’ I thought, but didn’t call out. She wouldn’t answer me, even if she was in. As though making up for lost years, she regressed daily into teenage petulance; eyes rolling behind my back, pouting and glowering if I asked her anything, acting in defiance of everything we had, everything I had given her, backing away into the darkness of her mind, a dull dark room with no windows.

The Clinicians said such extreme side effects were possible with the extended treatment she was receiving. That, coupled with the disappointment of not having been successful, could cause hormonal, and other, imbalances, which they monitored and updated. So I waited. And I hoped.

Piles of leftover food and dirty plates told me she had at least been Home in the last couple of days. That she hadn’t cleared up was no surprise, but that the Brat hadn’t was more a concern.

The door went around midnight. She didn’t turn the light on and headed straight for the shower.

‘Oh,’ she said after, realising I was there. She dripped; her towel hung loosely on her shoulders, more to keep the draught off her back than to dry her body. Beads momentarily hung off strands of her inky hair before joining the rivulets that traced down her British skin, as though spilling and sketching and printing upon her body anew, before pooling at her feet.

‘Hi,’ I responded. ‘You’re Home.’

‘You too,’ she said, and walked away. She slept in the small room she had made her own.

Next morning, I worked from Home. Naailah had worked through the night to number-crunch the flawed stats manually. She'd sent the Arcs their batches of new Clinicians, Archivists and Industrialists so training could start, and had set up my interviews with the Reeve candidates.

'Thanks for that, Naailah, it saved me a lot of time.' She sat across from me in the VLE, waiting patiently for me to flick through the headlines. She wanted something.

'I thought it best to not let yesterday's episode cause unnecessary delay.'

'How many candidates were deemed unfit as a result?'

'Final total loss was sixty five percent.'

'So, in the event, not so dissimilar from last year?'

'No.'

'So my ASR Safeguards are not too rigid.'

'No, they're probably about right, as you said.'

I nodded. She was too keen to agree with me today.

'About my VLE report concerning the Caverns?' she said eventually.

'Oh yes, I had taken a look.' I didn't want her to know that her pet-project had my attention. Years ago, the Maters, including my mother, embarked on a project, building a new transition that appeared to have the purpose of joining up with the old Johnson Flyover to link the Network to the First End again. The reasons for it were locked down from wider Network view, for Mater level only, but even now there were no details of what led them to embark on such a thing. It all caused great unease and uncertainty within the Network, and proved that my mother had reached a level of incompetence I could have saved them from years before. So, what followed wasn't really a coup, but a reordering, according to the needs and will of the people of the Network. The people of the Network looked to the Reeves, who, under my charge, had brought so much order and stability, to get to the bottom of it and regain control. We removed Leeds first and the breadcrumbs led to York. My Mother, so controlling and imbibed with the Foremothers' mission, had

obviously allowed her alcoholism to destabilise her underlying Cluster B before it finally killed her. They say she had been dead a while and Leeds had continued with the work regardless, trying to convince us of communication between the two, though there was no evidence, and certainly no possibility of any having taken place within the best part of a year, so advanced was my mother's atrophy. The Arcs kept too much from each other, formed and broke alliances on whims, so it was clear to all that a new two-tier Matriarchal approach was required. The Transition work stopped and became nothing more than a funfair ride to the Edges of York for those with an adventurous spirit. However, Naailah's report perhaps made some sense of it. The silence, the need to work without alerting the wider Network community. Perhaps they had been concerned about something. Perhaps it was this.

'And?'

'And I wondered why you brought it to me and not Leeds?'

'I, er, well,' she stammered. I knew it was because she didn't want Diot to be the one to take credit for her findings, or for solving the problem. 'I was asked by the previous Leeds Mater to commence my research when I was there, long before I came to work at the Core. But the project was shelved. And since, there have been, other, more pressing projects Leeds were needed on at the time.'

'Yes, I know, I asked for most of them.'

'Quite.'

'Did you never raise your concerns to Diot?'

'I assumed my findings were there for anyone interested in looking,' she said, brusque at the idea that it was she who hadn't acted appropriately. 'After leaving the Leeds-Arc I could only assume it would be picked up by the Hydro-Industrials.'

'And you found that it wasn't by...'

She didn't answer immediately.

‘I believed then, as now, that the Harthill-Howden Transition was to channel water from the sea. I resumed my research, in my own time, little as it is,’ she said. ‘It was clear you were not aware of the issue, because I believe you would be working with the Industrialists toward a solution. I suspect Diot has her hands full with both Leeds and Harrogate to give it the time and attention that is needed.’

‘It’s a very thorough account, thank you, Naailah. You could be right about its mounting importance.’ Her tense shoulders visibly relaxed at my acknowledgement of her work. She nodded in agreement. ‘But sending anyone into the Uncothlans. It’s asking too much.’

‘What about the Reeves that monitor the Flyover?’

‘What about them?’ I was perhaps too sharp. There was no need for me to be. All anyone knew, including the Reeves themselves, was that the Flyover Reeves monitored the Flyover in short shifts to prevent Tykes attempting to leave the Network. That was all anyone needed to know.

‘They have experience outside of the PEEKs,’ she said. ‘Perhaps if they accompanied, supported, a team from York?’

‘They know the Flyover, Naailah, not the Uncothlans, and anyway can’t be diverted from their duties.’

‘Perhaps there might be a few who would feel it important enough to volunteer to be part of a team? Researchers to test the waters. Clinicians to start a Clean-up if the area was proven valuable. Industrialists to determine long-term needs and how to meet them.’

‘You would be willing, would you?’ I said.

She hesitated. Perhaps she knew I was calling her bluff. Despite her Network ambitions, her love of study, of research, had always been her true love. She esteemed it to be the highest function one could undertake, like the true Yorkist she was. But perhaps this was a step too far. The only people who had ever left the Network was a small group of voyagers, over a hundred years ago, determined to ascertain the viability of the outside

world. They never returned, confirming the Network's expectations and fears. Bellwethers, people called them back then. Nothing but lost sheep.

'Of course,' Naailah replied eventually, not letting personal fear overwhelm her pragmatic professionalism. But it couldn't happen. It would destabilise everything. All we had. All we'd achieved and worked so hard for. All that the Foremothers had compromised for their Eden. There would be other ways. We would sustain ourselves and keep ourselves where we belonged, here, within the Network we created.

'I appreciate all your work on it, Naailah, it really has brought it to my attention' I said. 'But it needs an expert hand now. I will pass it to Leeds and ask them to make it a priority.'

'But,' she began, crestfallen.

'I admire your courage and your drive with this, I really do, but I need you here, focussed on Graduate Recruitment. You've shown me today one of the many ways in which I rely on you. I'm sorry, Naailah, but my decision is final.'

Naailah nodded. 'I understand,' she said. 'Though, perhaps after Graduate Recruitment, you might allow me to work with Leeds? I think I could be valuable to them.'

'I'll speak to Diot. It's her gig after all and you two don't exactly see eye to eye. I'm worried it would take you too far away from your work for me. Unless,' I said, and left it hanging a moment. She cocked her head, waiting for me to go on. 'Well, you said it yourself the other day. Succession planning. How better than to have someone working closely with me and seeing how they stack up?'

'Someone from Graduate Recruitment?' she said. She didn't know whether to be encouraged. With all the talk in her report of aquatic life, it amused me she had taken the bait. I could see the scepticism spread across her clever face. On the one hand, she believed strongly that her research needed doing. On the other, she could see she was losing her job. 'Idelle Devi?' she said, astutely, though I expected no less.

'Not sure,' I said. 'What do you think?'

‘I think she’s just what you’re looking for,’ she replied. ‘You’re interviewing Reeve candidates over the next couple of days; you can get a feel for her then.’

‘Good idea,’ I said. ‘I’ll do just that. And, assuming Diot’s on board, looks as though you’re finally going to be able to carry out your research after all, Naailah, how does it feel?’

‘Stirring.’ Her voice belied her forced smile. ‘It’s a real prospect. Thank you for taking it seriously.’

‘Not at all, it was you who quite-rightly pointed out the need for me to prepare for the day I would be surplus to requirements. What better opportunity do we have?’

‘Absolutely,’ she hesitated. ‘What if we find there is no viable solution within the Network?’

‘Let’s not be pessimistic, Naailah, nor in any rush to try and find solutions outside when there are bound to be simpler, safer measures we can take right here inside the Network. In the meantime, we could sanction rationing measures for severe-drought. Those at the Edges will be most affected primarily, but if they continue to disregard all guidance to move into the Network, we can’t be held responsible when our warnings transpire, can we?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘But it will sharpen our focus to avoid it.’

‘Right,’ I said. I have to admit I admired her resolve. ‘I’m sure Diot will be in touch with you soon enough.’

Naailah disappeared from the VLE and my room went dark. I stared into the blankness, her face dissolving into my memory of Idelle Devi’s from the assessment day.

‘You’re not going to work?’ Kate’s voice broke my thought. I turned to see her standing silhouetted in the archway, an old misshapen black jumper hanging on her, face still crumpled with sleep.

‘Not today,’ I said, standing to get myself a drink. She followed me into the kitchen. ‘I found this in the bin, when I cleaned up last night,’ I said, ‘Not that you’ll have

noticed. I suppose we need a new Brat? What did the last one do? Look at you funny like the one before?' I handed her a scrap of paper with her writing on. 'This afternoon, right?'

She took the paper from me as I changed the tap to my preferred coffee setting and poured a small dark syrupy cup.

'This afternoon,' she replied.

'Not going?' I took a sip.

She shrugged. 'Probably not,' she said.

'Do you know..?' I began.

'How much it's costing you?' she finished for me. 'No, not really. But it's not really my concern is it? Do you know how much it's costing me?'

'Tell me.'

She hesitated. 'It's not really your concern,' she said.

'We both agreed it was something we wanted,' I said.

'We both agreed it was something to do,' she replied.

'So you don't want it anymore?' I tried to keep my voice level. We had this discussion every time there was a Clinic appointment. 'I know you feel you're not getting anywhere, but it will be worth it in the end.'

Her face hardened.

'OK,' I said. 'I'm not sure, but isn't that the point? You said you wanted things to be less ordered, less knowable, well they are. Who would have predicted it would take so long? Who can predict if and when it will happen? And if it does happen, it will all still be unpredictable. That's the nature of having children.'

'Nature?' She barely laughed. 'Perhaps if it was really as unpredictable as it should be, it'd be easier. Maybe, if we weren't being so careful, so, specific, as to our 'requirements', it would have happened already?'

‘Or maybe it wouldn’t,’ I replied. There was so much already being left to chance. I wasn’t willing to compromise on the bare essentials. She may have wanted the irregularity and changeability, but where there were some, whatever the cost, I wanted certainties.

I put my cup down and pulled her to me. She resisted, as always, but relented enough for me to hold her. She smelled damp from where she had gone to bed without drying.

‘I’ll come with you,’ I said. ‘Find out what more can be done. OK?’

She didn’t answer me, but I knew she would come. She was still curious enough to want to know more. About what her body was capable of. For experiences she hadn’t faced before. I knew she would come.

She didn’t wince as the needles pierced her body and drew lines of blood out of the chair into the VLE scanner. Clinicians bobbed around her, referring back to their personal VLE screens, their Ring’s responding to instructions sent by the Senior Clinician’s Ring mounted on the stand. They looked at Kate’s notes, read scans, monitored and changed the lines of blood that threaded the chair.

She sat as though in a trance, face inscrutable, body reclined with her arms wide and outstretched, palms skyward, like some kind of martyr to the vampiric activities of the vaporous white phantoms flitting around her. A slick of deep red slid down the outside of the chair as another line was changed. There was a flurry of activity from the wraiths, but she didn’t move, nor flinch, as they quickly stemmed the flow, cleaned it up and returned her thumb to its required position.

‘This really isn’t on,’ I said, safely behind the glass, out of Kate’s hearing. The Senior Clinician stood like a conductor, her arms in the air scrolling through her own VLE notes. ‘Surely we should have had results by now? Are you using defective donors? Should we pick again?’



The Clinician pressed her fingers together thoughtfully and gave me a sympathetic smile.

‘I pay a lot for this treatment, Myra,’ I reminded her. ‘I don’t expect to be patronised, I expect results.’

‘Ms Burgic, I know it’s frustrating for you, and for Ms Swithens too, but I must remind you that despite our many advances, our choices, our ability to test, analyse, extract, combine, and compel nature, we still cannot complete. Maybe someday it will be possible, but what that day will bring, I don’t know.’

‘I’m not here to discuss the rights and wrongs of selective breeding, or what may or may not be possible in the future. That’s your concern.’

She smiled. I knew Myra from way back, sanctimonious then, as now, but ultimately a hypocrite, like most Clinicians; playing with nature, showing nature how clever we could be, and blaming nature when they no longer had an answer.

She swept her arm wide to expand the VLE between us.

‘I can assure you, we are providing the very best service,’ Myra said, as a giant scan of Kate’s ovaries appeared before me. ‘Ms Swithens is of optimal age and all initial tests showed her to be healthy. After she was unable to conceive in her regular cycle, we began various ovarian stimulations, including some more progressive methods. As you can see from the image in front of you, follicle development at the last session was advanced and ripe for harvesting, as with every other procedure undertaken before. Each ova,’ she continued, images of naked oocyte flashed into view one by one as she casually waved her hand, snapshots of children I would never have, ‘is selected to ensure we only use those with optimal chances of fertilisation.’

‘Then use the others too,’ I interrupted as more and more blank circles passed before me never to be seen again. ‘No point being wasteful.’

‘We have conducted a range of treatments upon Ms Swithens, AI, all types of IVF, In Vivo, In Vitro, cultured, intracytoplasmic, embryo-profiling...’

‘Then it’s not her, it’s... them,’ I suggest.

‘Ms Burgric, you know that screening and preparation levels on that front are optimal,’ she replied as our first embryo appeared between us, then the second, then the third, as though to prove a point. ‘Last time, Ms Swithens miscarried because of overtreatment. She had developed cysts, her ovaries enlarged, so we changed hormones. Today, we can only gather information to check whether hyperstimulation has reduced to manageable levels. Then we can resume treatment.’

The image of the last embryo hung in front of me. Six weeks.

‘We are also investigating Ms Swithens’ paternal tolerance levels,’ said Myra, her outline hazy behind another glowing pink and red collection of cells that would never come to resemble the parts that made up a small human. ‘Possibly the main contributing factor to her foetal rejection.’

‘Well, that I understand,’ I said. ‘But I believe you bods have yet to find a way around that particular problem.’

‘We could consider using your ova?’ Myra said, knowingly. ‘I’m sure it all still works.’ There it was. The sanctimony.

I stepped through the VLE projection to face her. She, cleverly reverting her gaze to Kate, deflected any confrontation and returned my attention to the issue at hand. Kate, now with her abdomen exposed, the Clinicians pressing scanning equipment upon her, inside her, ensuring they got the full picture. Kate, unmoved from the spot in which I last saw her, face pale, cold and without love. How could she be so hard and unfeeling? So many women went through this every day, this sacrificial, loving thing. I had given her so much; I only wanted one thing in return.

‘Ms Burgric? I said that you could consider using your own ova?’ Myra persisted her eyebrow arched. She had been my personal Clinician for too long.

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, Myra,’ I said. Time to leave. ‘I’m busy.’

The Network is white and coils around the Core. The original intention to follow an Archimedean structure, regular, even and unprivileged, was soon found to be flawed. How could all Homes and buildings be equal in status so far from the Core, away from all that was left that could be relied upon to rebuild a safe and successful future? So, the clever planners made outer-lying Homes bigger, with more facilities, more rooms, for growing families and burgeoning egos. A growing need for bigger and better ensued, mirroring that of the Age of Man that ultimately led to its downfall, but, for The Network, requiring explanation and reason, nature provided an answer and defining reason.

Yet as I step along the path, spiralling out geometrically as nature intended, I find little of nature upon it. Bleached of all colour and character, there are no weeds growing, no insects crawling, no small animals foraging and certainly no shit from larger animals deposited from the night before. They don't live here. The few that do live are at the colossal Cod Beck Facility, each in their specially designed habitats, where they can exist without fear or molestation, contamination or extinction and where, it is ensured, they don't bring that, from outside, upon us. They exist within the careful, pastoral care of the Archivist-Clinician Union who ensure that no species becomes over or under populated, using birth control and selective breeding to ensure the healthy, but managed continuation of the species and their husbandry and manipulation for the continuation of ours.

So here are just clean paths, checked and watched and managed, where dust is not allowed to settle for long and smooth walls emerge from the ground like fungi. And, as with fungi, there's a little of something rotten in the nature of this arrangement that allows for such growth. A saprotrophic and parasitic colonisation.

Like the foeti in my womb.

The encounter with Myra had really quite rattled me. If Kate found it hard to attend Clinic, she should have felt the way my guts wrenched and knotted whenever I was inside the place.

I returned Home, turned the tap to whisky and knocked a glass back. Then another. I'd have to speak to Maintenance. They were using the new make again when I knew there were casks enough for those of us that actually drank it. I don't blame them; how would Maintenance know the difference when they never touch the stuff but for occasionally inhaling a whisper of the angel's share?

I went into the VLE room, closed the door and sat in darkness, swirling a third glass of watery-whisky in my hand. I'd achieved great things in the Network. The VLE was vaster, more imaginative and intuitive than it had been before I took charge; I allowed more access to Core Knowledge than my predecessors, whilst still maintaining responsible control and a consistent message to temper the discomfort of the fusty old Senior Archivists who deemed some knowledge still dangerous for general consumption. It bothered them they no longer decided who or what. That they'd done nothing with the knowledge they'd hoarded for nearly two centuries, other than seemingly pass it around secretly to those who already knew; no papers, no further enquiry, no adding to this knowledge, no development or creativity springing from it; angered me. They were misers I'd like to lob into the fourth circle of Hell with media-addicts and tech-abusers from The Age of Man to see how they fared against each other.

The creativity and drive I sought came to me quickly once my Materfamilial status was established, in the form of a new, innovative Industrialist, Diot Burgess, and, with the Rings, I felt we produced something really beautiful. I'd been sceptical at first. Even in the Age of Man they were able to access information anywhere, she'd advised me. But demand outstripped their ability to maintain control, I argued. We've learnt from that, she

said. We manage the pace. We manage the information. I knew the ability to carry around your own personal VLE wherever you went, accessible anywhere within the PEEKs, would have mass appeal. Generic VLE rooms were too limited. Reeves would report when needed, not only when they could. We would have more control, not less.

The femtocontrollers designed by Leeds needed little power to run, the VLE did most of the work from the Core, running throughout the Network via the Autoroute and into the PEEKs around us, these veins producing signals that the Rings just needed to be able to pick up. So Leeds worked with Harrogate to produce organic thermoelectrical generators powered by the wearer's body heat, their kinetic energy, the tiny electrical signals that pulsed through their bodies every day just keeping them alive. Some users didn't like the increased number of static shocks they received from wearing them at first, but it's funny how people become used to little unpleasanties in life if they feel they are gaining in other ways. Melanin, too, so underrated a semiconductor before the Bother, and so underused in our own cloudy world, was found to be the key to both the running and personalisation of the Rings and their continuing development in the years after they were first released. A personal security system based on the wearer's own skin appealed highly to our tech-hungry but security-conscious Network folk. They became standard issue if you worked directly for the Network; a basic Brass Ring for all officials, but anyone could buy personalised enhancements if they were wanted, and of course they were. That they could be made into Rings of their own design, in a range of materials and colours, plain or embellished, meant that wearers still felt they'd retained autonomy over their individual style. And yet, like the many Rings worn in all the millennia before, all it really showed was that the wearer was not individual at all, but that they had been bought, by another person or an institution or the state to which they belonged and were fully pledged to their purchaser's ideas. They appealed too to cultural narcissism; their desire and ability to one-up on each other. Soon all Network-folk wanted them, with other advancements, such as PC, growing quickly after. No matter where you were in the whole of the Network, right

up to the very Edges, you could be in the VLE and completely connected, and the Network would always know where you were. But I don't wear a Ring. I am the watcher, not the watched. The buyer, not the bought.

Then onto Harrogate. Before I took charge, the Clinics were disparate. They all had the same purpose and procedures but would carry out conflicting investigations unknown by Core Services, retaining their knowledge to offer procedures and services other Clinics couldn't. That wasn't in keeping with my message for the Network. My Network was to be one family, with collaboration not competition. Everyone knows that progress flourishes where there is rivalry and struggle, but so too does antagonism, and the world has had its fair share of war. So, again, with Diot newly-risen to the Leeds-helm, I brought them all together under the bombproof roof of The Stray, a one-stop shop for all Clinical needs, where Clinicians cooperated and shared knowledge; good ideas leading to others, not to fears of being outdone.

Then it was the turn of the Reeves.

In the first two years of moving away from the Core Reeves to Materfamilias, there had been rumbles about a new Reeve initiative. It appears they thought my Clinical progress too slow and no help to them at all at the Edges, and so, enlisting the help of the then similar-minded Harrogate-Mater, already gunning for me after changes I had implemented to her domain and particularly my reintroduction of selective termination, had set up the CC Programme without my knowledge. Officially called Complete Cleanup, the Reeves called it Capture and Castrate. Again, it was Diot who brought it to my attention, introducing me to sweet, Layla, a Reeve troubled by the many hungry but inexperienced Athena graduates arriving with extreme ideas.

'Diot tells me your son is missing?' I said. 'Is he evading Treatment?'

'He's seven. It hasn't begun, nor does he know what it entails,' she said, her olivine eyes glassy with restrained tears.

‘So why would he have gone off?’

Layla shook her head. ‘He loved the ArchIVES, but I’ve been working so hard I’ve not taken him in such a long time. Perhaps he went the wrong way, got off in the wrong place. I just want to find him, before it’s too late.’

‘You’re Emer’s girl, aren’t you? From the Girls’ House? Unusual, some might say irresponsible, to have had a boy child in those circumstances,’ I said, sceptical of her reasons for sharing this intelligence with me.

‘Was it?’ she said, her emotions back in check. ‘I’m also the daughter of a Clinician who taught me that the Network aimed to ensure the disease was under control and there was nothing to fear. Are you saying she was wrong? The CC programme certainly undermines the idea that the Network know what they are doing, that your own Harvest and Protect programme keeps us all safe.’

She had my attention.

‘And surely there can be no Harvest if there is no crop,’ she added. ‘Then where would we all be?’

I had her watch and report back to me on what was happening, and we became close for a while. I would have promoted her, allowed her to keep an eye from a position of authority, but she declined. For a while, I timetabled her regularly into the Flyover schedule, being one of the few I could trust to ensure such unchecked and misguided initiatives weren’t reaching where we could ill-afford to allow them. The Network needed rule followers up there, those that did their job without trying to work out the real need and I had to ensure those willing to bypass the Matriarchy with their own agendas remained ignorant of our access to the First End. When it was over, she asked to be moved to Nightwatch, where I suspected she hoped to spot her boy. She never did, but remains our most reliable nighttime overseer. Back then though, she informed me of all CC activity, uncovered the instigators, so that finally, at the annual Network Symposium, I was ready to put a stop to the dissent.

The Reeve presentation to the Network was to be on this new initiative, with some new bright spark heading up their address, in the hope it would be officially endorsed by the whole Network. And Kate Swithens was certainly compelling with her forceful account of the horrors of disease, the signs of spreading infestation at the Edges and, finally, their recommended solution to control the pollution permanently. That the Reeves were the only ones capable of Completely Cleaning up the Edges where a diminished Network influence put all at risk. She provided evidence of their one hundred percent success rate in trials, mapping Edge towns in the York Arc she declared permanently Clean. The York-Arc Committee were easily impressed, so fearful of the return of disease. Clinicians, who felt they had lost power in my unifying of The Stray, were pleased with their Mater's involvement in this strong new initiative. Some Industrialists wondered why such a simple solution hadn't been used before. She smiled, the most beautiful smile. So elated at her own importance, her own cleverness. A radiant smile. A dangerous smile. One I wanted for myself.

For my counter presentation, I brought in Clinicians diverted from women-only treatments to handle more male patients than ever before, flooding in from certain identifiable Edge towns with complications and infections including septicaemia. That Edge dwellers didn't contribute to the Network, and had no means to pay for such additional strains, didn't mean we could simply allow seemingly infected men drop dead on our doorsteps. It would cause panic. Increased numbers needing such urgent treatment was already causing public concern. The CC programme was not Core-sanctioned so had not been publicised, and, for obvious reasons, likely never could be; no wonder Network-folk believed disease was returning and, with such rumours spreading, regular Clinical attendance rates were dropping at alarming rates.

*'That is a sure fire way of ensuring disease does return,'* I told the gathered Network officials. *'By attempting to simply cut it off completely, the CC programme*



allows it the possibility of returning through the front door, right in front of our eyes'. I showed them footage from the VLE of groups gathering, men in groups, sticking together again out of fear, fighting back when Reeves came near. I showed men spotted in different Edge towns, where the Autoroute, or the PEEKs could still pick up their movements, too close for comfort around the Orbital, and then disappearing, finding better ways to hide, escaping into some hidden communities we knew existed but were never able to find.

'Where are they going?' I asked. 'And more importantly, what are they doing?' I let them mutter their own suppositions before adding, 'and who is going to deal with them while our Reeves run around in clapped out old pre-Bother vans playing at Clinicians and Technicians?'

'The Reeves need more training,' Kate said. 'Or better leadership.'

'I couldn't agree more,' I said.

I implemented my new Harrogate strategy with Diot at the helm; the previous Mater stepping down immediately. And I established Materfamilias control of the Reeves, all reports copied to me, all initiatives sanctioned by me alone. I consoled Kate, after. Said she had tried. That it had been a good idea, but such direct approaches could never work; too vulgar, too transparent. She was young and had plenty of time, I told her. She was full of energy and I admired that in her. I asked her to dinner and enjoyed the shy smile she shared with me that night. I asked her to stay after many more nights like the first, to find new ways to make her smile. I asked her to move in to cheer her up, to give her security, when she had become too intense, too complicated, too subversive, to remain in the Reeves. I asked her to have children when I saw boredom threatening her sanity and my position, to occupy her, to assuage my own guilt, heterogeneous as it is.

I haven't seen a smile since.

I drank and blinked away the dancing light spots that appeared through staring into darkness for too long.

I was certainly not the same person that Myra first met, first treated, all those years ago and I hated that seeing her still had the ability to turn me into a scared eighteen year old each time. A child; a naïve little girl who thought the world had changed when it hadn't. Someone who believed in the righteousness of the Network. In the beauty of every sleek line and smooth limestone curve, like a sculpture worthy of Hepworth. A hope and wonder, an ambition, an innocent desire to always do the right thing. My dealings with Myra reminded me how fragile such hope and innocence was, how easily lost when care was not taken with it, my loss steering me to always strive for right action.

But there was no one else I would go to now either. Bound together by one event, one piece of knowledge. Not that she was bad at her job; on the contrary, Myra was an excellent practitioner with an extensive knowledge base in genetics and fertility, but everyone has to start somewhere. And early trials are not known for their success rate. And some ideas just have to be abandoned.

'Get me Naaliah,' I said and the VLE searched for her.

'Yes,' said my assistant, within moments, face inscrutable as always.

'I hear Diot is interested in your project and happy for you to join her team? You're pleased?'

'I'm keen to make a difference.'

'Good, yes, admirable, I know you well enough, Naailah, to know you will always do the right thing for the Network. Distribute your existing work where possible, plan for a handover. Soon as we can so you can get on with making this difference you speak of.'

'Of course,' she said without hesitation. 'Your meeting with Idelle Devi went well then?' she added, prescient as always.

'I've not met her yet,' I replied.

She flipped to my schedule. Still assisting. There was no need.

‘She’s booked for tomorrow. Late afternoon,’ I said. ‘I have no doubt she will be exactly what I need.’

8.

(Kate)

She will be pleased. She will think that, this time, it will happen. That the last few years have been worth the effort, worth the Brass. She will think that her endeavours have come into fruition, that her faith in my ability to conceive was not unfounded after all, that she had been right all along. That this is just what I need. That it will be the start of a new adventure, where the next twenty or more years will be something new to experience, to discover. That they will keep me company. Keep me busy. Keep me out of trouble.

She will be pleased.

So I'm not telling her.

I'm not telling her when I arrive Home and she's working in the VLE. I'm not telling her when she pours herself a drink before coming to see if I am there. I'm not telling her as she kisses my forehead, thinking I'm asleep. I'm not telling her when she's showering the next morning, calling out over the thundering surge to says she's going to work today. I'm not telling her when I delay her at the door, tightly bound in her workday clothes like a corset. I'm not telling her when she lets me slip my hand inside her shirt, put my mouth wide and hot and wet upon her clean neck. I'm not telling her when she forces her hand down my trousers, palm pressed tight against me, wrist trapped by the fastened buttons, by the still buckled belt, by the restrictions we have both placed on this interlude, and takes a gratifying grope, her fingers slipping down easily and finding their way inside.

'I'll probably be late Home,' she whispers, pulling out her hand and leaving.

How long before she knows?

I wasted no time. Idelle Devi was going to be the perfect replacement for Naailah. She had a great no-nonsense attitude. Just as I expected.

‘I’ll grab a shower, I think, and see if Naailah is free now to go over things,’ she said, stretched out beneath me on my office couch, still flushed. ‘I’d like to get on top of it as soon as I can. I like to deal with things head-on.’

‘Get them out of the way?’ I asked.

‘I just don’t like things being left undone,’ she answered confidently.

‘Me either,’ I said, not letting her go just yet.

After a long day of the mindless cycle of questions and answers of Reeve candidates, most of whom lacked the personality and a determination I had come to expect, added to the stress of the Clinic and Myra and Kate’s parting shot at Home, I commenced my meeting with Idelle Devi with more impatience and appetite than I’d planned and once I’d started I couldn’t stop. Except, by the time I’d finally done with her, felt and tasted every part that I’d wanted, I felt, not sated, but empty still. Disappointed, not triumphant.

‘Everything OK?’ she said as I rose to dress. I smiled.

‘Of course. And you?’

‘Good. Thanks,’ she said, rising herself and grabbing her clothes from the floor. She slipped on her Ring and numbers immediately glowed from it.

‘Actually, Cynthia, wow,’ she continued. ‘It’s much later than I’d planned. I’m going to head Home for a while, get some sleep, then I’ll contact Naailah to make a start on that work when I get back later, OK?’ She smiled. ‘I can’t be seen at work in the same clothes I had on yesterday, can I?’

She left and I called for a towering pile of food to help fill whatever void I’d managed to create inside me this time. I’m not sure what caused the most emptiness; the

disappointment of Kate not conceiving, her petulance and growing contempt for me; or my predatory infidelity, my need to own, if only for a short time, the brightest, most successful women I found, by taking possession of them, in those moments where they lost themselves to me; or Idelle Devi's ultimate indifference, that allowing my indulgence was just part of the job, another test to pass. But I knew they were all just distractions, really, from my real concern.

I wondered if it had survived wherever it has been taken. It had no place here within the Network, I knew that, but the embers of something, not quite love, not quite hope, had been stirred from the moment it had been born. That I was desperate to replace whatever it was I had been feeling over the years, with stronger feelings for a child with Kate, what I supposed would be real achievement, real family, real love, real hope, only seemed to fuel my feelings for the other.

Guilt. Maybe. Yes maybe it was simply guilt. I don't know.

I turned on my VLE to catch up on messages.

'Ms Burgric,' said the stern face of Ethel Millard, staring back at me in its startling way as it did on a daily basis. Her dark eyebrows contracted together, furiously wrestling over whatever concern she had today with the running of Cod Beck, which usually made me smile, in turn infuriating her all the more. Thankfully, it was a message that had been left late yesterday so wasn't live; they hated that I didn't wear a Ring.

'Once again we have found supplies to be short in the Birdforth sector. I have asked my team to conduct research into our missing supplies and there is a clear pattern, going back years now. I'd say it's a well organised group or groups that have been making regular trips and stealing from us,' she drew breath.

'I believed I had brought news of such irregularities as and when they occurred, but it appears that in both Birdforth and Rydale sectors, some Matrons have not been reporting them regularly, some for lack of care and ability to do their job, others for fear of reporting, in either case, sanctions are being made against the Matrons and any assistants

involved, but without my in depth report, it would never have come to light.’ Another deep breath.

‘Ms Burgric,’ she continued. ‘I know you are extremely busy but this is not the random act of one or two individuals, but the systemic theft of Cod Beck supplies. It needs to be addressed. The Leeds-Arc Mater assures me that improving the security of Cod Beck is a priority, but in the short term I request the deployment of increased numbers of Reeves around our perimeter to counter these raids. My report as it stands so far is available for you in the VLE. I look forward to hearing from you.’

Ethel’s face disappeared. More Reeves. More Reeves for Cod Beck, more for the Caverns, more for York, more for Harrogate, more for Leeds, more in the Edges, more at the PEEKs. Most of the requests I received were for more Reeves in someone’s Arc or facility as though there was nothing more that could be done.

Yet we have a managed human reproduction system that directly links to Cod Beck supplies; under Harvest and Protect Policy, when necessities decrease, so too does procreative access to the ‘Grain Store’, so to speak. In times of plenty, as we have now, we may allow a bumper crop.

Our most important artefacts, books, technology, medicine are safely stored in the Core, that no Bother could reach let alone destroy.

But fine. More Reeves. The solution to everything. The only thing that makes it *appear* as though you are not only doing something about something, but that you are doing it well. Forget all the other stuff, any other plans you have implemented, ideas you have for improvement, just guard what you already have and be seen doing it. Perhaps Kate’s approach had been the right one all along.

‘Get me Core Nightwatch,’ I said and immediately Layla appeared before me, sipping coffee, her guileless eyes, green as new spring leaves.

‘Working late as usual, Ms Burgric,’ she said.

‘You too,’ I replied. I often wondered what would have happened if I had stayed with her and not moved onto Kate. But she and Rose still had their two young girls despite the loss of their son, and I could always tell she was torn, so perhaps it was never to be. It reminded me of my earlier dealings with Idelle Devi. Perhaps Layla, too, had only done what she believed to be part of the job. Except she never did take up any of my offers of promotion or redeployment, with no apparent ambition other than to watch over the sleeping Network, still looking for her boy no doubt. So I consoled myself that she must have seen something more in me than only what she could get out of me, and accepted that I always tended more towards the wrong type.

‘You know I like the night,’ she replied. ‘Keep an eye on the Edges.’

‘Still watching those barrenlands after all this time?’ I said. It was madness really, but we all do what we must.

‘Someone has to,’ she said.

‘And Rose, she’s well?’ I enquired.

‘Lovely as ever,’ she answered automatically.

‘Listen, Layla,’ back to work. ‘I’ve had Millard on the phone again. I know,’ I said to the roll of her eyes. ‘But she’s put together a report that shows regular attacks on supplies. Whatever else she is, she’s good at what she does. The report’s on the VLE, direct it to the Birdforth Reeves and get them to follow up. I’ll sanction extra legs for the next week while they establish patterns, targets, reoccurrences etc. and we’ll take it from there.’

‘What about the Cod Beck Main Road?’ said Layla, suddenly more alert, coffee kicking in. ‘Extra legs there too? Watch the wagons?’

See. More Reeves.

‘Sure, good idea,’ I said. ‘Whoever’s on Core Duty is to keep me informed of any finds.’

‘Absolutely,’ she replied. ‘Night Cyn.’



Her VLE cut out.

There were no more messages. Guilt, briefly-hidden in work, returned quickly and I wondered how Kate was faring after her time in the Clinic. I hadn't stayed for her. I hadn't contacted her. Like me she didn't wear a Ring, so could be hard to track down, which was hardly an excuse. She said it was because I didn't have one. Uses it against me, as though we should both have them; chosen them together. But I knew she was cleverer than that and cared little about traditions old or new. So I never really knew where she was or had been unless I caught a glimpse of her in one of her usual haunts.

'Show me Home,' I said. I flicked between the VLE room image, the hallway and the lounge. No sign. Flicked back. Sometimes I'd catch a shadow of someone walking between the kitchen or the bathroom or the bedroom, sometimes a Brat, sometimes her, but not tonight. Maybe she was in bed. Or maybe she wasn't.

'Show me the Lido,' I said. Images of the Lido appeared and I flicked through quickly to see if she was there. If I had a Ring I would simply be able to grip the image and move to where I wanted, but in a room you had to swipe to where you wanted to be, dismissing each image with a wave of your hand.

There she was, in her favourite spot, one of the few people who went at night. I always wondered why. There were those who liked to take romantic strolls along the shore, letting the water run over their feet, hand-in-hand, wearing flowing white outfits that rippled in the breeze. VLE reproductions of the millions of holiday snaps from before the Bother; it seemed the pre-Bother world was flooded with them. The ideal that everyone seemed to want, to experience, just as they flood the VLE now; white sandy beaches and pink sunsets of the Age of Man are still the most viewed images in the VLE. The exotic. Peace and calm, warmth and solitude. No. Exclusivity. And the ability to show it off. Still sought after all this time, after all they know that passed. That's people.

But it's not her. I suppose she preferred it quiet, and, after all, it was pleasant in there despite the hour, the sea warm still. She habitually laid on the sand for hours and

stared at the sky as though stargazing. I often kept her there in the background as I worked, pointing and talking to herself as though navigating her way through the white illuminations strategically placed within the projected indigo image of the fake, unclouded, night sky. But I could never hear what she said due to the distance of the monitor and the sound of the waves. Whatever it was she said, it was repetitive, speak and point, speak and point; 'Qui est la, qui est la,' for all I knew. It sometimes made me sad to watch her. I'd clipped her wings and maybe one day I'd have to watch her burn as she tried to fly away.

She's got me a new Brat to play with. But she thinks she's been clever because he's older than the others.

I like to test her so-called flawless Treatment system by walking around the house naked. The younger ones tend to gaze out of pure curiosity and look away in terror when I catch their eye. Cyn came Home once and found one on his hands and knees, peering around the wall at my reclining form on the sofa, one hand pumping his prepubescent non-member with all his might to no avail. I think his subsequent obligatory trip to one of her precious Clinics may have been a little premature to be honest, but he got marks for trying. With the older ones, it's pretty obvious when they've had their latest dose; their droopy little Cyclopes stung by Campe's venomous scorpion-tail while condemned to this Tartarus with all the other naughty, wicked angels. They wait patiently for the day that they are asked again to rise up and bring their thunder and lightning, but the ground, the mother from which they were originally discharged, has given up on them it seems, content to keep her galli from ever experiencing a new spring.

This one, however, is neither. He has not recently, if ever, undergone Treatment, yet is no young boy. Small and spindly, he could pass for youth to someone who has long since stopped paying attention, a dirty blonde angel. But his features are weathered and his skin tough as one more accustomed to being outside. He moves with purpose around each room, fit and agile and full of intention. Driven by sense or nonsense, I'm not sure. How he can come to be here, in his fully functioning male state, intrigues me. I enter the shower as he scrubs furiously at our lavatory, turning slowly to ensure he sees the entirety of me.

'You're new to Brat-work, aren't you?' I say. 'You're not supposed to be so thorough. She'll cut your hours if it's too clean in one go.'

He looks up from his task once, to acknowledge my existence, and returns to his task with more haste. Finished, he leaves the room and I can hear him start again in another room.

I follow him around the house, still wet and undressed, to the kitchen.

‘I ‘ave a, friend, you might say, wi’ a mark like thine,’ he says. He has at least seen me, rousing my curiosity at what he chooses to notice.

‘What? These?’ I say, spreading my arms to indicate the swirling foliage that climbs my entire body.

‘No,’ he laughs and points beyond me. ‘That lickle one on y’ back.’

I peer over my shoulder at the rudimentary rose alba that is as old as my skin. The one that caused so much curiosity among the girls at the House, that stirred such suspicion among the House Maters, that I knew nothing of except it had always belonged to me.

‘An old tattoo,’ I say. ‘It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘Oh aye,’ he says. ‘It must mean summat my friend allus thought. Drove ‘im mad thinkin’ about it, it did.’

‘And what conclusion did he draw?’

The Brat shrugged.

‘If ‘e ever found out, ‘e never told me,’ he said. ‘But ‘e reckon’d it din’t get it in t’Network, the’d never gi’y’im it at t’House where we all lived. So ‘e thought ‘e must ‘o got it in t’Uncothlans. See what ah mean? Mad.’

Perhaps so. Or maybe not.

‘See him much, this friend of yours?’

‘Ca’t seh ah do much nowadays, no. Ah wa told ‘e war in t’Network, but ah’ve not come across ‘im yet. Even bin to t’Clinics, ‘genst me better judgement, where ah wa’ told e’ oft wa’. But no such luck.’

‘Bit dangerous, isn’t it? Loitering at the Clinics?’

‘Look, Miss. All ah want is to earn some Brass in peace.’ He tries to busy himself again, sponging a coffee stain under the tap. He’s worried he’s become too familiar with me. Let on way too much.

‘Bit too old to be a Brat, aren’t you?’ I say.

‘Job’s a job. Brass is Brass.’

‘Aren’t you a bit too, intact, for someone your age?’ I persist.

‘Look, if y’ looking to find out ‘ow much?’ he says, throwing his sponge into the sink. ‘It’ll cost y’.’

I stayed as long as I could, prioritising and completing Reeve training allocations particularly. In light of the new strategy, they would be needed sooner rather than later. I'd convinced myself it wasn't lazy, but knew deep down that giving the people what they thought they wanted was another sign that my heart was no longer in the work. The candidates were acceptable, as their initial CPD results showed and despite the disrupted test, so I placed them among the newly inflated Cod Beck Teams. It would give them some initial first-hand, but low-key experience of the Edges before they had to deal with the real thing. The Cod Beck Main Road had always been well patrolled, even before this new alert, so there was never any real action. Any stray Tykes caught there were shipped to the Clinics swiftly, but it was a pretty rare occurrence these days.

The Leeds-Harrogate Mater had been after an update too, particularly in light of the new work I had sent her way.

'Don't short change me on Industrialists this year, then,' Diot said. 'A few engineers wouldn't go amiss. No point saving all these people from themselves, only to kill them off through lack of resources and the wherewithal to tap into them.'

It took time to filter out those who had a more theoretical approach and would just frustrate the Industrialists with their lack of pragmatism, but eventually, I had to call it a day. She'd have to wait for the Clinician list.

My eyeballs burned and my bones ached for sleep. Kate wasn't in again when I arrived Home. No surprise. When had I last seen her? Yesterday? No, perhaps the evening before. I never expected her to wait in for me. Just as she never expected me Home. We could go for days slipping past one another like figurines in a weather house. She liked the rain. She was less tense, less intense, when it rained, her depression released, as though it brought

her new clarity and purpose. I didn't see her much on those days at all. But it didn't last long. Like the weather, her mood revolved in rapid cycles.

I slept deeply for hours, my body heavy with fatigue and my head in a dark, unknown void, until lighter sleep began to play with my mind, my memories, and in flitting dreams I was young and hopeful again as we only ever are in dreams. I'd escaped my droning mother and her erudite ways; the only thing I inherited from her was my, at times, excessive taste for barley. No, not true. Her autocratic, ambitious gene was there too, just hidden well among the piles of books and empty bottles. My father had died when I was too young to know him, as most fathers did back then before the arterial effects of the Treatment had been improved, and he was never discussed. And then, as always followed, just before waking and the return to the present, there was Him, the other man I never knew yet had altered my existence, creeping into my subconscious, dimming the brightness, darkening the hope. Like the earth after the Bother, I remain in distrusting darkness.

The fog of cheerless sleep remained upon me. I escaped the negligible but soft early morning light and sat a while in the unlit VLE room, chasing shadows.

I hadn't really understood the risks of the disease back then, not known what it was, really, until it happened to me, and the true purpose of the Network became clear. I'd only wanted to help. To show Him that we could make things better. I don't know if He thought I liked him, or if He took my kindness for weakness, but He showed me that some people don't want the world to be better. They see only themselves and how to show how powerful and indestructible they can be, in that moment, at the cost of the other. That's the disease, you see, the hubris, the worst kind of driven desire and selfishness until you secure nothing but your own destruction. I knew I was infected the moment He pushed my face into the gritty earth and pulled my clothes off. Because I most certainly didn't want to help

Him anymore, I wanted Him dead. I'm sure He is now. Perhaps long ago. I never found out after He ran away.

I could feel my own infection growing and hid myself away from my mother in fear and shame, not returning Home until I could no longer pretend, until it was almost too late for others not to notice. My mother took me immediately to Harrogate. She told them to do away with it, that, unplanned and unmanaged, it was a danger to the Network. The young Clinician, unaccustomed to Aphra Burgric's scotch-fuelled direction, reminded her it was that such surgical removal was not permitted within the Network. At my mother's distress, resulting in a number of clinical items being tossed to the floor, the Clinician suggested alternative solutions, ideas she had been working on, Treatments not yet tested. She believed that even at this late stage, and with such risk of infection, it could still be managed and manipulated genetically in vivo. Her tests hadn't yet been fully authorised by the Harrogate Mater. This Clinician, as was ever the case, wasn't willing to offer one service in defiance of the Network, but was eager to offer untested alternatives for a member of the Matriarchy if it had the possibility of improving her standing. Even in her youthful fear of my mother's seniority, the Clinician knew an aborted child served the ambition of no one in the Network.

'Why not?' I remember my mother saying, her sallow, myopic eyes looking at me in pity. 'The damage is already done.'

Myra's amnio drugs, and in-utero treatments didn't work, of course. Tests told one thing one week and another the next. Scans were indiscernible. It wasn't clear what, if anything, had been achieved. Eventually, it was too late for anything else, and my mother finally had her way and had it cut from me. Natural expulsions, like natural conceptions, had been dismissed a thing of the past within the Network, another Clinical need controlled, nature tamed for all our benefits.

'All indications show that she could be a girl,' said Myra to my mother. 'If you wanted her to be.'



‘It’s not a girl though,’ said my mother. ‘It’s both. Or neither.’

‘But there are treatments, surgical procedures that may be undertaken,’ Myra continued.

‘Not on a baby,’ said my mother, suddenly disinclined to the tampering that had been so ubiquitous in its gestation. ‘By the time it’s old enough to have them, it will be too late and, anyway, no drug or augmentation will make it anything other than what it wants to be. It is what it is, now it’s here, and not you, or I, can determine that.’

I don’t know when my mother took it away or where exactly she took it, whether that day, or days later, as she hadn’t ever allowed me to see it and I, too young to argue otherwise, stayed confined to my Treatment Room, convalescing and pumped with whatever cleansing solutions they felt I required. But when she told me, many days later, that the baby had gone, their drugs stopped working. The disease drove me mad for a while, with a desperate, baying, instinctive howl that grew and manifested into deep-seated resentment and festering hatred. More drugs of different kinds, more Treatment, more talk. Targeting the symptoms rather than the illness abated the fury and I enjoyed the numb, blankness for a while.

She had been right, of course, as all mothers are, and I wouldn’t have become who I was without her. I left Home as soon as I passed Graduate Recruitment and didn’t see her again. I stayed out of York, not returning even after her death. The Reeves that found her asked what arrangements were in place. I told them there were none and that she could be taken to the Mass Grave at Catterick for all I cared. It shocked them that I suggested my own mother, a Mater once held in high regard, should be dumped in with the toxic remains of those that died from the radiation of the Great Falling Out. I don’t know what they did with her in the end. Perhaps they did as they were told.

She sent me a message, once, while I was still Core Reeve Mater, making a difference, the Edges Cleaner than they had ever been.

‘For all the Sipriotes’ you manage to doctor, there will always be the one that got away.’

It was written on paper, of course, like her beloved books that she entombed herself within, not spoken to me in person. Or through the VLE, even, which she used rarely, except when directing fool’s errands it seems. Spiteful, cowardly, bitch. I never knew if she was referring to Him or to the Other, but those thoughts had been buried, or so I supposed until lately.

The front door clicked. So she was Home. I wasn’t sure that today was the best day our paths should coincide.

‘Cyn,’ Kate said, unusually seeking me out. ‘Are you there?’

I remained silent and closed my eyes. Perhaps if she saw me here she would think I was sleeping. I really hoped she wasn’t breaking the habit and seeking out my company.

‘Cyn,’ she said again, at the door, ignoring my wish, before continuing in a strange voice, at once despairing and gleeful, almost giddy, I wasn’t sure. ‘I’m bleeding. I’m bleeding so much and it won’t stop’

I shot up.

‘What’s bleeding, what?’

I thought, she’s done it. I should have seen it coming.

‘What have you done?’ I said grabbing her arms, holding them out to inspect them.

She yanked them away. Her eyes scrutinised me angrily for a moment, as though offended that these were my first thoughts of what might be happening to her, of what she was capable, before a malicious glint passed quickly to mournful anguish.

‘Our babies,’ she scuffed and grabbed at her dress, pulling it up to reveal her red-stained knickers, her blood soaked legs. ‘Our babies are dying.’

I can't keep them all, they say, these humans growing inside me. That I must choose which to keep safe inside and abandon the rest. They can't all be helped. A familiar story, I seem to think, told across the world, across the centuries.

I visit the Clinics every day, as they instruct, and allow them to make the necessary insertions into my skin, my head, my cavity. Though cavity is no longer strictly true for there is a fair assembly in my chamber and they make the decisions now. What I should eat, when I should eat, how much I should stand, how much I should sit, or lay, and the pursuits I should avoid. Their mouthpieces are the white-coated Tewits, Partrigs, Peggy Whitethroats, Shufflewings, Gawks, Ratbirds, Fishers and Cooscots who twitter around me, pecking with their sharp beaks, flapping their wings and singing the same songs. I've seen all the birds in Harrogate now, I think, but for the Nightingale and Hoopoe for which there are no local names, because the Nightingale, so it goes, was never heard in Yorkshire. Yet Philomela's song can be heard throughout the Network today, while the Hoopoe remains barred, his leadership skills found wanting, his warmongery, rape and thievery well documented throughout Cloudcuckooland.

But we mustn't forget that it is in fact the male nightingale that sings, not the female, so the song of lament we hear now must be an echo, or recording of male voices heard long ago. Or perhaps Philomela's mutilated tongue was returned to her only if she agreed to speak with a male voice, ricocheting down the centuries via the great poets from The Age of Man and into all of our everyday words. Deceiving us into thinking that we speak now for ourselves.

I hadn't spent this much time in the Harrogate Arc since I received my own treatment all those years ago. The pulsing, throbbing, hum of Clinical equipment that ran around the place echoed from a time when the only sounds I could hear were the dripping coils of fluid being pumped into my childish body and my own woeful heartbeat.

'I hear congratulations are in order.' Diot Burgess caught up with me in the corridor as I left Kate with the Cuckoos.

'News travels fast,' I said, not slowing to chat. Though not fast enough it would appear. Perhaps everyone knew before me.

'Not at all,' she reassured me. 'The Senior Clinician on the case consulted me about the present situation. I agreed she should work with other senior colleagues to ensure the best care and treatment is given to Kate and the babies. It really is in their best interests.'

'Well your congratulations are a little premature then, aren't they?' I scolded. 'Save them for when one actually makes it to full term and leaves its wretched incubator unscathed.'

Diot didn't respond. Perhaps she thought I'd gone too far, but Kate's refusal to selectively terminate was putting all of them at risk. I stopped and turned.

'I appreciate all the help the Clinicians are giving,' I said, more measured. 'But let's face it, whatever they do will have little effect if she insists on ignoring advice to selectively abort.'

'Well, I wouldn't know myself, but I imagine it's difficult to lose a child at any stage, whatever the reason,' she said compassionately. She considered me too carefully. What did she know? Could she have accessed files about me? About my own circumstances? Did she consider me uncaring, ruthless? Well she was wrong. That I couldn't bear to lose another child was the very reason we had to choose. Were it my

body... But it wasn't my body. And I had deleted any record pertaining to my Treatment and confinement as soon as I became Materfamilias. The only knowledge of what happened remained in the heads of Myra and me. Myra. Perhaps she had offered some background whilst 'consulting' with her Mater. I had to tread carefully.

'It's very hard, I'm sure,' I said. 'But you know, as well as I, that the choices we make must be practical and in the best interests of the many.'

'Perhaps that is what Kate is considering? The many?'

'Then she risks them all.'

'Maybe it's a risk worth taking.'

'Diot, I appreciate you playing Devil's Advocate here, I really do, I can see you are trying to help me see it from Kate's point of view, but let me clarify things for you. Kate does not share that point of view. Her reason for choosing to ignore Clinical advice is purely an act of defiance. Against me, yes, but in general, against everything. Tell her to do anything and she will simply act contrarily to it, even if the outcome is one that she herself would not wish.'

Diot considered what I said for a moment.

'Are you telling me that her state of mind is questionable?' She paused. 'As, of course, that would enable the Clinicians to take an alternative course of action. If she is unable to make sound decisions herself, then, under the care of the Network, they would work in her best interests and in those of the unborn children.'

I had shielded Kate from this scrutiny for so long. I always thought I would manage. That I wouldn't abandon her. But in many ways I had already, a long time ago. When what I initially thought was brilliance and determination to carry out the Network will, turned out to be pure chaos and oblivion. When I realised she was merely another in a long line of diversions, each one younger and younger, until I could no longer ignore my need to mother. And she needed looking after, didn't she? I couldn't abandon her when she had been abandoned before.

‘I believe that might be true,’ I said. ‘But I would expect your own, full and impartial, Clinical assessments to be made first? All I want is for this madness to be over.’

Diot smiled, satisfied in some way at the decision I’d reached.

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘It will be done in the correct manner.’

It was the first time I hadn’t been completely on top of things. I didn’t make it into the Core once that week, spending my time escorting Kate to and from The Stray and working from Home instead to keep an eye on her. We weren’t used to spending this much time together and she was like a caged animal roaming around the rooms and leaning against the window for hours at a time. I told her she should be resting, laying down, like the Clinicians told her, legs elevated, not stressing herself out. But she didn’t listen and didn’t respond. The only thing that appeared to lift her from her antagonised gloom was, surprisingly, the Brat. He came daily, as scheduled. As he went about his business, she followed his grey overalled form around our Home. Conversing. She didn’t do that. She didn’t natter. What about I don’t know, whenever I came within earshot she stopped talking. For his part, he worked hard, so I couldn’t complain. He didn’t look at her in any desirous way, older, he was quite obviously well along in his Treatment. And she didn’t attempt to taunt him. His shaggy blonde hair fell over his pink, weathered face as he worked. He didn’t look up as they talked. He always worked, scrubbing, wiping down, and she followed him around. I was curious about what she could possibly have to talk about with him, but I was also relieved that I didn’t have to watch her continuously while he was there. There was part of me that was sort of glad she had a friend. But I had to stop thinking that way, my maternal feelings were better directed at our babies, not her. But now I’d started to question everything, I was finding it hard to stop, and my world, this life I had worked so hard to build, felt like it was cracking. Worse than that, I was letting it. Maybe even helping it. I had spent so long trying to be mother to everyone, and I was tired of it. Perhaps it was time they all left Home.

I was exhausted, catching up on weeks of lost sleep, though liquor-induced-slumber isn't real sleep at all. But, for me, the daylong dreamless black coma is the only place I can rest. In any case, if I had any concerns about the Brat and their budding friendship, they were soon put out of my head when Elmet sent another to carry out the work.

'What happened to your colleague,' I asked the new boy after a couple of days. Much younger, freckly-fresh-faced, no sign of requiring any Treatment yet. He shrugged. But why did I expect him to know anything beyond than the bit of Brass I supposed he made doing this job.

'Kate?' I said, calling to her as she lay sprawled on the carpet staring at the ceiling rubbing her bare stomach. 'What happened to your little friend?'

'I have no little friends,' she answered.

'The Brat, Kate?' I said, leaning against the doorframe. 'Robin, wasn't that his name? He did a good job. You seemed to like him well enough. It's a shame he's been replaced. He didn't say if he was moving on? Doing something else? Going to work at Cod Beck perhaps? Or the York ArchIVES, they'd keep him busy. Either would likely be better paid for a good little worker like him?'

She didn't answer. She instead continued to lay and rub, humming a tune. I watched her as she sang to herself.

'Oh, what a wonderful thing to be, a healthy, grown-up busy, busy bee...'

'What's that?' I said, watching the circular stroking motion she made.

'A song my mother sang,' she said. 'At least, I suppose it is. Else, how would I know it?'

She never spoke of what she remembered of her family. For all I knew, she remembered nothing at all. Perhaps she was beginning to feel more maternal. Maybe something was awakening in her.

'...Taking back the honey to the dear old queen.'

She laughed joyously and looked at me, beginning to sing again, louder, wagging her finger at me as she sang.

‘Oh, what a wonderful thing to be,  
A nice obedient, busy, busy bee,  
To be a good bee one must contrive,  
For bees in a beehive must behave.  
But maybe I wouldn't be a bee,  
Bees are alright when alive you see,  
But when bees die you really should see 'em  
Pinned on a card in a dirty museum.’

‘Have you finished now?’ I said.

‘Bzz Bzz Bzz Bzz Bzz,’ she sang, her fingers flapping little waves either side of her face, like wings.

‘Stop it, Kate,’ I said. ‘When are you going to just stop it?’

She returned to her mindless trance, at some dust-speckled space between her nose and the ceiling, an inane smile lingering on her lips, her hand mindlessly slipping back to her abdomen, cradling the small mound as blood began to run and pool from under her legs.

‘Bzz Bzz Bzz Bzz,’ she whispered.

I missed the message from Naailah whilst rushing Kate back to The Stray, picking it up in Myra's office while I waited for the Clinical report.

‘I know you've other priorities just now, so won't wait for you to confirm what I expect you've authorised. Diot has set me to work immediately on the Caverns project. Idelle Devi has all she needs and I'm sure will be everything you expect her to be. Best wishes to Kate.’

Best wishes. She needed them where she was now.



I hadn't in fact authorised anything about the Caverns, but Diot knew what she was doing so, if she was putting Naailah straight to work, I trusted her judgement.

'You did the right thing,' said Myra, returning. 'We can look after her much better here. Less likely to become overexcited than at Home.'

'Where's Diot?' I said.

'I'm not sure. Perhaps Cod Beck? Or in the Leeds-Arc? She wears so many hats it's hard to pin her down.'

Kate was in the next room. Sedated, she slept soundly as the remaining cells in her womb were monitored. She'd lost another three embryos since last time. Six left. More manageable, Myra said, but still too many for them all to survive. They would need to be watched carefully, she said, as it was difficult to determine the gestation period of the remaining embryos without being more invasive, and that risked termination. Tests on cells that had already been aborted were revealed to be three weeks, four weeks and, lastly, eight weeks old; just seven days from being described as foetal.

'How could this have happened?' I demanded. 'I thought you had managed the overstimulation?'

'We were, as I explained before, trying to adjust the hormones to reduce the hyperstimulation Ms Swithens is experiencing,' Myra said. 'But the other factors, which we also discussed previously, are those that we cannot control.'

'Yes, you suggested paternal rejection. Clearly not an issue at all!'

Myra cleared her throat but didn't speak.

'So I'm asking again, how have we got in this mess?' I said.

'Ms Burgric,' she began. 'You have to understand that our procedures are very strict, as is our advice to our patients, but we cannot prevent it being ignored.'

'Yes, yes, because you Clinicians never work outside of the rules, do you, Myra? Let's not play silly buggers, shall we? Have you been carrying out additional treatments,

‘new’ ones perhaps, testing them out on Kate to get results, because it wouldn’t be the first time, would it? Wouldn’t be the first time your meddling hadn’t gone quite so well?’

‘I can assure you,’ Myra replied, steadily. Her eyes were hard, but her mouth curling at the corner as though suppressing a nervous smile. ‘It is not through the efforts of the Clinic that these embryos came into being. For one, the lost embryos each had different DNA.’

‘You had been testing for paternal tolerance!’ I delayed her as long as I could without looking like the complete idiot I clearly was. ‘I assume you used a number of male cells to test this against?’

‘None of the DNA matches any we hold in our database,’ she said.

Silence for a moment. Myra did not look away from me. She held my stare, a glimmer of triumph.

‘I asked Diot to carry out independent assessments. Were they done?’ I said.

‘Yes all the information is here,’ said Myra pulling up her VLE. ‘But a full, rounded Clinical assessment is always more difficult for having no direct parental information on Ms Swithens.’

I’d heard it all before. When we began in our attempts to have a child, her cloudy genetic history was laid bare. No direct maternal matches were found in the VLE when she was first brought into the Network as a young child. Clinicians confirmed her to be a genetic Swithens, a Founding Family name, but of some generations hence; the Network being small, crossover of hereditary paths and historical-lineal equivalents are not uncommon, but it is unusual not to find other, more direct Network links. There was a boy though, younger, likely a brother. Put into one of the Boys’ Houses around the same time she was lodged at the Girls’ House at five. We could only assume they were born to non-registered Edge dwellers that had died. She wanted to look for this boy. Insisted upon it before she would agree to any further treatment. So we mined the VLE for more clues. Frequent Network records existed on him up to twelve, a condition of him being in a Boy’s

House, but they stopped before Treatments were due to begin. We guessed he ran away, back to the Edges. Only one other Clinical record of him was found. A blood report, five years after his last official record, full of toxins including traces of old THC analogues as well as newer opioid mimics. It was unearthed among an anonymous batch of Tyke records from the Mobile Clinics. Having never been Network-sanctioned, CC records were logged but not officially aligned in the VLE against any existing Network held Clinical records. Once the programme was binned, no more time was to be wasted on it, the data disregarded. The DNA search found him there, but the batch was inconclusive, with some detailed records confirming the completion of simple orchiectomy Treatment, others less thorough. All that could be gleaned from the data was that he had been there. Whether he had survived the Treatment, or if he had been Treated at all, was uncertain. She never mentioned him again, but I was sure she held herself responsible for his certain demise.

‘Clinical Concerns have been in place for a while,’ Myra continued. ‘But I think you know that. Inflammation of Ms Swithens’ cytokines indicates high a level of psychosocial stress, which, in Clinical opinion, has been exacerbated by her Treatments and subsequent pregnancies. We also believe that she is rule-bound, that the,’ she paused for effect, ‘actions, she has taken in order to conceive represent obsessive-compulsive ritual. Your own reports, and our observations of her behaviour, include both symptomatic withdrawal and loss of inhibition, restlessness, agitation and severe mood swings. Mrs Swithens told Ms Burgess in one consultation that she felt as though she had long been living inside a dream that she was waiting to wake up from...’

‘Yes, OK, I...’ she really didn’t need to go on. It was clear to me then that, no matter my standing, no matter my success, no matter that I had brought stability and prosperity to all within the Network, one thing would always bring me down. In the first, I hadn’t conceived in the correct manner and had required the help of others to try sort out the problem. I had allowed the child to be taken from me, given away, abandoned, left to die, who knew what. I didn’t know what. I had been deemed unfit. In the second, I had

refused to, and in so doing, left it too long to try again myself in the correct manner. Worse than that, I had made, in Kate, another unfit mother. Was that Myra's, *their*, belief, their judgement, or just my own reflected in their eyes?

‘We require your agreement,’ added Myra. ‘But it is the Clinical recommendation, agreed by Ms Burgess, that Ms Swithens is admitted and transferred to Complete Clinical Care.’

‘The babies?’

‘Will be constantly monitored whilst Ms Swithens is cared for. She will be lightly sedated, to prevent unnecessary exertion or volatility; it really is their best chance.’

‘Make sure she’s well looked after,’ I nodded. ‘No unnecessary tinkering, Myra. Not this time.’

‘Of course. It’s for the best, Ms Burgric,’ Myra smiled. ‘And I’m sure Complete Clinical Care isn’t like the old days. Even so, it will help that she has a Network Matriarch looking out for her best interests, just as you did.’

‘I really must return to the Core; I’ve been away too long.’

They say we become our parents. Ultimately doomed to repeat and not to learn. As I walked away from Kate, back to the solitude of my work, I looked out through my mother’s eyes, her face morphing over mine, the transformation complete.

It's a curious thing, to have a friend.

You don't know they are a friend when you meet them, you're not even sure if you are going to like them and, as a rule, I don't. People are a means to an end. Being brought up in a Network House teaches you quickly that the only person you can rely on is yourself and that other people are only worth getting to know if you can get something from them, otherwise, it is they that think that they are going to get something from you.

The boys think they have it bad. There are a lot of Boys' Houses throughout the Network. Accidents, whether through faulty or missed treatment, or through not having enough Brass to ask the Clinics to screen the cells prior to treatment and receive follow-on pregnancy enhancement treatments, or through a visit to the Edges and forgetting that Network women, unlike those from the Age of Man, are not required to be responsible for contraception.

For some women, it is the shame.

For others, it is the cost.

The boys are kept like the hens at Cod Beck; well enough. They are well-fed and kept warm, fit, clean and clothed. They are educated to acceptable standards and have access to the VLE and passes to the ArchIVES at York. It is a source of discontentment among some sectors of the Network, that these boys have better livings and opportunities than some hardworking Network families. But the boys are needed for the Harvest and Protect Programme to be successful and for the Network to endure. Treatment starts as early as possible; with so many boys in one place at the same time, it is critical to ensure that disease isn't allowed to take hold as it could spread quickly. But the changes that the Treatment brings on at such a scale are more noticeable in larger numbers, among people you have lived and grown up with, and it scares the boys. The younger ones call the older,

Treated, boys, Bots. The only options they believe they have in life are to become Bots, or to run away to uncertainty and Troll at the Edges. So my new friend, Robin, told me.

For us girls, though, it's worse. Because, who abandons a girl?

There is only one Girl's House in the whole of the Network. Small, cliquy, and very competitive. Most are 'Only Ones' with plenty of Brass at the back of them, left to them by their unfortunate parent or parents, enough to start them off once they leave the House, on top of the excellent education they receive. Girls from the House are usually among the top performing groups across the board, at all ages, which has led the York-Arc on more than one occasion to consider whether it would be better to take all children away from their families at school age and keep them until ready to join the Athenas. Prestige won out over sentimentality, of course; if so many children became high achievers, they worried, there wouldn't be enough differential throughout the Network, nor enough boys to backfill and do the rest of the menial stuff. Better they all stay with their families and let nature and nurture do the initial screening and filtering for the Network at no direct cost.

I am the abandoned girl.

Unusual. Unwanted.

The only thing I thought I had brought with me from before is the alba on my shoulder. The other little girls didn't like it and it made me self-conscious at bath time. I stayed away from them. Marked out, different, as I was. And so I grew up not knowing or seeking friendship. Left in the care of the Network, of those who know best, with their advice and Treatments and four meals a day being pumped into me. Routine, care and control. Tools to make me feel safe. To make me feel valued. That my life is valuable. That my life *means* something. To me. To them. Watching, to ensure I comply, to ensure I am grateful, and that I repay my debt in the right way.

I remember once asking the House Mater where I came from.

'Goodness only knows,' she said.

But, if only goodness knew, it can't be that bad a place, can it?

And so then, when my new friend told me that my alba was not the only one in the whole Network, that he had seen another, barbed and seeded proper, one just like mine, I of course needed to know more.

'Where should we look for this young bud?' I asked my new friend, driving him to all the places he had once been, or might be seen again. While Cyn drank and slept away her long dreary nights, we searched the back alleys of the Edges and I let him talk of all he knew. The last place was an abandoned mansion he'd been reluctant to visit, full of artefacts and recently slept in beds.

'The've all gone,' my new friend told me, appearing relieved.

'Gone where?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'Do't know. Do't care.'

'Where else could he be?'

'Ah told y', he replied as we drove away. 'The' send 'im on errands to t'Clinics. Ah just ca't be seen there more than I 'ave already, not wi'y'out bein' collared.'

And so, my friend, knowing nothing more, had no more tales to tell. He drew dark little paths through the dust on my dashboard; spirals like the Core; hexagons like honeycomb; circles like links on a chain. And once I had taken him, I had no further use for him. So we parted ways and I am friendless again.

And, as before, I find I am abandoned. Alone. Left in the care of the Network, of those who know best, with their advice and treatments and four meals a day being pumped into me. Routine, care and control. Tools to make me feel safe. To make me feel valued. That my life is valuable. That my life *means* something. To me. To them. Watching, to ensure I comply, to ensure I am grateful, and that I repay my debt in the right way.

There were too many messages to catch up on when I returned to the Core after a uneasy night's sleep at Home, though it seemed things had gone well in my short absence. I put it down to having allowed my emotions rule my judgement last week, when I momentarily questioned my continuing purpose as Materfamilias, but the work that had been done could only have been handled as efficiently and effectively as it had with the right structures, teams and people in place to do them. And hadn't I been the person to build them, to appoint them? Layla had filed a report that Core Reeves had dealt successfully with an incompetent attempt by some Edge escapees to access the Flyover. Around a week ago now, she'd requested additional patrols, surprise, surprise, suggesting the reassignment of the underutilised Burford Reeves, which Naailah had sanctioned temporarily in my absence. It was just one of the many things Naailah had worked hard on up until her departure, so credit to her, and for the time she had put into leaving things in order for Idelle. We did make a good team. Perhaps I had been too hasty. Idelle could have been trained up beside us, rather than thrown in at the deep end. But what was done, was done, for now. Perhaps I could look into a new Leeds-York Union based around this water project Naailah had in mind. When she came back with her findings, I'd see what opportunities it threw up. She might reinvigorate York. I might even be interested in York again. She could work alongside Diot Burgess; what a team they could be, both doing the things they loved most. Idelle Devi would be my assistant. Strictly my assistant. In time, one of them might even progress to the Materfamilias role if we widened the Matriarchal Pool, such an old unnecessary rule now, put in place to ensure the inviolable terms of our sanctuary here in the Network. When so many were now loyal to the Network and its aims, why should they not be allowed, and why would they not want to be responsible for upholding the foundation upon which it was built. We here are the custodians of a woman's right to live unmolested, to live our lives as we choose, progress and innovate



without intrusion or appropriation. And so long as we don't step outside the boundaries of the PEEKs, so long as we keep our affairs to ourselves and leave those outside to their own business, we will always be able to do so. Why would any of us want to step outside into the Uncothlans again, to try in turns to negotiate with, navigate or avoid the never ending Bother, when everything we want and need is right here?

It wasn't lost on me that my renewed hope in the Network had arisen from a sense of freedom I hadn't felt in I didn't know how long. My own sense of freedom had emerged from Kate's confinement. There are always difficult choices to make, but, should you have the right disposition and resolve to make those choices, the payoffs can far-reaching.

Next message.

'Reeves Section, cfi Materfamilias,' said a Reeve breathlessly, evidently talking while walking, arm stretched in front of her. She was followed by a number of people but it was dark and I couldn't see who or exactly how many. I looked at the time, it was now midday; the message had been left nearly nine hours earlier.

'Core Reeves. What's your report, Edwards?' replied the Core Duty Reeve. It was Layla, of course, in the middle of Nightwatch.

'Big haul. Twelve individuals. Proper Edgies, and I mean proper Edgies. It's pretty disgusting actually, clarted up to their eyeballs, they are.'

She gave away her own Edge upbringing the more she spoke. Funny how a reformed anything, drinker, smoker, meat-eater, Edge-dweller, become more self-righteous than those that never were. Fear of relapse perhaps. Constant reaffirmation required.

'Anyway, they need a big Clean with an Extended Stay at Clinics before they're let loose again. Picked up on the Cod Beck Main Road, just south of Catterick Tombs and the old waste fortification site. Whatever they live off out here hasn't agreed with them at all. I dread to think what it's laced with. Anyway, we've still a bloody long way to go down the Main Road to Isurium and we have these new Athenians with us, fretting over all the mess, so we're requesting transport.'

‘Checking for you now, Edwards,’ said Layla. ‘No, sorry. They’re all carrying goods from Cod Beck.’

‘Great. Can any pick us up?’

‘No, Edwards, they cannot pick you up. They contain goods for Network consumption. If the Edge Dwellers are in need of as much Cleaning as you say they are, then why would we risk cross-contamination?’

Edwards sighed.

‘Well, that’s just marvellous. Well, hopefully one or two’ll drop dead in the next six hours then. Lower the trouble probability when we reach The Stray. It’s a long walk, them not being so good and that; I’d hate for it to do ‘em in.’

‘I’ll have the VLE track you so that when you reach Isurium a carriage is kept clear for you to take the Burford Journey to Lancet. Otherwise best keep them moving; dead Edge Dwellers don’t look good on reports. Which reminds me, make sure you file yours within the timescale, the last three are coming up on the VLE as late. It’s two hours after entry into Safekeeping, not twenty four, not fifteen, not even three.’

‘Well, sometimes Safekeeping hold you up. What do you think’s going to happen with twelve to process?’

‘The VLE is issuing you a final warning, so I guess you’ll just have to not let them hold you up. Out.’ Layla came off the VLE.

‘Righteous cow,’ Edwards muttered to one of her colleagues as she let her arm flop down. ‘Aww, fuckin’ ‘ell mate, do you mind not heaving where I’m walking.’ The VLE message ended. It amused me when they forgot they’d copied me in. In any case, it sounded as though the Reeves on the Cod Beck Main Road were doing their job and the new recruits were getting immediate hands on experience. Still, twelve on the Main Road was unusual these days, with comings and goings to Cod Beck regular, Edge Folk knew to avoid being anywhere near. They sounded unwell; dysentery, I guessed, it usually was. Found us when they needed us. These little communities they built, usually after running

away from the Network, took for granted how coddled they'd been under our care, only causing their various infections and diseases to spread quicker. If it didn't kill them, they usually came quickly back around to our way of thinking.

'Get me Ethel Millard,' I said. Perhaps they just rounded up whoever stole the provisions from Birdforth and Rydale and we could put it to bed. Job done and seen to be done.

No answer.

Strange. Millard always answered a call.

'Ethel Millard,' I repeated. Nothing.

'Read Quarters,' I said. No answer.

'Bonny Quarters.' Still nothing.

'Cod Beck Duty Reeve,' I said.

Dead. Now that was more worrying.

'Idelle Devi,' I said.

'Hi Ms Burgric,' Idelle said, pushing her hair from her face. 'How's Kate?'

'Kate? Fine. Listen, Idelle, I can't get hold of Cod Beck. Can you keep trying please and also get Leeds to check the VLE?'

'Sure,' she said, a trained look of concern on her face. 'Who are you trying to reach?'

'Ethel Millard, but anyone will do. It's more the VLE I'm concerned about. I want to know if Leeds are aware of anything and dealing with it.'

'Of course,' she replied.

I cut her off.

'Core Duty Reeve,' I said.

'Ms Burgric,' came the response. I didn't know her. Layla would have finished Nightwatch at nine, more was the pity. I valued her calm competence.

'My Cod Beck teams,' I said. 'How many are in place?'

‘Two teams, each with five graduate trainees and two Reeves, were sent to Birdforth and Rydale within three days of your original instruction. A further team was commissioned yesterday on the Cod Beck Main Road. The rest are still going through Core Personal Safety and can’t be sent anywhere yet.’

‘And the main Cod Beck team? How many?’

‘No new trainees have been sent to the main team.’

‘No, I mean the team itself. How many in the team? Shift patterns, numbers, should someone be there now?’

‘You mean on duty? There’s always a team on duty.’

‘Have any of them checked in with you?’ I was getting impatient.

She flicked her hand from right to left, reading reports I couldn’t see.

‘Just the Main Road team. Early morning. They made arrangements for Safekeeping and Cleanup of some Edge boys with the Nightwatch Reeve. I see you were copied in. Are they the ones you were after?’ she said.

‘Anyone else? Today I mean?’

She flicked again.

‘No, all quiet.’

‘What about a mid-morning check-in?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Don’t they check in regularly?’

‘Not unless they need Core Coordination or Authorisation.’ She started to sound nervous.

‘All teams used to report in three times a day.’

‘I,’ she faltered. ‘I think that rule was relaxed.’

‘On whose say so?’

Her eyebrows lifted along with her shoulders. She didn’t know.

‘They all have Rings,’ she tried to explain. ‘They don’t have to check in from a VLE Room anymore because contact is instant. We can track the teams when they are out on jobs.’

‘If the rule had been followed, you might know that Cod Beck is currently unreachable. Go through your lists. Get hold of someone,’ I said. ‘Check in with them. Make sure all is well and let me know.’

Connection ended.

My middle finger tapped on the desk in front of me as I thought.

‘Diot Burgess,’ I said.

I needed a Loiner’s brain. Someone like me who had worked on the structures of the Network. Knew the VLE inside out. The Reeve was right; contact was instant. The VLE ran through the Network like blood in our veins. Cod Beck had been cut off somehow. Maybe Ethel had been right. Perhaps we hadn’t been watching the northernmost Edges as we should have been; worried more about the towns than the wilderness.

‘For fuck’s sake, Diot Burgess,’ I said when she didn’t answer. ‘Get me the fucking Leeds-Harrogate Mater.’ But still Diot didn’t answer.

‘Show me the last recorded location of Diot Burgess,’ I said. Maybe she was at Cod Beck. Being part of the York-Harrogate Union, it did come under her care. The winding blue Network map unravelled, first magnifying the Harrogate Arc, then The Stray, then Sparrow Clinic. Ten o’clock. Progress check on a routine Primary Protect and Harvest in the House Sparrow Treatment Suite. It appeared to have been halted for some emergency. She then terminated the treatment and her connection to the VLE ended.

‘Show me House Sparrow Treatment Suite, room five.’

The room flashed into view. Sure enough, Diot was treating a young patient and speaking to someone who appeared to be the boy’s father. There was another patient in the room, hovering anxiously by the door.

‘Sound,’ I ordered.

‘Ah do’t want to insist,’ said Diot, in an idiomatic voice I’d not heard her use before.

‘And ah’ll not ask y’ to,’ the father replied, before taking his son by the hand. ‘We’ll not keep y’.’

‘D’ we’ve to shift, now. Ah’m not deein in this Pit,’ the boy at the door shouted. He was sweating. ‘Ah want to go ‘ome. Y’ said y’d get me out. Sorry, Shaf.’ He said to the father. Diot took her Ring from the Control Stand, put it in her pocket and left with the other patient. I could hear a commotion in the background.

‘Show me Sparrow. Room by Room. This morning. Ten.’

Chaos. Clinicians, Technicians, Patients, Reeves. What the hell was happening? Why did I not know?

‘Get me The Stray,’ I said. ‘Reeves Section.’

But of course it was dead.

‘Fuck it. Core Duty Reeves.’

‘Ms Burgric. I haven’t been able to locate,’ the Duty Reeve began.

‘All teams,’ I said. ‘Deploy to Cod Beck and The Stray. Immediate action. Fully kitted for Care and Control.’

‘Yes, Ms Burgric.’ Gone.

‘Idelle Devi.’

‘I was on to Leeds,’ Idelle said immediately. ‘They say the whole of the Harrogate Arc is affected; they’ve been working on it since ten.’

‘And they told no-one?’

‘They reported it to their Mater, but had to leave a message as she wasn’t contactable.’

‘Didn’t the idiots conceive that she might be within the Arc? One week. One week I’m away. Do I have to think for everyone? Get hold of York and ensure they are not affected. If all seems normal, tell them to commence Containment Procedures. I’ve

deployed all Reeves, immediate action, to The Stray and Cod Beck. I may have to commence Core Lock Down, as a precaution, so get yourself to Boothroyd Castle just in case. Keep in touch. I'll meet you there.'

'Get me Naailah,' I said. I didn't expect a response, supposing that she had gone eagerly to the Caverns to carry out her research. 'Naailah. When you see this message get yourself back. Boothroyd Castle.'

Core Lock Down. I hoped it wouldn't come to that. The Core hadn't been fully closed since the Great Falling Out. I'd lost focus. While spending too long contemplating the weaknesses of others, I'd overlooked my own.

'Show me Cuckoo Clinic. Diederik Suite.' Of course, I knew I wouldn't be able to see her with the blackout in place. I suppose it was my last attempt at showing I cared. Better that, than nothing. To check she was still being looked after by someone. That she was safe. Secure from whatever was going on around her. Make sure she was contained, while I looked after everyone else. Because that was what I did wasn't it? Kept the Network safe and found ways to ensure everyone, to ensure she, could do nothing to bring harm to themselves or others.

'Show me this morning at ten.' When I knew it was still running. Empty. 'Show me this morning at six.' Still empty. I'd only left her the night before, right there in that room, she couldn't have gone already. 'Show me yesterday evening. Seven p.m.' I'd only left a little before that. Not long before.

But it seemed she was being transferred immediately to Complete Clinical Care after all, sat in a wheelchair ready for transportation. When Myra had said that Kate had a Network Matriarch looking out for her best interests, I immediately thought she meant me. But as Diot Burgess tenderly wrapped Kate up to protect her from the cold outside, crouching in front of her and speaking to her so softly I couldn't hear a word, I realised that perhaps Kate had another guardian watching over her with a different agenda. And perhaps the entire Network did too.

We are to be evacuated first I am told. Before the other cuckoo and their incubations. Before they will begin to let the boys leave. Before they tell the boys they must. Before the alarm even sounds. Before anyone knows there will be a need to evacuate anyone at all. Our bodies are detached from the Clinical Chair in which I've slumbered all day and we are disconnected from the VLE by a faceless shadow. It dresses me and covers my knees with a blanket, 'for the journey,' it whispers. A blurred light flickers before me like a flame where its head should be, bobbing in and out of sight, an aura from the room's bright electro-luminescence. Drowsy, I am lowered into a new chair and wheeled from The Stray.

Upon a train. Away, away. Out briefly into the fierce cold night air and eventually guided inwards again, pushed back inside, under the brick archways like the folded rugae of the vulva I must once have left. There is magic within these walls that once allowed men to pass through in their search for sight and knowledge, only for them to leave again when what they sought was not found, or what they found was not what they sought after all. But the magic remains, for, though I have never been here before, I know I am being taken home.

The shadow says to wait here, that we are all safe now.

'All that tha's after'll come to thee, an tha shall know thissen once mower' it says. 'An then it'll be time to be off fo good. 'Time is comin.' The shadow takes my hand and puts it into that of another. One that is warm but small and frail. One that I will hold all night until it becomes cold and lifeless. The shadow dissolves into the creeping morning light.

We wait as a damp air settles on the blanket.

We wait as the cold begins to pick at our toes and rouse our brain.



And just as it begins to look as though nothing is coming, he arrives.

‘Are you looking for us?’

‘Eh?’ He says into a procedural mask though he can be no Clinician, seeing us for the first time as he hobbles passed the glass cubicle in quick uncomfortable strides, with intent only possibly in familiar surroundings. He scowls at the open door, which is clearly a less usual sight, but stays outside.

‘Your leg is hurt.’

He looks down as though he’d forgotten. He’s been hurt for so long, it’s become part of him. He shakes his head and begins to limp away again.

‘Are you not here to help us? To take us away? They said you were coming for us.’

‘What you on about?’ He says, so perhaps he is not. ‘A’ve sed it a million times, ah’m not ‘ere to look after nutty Network lasses. Ah’m looking for someone. They said to come ‘ere an wait. The’ said the’d get me out. But it seems ah’m allus t’last on t’list o’ folk the’ mean to ‘elp.’ He’s not talking to me anymore. Angry, the mask sticks to his clammy face and contorts in creases with each word and grimace and sneer.

‘Why are you wearing a mask? Are you infected?’

He laughs and pulls it down aggressively to either show me he is not, or to ensure I get a dose of whatever he has. His mouth and chin are pink and puffy from the recycled moisture of wearing his mask for some time. He sniffs back his runny nose, the thermodynamic filters working overtime in the new fresh rush of cold air.

‘Not me, though yee lot reckon we all are. Check yersen. It’s you that’s ‘oddin’ ‘ands wiya stiff, love,’ he says to me, but I see his triumph dip as sadness, momentarily, fills his eyes, when he glances to my right and quickly away again. I turn to see what he sees, and there is a face that I sometimes imagine I see when I look in the mirror. It’s more hollow than I remember, mouth stretched wide into a last yawn, a pale jaundice lingering

within the thin skin and in her eyes. Eyes empty now of what I think must have held such a fondness I've never seen inside the Network.

'Who is she?' I ask, holding that last long gaze.

'Jus' some lass a' wa' told to keep an eye on.'

'You looked after her?'

'Ah did as ah war asked. Saw to er when 'er keeper 'ad to be elsewhere. Like now it would appear. Oo is she to you?'

'An impermanent companion, like most people. So you're not here for us?' I sigh. My breath forms clouds. All the warmth there might have been in the world gone and all that is left is dank air. 'I was told to wait too. That someone would come for me.'

'Well it in't me, love. Y' wa' lied to. Join' club.'

'What lies were you told?'

'That ah'd be 'elped. That if ah did all ah were asked, if ah played ma part, ah'd get all what ah wanted.'

'We're all lied to about that.'

He's leaving again, outside of the glass walls of this tomb, his stomping footsteps echo around the vaulted walls. I call after him. 'What was it you wanted?'

'To get the fuck out o' this shit'ole,' he shouts over his shoulder.

'I have a car.'

He stops. He's listening.

'My legs still feel too jelly-ish to walk, but, if you can get me to it, I'm sure I could manage to drive. I can take you where you need to go if you can tell me where we are.'

He's not answering, but weighing up his options. How long has he been out here, alone, leaning on his stick, keeping out of sight? Too long. He's worn out.

'Fountains,' he says.

'I keep my car near the Lido. Listen, we've both been let down, but we can help each other. Do you have family? I can take you to them. Where's Home for you?'

He turns with sad, sunken eyes, deep and dark like potholes.

‘Beyon’t PEEKs. Tek me there, can y’?’

A kindred spirit. My favourite kind. ‘It’s exactly what I can do.’

I hold my free hand out to him but still he hesitates.

‘Ah ca’t trust y’.’

‘True, but who can you trust?’

‘There wa’ someone, once.’

‘We all had someone once.’

He returns to us all in this, our private room and grasps my outstretched hand and in that moment, palm to palm, I am a bridge between the cold, lonely vacuity of death and the promise of life and strength and purpose. We make now our own private vows, our own silent remembrances, set soon to leave in search of our own divine happiness.

Leeds was contained. York was contained. The Core was contained. Locked off for safety. Nobody in or out of the Arcs. No Autoroute service running anywhere. You want to go somewhere, you walk. You want to walk somewhere so badly at the moment, you're up to something, and the Reeves will have a word.

Harrogate was in chaos. Patients fleeing The Stray. Clinicians and Reeves not knowing who was infected and who wasn't until it was too late. The condition spreading quickly like mercury, not purifying and healing, but polluting all with its toxicity and making the earth black, unclear itself whether it was breaking down or reinforcing boundaries. Doors opened; doors closed. No control; tighter controls. Freedom; not free.

And when I say condition, I mean both the poison the Edge men brought with them when they entered the Network as well as the old disease. Clinical tests hadn't started yet on what it was exactly they were carrying; it was too early, we were still fighting fires. It was almost beside the point anyway, deadly as whatever it was, the side effect, the transmutation of the disease they brought, was the bigger problem. The one going to cause most damage, the one that will cause the most long-term harm. This Bother they brought back with them, direct into the heart of our only means of managing our future successfully, was the one we had kept at bay for well over a century. But now the Grain Store was polluted and resources would have to be burnt. I had to see for myself. Maybe some could still be saved. Some future. Some control.

I was sweating inside my black SORT suit. The last time I wore one was during Reeve training, a long time ago now. I remember how the other recruits thought them excessive, overkill, that we were a different society now, cleaner, controlled, safer; these suits were

relics from the Bother, before the time the PEEKs went up, when Uncoth men were still trying to get in and radiation sickness was still carried on the wind, and the well had to be sorted from the diseased. But my own experiences had shown that Bother could leak into the Network, still drip down its old streets. that one slip up, one blink, could catch us off guard and we had to be able to defend and respond, should the Bother ever swell or threaten to engulf the Network again. Well, I hadn't blinked. More like forty winks it appeared, as I looked down on The Stray, high above from the Lancet Dropoff, and the foetid stench of Bother suffocated all below.

The shuffling steps of black SORT-suited Reeves, in groups of five or six at a time, passed beneath me, back and forth, with calls of various Clinics being closed and locked-down, shouted estimates of people inside the various Treatment Suites bounced off the glass walls echoing up to the glass ceiling above me, status confirmations of whether they appeared to be 'Clean' areas or 'Contaminated' reverberated off the hard surfaces, any soft furnishings having been removed, sent to the incinerators no doubt in keeping with Clean-Up Controls.

'Lapwing, red,'

'Water Rail, green,'

'Cuckoo, red,'

'Sparrow, red,'

'Kingfisher, green,'

'Woodpigeon, red,'

'Willow Warbler, red,'

'Partridge, green.'

The upper levels all shut down, filled with contamination. It was like listening to the roll call of the extinction of birds that used to live in these parts, all those many years ago; the birds of the air blown from the skies with nowhere safe to land, those below, like Lapwing, waiting for the inevitable drip and seep of contagion. And as with the birds of days past, all

our eggs, you might say, were in one basket, and it was time to find out how many had cracked.

‘Ms Burgric.’ A Reeve had been assigned to me as soon as I arrived, to give me my suit and keep me from getting too close to anything going on inside. She stepped in front of me as I made to leave my platformed haven. Peering down like Napoleon from a hillside wasn’t my style.

‘Ms Burgric, I suggest you wait here until reports are brought back. We haven’t achieved full lock down yet.’

‘What’s the point of me steaming in this suit if I’m not going to be allowed any further?’

‘It’s a precaution.’

‘Yes, exactly,’ I replied, side stepping her one-woman blockade and continuing on my way.

She followed me as we passed white-suited Clinicians, mostly off-shifters called in to cover those on-shift who had already gone down with whatever it was, on their way to Treatment Suites to make their assessments and commence Treatments where possible. Grey-suited Assistants were attempting to decontaminate zoned off areas, buckets of steaming soapy water for the bodily fluids, steam cleaners, cleaning fluids and chemicals, foolish, I thought, if they don’t know what they’re dealing with.

‘You,’ I called to one of them. ‘What cleaning products are you using?’

She shrugged. ‘Bleach?’

‘Well, can I suggest you don’t. In fact, I suggest you all just stop. Right now.’

‘But the’s sick and shit everywhere,’ she said, her voice sounded strained even through the mask. ‘We can’t just leave it all over.’

‘Well I’m telling you to,’ I said. ‘And tell the others.’

‘If we don’t clean it up, it’ll spread.’

‘And if you clean it up like that, before we know what we’re dealing with, it could make it much worse. It might never be clean. It could leach into the fabric of the building, into the floor, the walls. We’ll have to tear it down and start again and, even then, we still won’t know if it’s gone. So just do as I say.’

‘Who are you to tell us? We don’t answer to t’ Reeves. This is ‘Arrogate. We work to t’ Clinicians, to that Miss Burgess. If t’ Reeves had done the’ job properly in t’ first place, we wun’t be in this mess.’

I twisted inside at hearing Diot’s name. She was still nowhere to be found. Being as the Diot I thought I knew would have been at my side resolving these problems could mean only two things, and I rather hoped she was lying dead somewhere on the Cod Beck Main Road, rather than admit I’d been fooled and undermined. Resolving that in my mind would have to wait.

‘This is Materfamilias Cynthia Burgric,’ said my Reeve escort, clearly annoyed at the attack on her colleagues, her profession. ‘Do as she says.’

‘Well, what do y’ suggest we *do* do then?’ she replied testily. ‘Leave it in this state, shall we? How long for?’

‘Ask your Clinician friends,’ replied the Reeve, as equally rude.

Bother follows Bother. And it follows quickly.

‘Can I suggest that the area is only cordoned off for now while your colleagues identify the cause?’ I said, calmly, to diffuse the growing hostility. ‘I will speak to the Clinicians and find out what they know so far, but for now, please wait?’

She stood holding her plastic mop handle in a kind of reverse-grip, like swordsmen depicted in films from the Age of Man, ready to defend her territory and despatch us Zatoichi-style, but more likely to impale herself with such flashy but incorrect and inefficient methods.

She turned and approached her cleaning colleagues, halting their own attempts to clear the mess and gathering them together to discuss their next plan of action.

‘She should be reported to her seniors,’ said the Reeve.

‘I need to see how widespread this situation is, how much damage has been done and what that means for the immediate and long-term future of the Network, so I can’t say it tops my priorities,’ I said, moving on through Lapwing.

All doors were closed, locked against any without Senior Network Control, so that at the end of every corridor, around every corner, I used my old Brass card. Though her expression wasn’t readable through the SORT-suit mask, I could tell my companion was curious about my lack of ring. She wasn’t the first and I doubted she’d be the last, but as others grappled and struggled to even hold their ornate trinkets in their oversized gloved hands, dropping them clumsily and struggling to pick them up again, I was glad to prove that my methods and safeguards weren’t quite redundant yet.

A group of Reeves carrying electrical asps, the short black stubby stems poking out from out of their baggy, gloved hands, ready to extend as needed, approached us as we arrived at the joint staircase that led to the grand opposing entrances of Sparrow and Cuckoo.

‘This area is closed. It’s been designated as ‘Contaminated’ and we’re not to let anyone other than authorised teams through.’

My personal protector stepped in again, about to begin her ‘do you know who this is?’ routine.

‘Thank you, Layla,’ I intervened, having recognised the Reeve’s voice despite the muffling effect of the mask. ‘A bit early in the day for you, isn’t it?’

‘Cyn?’ she answered. ‘Can’t tell who anyone is in these suits.’

‘Yes, they’re a real leveller,’ I said turning to my protector. ‘Out from under that desk and using your legs as well.’

‘Good to be useful,’ she replied, but not reacting to my joke.

‘Yes, there’s plenty to be useful with today it seems.’



She didn't respond, just nodded beneath her baggy suit. And it suddenly struck me how it was really quite unusual to see her outside of the VLE and so far away from her ever-vigilant watchtower position.

'Rose got the children?'

'What?' she replied. My change of questioning, veering away from the obvious issue at hand, appeared to throw her a little. Seeing her so suddenly out of context had made me realise just how little time she spent with her family, how much she avoided time with them, talking about them. Like me, with Kate. Kate. She'd be OK in Complete Clinical Care. And the babies. I wondered if Diot expected me to be grateful for the mercy shown to them?

'I was asking after Rose and the children. I assume they're safe?'

'What? Oh, right.' She stopped a moment while thinking. 'They're all at the House, so safe and all together. They probably haven't even noticed the difference, except for the VLE being off.'

'Right,' I replied. 'Did you even go Home? Or did you come straight from Nightwatch?'

She doesn't answer me.

'You must be shattered.'

'I'm fine. It was a slow night. I'm needed here, so here I am. Speaking of which, I need to check in and find out where to go next.'

'The VLE has been down in Harrogate since ten. Isn't that where the House is, at Ribston Pippit? How would you even know to come?'

She made to move on, towards the bottom of the staircase, towards the closed doors of Sparrow and Cuckoo, away from us and the colleagues I believed her to be working alongside. She was on her own and that was clearly not the rule or expectation. Anyone that was here officially was here with company, in pairs or as a group, with support. Even me.

‘You know, Layla,’ I moved with her. ‘I’m wondering. In all these years of watching the Edges, you maybe forget how long we’ve known each other, but, in all these many, long years, you’ve rarely reported any suspicious activity during your shifts, did you know that? Except that one time last week in the York Arc, near the Flyover. You reported it so promptly, so readily, I wonder, are you sure there is there nothing else that comes to mind, nothing odd, no gatherings or movements of people, nothing at all that might have given us warning of events today?’

‘I never saw anything to tell,’ she replied.

‘That’s not the same thing.’

‘Why are *you* here, Cyn?’ she asked, far too defensively. ‘From what I remember of you from our long friendship that you speak of, you’re a long way out of your own Ivory Tower too.’

‘Nothing?’ I continued my own line of questioning. ‘Nothing around the Edges? Or at Cod Beck? What about the Main Road? Nothing that would have made you think twice before letting those Reeves bring so many diseased Edge men into the Network without further scrutiny?’

‘Like I said, nothing,’ she replied flatly, trying to remain even, though it was clear from her foggy mask she hadn’t realised I’d known she was the one to admit them. She set off again, on her way past the second line of Reeves guarding the way up to our most precious Clinics.

‘Hold her,’ I told them. She didn’t speed up, instead walking slowly and calmly away. The Reeves were clearly confused, looking to me as they advanced reluctantly on their colleague, unsure of why they were being asked to take control of her.

‘Just get hold of her will you,’ I repeated my order. ‘And take her somewhere secure for questioning.’

‘For questioning?’ one responded as Layla moved easily past them. ‘Questioning about what? What has she done? Who are you again?’

‘I’m not having this,’ said my own Reeve companion, clearly frustrated with the lack of compliance my instructions had received so far, deciding to take matters with Layla into her own hands. But she went on her own. These times of uncertainty and anonymity, these times of Bother, where faceless orders questioning the trustworthiness of colleagues, of friends, caused unquestioning and hysterical heavy-handedness in some, and immovable defiance to perceived overreactions in others, were lonely times. Bother follows Bother. She had no support as none of the other Reeves she shoved out of the way were going to assist. She had no stunner to hand, not that I supposed there were really any use through black SORT-suits, but it could all so easily be avoided. So I stepped forward with her, an extra pair of hands, in case Layla resisted, or she, or any of the others, decided to use an asp. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that. I just needed to diffuse the situation. I’m sure she could explain things. It was just the situation we were in. All of us. Making everyone tense.

‘Layla, stop,’ I said. ‘I just want to go over what happened when you let the Edge dwellers in. There’s no need for unnecessary dramatics. I expect your friend has something to do with it. Diot. She’s manipulated us all and we need to get to the bottom of it, find out how far this goes. No need for any more trouble than we have already.’

‘Yes, you’re right, I knew they were coming and why,’ she said, stopping. She pulled off the oversized mask and turned, her face hot and clammy, a calm smile on her face, as the others called orders for her to replace her protection. ‘I let them into the Network, not Diot,’ she said. ‘I really hoped to have to avoid this, but I just can’t have you telling the Big Bosses anything. There’s too much at stake and still too far to go.’ She raised her asp-carrying hand and a change washed over her face, the blood draining away and leaving her ashen.

It wasn’t an asp. It was something else that her baggy suit had hidden out of sight. Something old that we never used. Something that had been destroyed within the Network in the final Wapentake after the PEEKs went up. A thing that was once longer, but was

now roughly sawn off, with ridges like the dendrochronological record of the many ways in which Man found to kill one another over thousands of years.

‘Otherwise, all of this, this loss and sacrifice and captivity, has been for nothing.’

And she shot me.

Like a homing animal, I retrace my steps through this door, looking for the signs and sounds and smells that might lead me back. Back to all I lost when I first crossed this threshold and was brought inside. An effort to invert the lifelong process of coding and assimilation that being a node in a small-world system demands, to break away from the dyadic ties and subset cliques that demand my cooperation and subordination to this closed construct. But, for me, their conditions are impossible to fully meet, so I am stuck in an infinite loop of resistance, rebellion, repentance and return.

And the coding is strong. Why else would I have so many boys contribute to my own, personal, harvest and protect programme? Compelled to ensure that somewhere in there is one strong enough to carry on, when, really, there appears to be very little point. We are told it is the most marvellous miracle, though I don't know how anyone in the Network would know; childbirth has been absent from the Network for as long as anyone can remember, a triumph of science, of no longer being willing to accept such a biased and unwarranted punishment, over God and the GOD. Those who did experience it, before the Network, in the Age of Man, I suspect, were liars. Cyn is right, it is a new experience for me and, I'll admit, the only one that has ever given me cause to be afraid. I think it means I care about something. And I want to find out what that is. But, perhaps it too will pass. Or maybe I will never know and it will all come to nothing. Either way, it won't happen within the Network; it will be taken away from me, my fear, my independence, my choice, as though it never belonged to me at all.

How many of my dedicated donors will be successful and which ones? Maybe none of them will. Perhaps all my babies will die and I will never again see the faces of the boys who succeeded, because they didn't.

Guess I'll just have to keep trying. Looping.

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‘Don’t do it,’ calls the Brat I’d left dangling further down the fence, a marionette hung up after his performance with no one to pull his strings, days and days ago, how many days I couldn’t say now, before the new Bother, before the birds, before the blood, before his issues made room for themselves.

Alive.

I’ve never come back to a live one before. He’s stronger than I gave him credit for. Now there’s a contender, I’d say.

‘Robin?’ says my new boy.

What new wonder is this?

‘Don’t do it.’ The Brat calls to me again while my new boy limps towards the wretched form, quickly, eager to see the Brat. Help him I expect. But it’s not why I brought him. He wanted to be brought Outside. I’ve done that. Held up my side of things. I said we could help each other, and I know how much he despises those who don’t reciprocate, but feel that, now, like the others, he’ll not be much of a willing donor. I’d better help him along. They’re all much more cooperative when I help them to be.

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‘Don’t do it,’ the Brat says to me again and again incoherently. He doesn’t take his eyes off my new boy whose bony wrists now hang limp from the old chains. When he wakes, he could probably squeeze his hands out of the shackles, pull his fingers in tight, ignore the metal scraping the thin skin from his bones, and go wherever he pleases.

‘Don’t worry, I didn’t give him much,’ I say to the Brat, my friend, though I don’t mean to reassure him. My new boy needs to be semi-awake at least.

‘Don’t do it,’ he says again. ‘He’s not used to it like I am’

‘Used to what exactly?’

‘This, this,’ he says.

‘What is this exactly?’

‘Don’t do it, ‘es not used to it,’ he repeats, slack-mouthed. The Brat’s becoming delirious again. Head lolling. Blood loss, maybe? Infection?

‘Used to it? I’m not even sure you even know what ‘it’ is.’ Time my new boy started waking up. Holding his chin, I watch as his lids flicker and pupils dilate and constrict, whilst I, I suppose, come in and out of focus.

‘What do you think?’ I ask the Brat as I look through my depleted supplies retrieved from the car. ‘Type 5 blockers are pretty kitsch, but for you boys they’re a retro marvel for this sort of job. Worked well on you, didn’t they, when you started getting tired or ‘scared’ or whatever it was you said you were? When my new boy comes round it’ll feel like any other morning NPT.’

He’s shaking his head and muttering some crap about ‘it’ still.

‘Let me tell you about ‘it’. The ‘it’ you’re talking about is the state in which you now feel you are living and ‘it’s’ effect on you. You individually, you collectively. ‘It’s’ a relatively new viewpoint for you. When you’ve had ‘it’ for centuries, from a time before you can even imagine, when ‘it’s’ so engrained into your thoughts, your movements, your motivations, your words, your body, your very being, as though some clown of a geneticist long ago, marked ‘it’ into your very code like the joke that ‘it’ is, then you can talk about knowing what being used to ‘it’ is.’

His grieving eyes watch the tip of my syringe as I insert it into my new boy’s stretched, sinuous neck. They close slowly with resignation as the last drop is plunged into my new boy’s bloodstream and we wait for its effect.

‘No matter what you do, or where you run, ‘it’ always catches up with you. And you can’t change ‘it’, or challenge ‘it’. Not with any real teeth, because anything other than ‘it’ is monstrous or repellent or madness, so why would we want anything other than ‘it’? Why would you want to look, act or feel otherwise than what ‘it’ tells you to? The alternative is unknown, scary, so better ‘it’ all just remains the same.

You maybe *feel* 'its' effect on you, but 'it's' a long way off being who you *are*. 'It' doesn't define you. Marked out down the generations, defiled, degraded and divided, medicalised, modified, because of 'it' and, because we know of nothing else, we tried to impose 'it' on you, *that's* the bit of 'it' you feel. The bit that scares you. The bit that angers you. We did a pretty good job at trying, didn't we? But, 'it' being part of who we are, we only managed to impose 'it' on ourselves a hundredfold. 'It' continues to define and divide us. Control us. And we continue to let 'it'. No matter how far we think we have come, 'it' always seems to drag us back. Back to Bother. All of us.'

My new boy starts to rouse.

'And so 'it' wills us to go on.'

'Don't,' the Brat says, but I ignore his plea. The Brat's head is too heavy for him to turn away, so he closes his eyes in pain as my drugs take effect on his supposedly innocent friend, and I begin to take what I had taken from him easily, days before, and from the long line of boys behind him, their empty husks turning to dust. I am the Fairy Knight, come creeping amongst the sleeping maidens, thieving from them and leaving with all the treasures; the bluebearded lord with a secret chamber, my curious boys betrayed by the blood on the keys. It was once said that no man could be as cruel as a woman; that it is not cruelty men seek, but only seduction and love. That cruelty, whether it arrived as desertion or death, was not the intention itself, and so not in itself cruel. Am I now too the seducer? Absolved of my sins because it is not abstract cruelty I seek?

But today, there is nothing. The new boy unable to hold up his side of our tacit agreement after all. And the link, the connection I felt when we were brought together only a few hours ago, isn't the one I thought it would be. Perhaps it was the cold vacuity I felt in him, not in the old lady. Perhaps the life, strength and purpose was mine all along.

'Don't,' the Brat says again with greater effort, as I leave the new boy no less than when I found him. Successful or not, the Brat knows what must come next. He reaches his



shackled arm towards his friend but cannot reach. I could leave them, as they are, just out of touch. Or unlock their chains and let them decide their own fate. They could go back. Back to what they know, don't like, don't trust, and will never change. Or they could wander into the old barren lands that their fathers wasted for them and take their chances with the short time they have in its infinite insignificance.

In or Out. They could be together either way.

But it seems I am cruel, after all.

'It's 'im!' the Brat strains out the words with greater force, with his remaining breath. 'Look at 'im, we found 'im. Digs... Don't...'

Blade in hand, I consider my new boy fully for the first time, his loose clothes falling as he drowsily pulls at his chains and, there, on his shoulder, is the rose that matches mine, as though we were propagated and grown together in secret. He lies before me, his mystery lost as mine, the naked boy Harpocratis keeping his mother's secrets. So who am I? What role do I play? Mother, sister, daughter, consort, lover, witch. Protector. Taker. Life. Death. God of my own back yard. Life being syncretic, I expect I am all, but long to be so much more. Perhaps Harpocratis being here means there is more to this world than what we think we can know. Perhaps He is a good omen.

But there He goes again, giving false hope that there is some kind of salvation for any of us, when the spiralling maelstrom of humanity, its opposing tides working forever against each other, rotates our fortunes, leaving us reeling, crashing and sinking between Scylla and Charybdis. And I see too that, where now we should both be in full bloom, he is but a cutting. Scarred. A mere ornament for display. A posey that brings about the poësis I have been searching for my entire life. Not the glories of heroism, nor the bringing forth of children I am now forced to complete. But the knowing of who I am, and that that is enough. That our nature is one of nothingness. That the apocalypse of man, exists in us all and is why, in the end, there is nothing, not even love. I cling to nothing, because everything else is manmade.

‘Oh dear,’ I say, curiously finding tears swelling in my eyes. ‘How sloppy of them. They only did half the job.’ I sniff as his drowsy eyes look sadly into mine. ‘Shh,’ I say, that lingering tear finally shed, perhaps from happiness, but I couldn’t tell you, I don’t remember. ‘Don’t cry. It dun’t hurt for long.’

And then I cut him, like I cut them all. Because they expect it. What else should I do? A woman? A dangerous woman like me.

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*We wa nibber meant to look so close. Jealousy ad built them PEEKs, twound like an edder round er breast to ward off them that besieged er, on 'y to let it bite at er own eart.*

*It war easy enough to track er down. A donned clean clo'se an a Network tongue like a disguise, an follerd –trail o gnattery folk oo'd ad enough of er ill-tempered ways, glad she'd at last tekken ersen off to –old ouse to drink ersen silly. The complained of ow –programmin she'd bin implementin wa mower severe than the'd seen afower, that –resources she'd bid em free up on –VLE an med em lern in –Athenas, wa mower eavily focussed on –Bother than it ad ever bin afower.*

*But the sed she'd cem to be so fearful o –VLE she wa once maister o, that she nibber used it ersen no mower, on 'y callin to folk face-to-face, an she soon took ersen off to do nowt but read er old beuks, sendin in long missives, that wa-nt quite plum, written from er own and. An though the kept returnin to er old ouse fo whatever she'd av em do next, er missives ad stopped, an the wa-nt shewer what the wa to do next. The wa-nt nibber to go inside. She refused to see none but er Lass. This ere Lass wa supposedly a reight big-time Bobby oo'd not seen er mam in yonks; not 'York-minded' enough to ever be their Mater, the sed. But summat mun be done afower Arrogate, o wo'se, Leeds, reckon'd the war in charge o –Network all on ther owns.*

*A sed to em ad be mower than appy to tek on this fruitless job, if the wanted it o me, an the wa reight glad of it, for it wa too close to –Edges fo their likin, an they each reckoned emsens to be worth mower than a mere padder. An since the'd tekkin me for a Brat lookin to mek a bit mower Brass, they ad no concern about sendin me off to –backend o Derventio, just off –Autoroute to Hild. If –Ward Limit line a-nt o bin there, ad a sed it war in –Edges mesen, mindin me a bit o –En Pecked Ouse, off on its own, not part o –swirlin sneel-orn that Network ouses usually wa. It looked like the'd appen once tried to*

*mek it look mower like rest o –Network, but that th’only ad to scrat at all –white muck that med up its walls, to find what ad allus bin there underneath.*

*‘Cynthia?’ cem a voice from from beyind a barricade o beuks as a took mesen into them murk rooms. ‘Is that you?’*

*The war a shuffling an scuffling o someone tryin to shift emsens as though fo –fers time in yonks, graspin at them tall towers, just as unsteady as she, til they all fell together wiya clatter o beuks an bottles an a puff o dust, rising like smits from a chimley.*

*‘Cynthia?’ she called agen, but a sed nowt while she struggled agen to er feet, oddin on to er couch fo support, a reight muck-tub for any Network Lass ad ever sin. ‘I knew you would come if I wrote you.’*

*She war already badly wi what ailed er, er face war all clammy an paisty, er ole bane-cart snirled an wizened. She peered at me, een as mucky as –weather, seein nobbut ghosts bi then.*

*‘I’ve waited a long time for you to come, as you can see,’ she cackled wiya voice as thin as –pages from one of er beuks, er pegs rotted back on sower gums, swingin er arm round clumsy an knockin down –cluther about er. Laffin set er off, peffin an jeffin a while, gippin up –black-cotterd bile that wa clearly poisonin er.*

*She waited a bit afower slumpin back into er pit.*

*‘You’re not my daughter,’ she sed, dowly as she gaumed er hopes wa lost agen. ‘She’s not coming.’*

*‘Why’s that?’ a dared to ask er, droppin me layne, for a wa-nt iddyin from er now ad found er.*

*‘Because we all blame our mothers for the way things turn out.’*

*‘Then we’re all buggered a-rt we, if we’re bahn to be blamed for owt that follers? I-nt what we do up to ussens? Ca-t allus blame other folk for ow things turn out.’*

*She screwed er een up at me, tryin to get some sense, some shape.*

*'I said you people were not to come into my Home,' she sed. 'I have nothing to say to you. Go away.'*

*'If that's what tha wants,' a sed. 'It wa nice to meet y'at last.' An a left. But when a gliffed back ovver me shoulder, the war a shadder at –winder, a wa shewer. It wa gone wiya whew just –tsame, so appen it cu-nt be Jealousy, fo she'd be far too crippled wi grief to ever rise from er pit. So if it wa-nt Jealousy, appen someone else dwelled there instead, like –last thing left there in a box otherguise filled wi emptiness.*

*An so a cem agen to that neglected place, an found it still oppen.*

*'Do you read?' she sed from beyind –rampart she'd med ersen, avin eard me soft tread on er threadbare floowrs.*

*'These books were all written by men, of course,' she di-nt wait fo me to seh. 'The older ones, the ones that came first. Here,' she wafted er and at those to er left. 'Are those of Ancient Greece and Rome. These,' she wafted at -others. 'Are romantic tales and sagas from everywhere else. There are some marvellous stories, wondrous thought and reason can be found within these pages. Alongside some utter twaddle. We upload them into the VLE for all to read without any authorial detail, so our readers don't think that what they are reading is outside of them, something they didn't think, reason, say, write, do, themselves. It was a good idea in theory. But the stories themselves are outside of us. We never did experience life the way it is depicted in these tales. You can omit the author, but not the content. Those eventually written by a woman's hand are so evidently contained, bound tight by the rules set by those who allowed them. A few broke free, but even now are dismissed as insignificant or inconsistent, or mad, or dangerous, among ourselves, and are unable to stand against the giants we have always propped up. There are brief flickers; you see them, just before the Bother really took hold. Change. You can sense change. Hope. Yes, I'd go as far as saying there was hope. Vainglorious hope with its dare to*

*dream and swagger. Its dare to give voice and raise its head. Perhaps it deserved to be shot down and shut up, when it seems all we could ever learn was to be the same again. Better perhaps to have not have put them on the VLE, or allowed them into the Network at all. Locked them away. Better still burned them at the Core with anything else we carried off from before, like magpies to make use of for ourselves. That would have been a real beginning. We might have learned something new had we allowed it from the start.'*

*She ad another one o them girds, laffin til that black muck filled er gob agen. It dribbed dahn er chin in sticky strands o spittle, an she minded me o Non when she wa fo-bucket. She yad a swig from a bottle an then clamped er gob shut, closin er een agent-bruffs that fossed emsens dahn er nose-tholes, as though, avin tekken er medsun, she on'y ad to wait for it to pass.*

*I eye-spied –columns o beuks she war on about, big eavy beuks wiyold covers and brokken spines. The'd not bin touched in ages. A stepped forrad for a better look, ran a finger ovver –one that war at –top ov its teeterin tower, mekkin a lickle trench in –dust. I oppened it's flap to av a leuk.*

*'Do you read?' She sed agen, mekkin me jump. –Beuk flap clapped shut. Appen she wa-nt so ip-an-thigh dark in theyer after au. 'Can,' she started again, stopping short an thinkin on, afower carryin on wiyer question. 'Can you read?'*

*'A can read,' a sed. –Dust ad set loose catched in me gullet an filled –space atween us, like swirlin, twinklin stars, not shewer yet where to settle.*

*'Good. Because I can't,' she sed. 'Amblyopia has sewn up my eyes and I can no longer pore through these precious pages of worlds that once were and might have been. What's that one?' She pointed at no particlar tower, tiltin er ead this way an that, tryin to get a clue o what wa there. A lifted one up, an, avin seen me shiftin shadder, she put er arms out as if to tek it off me like it war a babby. A gev it er, an she snuddled it in tight, croonin a bit. She gev it a big sniff an rubbed it atween er fingers.*

*'Calves leather,' she sed to ersen. She oppened it up, careful an worshipful, ran er and ovvert lumps an bumps o print, cockin er ead to one side at –crisp crinkle -pages med as she turned em. She sniffed agen, no wonder she wa-nt so good, snooking up them word-stours all day. 'Seventeenth Century.' She odded it out to me. 'What does it say?'*

*'A di-nt come ere to read thee tha tall tales,' a sed, testy.*

*'Perhaps you came to hear them then?' she cackled.*

*'Jus one.'*

*She nodded er ead, yieldin, put er book aside before golshin another gobful, tekkin er drops afower settin er stall out.*

*'Yes, but it was one meant for my daughter. We rule by right, you see, the Burgrics of York. York controls the VLE, the knowledge, what is seen, what is known. Part of the deal struck by our illustrious ancestor, the first Network Mother, who sought a solution to the oldest battle. A kind of two-state scenario where we might be able to live, if not side by side again with those who sought to oppress our attempts to resist, at least away. And it's hers, all of it. It's not much but it's all we have left. I did everything for her. But she's not coming, is she? If she doesn't come, I can't tell her.'*

*'What's to tell?' a sed. 'I-nt this all ther is to know, ere in –Network. No mower Bother, no mower nowt after –Great Fallin Out, but fo what's inside –PEEKs an what yee lot keep safe?'*

*'You and I know different.'*

*'Aye, an what thee knows an I, are different agen all –tsame.'*

*She thought on that a piece.*

*'What could you possibly do otherwise, knowing what I know?' She laffed. 'Like Moses to Pharaoh, would you have me let your people go? Shall you open the PEEKs, part them like the Red Sea and lead them to, what promised land?'*

*'See, tha's so bound up in all these old tales tha's not looking to write new ens. An these ar- my folk in -Network, a the? Far as a know, Iyav no folk, whether in ere or out*

*there, cept appen fo one that wa stolen off me an av not met yet. Tha meant me to av no folk o me own. When tha put me out like rubbidge to be etten by fauses o tekken by them Fellas o to dwine to nobbut banes up there on –moors.'*

*'Your presence in the Network would have brought imbalance and uncertainty. Your admittance to the Matriarchal Pool would have led to an undermining of the Network I would not endure, the moral order we had enacted here was paramount. It had been given to me by my mother, and to her, by hers before her. To do otherwise would have been a betrayal. What could be done with you inside the Network? Even at the Edges there was too great a risk you would be found. But not outside. Outside the PEEKs, where no one could look and we had seen to it that no one wanted to. I took you to a place so remote I thought no one could endure. And yet, there she was, a woman so utterly forsaken, who endured still.'*

*'Non,' a sed wiyout needin er to tell me no mower o this lass she'd spied.*

*'I'd laid you down, close to where the PEEKs parted, scared to step too far beyond our self-imposed boundary, and was hurrying back to safety, when I saw her, for all the world the archetypal abandoned woman I had read of so many times over. But, I immediately realised, abandoned by us. She had been excluded from our mission, whether through chance or choice, excluded all the same.'*

*'An them Bellwethers? Excluded anall?'*

*'I watched my mother trick them into going outside, for daring to question our necessary confines, the Network's watchfulness, to use them as proof that there was nothing outside the Network but the dangers and uncertainties our walls kept out. But out there, in that remote place, so far from the structures we built, I questioned our entire purpose. What had we become?'*

*'Bane-idle?' a sed. 'Fraidy cats?'*

*'In the hidden holes of the Edges, I believe they call us Attercops,' she sed. 'Having taken pride in building this land without help, having spun so rich and beautiful a tapestry*



*depicting our grievances and abuses overcome, this name is not so far from the truth. This land is not our creation. We merely imitated, and in so doing we committed a crime against all. Against ourselves. Reward is our punishment.'*

*'Yet tha still caffed me off easy enough. An tha di-nst bewail ol Non so much to giyer own place inside.'*

*'I left her a way in,' she sed narked. 'And in so doing I locked myself in here without the means to fulfil my duties.'*

*'It war a saar-baned gesture is what it wa,' a glimed. 'It wa nobbut chance Non found thine Key, an nobbut chance mower she found me an awteen us we cem to turn it. Tha mollified thissen is all, ovver me an Non both. Gev thissen reason to iddy in ere wi thine beuks an feel sorry fo thissen, doffin off any an all o thy obligations. An ere war I thinkin a wa -maister o Ducks an Drakes.'*

*'Should I have taken her in? Where? Tell her what? That she may come inside as long as she stayed away from everyone and told no one about outside? She was as much as a threat to the Network as you. As hard and high as those PEEKs may seem to you, it is a fragile line between what was then and what is now and what could still be. To diminish it, is to diminish us. Too many steps over the threshold, one way or the other, dilutes us in the swell of all there has ever been. To have allowed her would have been to admit there was someone to let in. And who else besides?'*

*'Them Bellwethers fo one?' a sed.*

*'They were lost to us.'*

*'Tha knows that to be fibs anall. Mind, appen Non wa best where she war after au, if a bed at Fountains war all she could look forrad to once she wa let in.'*

*She took another long drink from –bottle she clutched in er mitts, but appen it war all gone fo she flung it to –floowr onto –base o one of er teeterin towers. It rocked back an forth afower tumblin down. She fell onto floowr, avin eard er precious treasures felled,*

*scrabblin forrem as if to er life itsen. When she cu-nt stop em from all tumblin down round er lugs, she fell ersen in a rumple, a muck-eap among er truntlements.*

*'See,' a sed. 'Them ramparts a-rt so unyielding, after au. The jus needed a lickle push.'*

*'You're wrong,' she whispered, wringin er mitts in anguish, er face tired wi torment. 'This world is not a palimpsest. We cannot scratch out all that has gone before to rewrite it as we please. We can only make the best of what we have left. Of what we have been given.'*

*A stepped forrad to pick er up an set er back down on er couch, poowr raggald she wa, no mower o less than Non ever wa, or that old Lass at Fountains, or them poowr buggers stuck for eternity at –First End, or even them Tykes goin round an round an windin up nowhere. Confined, all of em, whether forsekken, mad-pashing, man-keen, or Philosopher Queen. Howsomevver we come to be in –world, an whatever role we' giyen to play, all we want is not to be set apart. Opin that we belong somewhere to someone. An it's them folk we belong to oo each giyus ope in return, that lightening in all of us, that promise we each mek to one another that we'll keep on, whether o not –world around us is ow it should be.*

*'Tha's tried so ard to do jus that,' a sed. 'But the's no need to scratch out them old tales if tha'll just allow new ens anall.'*

*'There are no new stories. The same things happen time after time after time. I've read them all, each and every one.'*

*'Aye well, Iyant,' a sed, picking up one of er beuks she so treasured. 'But then a reckon Iyav some tales tha's not eard neither. Appen we can lern off one another? Appen we can come to know all that's gone afower, but not say it's on'y way it mun be?'*

*She nodded. She laid er ead back wiya satisfied smile, waitin to ear all er favourite tales, knowin just what wa to come, appy to relive em ovver agen, cos she knew em so well. Would she interject at nows an thens to let me know what a could expect to find out if a*

would just read on? Would she tell me to read wi mower spirit if ad not done so fers time? Would she tell me ow to sey it, if a sed it wrong? What else would she tell me in that time she ad left? About them Big Bosses an -Bellwethers an -secrets o -Network a so wanted to lern? Would she tell me ow many folk mun live an love an dee afower we can lern to brek – same cycle? That the’s some soowrt of order we mun foller, no veerin from –path we’ve bin set on? But if the’s no gettin away from what’s bin set out for us, ow do we live in ope o summat ayont, that’s better than what we left beyind? Does all ave to brek apart furs, all to nowt, afower folk come together to mend it? Appen change can come about, like that fella wiyis bread sed to me, through aidin -folk we meet, each in us own small ways. That in lookin for ussens, we find others, an that in them others we find ussens.

She eard –crinkle as a turned er pages, oppenin er een as she eard ma deep breff in, ready to read them old words, iskin in as though -drawin-away into er world war inevitable, an that this ere wa –very end.

She put out er and, an placin it atop er old beuk, pushed it away.

‘No. It’s your turn,’ she sed. An so a begun.

‘This is Non’s Speyk.’

*As told to Tabassum Bangash Firdaus*

*Writ int ninth year ot Remarrowin*