

# Incognito

Hey, poofter.

Fifteen disinterested queens and a fat dyke with a cocker spaniel.

She couldn't even begin to fit together the corners and edges.

Ferrying away agony and hurt, perhaps.

Listen, you flighty, shallow harlot.

Most of his duties were unimpeachable.

It was like something from another age.

No it bloody isn't! *Piss off!*

I walk among them and they do not know me.

He'd have to entertain himself some other way.

We care for no jewels, whelp!

It's a nice day to start again.

She couldn't think of any good reason to look away.

He had no answer.

Who could work magic without beauty?

He found thoughts in his head that he didn't remember putting there himself.

Perhaps they were *things* after all.

Long enough to deal with a fucking Saturday night on the desk, at least.

A bookcase with no books.

Will these people *ever* get the hang of winter?

He isn't even on the same planet as you.

How is he supposed to go on living?

He'd come this far, he might as well see it through.

With no regrets, with no backward glance.

Nothing but a frayed, unravelling end.

I've been impersonating someone else for all this time.

# 1

## Adam

*Hey, poofster.*

The autumn night was mild and damp, fine drizzle falling through the sodium streetlamps' orange glare. Yellow leaves choked the car-lined gutters along the suburban avenues that led from the tube station to his lover's home. Adam's mind was elsewhere, impatient and distracted.

The day had gone on for what seemed like his whole life. Every piece of work had to be done over time and again. Lunchtime had been filled to the exclusion of lunch by stupid petty errands, telephone calls with officious bureaucrats, a pointlessly panicky dash to shops not stocking what he needed. The endless afternoon had drifted unstopably into evening and now all he wanted was to be home and fed and cradled to sleep in the arms of someone to whom he was something other than an incompetent menial.

As he turned off the main road, a growling taxi swerved past, throwing a spray of filthy water over him, drenching his trousers and his plastic carrier bags of groceries. Hour and a half commute almost over, just five minutes trudge remaining, at that moment he felt like he would never make it, was almost ready to stop and surrender, drop everything, die.

Then the hooded teenager stepped out in front of him.

"Hey, poofster."

Adam didn't have the time or energy for this. He gazed at the boy for a moment with weary disdain, then tried to continue on his way. Pushing past, he quickly saw that his assailant was not alone. Five, maybe six others materialized from between the parked cars. One of them shoved him from behind, trying to be rough but lacking conviction.

"We're talking to you."

Adam knew this scene. He'd been through it before, and was strong enough to deal. He turned on the first lad, who looked about fifteen and seemed to be in charge, or at least trying to be.

"What?"

"You're queer, aren't you?"

"Give me a break."

"Aren't you?"

"What the fuck is it to you?"

"We know you are. We know what you do with that bum-chum of yours."

"Really."

"Yes. It's disgusting."

"For Christ's sake. How old are you?"

"Too old for you, you fucking child molester."

The others were shifting around uneasily, muttering half-hearted insults, but the leader was just getting warmed up. There was something bright and scary about him, a malevolence glistening from his rain-wet skin, a disconnection. It dawned on Adam that there might actually be some danger in this situation, something beyond aggravation and delay. He began to be a little afraid.

"We don't want your kind around here. Touching up little boys, spreading your filthy diseases. It's not right. This is a nice neighbourhood."

Adam couldn't stop a nervous bark of laughter. He knew it was stupid but he said it anyway:

"What are you doing here, then?"

With no hint of hesitation, the boy punched him in the face. The impact knocked Adam's head back and he was seeing stars before he even noticed the shocking, bewildering pain.

"Shit, Pete! What the fuck are you doing?"

Adam dropped the shopping bags, fruit rolling out across the wet pavement and into the street. A car drove past, its occupants not noticing, or choosing not to notice, the scene outside their windows. An orange exploded beneath their tyres.

“What has to be done, fucker. Or are you turning queer all of a sudden?”

“It’s not like that. Jesus!”

“Fucking sounds like it.”

Adam tasted blood in his mouth and decided this might be his only chance. Shoving the leader out of the way, he ran. It almost worked.

They caught up with him in moments, and any doubts they might have been entertaining vanished in the heat of the chase. There was a blow to his legs, and to the back of his head, and then Adam found himself on the ground. He didn’t remember quite how he’d got there. The boy, Pete, stood over him.

“You shouldn’t have done that, poofster.”

Adam blinked up at him. A streetlight blazed directly behind his head, creating a kind of halo in the fine rain, and it occurred fuzzily to Adam that Pete would have loved that if he knew. His self-righteousness was so clear. So incandescent.

Then the kicking started.

## Blanche

*Fifteen disinterested queens and a fat dyke with a cocker spaniel.*

“...and we’ve got a special treat for you tonight, all the way from the West End—which may not sound like far, but believe me, in *those* heels...”

Too fucking right. On a wet November Tuesday in Essex, and for what? To sing “I am what I am” for fifteen disinterested queens and a fat dyke with a cocker spaniel. Blanche would be lucky if she made her train fare home from this shithole.

“...let’s have a big hand, please, for the fabulous Blanche Du Theydon Bois!”

Forcing herself to grin like a cheshire cat on ecstasy, and nearly as believably, Blanche stalked up two and half steps to the so-called stage, a milk crate with delusions of grandeur.

“Darlings! Loves! Oooh!” An exaggerated trip. “Oops. Blimey. Hello, boys! Are we having fun yet?”

A couple of people grunted desultory greetings over the top of their Carling Black Labels.

“It’s such a pleasure to be here on this fine autumn evening. Don’t you just love autumn? I do. Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Oooh, ‘ello. Bloke down here’s saying ‘Mellow what? What’s she on about?’ Fruitfulness, dear. It’s Keats. You know, poetry? Get me a double G & T and I’ll show you my couplets. Ain’t you got nice arms, darling? Ain’t he got nice arms? What’s your name, love?”

Christ. What was she doing here?

“John, is it? Pleased to meet you, John. You on the way to the bar, then? Oh, the toilet? Such timing: I’d join you but, you know how it is, the show must go on. Besides, kneeling down in this frock, well it’s no laughing matter. You hurry back, now. We’ll be waiting.”

She watched him in mocking silence all the way to the toilet door.

“Bless him. If he’s more than ten minutes, let’s send out a search party. Now, where was I? Oh yes, autumn.”

It already seemed hotter under the lights than it should. Blanche nudged a stray strand of wig out of her eyes, then plucked a lacy fan from her waistband, flapping it affectedly: too gently and too far away to make a difference, but it wouldn’t do to block anyone’s view.

“Thing that gets me, this time of year, is the kids. Little bastards, aren’t they? And that’s just my own. I still haven’t forgiven them those stretch marks, you know. Thank fuck I was sleeping with a plastic surgeon.”

She turned this way and that, gesturing to her flat stomach, eyebrows raised.

“Worth every sweaty, slobbering kiss.”

A few people laughed. A little.

“I sent my boys out trick or treating the other night. Mickey, that’s my youngest, wanted to be a witch. I was so proud. I made him a little banner saying ‘Surrender, Dorothy’ in fake smoke. And ruby slippers. Something tells me the family business is going to be in safe hands. “But trick or treating? Whose idea was that? It’s nothing but petty extortion. With menaces. I wouldn’t mind if they made a bit of effort with the costumes, but most of them have no idea how to bead a lash. Makes a girl weep, I tell you. Just the sight of those vampire types has me reaching for my hairbrush and a bottle of fake tan. And when it comes to ‘Penny for the guy?’ Darling, it’d take more than a penny to make good *that* fashion atrocity. Just cos you’re going up in flames next week is no excuse for not making an effort, know what I mean? That kind of occasion, you’d want to look your best. Brown polyester slacks and a beige shirt don’t exactly cut it, do they? Burning’s too good for ‘em!”

Perhaps there’d been a time when she enjoyed this bitchy, malevolent bollocks, but if so she could no longer remember it. Was this her life?

“Listen to me, I’m like the spirit of SAD. Clocks go back and it’s all doom and gloom. I’m even depressing myself. Sod that, let’s have a song, eh? Maestro?”

The pub darkened and she was caught in a single tight spot, like a rabbit in headlights—a rabbit in pink sequins and a platinum beehive. The music struck up.

“Once I was afraid, I was petrified...”

This was no better than sleepwalking, than being in a coma. She felt she might wake at any moment in a hospital bed, limbs atrophied, eyes no longer remembering how to see, her whole tacky career nothing but a lurid fever dream. Don’t go into the—flickering, flyspecked—spotlight, Blanche! Don’t go into the light!

“...I should have changed that stupid lock, I should have made you leave your key...”

John wandered back from the lav, and Blanche fixed him with a malign glare the whole way. He was sheepish, but not intimidated. She hated herself for trying to embarrass him... but not as much as she hated herself for failing.

“...I will survive! I will survive!”

And so she would.

# 3

## Corinne

*She couldn't even begin to fit together the corners and edges.*

If Corinne ever had an identity distinct from this anonymous lost soul, she could no longer remember it. There was nothing more left of her now, in the dank November evening, than a beseeching expression, and a paper coffee cup in which half a dozen copper coins rattled, and the grubby knitted shawl she huddled under in her Covent Garden doorway. Sometimes these ingredients almost seemed like a life; more often not.

Just at that moment, things were hazy. As was the case all too often these days. Fragments of memory lay about her mind in great jumbled piles, like the pieces from a hundred jigsaws all mixed up, but she couldn't even begin to fit together the corners and edges, let alone make sense of the overall picture.

There were moments when she thought she grasped more; when great clumps of the past would drift through her mind, taunting her with their coherence, their intelligibility. At those times she might read parts of the story to herself, and identify with the woman she had been in other lives. Sometimes she could even trace some of the threads from there to here.

Coming to London, for instance. That was one of her most teasingly tangible memories. Corinne had never been quick-witted, never been especially able to make sense of the world before it changed around her. She wasn't *stupid*—she learned right enough, could read and write and add up—but wasn't good at putting things together, lost focus easily, got distracted and confused. She experienced perfect clarity at the level of words and sentences, but by the time she got to the end of the page everything tended to be in a bit of a muddle.

She had gotten by in her youth, back in her little Scots village. People had made allowances and she had made an effort. She always did her best to be independent, to support herself. If there was one thing she really couldn't bear—and sometimes she even remembered why—it was being a burden on others.

But there wasn't much else she could be, there; and, after her mother died, nowhere to hide. She worked briefly as a shop assistant in the tiny post office, but the blurry, dissociative patchwork that was her experience of the world didn't lend itself to satisfactory performance of such a job, and the manager soon, regretfully, let her go.

She came across an advert for an *au pair* in *The Lady*. She was never clear how—nor why it had struck her as appealing—but somehow she cast herself in that role. It was exactly what she needed. It would get her out of this backwater and into the big city, where she could disappear, where nobody would know her business and they wouldn't condescend. Deciding that it would best to apply in person, she boarded a coach and was gone.

Sometimes she would have a vague recollection of talking to the lady on the telephone; sometimes it seemed like she went to the house. There was a lot of awkwardness in those memories, but the specifics remained stubbornly out of reach. One way or another, she didn't get the job; as anyone could have told her she wouldn't, if anyone had been interested, if she had let anyone know her plans.

And so she'd found herself in London, with nowhere to stay and nothing to do and only a vague sense of what was going on. She found herself on the hostile streets with hostile people in a hostile world whose rules of operation were so far beyond her understanding that she was only dimly aware they existed at all.

Just about the only thing she came to understand was that everything she did was *wrong*. There was always someone shouting at her, pushing her around, moving her on. Days were bewildering, evenings worse. Only in the darkest hours of the night, when everyone else was asleep, did things calm down enough for her to grasp the vague shape of the situation, and then

she wept, shivering in whatever dank refuge she'd been driven to, great heaving sobs of uncomprehending agony.

Sometimes she ate, and sometimes she washed herself, and sometimes she almost seemed like anyone else. Sometimes she wished she was back home, being a burden on people, condescended to; but even if she'd had the money to get back, she didn't know the way. Didn't even know what the village was called.

She was arrested a few times. The police said she was on drugs, which she wasn't, and a vagrant, which she was. She didn't argue, it was warm and dry in the cells, and sometimes they fed her. She lacked the guile to get herself locked up on purpose, but every now and then it made a nice change.

She begged, of course. What else was she to do? She wasn't good at it, could no more understand the rules of that activity than anything else, but sometimes she received a few coins from suburban commuters wanting to be rid of this shambling apparition by the quickest means possible. She would accost passengers at busy bus stops and pedestrians waiting to cross traffic-heavy roads, and every now and then one might respond.

Just once, just for a few minutes, someone paid attention.

"Spare some change, sir?" She always called them "sir" and "ma'am", it seemed respectful.

Her mark was turning away with the usual cold disregard and something crumpled within her. She wasn't quite crying, but her empty despair poured out:

"Please don't ignore me. Please. I've been asking people all night and no-one even looks at me. One person gave me this." It takes the man a moment to identify the small pink cuboid as a pencil eraser. "The only thing I've got all evening. What for? I don't understand. Then he laughed and pushed me away."

Somehow this struck a chord with the listener, and he slowly unravelled her whole fragmentary story. He was won over completely—if she'd had any guile at all she could have taken him for a ride. Before long they were crying together by the 73 bus stop. He gave her all the money he had, but it was the contact that stayed with her, that occasionally flitted across her mind in the years to come as one of those taunting memories, almost making sense. When she slept that night, someone stole most of the cash, but she dreamt of having someone listen to her, and weep with her, and care, and they were sweet dreams.

But that was years ago.

This night, this dank autumn night, she was huddling in her doorway with bewilderment on all sides. It was cold and drizzling and her body was a tapestry of aches and pains, which was quite normal. Her feet were swollen and she dared not take off her shoes. She'd eaten sometime recently—perhaps today, perhaps yesterday—and had a few coins in her cup, so she wasn't too focussed on the begging, or on anything. Which was quite normal. There were plenty of people on the streets, spilling out of restaurants and bars, even a few still-open shops, so it couldn't have been too late.

She was used to this, in her way. Crowds all around, not one person in them even registering she was there, and they nearly as absent and indistinct to her. Everyone was blurry, smeared out, background. Until *he* walked by.

The clarity was shocking, like a physical blow. What was he doing here, amongst this throng? His presence was so concrete, so palpable, that it showed the rest of the world for the grey murk it was. Corinne couldn't look away.

For a moment, he faltered, suddenly aware of being seen. He looked around, picked her out, held her gaze. Held it hard.

His expression softened. His mouth formed words she could not comprehend, and he smiled. Warmth flowed through her, and her aches faded, and her shoes suddenly seemed a little less tight. Odd memories came to her, but these ones did not tease; perhaps they weren't hers at all. There was a thundering of hooves across the moor, and the baying of hounds, and lusty cries on the high wind, and the clash of iron on iron.

Then the huntsman turned and walked away, and was quickly lost to her sight.

# 4

## Daniel

*Ferrying away agony and hurt, perhaps.*

Adam looked terrible. What could be seen of his face through the patchwork of dressings and micropore was swollen and distorted, livid with purple bruising. His right ear was swaddled, his chest strapped, his arm in plaster. A tube ran from his nostril, another from the corner of his mouth. Ferrying away agony and hurt, perhaps.

Daniel just watched him breathe.

It had been two days now. Three, since they were really together. Everything had been so taken for granted. A blithe farewell, vague plans to meet, a few idle moments of telephone chit-chat. A dinner date, nothing special, just dropping by after work. They'd cook food and watch some TV, hang out, go to bed, make love. Daniel had been there, waiting, a few streets away, but Adam never arrived.

Daniel heard sirens that night, as he was making green curry paste, but there were always sirens in the city. Sometime later he cooked the chicken anyway, and ate it, furious at being stood up. Shoved a bowl of leftovers in the fridge. His calls to Adam's mobile went straight to voicemail. He fretted and raged, eventually went to miserable sleep; and when he woke up everything went to hell.

He wasn't the first point of contact. His picture was in Adam's wallet but his name and number weren't. Why would they be? He was just one contact among many in a malfunctioning mobile phone, nothing to mark him out as the partner, the lover, the next of kin. Under other circumstances he might not have found out for weeks.

"Hello?"

"Daniel? It's Rebecca."

"Becky? What the...?"

"Adam's in the hospital."

Suddenly he was wide awake, all vagueness gone. The moment snapped into focus and he found himself blinking into the abyss.

"Fuck. Why?"

"He's in a coma or something. I think he got attacked. Beaten up."

"What?"

What? What? What? What? What?

Fuck.

"He was found unconscious in the street. I don't know the details. Can you meet me there?"

Of course he could.

Adam's chest rose and fell hesitantly, struggling against its bindings. His breathing was shallow and liquid. Between each gurgling breath was a ghastly silence, fraught with the possibility of remaining unbroken. The doctors assured Daniel that Adam was stable, but his battered body seemed so frail and vulnerable, and he just wouldn't wake up.

Daniel felt sick the whole time. He longed to get into the neatly made up bed beside his lover and hold him, hold tight, drag him bodily back to life, but the web of wires and tubes was impregnable. Sometimes he would lay his head lightly on Adam's heaving chest, sometimes whisper words of encouragement in his unscathed left ear, but mostly he would just sit and watch, helplessly.

"Come back to me, baby. I don't know what to do without you. Don't leave me to deal with this alone, I'm not ready for that. I'm trying to be strong, trying to hold on, because you'll need me to be solid and there for you when you return, but I just don't know how. You're my beacon in this, my anchor. You should be showing me the way to get through, to find you and



bring you home. Please. I need you by my side. You're so much better at all this than me. I just don't know what to do. Please. Please come back."

Daniel never said these things out loud, but perhaps Adam heard him anyway. Perhaps Daniel's voice called to him on the dark and bloody battlefields he roamed in his dreams, called across the mud and slaughter and made him put down his sword, summoned him home to have his wounds nursed.

Perhaps it was just time to open his eyes.

## Euphrosyne

*Listen, you flighty, shallow harlot.*

“Beauty is where you find it. Isn’t it?”

“I suppose it must be.” Attention elsewhere.

“It’s not that I don’t care about him.”

“Of course not.”

“But you have to follow your heart. You only live once, you know?”

“Believe me, I know.”

“Well there you are, then. You have to cherish beauty while you can. Life’s too short. No?”

No. All things considered, Euphrosyne could not honestly say that life was too short. It seemed tactless to argue the point, though. To say, for example: “Listen, you flighty, shallow harlot, your life has already gone on longer than you can justify and every extra minute you keep breathing is an unearned gift you’re too stupid to recognise. Listen, you flighty, shallow harlot, your life, like most lives, is not nearly short *enough*.” Tactless and hateful and without the possibility of any good outcome. So she remained silent.

“And he *is* beautiful, isn’t he? Doesn’t he just set your eyes on fire?”

Euphrosyne’s eyes were cold and clear, free from even the tiniest hint of flame, but yes, the harlot’s beau was beautiful.

“Doesn’t he just make you want to dance?”

“Yes. Yes, he does.”

And that was true. She couldn’t remember the last time she was so inspired by the sight of someone. She certainly couldn’t remember the last time she’d danced.

“Well there you are, then.”

There she was.

The evening was not really going as planned. Its butterfly lure had been impossible to avoid, the glittering trap of unabbreviated gorgeousness, but in the end that was—as it had always been—an unrewarding pursuit. A youth pushing past nudged a splash of red wine onto her dress. Euphrosyne was too old for this, but still she couldn’t quite shake the habit.

Someone turned the music up, which at least relieved her of the obligation to converse with the harlot. She swayed her body a little—not enough to arouse Terpsichore—and idly gazed at the vision in the other room.

She’d seen many beauties in her time, and he was a good one. Not the best—if memory could be trusted in these matters, which it couldn’t—but good. She watched the shapes he made and the attitudes he struck and appreciated them greatly. She watched the effects he had on others and appreciated those less.

Mean spirits seemed to crowd into the house, making the atmosphere tight and bitter—and they were drawn there by *him*. Just as she had been.

In other parties, in other houses, it was not like this. Those revels were livelier and happier—perhaps that bit more so than they would have been in this one’s absence. But here, the air was musty with resentment, with jealousy and bitterness. With the urge to possess and control, the urge to destroy.

Euphrosyne had the sense things hadn’t always been this way, but perhaps that was mere nostalgia. Covetousness and envy and hate had a long history, longer even than hers. It was the human condition.

She closed her eyes and drew down into the moment. Waved away the beauty, slipped off along the hall, opened the door, and out.

# 6

## Forbes

*Most of his duties were unimpeachable.*

There is a certain amount of comfort to be drawn from the statement “I was only following orders.”

Not as much as you might imagine. Not as much as you might *hope*. But some.

So it seemed, at least, to Forbes. Forbes was always following orders.

His duties were wide-ranging and complicated, and most of them were unimpeachable. He drove people from one place to another. Laid their tables, ironed their clothes. Ran errands, smoothed their paths, managed their lives. Who could fault him for that? He had a job, provided a service, and was rewarded for it. All he ever did was to help people do what they wanted, what they needed. All he ever did was help.

Most of his duties were unimpeachable, but not quite all. Every now and then he was called upon to do something that was...

Was...

Take the girl. Karen? Something like that. She'd come to the city for the wrong reasons and the lady didn't take her in. She wasn't right, not right in the head. The lady felt sorry for her, but giving her charge of the children was completely out of the question. “Let her down gently,” she'd said. “Send her on her way.”

Forbes knew Karen had nowhere to go, and knew she didn't understand that having nowhere to go was a problem. The girl was a born victim, exposed on a hillside surrounded by slaving wolves. She was crying out to be saved, but no-one told Forbes to save her, so he didn't. He let her down gently. He sent her on her way.

He left the lady's service soon after.

Years later, when he was ferrying Miranda to one of her illicit assignations, Forbes thought he saw Karen wandering one of the uprooted streets around King's Cross station. It was only a brief glimpse, he could easily have been mistaken, but in his heart he believed it was her. He believed she was there, homeless and bewildered and suffering, because of him.

He'd had his chance to be a decent human being. He'd had his chance to save someone who needed saving. His career, his whole life, was predicated on helping people, that was what he did, but when he'd had the opportunity to *really* help, he'd let it pass. He never forgave himself that.

Years later, when he was ferrying Miranda to one of her illicit assignations, recording the whole thing for Georgie's delectation, Forbes wondered whether his services to both of them were just as much of a failure as sending Karen on her way. He wondered whether both of them would have been better off without his interventions. He wondered, as Miranda fucked some anonymous rentboy on the back seat, what kind of monster he had become.

But, when it came down to it, he was only following orders.

## Georgie

*It was like something from another age.*

When Georgie arrived in a bustle of grapes and flowers, Adam was alone. Daniel had made himself scarce when he heard the old coot was coming. He never could understand Adam's relationship with Georgie; it was like something from another age. Adam was able to sit up in bed now, no longer knotted up with tubes and wires. He still looked a state but the swelling was subsiding and he seemed in surprisingly good spirits. He was expected to go home at the end of the week; in the meantime, he entertained.

"Dear God, child, what have they *done* to you?" Georgie planted a moist kiss on Adam's forehead. "You look like the Elephant Man."

"Thank you, Georgie, that makes me feel so much better."

"Is that arm broken?"

"In three places. Little fuckers certainly did some damage."

"Bloody animals. They should be put down."

"I'm not about to disagree."

"Good. If you did I'd have to slap you. You'd sound like some frightful holier-than-thou Christian or something, turning the other cheek."

"Never fear, I remain the vengeful bitch you've always known."

"Huzzah! What happened to your ear?"

"Ack. Lost a chunk of it, I'm afraid. They say it won't affect my hearing, but it ain't gonna be pretty."

Georgie looked green. "Sorry, my boy, I think I have to sit down."

"Please do. I hate people standing around the bed, anyway, when I'm stuck in it. The thing that hurts most is losing my earring. You remember the little diamond stud that Daniel gave me?"

Georgie nodded.

"Torn off in the *mêlée*. Maybe they nicked it, I don't know. I don't remember much about the whole thing, to be honest. I don't really want to."

"Christ. You poor baby."

Adam shrugged sadly.

"Where *is* that boyfriend of yours, anyway? Shouldn't he be doing the whole Florence Nightingale bit?"

"Oh, he has been. Keeping watch night and day, poor thing. I think I got the easier part of the deal, in some ways."

"Oh, *please!* What utter tosh! You're the one missing half an ear."

"Well, yes—but I spent much of the worst of it unconscious—and off my face on painkillers since then."

"They do get some quality pills in these places. If only they'd hawk them in London's nightclubs rather than just, you know, giving them to *ill* people, there'd be no more NHS budget problems."

"Ha ha."

Georgie smiled.

"I'm still pretty spaced out, to be honest. I've been having the strangest dreams, like something out of *Dungeons & Dragons*."

"If I had the faintest idea what you were talking about, I wouldn't admit it."

"Tsk. Will you admit to knowing about King Arthur and Excalibur and all that?"

"Reluctantly."

“Like that, then. Bloody ancient battlefields, swords and armour and horses and all that. Weird and horrible but also kind of exciting. When I wake up it’s hard to tell whether my limbs are aching from the real injuries or from swinging a sodding great broadsword all night.”

“Good grief. I don’t know what those drugs are, but I’d like some.”

“Tough. Have to get some perks from this shitty business.”

“I suppose.”

There is a pause.

“Miranda sends her love, by the way.”

“She does? Fuck, I *am* hallucinating.”

“*Love* might be overstating a little.”

“Miranda sends her complete indifference, perhaps?”

“That probably sums it up.”

“Do please wish her the same.”

Georgie rolled his eyes, and patted Adam’s plastered arm affectionately.

# 8

## Herla

*No it bloody isn't! Piss off!*

The autumn night was mild and damp, fine drizzle falling through the sodium streetlamps' orange glare. Yellow leaves choked the car-lined gutters along the suburban avenues that led from the tube station to his home. Harry's mind was elsewhere, impatient and distracted. He shrugged his jacket tighter, shrank inwards from the rain. Under the hood. It had been a trying day. Just the usual work stress, nothing out of the ordinary, but trying. Everyone wanted him to be someone he wasn't. Everyone wanted something he couldn't give. It was a relief to be out of there, to be on his way home.

Amid the splatter of drops and the rumble of distant traffic, it took a little while for him to register the strange noise on the street, the strange

*clip-clop*

noise. It took a little while to make the connection between disjoint realities. Who expects a *clip-clop* in the backstreets of Turnpike Lane?

*clip-clop*

He knew, at some level, what he would see when he turned; knew what to expect. Still it came as a shock. Who expects a *clip-clop* in the backstreets of Turnpike Lane?

"Sire!"

The horse snorted great gouts of steamy breath, flicking its rain-slick mane. Fat drops poured off its rider's beard, seeped into his leather armour. A second rider clip-clopped up behind. And a third.

"Sire!"

Harry looked up, exasperated.

"What the *fuck*?"

"Is it time? Sire? Is it time?"

"No it bloody isn't! Piss off!"

The rider looked so downcast as he blinked the drizzle from his eyes, rainwater coursing over the deep lines in his face. His long red hair was sodden beneath the tarnished helm and weariness infused his being.

"We have been waiting so *long*. Our blades thirst for enemy blood!"

Harry's face softened, but he remained firm.

"That time has not come, my Einheriar. You must be strong."

The riders looked to one another, forlorn, hoping there was something to keep them there, hoping their leader would give them life once more. The dead weight of centuries pressed down on their shoulders.

"Go. Resume your vigil."

*clip-clop*

"Sire."

They turned slowly, bedraggled and disconsolate in the acid light, and sloped away between the parked cars.

"And for God's sake be discreet!"

Harry pushed his hands into his pockets and walked on. By the time he reached his shabby terrace he'd already forgotten the riders, sunk back into the drab stresses of the day. A faint whiff of wet leather lingered on in his nostrils, but that too was dispelled when he saw the broken glass and splintered frame and his front door hanging open.

# 9

## I

*I walk among them and they do not know me.*

I walk among them and they do not know me. I hold them in my hands and sculpt their fears and tease out random details of their witless lives, and all without them ever even noticing I am there.

How I hate them for their ignorance. How I hate their dull insistence on their own separateness, their individuality. What kind of catastrophic failure of the imagination leads them to think they exist at all? What can they be, if not my creations?

Who do they think they are?

Do they picture themselves as random collections of molecules? The products of millions of years of grinding evolution? Do they conjure up hackneyed bearded sky-gods to explain their own pointlessness?

*Who cares what they think?*

I *know* who they are. How can I fail to know, when I make them up? They are mine, every last detail of them. I can make them feel lust or confusion or sheer visceral terror at my idlest whim. They live by my will, and die by it. If I wish to torment them, they are tormented. If I choose to soothe their pain, they are soothed.

I never choose to soothe.

Who am I, then? Who do I think I am?

Do I picture myself as a random collection of molecules? The product of millions of years of grinding evolution? Do I conjure up hackneyed bearded sky-gods to explain my own pointlessness?

*Do I fuck as like.*

I know who I am and where I stand. I, unlike those worthless wretches I invent and reinvent and tease and torture, have a sense of proportion. A sense of what matters.

Oh yes, I know what matters in this world. *My* world. Oh yes.

I know what matters.

# 10

## John

*He'd have to entertain himself some other way.*

By the time he got home, John was seething with resentment at that fucking bitch of a drag queen. How dare she make fun of him in front of the whole pub? Who the fuck did she think she was? It wasn't like she was even fucking *funny*.

He threw off his wet jacket and went into the kitchen. Put the kettle on. Rummaged through the refrigerator, decided against eating any of the items in it, and popped a couple of slices in the toaster instead. Contemplated the rest of the evening.

What he really wanted to do was track down that talentless tranny whore and kick her insolent teeth in... but that wasn't practical. Not tonight, anyway. He'd have to entertain himself some other way.

When the toast popped up, he smeared it with low fat margarine and went into the living room. Flicked on the TV and sat down to munch in front of the late news. It was the usual rubbish: suicide bombers in the Middle East; more tube strikes; missing children; asylum seekers. The social fabric coming apart. Depressing and boring in equal measure. With a click he shut it off.

When he finished eating he brushed the crumbs from his shirt and dumped his plate in the sink. Switched on the kettle again, to make sure it was properly hot, and made himself a nice cuppa. Smoky lapsang souchong. *Best drink of the day.*

Then he wandered down to the basement.

At John's approach the boy started thrashing against his bonds, screaming frantically but inaudibly behind the duct tape gag. Somehow he'd managed to work one battered leg free and was kicking it around uselessly. John would deal with that later.

He set down his cup on the workbench, and surveyed his tools. Gazed dispassionately at the creature tied to the wall, whose wide, bloodshot eyes were fixed on him in inhuman terror.

Took a soothing sip of tea.

To tell the truth, he wasn't sure he could be bothered. The brat wasn't going anywhere; he could wait. But then he remembered Blanche. Blanche du Theydon *fucking* Bois. He had some anger to work out about that, he realized. Oh yes. Some *issues*. Under the circumstances, perhaps he could be bothered after all.

He contemplated the matter for a few moments longer, then lifted the soldering iron from its hook and plugged it in.

Then, while he waited for it to heat up, he polished off the rest of his tea.



## Kh'nyzzeyn

*We care for no jewels, whelp!*

Who sings now the flesh ballad of sacrifice in the threads of Mir-Ghal'ai? Who summons the great Kh'nyzzeyn? We scent you, creature; we sense your presence.

*Beware!*

We swim the snow tides of Shuru-Bau; we fly the rocky cliffs of the dead. Do not you idly disturb the great Kh'nyzzeyn, be it at dear peril.

Stronger are ourselves than your puny frame can encompass. Your mind is too small, creature, for the enormity of us. With what seek you to pay our way? To buy us must be great expense.

We care for no jewels, whelp! Dull stones be all about us in the Heartless Lands. Do we call you for such trifles? Prepare to evaporated be!

Yet, *blood*. We scent it, creature. Is your own? Is?

And flesh. Oh yes, the taste we know. Resonant with yearning, with sorrow. Nothing there is like it. Is your own? More, is there?

Always more.

For this we might deign to attend. Giving no honour, creature! Giving no quarter.

Acknowledge we not your summons; you are but creature. Flesh, only flesh. But attend, at our whim. Yes, we might deign.

Who summons the great Kh'nyzzeyn? Be it at dear peril! We take your proffered flesh, our appetite decrees, but not the stone! Filthy stone! Begone! Flesh and blood only.

Flesh and blood!

At our whim, we might deign. The great Kh'nyzzeyn; giving no honour; in the threads of Mir-Ghal'ai. The flesh ballad of sacrifice. Sing on creature. Sing on.

Beware! We might deign!

Creature, we might deign.

# 12

## Lucy

*It's a nice day to start again.*

Lucy strode across Hungerford Bridge—the real one, not that Johnny-come-lately pretender on the West side—and there, on the South Bank, Zoe was waiting for her.

“Hey baby, it’s been too long.”

“Damn right. Jesus, is that a wedding gown? Please don’t tell me...”

“Just a fashion *faux pas*. You know you can rely on me to be perpetually single.”

“Thank God for that. Are you drinking?”

“Was there ever any doubt?”

“I need alcohol in my body right now and I’m not bothered how it gets there.”

“Enema?”

“The Archduke.”

“Spot the difference?”

“Ha ha!”

The Archduke was noisy, but there were tables. Zoe and Lucy adopted one.

“What’s with the get up? Are you becoming Miss Havisham?”

“An idle whim. A Billy Idol whim.”

“It’s a nice day to start again.”

“It always is.”

“Did you hear about Adam?”

“I’ve heard about little else all week.”

“It’s fucked up.”

“In every way.”

“I hate that there are people out there who would do that. For fun or whatever. Like it’s a normal activity?”

“It *is* a normal activity.”

“Hanging around, waiting to beat people up?”

“Yes. Have a few drinks, kick a few heads in, it’s the human condition.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do. Some people exist to hurt other people, it’s their purpose in life.”

“Bad day at the office?”

“Don’t even ask.”

“Okay. Who do you fancy for the Premiership, then?”

“Very funny. You know I despise that shit.”

“I do.”

“If I never hear the name of another footballer it will be too fucking soon.”

“I’m beginning to agree. Even Becky seems to be succumbing to the lure lately. What’s that about?”

“I don’t know. Is David Beckham some kind of dyke icon?”

“Don’t look at me. I don’t pay attention to that stuff.”

“Does Becky?”

“Fuck off.”

“Don’t you love how it’s getting dark so early?”

“What? No. Are you insane? Nobody loves that. This is the most depressing time of the year.”

“I do. The whole wintery feel, the nights drawing in. It’s wonderful.”

“You are out of your mind, Luce. It’s horrible. It’s, like, dark *all the time!*”

“Exactly. Everything’s better that way.”

“In the dark?”

“You don’t see all the wear and tear and grime and dirt. Everything seems much sharper and stronger in the dark, much clearer. It’s glamorous.”

“Just because you can’t see it, that doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”

“Seeing is believing, Zoe.”

“Who are you? What have you done with the real Lucy?”

“I just like the winter, that’s all.”

“Right. You’re the Princess of Darkness.”

“On the nose.”

## Miranda

*She couldn't think of any good reason to look away.*

Miranda had no real idea what she was doing at the party. This was not unusual; she rarely knew what she was doing anywhere. She rarely intended to do anything at all, but somehow found herself doing things all the same. She considered herself living proof that volition played much less part in human affairs than was generally realised.

The music was loud and irritating; the lights dim and irritating; the people shallow and irritating. At some level Miranda was even irritated, but not enough to pay any attention to; not enough to act upon.

Instead she just watched people. Well, at first it was *people*; before long it was *one* person. A young man, dancing. He looked vaguely familiar, though not enough that it occurred to her to wonder where she'd seen him before. If he stirred any particular feelings in her, she didn't notice; but he was nice to look at, and the way he moved was enticing, and she couldn't think of any good reason to look away.

So, she watched. And as she watched, she gradually became aware that she wasn't the only one. Gazing at the oddly-mesmerising patterns he made dancing around the room, it seemed to her that everyone around him was somehow woven into those patterns, that they were all somehow in orbit around him. She noticed that those other people were a lot more aware of him than he was of them. Some were looking at him, clearly captivated; others were not looking, but so self-consciously that it was almost worse than a frank stare.

Miranda was not particularly attuned to these things, but eventually it dawned on her that there was a kind of tension in the air. A kind of... *hostility*. She couldn't identify its source, it almost seemed to be coming from everywhere. From *everyone*. It didn't really make sense to her—she certainly didn't make the connection between this odd, bitter atmosphere and the sense she'd had that nearly everyone present was somehow in thrall to the handsome dancer—but it did make her slightly uneasy.

A woman in a wine-stained dress slipped past Miranda on the way out, and as she slammed the door there was a lull in the annoying music. The man stopped dancing. Oblivious to the glares and scowls of his companions, he wandered out towards the kitchen. Miranda—without volition, of course—followed.

“Hello.”

“Hi. Have we met before?”

“I don't know. You look sort of familiar. I'm... I'm not very good with faces.”

“Were you at the show earlier?”

The show? She vaguely remembered there'd been some event before this. A fashion parade or something.

“Uh. Yes, I think so. Were you?”

“I was modelling. Weren't those jackets marvellous? I really think Ursula is a genius, don't you?”

Miranda couldn't remember a single detail of the clothes and had no idea who Ursula was, but it seemed polite to agree.

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Menswear is such a wasteland, generally, but her stuff really stands out.”

It was immediately clear to Miranda that this person was an idiot. She felt she was something of an expert on vapidity and shallowness, and he seemed to make both into an artform.

“I couldn't agree more. It was revelatory.”

He looked so delighted she couldn't help smiling too.

“I’m Miranda, by the way.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miranda. Alexander.”

They shook hands.

Wig boxed up, gown packed away, false eyelashes peeled off. Blanche du Theydon Bois smeared cold cream into her thickly-founded face and Norman Chadwick wiped it off. After the makeup was gone—and it took awhile—Norman looked at himself in the tiny mirror and sighed.

“For fuck’s sake, girl. What do you think you’re doing?”

He had no answer.

He hurled the last remnants of his act into the ridiculous steamer trunk he had to cart around everywhere, locked it shut. Checked his civvies—there were always a few stray flakes of glitter but, on the whole, he’d pass—and struck out into the bar. This was usually the worst part.

“Great show tonight, Norm.”

“Thanks. Is the cab on its way?”

“Five or ten minutes. Have a drink in the meantime? On the house.”

Such generosity.

“Why not? G & T, please.”

“Coming right up.”

“Bit quiet tonight, eh?”

“Yeah. You know how it is. Rainy, weekday. No-one wants to go out. Here you go.”

“Ta. Thank God for the weekend, eh?”

“Damn right. We’d never break even otherwise. I dunno, sometimes a good show will pull in the punters, but mostly it seems they’d sooner be home in front of the TV with a six-pack of Special Brew.”

“Feel that way myself, sometimes.”

“Mmm.”

Norman swirled the ice around in his gin and tonic.

“That John chap wasn’t bad. Do you know him?”

“Not to talk to. Comes in from time to time, not really a regular.”

“Nice arms. Muscly.”

“Yes. Not one of your great personalities, though, far as I can see. Gives off an odd vibe. Like he’s always pissed off about something.”

“There’s a lot to be pissed off about.”

“Maybe.”

“Not like it matters, anyway. Can’t exactly chat him up now.”

“No. He’s long gone. Won’t see him again for weeks, I shouldn’t think.”

“Story of my life.”

“Story of all our lives, Norm. Is that your cab?”

The autumn night was cold and hard, a fine prickle of icy rain falling through the sodium streetlamps’ orange glare. As the taxi meandered through its endless, shifting outskirts, the city became an alien landscape before Norman’s eyes: blurry, hostile, painted in garish, unnatural colours. Perhaps that last gin was one too many; perhaps that last line was. He felt like he was in an ultra-violent video game and someone else had the controller.

As one depressing suburb segued into another, Norman found he no longer had any idea where he was. The driver could be taking him around every forgotten backwater of London—and a few backwaters of completely other cities. At one point they seemed to be travelling in open countryside, great rolling thickly-wooded hills on all sides, just a flimsy thread of tarmac and orange streetlights showing the way. At another, they were driving through the aftermath of a

terrible riot, roads lined with the burnt-out shells of cars, smoke everywhere, hanged bodies dangling from the lamp posts, handwritten signs around their necks reading *TRAITOR*. Harsh trumpets sounded, and there was the thundering of many hooves.

“Left here, please. Then the first on the right.”

Jesus, I need to sleep.

“Just by that red Volvo.”

As Norman dragged his trunk out of the cab, something glittery caught his eye. A little sparkle amid the fallen leaves. He paid the driver and pocketed the receipt. Manhandled the trunk up to his front door.

A little sparkle amid the fallen leaves. He had no idea why it tugged so at his attention, but it did. He couldn't ignore it. Leaving the trunk in the hallway, he stepped back out into the street.

Cold rain spattered down, each drop a tiny icicle in the making. The pavement was covered, the gutter filled, with sodden, yellow leaves. Norman couldn't even remember what he was looking for, where it might be. He scanned the scene disconsolately for a moment.

There it was again. Sparkling.

This time there was nothing to distract him. He dropped to his knees on the pavement, soaking his jeans, and swept the leaves away. Dug around in the running gutter, sure now that there was something there. His chilled fingers touched it, fumbled, lost, grabbed it once more.

Plucked it out.

Then he was back in his hall, slamming the front door behind him. Feeling vague. He couldn't quite remember what he'd been doing in the previous minutes, it had all become a frigid blur; but at least he was home.

He dropped the little diamond earring onto the dining room table and went to run himself a nice hot bath.

# 15

## Oscar

*Who could work magic without beauty?*

A glance in either direction confirmed that Oscar was unobserved. He quickly levered up the manhole cover and lowered himself inside. He'd have preferred to have someone to replace the cover after him, someone to keep lookout, but he was only going to be gone a few minutes. He knew the tunnel well, knew exactly how short the drop was, landed easily. The floor was damp, but not running. Pulling a hefty torch from one of his deep coat pockets, he lit his way down the southern passage for the hundred metres or so until a wide shaft opened up in the floor ahead. The shaft wasn't intended, first and foremost, as a trap for the unwary; but the low lifes who'd made it were quite happy for it to serve that purpose as well.

Positioning the torch on the floor so that its beam illuminated the space before him, he stepped forward to the brink. He was glad he couldn't see down into the shaft; the seemingly-infinite drop always made him dizzy. He rummaged in his pockets again, and this time pulled out a reel of thin twine, with a conical silver plumb weight on the end. A crude tool, but just now his more sensitive instruments—and himself most of all—were so buffeted by the contrary forces at work as to be unreadable. His hope was that the dowsing line's clumsiness would filter out all but the loudest signals. At least it might give him some idea what was going on.

Standing as close to the edge as he could bear, he reached out over the shaft and began to pay out the line. It thrummed gently between his thumb and forefinger as it gradually descended into the pit. Five metres. Ten. Twenty.

When the line was almost fully extended, he stopped and held it tight. Stood still and silent over the abyss, focussing on the thread between his fingertips, trying to tune into its vibrations. It had been awhile since he last worked this sort of divination, and his mind did not slip easily into the way of it.

As he waited, picking out one note after another in the faint throb, he became aware of keening sound from the depths—not through the twine, but to his ears. He was startled. This was no song of the low life. It was harsh and unmelodic, devoid of beauty, little more than a guttural shriek. Who could work magic without beauty? Without shape or pattern? It made no sense. Sense or not, there it was. It grew louder and harsher. The plumb line picked up its overtones, resonating weakly at first, then faster, harder, until any traces of the information Oscar sought were quite obliterated. That shrill cry consumed everything.

Cursing, Oscar disengaged his thoughts from the line and began to haul it in, hand over hand. The keening whirled around him like a strong wind, brutal and disorienting. The trip had been a waste of time.

Both hands were gripping the string when the yank came, and it was almost enough to pull him over the edge. He cried out in surprise—and at the same instant the torch went out. The darkness was absolute, the rising scream dizzying. Before him yawned a pit that descended further than anyone living could say—and his hands were tangled in a line that led into it. He felt himself beginning to panic.

There was another yank, but Oscar was braced for it. By the time the third came, his hands were free. The plumb line slipped away into the eternal dark and was gone.

At once the keening stopped, though its echoes persisted for several seconds. Oscar sat heavily on the damp ground and tried to get his bearings. He had to get out of this place. He had always been at home in the underland, but now he was afraid. He had to force himself to let that go. He had to force himself to concentrate.



Struggling to his feet, he backed slowly away down the tunnel through which he'd come. All was quiet once again. There was no sign, as Oscar carefully tiptoed away, that anything out of the ordinary had occurred. Not until he was almost out of earshot.

Then the guttural, barely comprehensible, voice whispered:

“Beware.”

It was almost lost in the enclosed blackness of the tunnel, but not quite.

“Beware, creature.”

Oscar's skin crawled, the hairs on his arms standing straight out. For a moment he thought he was going to vomit.

“We might deign.”

# 16

## Pete

*He found thoughts in his head that he didn't remember putting there himself.*

Standing in the hallway, Pete found himself a little uncertain what to do next. Kicking the door in had been much easier than he expected; he hadn't really thought much beyond that. Steve and Jez cowered behind him; Jez was shaking and Steve looked like he was about to burst into tears. Pete collected himself; stepped around them; pushed the door shut. It swung open again, slightly, but not enough to notice from outside. Not unless you were looking. Pete knew nobody would be.

"Fuck."

"Yes."

"Fuck."

They giggled nervously, relieving the tension just a little.

"Steve, go look in the living room. Not the TV, too heavy, but anything you can carry easily.

Anything that looks posh. Jez, come with me."

Steve still looked like a frightened child—his lower lip was quivering and his face seemed to have no blood in it—but he did as he was told. Pete tiptoed up the stairs, Jez in tow.

At the top, he nudged the door immediately ahead with his toe. It swung silently open. It was clear even in the dim light that it was a bathroom. Nothing of value in there.

A crash sounded downstairs. Jez yelped, and even Pete jumped, a tiny bit.

"For fuck's sake, be careful!"

"Sorry!"

"Jesus."

He turned onto the landing, another door at his side. Again, he pushed it open. Some kind of study: much more promising.

The walls were lined with shelves of books and files; boring. But there was a laptop on the desk and, at the other end of an umbilical wire, an iPod.

Paydirt.

"Jez. Grab those."

That was enough to make this little adventure worthwhile. There probably wasn't anything of value in the bedroom anyway. For a moment, Pete considered not bothering to look. What was going to be in there but clothes and sheets and aftershave?

*Jewellery, perhaps? Or cash? Who knows?*

Not Pete, that was certain. He didn't even know where those thoughts had come from. They didn't feel like his own.

But that was nothing new. All too often he found thoughts in his head that he didn't remember putting there himself. Sometimes he felt like a puppet, a pawn; he didn't mind that feeling in the least. It was like having a purpose, like being *for* something. It was reassuring. The certainty, the control, the direction; the brilliance. None of it felt like his own, but it made him real and strong. It put things in perspective.

He kicked open the bedroom door.

There was the bed, of course. A wardrobe, a chest of drawers. A bedside table. There was a clock radio there, but it was just cheap plastic trash, worth nothing. Shoes were jumbled on the floor. A movie poster on the wall. *Andy Warhol: Querelle*. It meant nothing to Pete. There was nothing here.

But he opened the wardrobe anyway.

Three suits on hangers. A dozen shirts. Ties. Pete pulled them all out, dumped them on the floor. Behind him, laptop in one hand, iPod in the other, Jez flinched as the clothes piled up.

“Pete...”

“Just a fucking minute! One minute’s not going to make any fucking difference, is it?”

Jeze mumbled that no, it wasn’t.

The wardrobe was empty now, Pete standing in a jumble of clothing. Or... wait. Not *quite* empty. There was something still there, hanging at the back. Pete reached in.

“What the fuck?”

The leather strap was cracked, even worn through in places. The silver filigree dull and tarnished. There were endless fine cracks and scratches in its varnished surface. Still, it was a thing of beauty. Pete held it up to the light from the window.

*Yes. Oh yes.* The thoughts were, once again, unbidden. *That’s it, oh yes.*

Yes. Pete was more certain than he could remember ever being about anything. This was the thing. This was what he’d come for. It rested in his hand with a solidity unlike any object he’d ever held. It was, despite the wear and tear, beautiful.

“Pete? What is it, Pete?”

Pete turned to show Jeze the horn.

“What the fuck is that?”

Pete felt no need to reply.

“Look, can we get out of here? For fuck’s sake, can we just go?”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

Yes.

Let’s go.

Quentin liked the night shift. A lot of people considered it unsocial, but there was nothing else he would be doing otherwise, not these days. There was a lot less hassle late at night. Mostly. He could get through the paperwork uninterrupted, sneak some study time for the exams he was taking in the summer. It was quiet.

Of course, when things went wrong they tended to do it big time. If a patient was going to go, the early hours were the preferred time. It wasn't called the graveyard shift for nothing. Sometimes Quentin had to watch four or five people die in a single night. Not often, but enough to leave scars. He tried not to get attached, tried not to care, but death had a way of getting its claws in anyway. A way of worming its way into your heart.

There was none of that tonight. No-one was critical, no-one was on the brink. No-one was even insomniac. The ward was dark and quiet. Ventilators whirred and clicked, the heating ticked over. People snored. It was blissfully uneventful.

Quentin allowed himself to focus on his textbooks for awhile, trying to get a handle on ordinary least-squares regression. He thought he'd grasped it in the lecture, but now the words and symbols on the page wouldn't slot into place. The more he stared at the scatter graphs and the regression lines, the more random they seemed, just an elaborate practical joke at his expense.

He rubbed his eyes. It was time for a break. Time to do the rounds; to do some work. It wouldn't take long.

And it didn't.

Peaceful sleep. Laboured breathing. Tossing and turning. There were four dorms and four single rooms in Quentin's ward, and every one was quiet. He checked each patient. He tucked Mr Galbani's flailing arm back under the covers. Wiped the drool from Mr Robinson's cheek. That was the nearest he came to being needed. Nobody's drip was backed up, nobody was bleeding or choking, nobody needed any attention at all.

But since Quentin had some attention to spare, he lingered in the last of the rooms, watching Mr Hickox. Watching Adam.

It would probably be his last chance. Adam was going home tomorrow. He still looked pretty battered, would be wearing bandages—not to mention the plaster cast—for some time, but he was on the mend. Ready to face the world.

Ta ta.

Quentin was happy about that, but still, he would miss Adam. He was one of those ones Quentin connected with, despite himself. He wished he couldn't relate to what had happened to the boy, but he could; it pushed every one of his buttons. The thought of him hunted down on the street, caught, beaten into a bloody pulp... Well, it was upsetting.

It wasn't the same, but it reminded him of some things in his past, things he usually preferred to forget. People he preferred to forget. Though perhaps *people* was overstating it. Perhaps they were *things* after all.

But he wouldn't think about that. Wouldn't think about the beatings and punishment, the bruises or the scars. Wouldn't run his tongue over the bridgework that filled in those missing teeth. Especially wouldn't think about the deep seams of emotional sadism that had been mined back then, so much richer and more rewarding than mere physical injury. No.

Instead, he would just watch.

Adam was sleeping quietly, his chest rising and falling in gentle rhythm. His eyelids fluttered a little. Perhaps he was dreaming.

Quentin stood beside the bed for a couple of minutes, almost paternal. Watching tiny expressions flicker across Adam's face, listening to the little murmurs. He was probably a handsome man when he wasn't swollen and bruised, but Quentin wasn't attracted to him that way. He just wanted to wrap him up and protect him from the evils of the world. He just wanted to imagine that was possible.

Adam started to move a little more, head nodding a tiny bit. His lips parted and he whispered something Quentin couldn't hear. He leaned down to listen closer, but couldn't really make out the words. Something about "night" and "day"? He had no idea.

Whatever the dream was, it soon passed, and Adam sank back into a deep and apparently placid sleep. He started to snore quietly. He smiled.

Quentin smiled too. He was surprised and slightly embarrassed to find himself giving Adam a tiny kiss on the forehead. Then he went back to his books.

# 18

## Rebecca

*Long enough to deal with a fucking Saturday night on the desk, at least.*

“What is your fucking problem, you frigid cooze?”

Rebecca took a deep breath and tried again.

“There’s no need to be aggressive, sir. I don’t have a problem. I simply need to determine your name and address before proceeding with...”

“I’m not being fucking aggressive!”

“Of course not.”

“Who’s in fucking charge here, anyway?”

“As far as this goes, sir, I am.”

“Fuck off.”

“Excuse me?”

“Who’d put a dried-up lezbo like you in charge of anything?”

Sometimes, Rebecca just wanted a licence to kill. These bloody people. She was trying to *help* these bloody people, that was her whole sodding function here, but would they let her do it?

Would they ever appreciate it? Of course not.

“Sir...”

“Come with me, sir. Sorry Becky, you shouldn’t have had to put up with that.”

“I’ve had worse.”

“I know, but still.”

Rebecca was grateful to Bates for intervening, but at the same time furious. She could have handled it, didn’t need to be rescued by a man every time some wanker got out of hand. How long had she been doing this? Long enough to deal with a fucking Saturday night on the desk, at least.

Her mobile rang: Zoe.

“Hey Baby.”

“Bad night?”

“Don’t even ask. Christ. What’s up?”

“Just checking in. OK, that’s a lie. Can you pick up some milk on the way home?”

“Sure. Just milk?”

“Something breakfasty. Croissants or whatever?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Hang in there, girl.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m hanging. See you in the morning.”

“Love you.”

“You too.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. Saturday nights.

“No, officer, no, I’m not, really, please.”

Becky knew that voice. She sighed.

“I just want to speak to the sergeant.”

“It’s OK, Dave, let her through.”

“If you say so.”

“Hello Corinne.”

“Ma’am.”

“To what do we owe the pleasure this time?”

“Ma’am?”

“I mean, what do you want to talk to me about?”

“Oh, yes. It’s the boy, you see. They keep saying I imagined it, but I didn’t, you’ve got to believe me. I’m not on drugs, honest, miss.”

“I believe you, Corinne. Remember me? I’m the one who believes you.”

“I remember.”

“What’s this about a boy, then?”

“He took him! I saw him take the boy. He didn’t think anyone was looking, didn’t think anyone would care, nobody ever cares, you see? You know how nobody ever cares? But I was there and I saw. It happened, and I saw, and I care. I’m not making it up, really.”

Becky was all too familiar with Corinne’s stories, but something made her pause this time.

Corinne’s demeanour was... well, Becky didn’t know what, exactly. A little more composed? And frightened. The fear shone out like a flashlight.

“Please, ma’am, please. You’ve got to come with me. I know where he took him, I saw.

You’ve got to come save the boy.”

“What boy, Corinne? What boy? Who took him?”

“The beast.”

“The beast?”

“The beast took the boy.”

Becky tried to imagine what this was going to look like written down, what her report would say. Then she thought of that prick she’d been talking to before and decided she didn’t care. It was a Saturday night. Might as well go with the fucking flow.

“Where did the beast take the boy, Corinne? Can you show me that? Where did the beast take the boy?”

“I can show you, ma’am. Yes, I can show you.”

# 19

## Steve

*A bookcase with no books.*

It was easier this time than before. Less of a struggle. Two swift kicks and the door flew open. Steve stepped inside quickly, glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, pushed the door closed.

He didn't need Pete.

The hallway was dark and empty. He slipped into the front room, looked around. TV, video: too heavy, too cheap. Not worth the effort.

Steve didn't know who he was anymore. Sometimes he felt like a puppet, tugged by invisible strings to do things he could never even have imagined before. Sometimes he felt he was possessed by the devil.

Or by Pete.

That boy was fucking crazy. Jesus. Steve couldn't believe some of the shit he pulled, and they all just went along. Like it was perfectly natural. Perhaps it was. He could no longer tell.

They all just went along. *Steve* just went along, but it wasn't enough, it was never enough. He never got any credit. He did his best, put his back into it, went at it with a vengeance, but Pete still treated him like some kind of loser.

"I'll show him."

Up the stairs: two rooms. Bedroom at the front. So neat and tidy, at first Steve thought it must be for guests. It didn't even look lived in. Wind up alarm clock, stopped. No posters on the walls. Chest of drawers with primly-folded underwear, balled socks. A rail of pressed shirts. A set of dumbbells in the corner. No jewellery, watches, laptops. No cash.

The other room was worse. Floorboards and net curtains. A bookcase with no books.

For fuck's sake.

The bathroom was small and clean. Razor, shaving cream, toothbrush, toothpaste, floss. All lined up square. Anti-bacterial hand soap. Towel on the rail.

Perhaps Pete was right after all. Steve *was* a loser.

He trudged back downstairs. There was a little yard out the back, just a square of dirt. No weeds.

The place was a complete bust.

Then he noticed the cellar door. What the fuck, might as well. Maybe this guy kept his treasures down there.

Steve flicked on the light and started down. There was a nasty smell, and some sounds he couldn't identify. Before he reached the last step, he saw the boy.

The boy's eyes widened. He started thrashing his battered head around. Tiny muffled screams tried to escape the gag.

Steve thought he was going to throw up. He had to struggle not to scream himself. He wanted to run the fuck away, right now, wanted never to have seen this nightmare. He could do it. He could just run.

Leave the boy. Leave the workbench and the tools, the knives and saws and drills. He didn't belong here, wasn't a part of this story. He didn't want to be a part of it, wanted to read about it in the tabloids and laugh at how sick it was. What the fuck was he doing here, anyway?

The boy couldn't speak, but Steve knew he was begging and pleading, could see it in his eyes. Christ, he knew what begging and pleading looked like, he'd made people do it often enough. He stepped back, ready to flee.

But those eyes, in that ravaged face. He couldn't have been more than fourteen. Screaming and screaming.



“Shit.”

He had to try.

He was just cutting the rope when he heard someone coming to the front door.

# 20

## Thalia

*Will these people ever get the hang of winter?*

Thalia gazed out of the café window and her breath was a cloud of peppermint steam; the glass was instantly opaque. She sighed.

“I’m getting too old for this.”

Euphrosyne made a noncommittal noise and took another sip of her eggnog latté.

“Sometimes I wonder why I’m even still here. The world seems leached of colour and spirit these days. There’s so little beauty in it.”

“Oh, the ennui of youth. Always so very world-weary.”

“The ennui of *what*? How many years do you have on me, woman? Four? Five?”

“Something like that.”

“A drop in the ocean.”

“True. But you don’t see me wallowing in some exaggerated mid-life crisis, do you?”

“I suppose not.” Thalia took another sip of tea. “Mid-life crisis. Ha ha ha.” She was surprised to find her faux laughter becoming the real thing, almost. It felt good. She swiped her hand across the steamed-up window, restoring the snarl of rush-hour traffic and grim-faced pedestrians to visibility. “Grief. Will these people *ever* get the hang of winter?”

“No. Why should they? Why should Hades let them?”

“Quite a price to pay for such a meagre snack.”

“A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the seasons.”

“An awfully long lifetime.”

“Who would know better than you and I?”

“There are some.”

“Indeed there are. So, have you seen our elder sister lately?”

“Not for years. I’m sure you recall our disagreement?”

“How could I forget?”

“I haven’t seen her. I’m sure she’s doing just fine for herself.”

“My, but you do sound bitter.”

“I suppose I am. Aren’t you?”

Euphrosyne shrugged. “It’s all water under the bridge.”

“A drop in the ocean?”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe it’s that age difference after all. I don’t know, I thought we stood for something.

Meant something, you know? Together.”

“All for one and one for all?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, the idealism of youth.”

“If you like. But it turned out to be just a route to making a fast buck for her. She sold out. Betrayed everything I thought we believed in.”

“Isn’t it a bit late in the day to be believing in things?”

“Not for me: I’m only just onto my mid-life crisis.”

“Of course.”

# 21

## Ursula

*He isn't even on the same planet as you.*

“Xander, darling. Thanks again for the other night. You were *stellar*. Made the whole show.”

“Your clothes made the show.”

“Pffft. It's all just product.”

“Ursula, I'm shocked!”

“Oh, you rumbled me. You know how I love to shock. Of course it's all about the clothes.”

“They're gorgeous. I would do anything for one of those jackets.”

“Anything? Dangerous words, my pet. Perhaps I'll think of something.”

“Within reason.”

“Of course. Anyway, much as I obviously love my outfits, some of those boys Lucy booked, Jesus. Made everything look like shapeless rags. I might as well send *donkeys* down the catwalk. Perhaps I will next time. Thank God for you, at least.”

“I thought they all looked perfect.”

“You say the sweetest things. Anyway, why I called. Are you busy next Tuesday? I know I should go through Merrick, but who can deal with that hassle?”

“I'll have to check. There's some Jasper Conran thing, but it might be Wednesday.”

“Jasper? Are you serious? Please, he isn't even on the same planet as you.”

“It pays the rent.”

“Babe! When did *you* ever pay *rent*? Anyway, he doesn't need you like I do. Donkeys, I tell you. Donkeys. And you did say you'd do anything...”

“What's the occasion?”

“Photo shoot for Details. I'm going to be the new black, apparently.”

“You're already that.”

“Cute. But back in the real world, the stylist's a complete *muppet*. I swear he's off his tits on crystal every time we speak. They're shooting in a burnt out factory near Heathrow and it's going to be a complete fiasco. Everything doom-laden and out of focus, spooky photography and screw the clothes. So fucking 90s.”

“It's retro.”

“Whatever. This could be a big US break for me, and they're going to piss it away. I need somebody to anchor it. I need *you*.”

“What difference can *I* make?”

“Bless.”

“If the pics are going to be crap, they're going to be crap. What difference does it make who's modelling?”

“Baby. My dear, sweet, low-watt baby. It makes *all* the difference. Even out of focus you make my clothes look beautiful. Even in a goddamn arson site in Heathrow.”

“Your clothes *are* beautiful.”

“Thank you so much, Xander. I like to think they have a certain something. But the awful truth is, clothes *don't* maketh the man, it's the other way around. And I need you to do that. I need you to maketh the fucking clothes. I need you to sell them right through every wackily-cropped fuzzy monochrome artwank snapshot.”

“Well, if you put it that way, I guess I'll do my best.”

“Thank fuck for that. And thank *you*. I knew I could rely on you.”

“It'll cost you.”

“Darling, I will hand tailor your jacket myself. I'm fetching my thimble right now. Really, it means a lot.”

“How could I say no to such a genius?”

“You couldn’t, of course. I’ll get Lucy to email you all the details. Thanks again, darling.”

“You’re welcome.”

# 22

## Victor

*How is he supposed to go on living?*

When the constable removed Victor's gag, he couldn't stop screaming. The officers tried to calm him, "Hush now, it's okay, everything's okay, you're safe now," but the truth was they wanted to scream too. They knew it was *not* okay, it would never be okay again. Not for Victor: what is a fourteen year old boy supposed to do after experiencing *that*? How is he supposed to go on living?

After some debate they moved him a little, tried to make him a bit more comfortable. When Steve had cut him free, Victor just collapsed, unable to stand or even crawl convincingly. Victor's abuser had been very thorough in punishing him for the freed leg. Later, the investigators would identify the iron crowbar the man had used, methodically shattering the bones of each limb in turn.

So they laid Victor down, covered with a blanket, and one stayed with him, reassuring, soothing, sickened, helpless to make things better, while the others searched the house and the cellar and the bare yard out back. Victor was still hoarsely screaming when the ambulance arrived. The paramedic who sedated him wept as she did it.

The house was cordoned off and the garden lit with huge searchlights. A crowd had gathered, neighbours and journalists, and dark rumours were spreading, none as terrible as the truth. Victor was stretchered out, and in his brutalized, delirious state, the blizzard of photographers' flashes seemed like the lights of heaven, the lights of welcome death come to take him away from a world in which such torments existed.

He blinked out into the hazy crowd, and for a minute the vision resolved into an image of his rescuer, bruised and handcuffed, leaning against a police van. A female officer was talking to him, and he was angry and shouting, and then she was, and people around were starting to pay attention. Suddenly, shockingly, she punched him, a massive blow to the face with the strength of her whole body behind it. He was thrown back against the vehicle, slid down to sit on the ground, and then other officers were rushing over to intervene and Victor's view was blocked. Everything became vague again. The pain was still there, the shriek of burns and flayed muscle and twisted joints and shattered bone, but it was all at a distance, veiled, and Victor floated away from it. He felt as if he could see himself being carried into the ambulance, see the lights and the crowds and the grubby suburban street. Gradually, smoothly, he rose further and further, the sprawl of winding roads and terraces and schools and churches and hospitals opening out beneath him, canals and shopping centres and the twisting, glittering threads of traffic, red lights on one side, white on the other. Then he was up in the clouds; the city fogged over beneath him and was quickly lost.

Perhaps for a moment, just before he lost consciousness, Victor returned to himself as they carried him into the ambulance, and his eyes strayed over the crowd. Perhaps he saw the face of his nemesis in amongst all those people, staring at him, holding his gaze, rage bubbling out through his eyes like hot fire.

But Victor knew he would be seeing that face everywhere he looked for the rest of his life. It didn't mean the beast was really there.

## The Wild Hunt

*He'd come this far, he might as well see it through.*

A full moon shone bright in the crisp night sky. The air was icy but improbably still, and a rime of frost glittered on the ground. Pete pulled his coat tighter around himself and strode across Blackfriars Bridge, walking a little faster than was comfortable. He didn't have far to go, but the bulk of the horn was uncomfortable against his side, and he wanted this over with. He had no idea what possessed him to steal the thing in the first place. It was old and precious-seeming, but also worn ragged. And *ridiculous*. Who would want something like that? You knew where you were with a laptop or a diamond ring. Easy come, easy go. Finding a fence for this had been quite a different matter.

For a moment he was tempted to give up the whole business, just toss the horn into the river and go home. But he'd come this far, he might as well see it through.

The night was quiet. The lights of an aeroplane drifted overhead, a night bus rumbled away down Blackfriars Road. He could make out a couple of cars on the Embankment. There should have been dozens. There should have been people on the streets, scurrying home or drunkenly carousing. Was everyone usually so put off by the cold? Pete couldn't remember. Perhaps they were.

He walked on.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked; a long, sorrowful howl, like the baying of a wolf. Pete shivered; from the cold, he told himself.

The bus had disappeared into the distance. Looking around, he realised he could no longer see the plane either. Nor the cars. The stillness was unsettling. There was nothing moving at all; nothing except the surface of the river.

Pete had lived in London his whole life, and couldn't ever remember a moment like this. He was used to noise and bustle, not silence. Now there wasn't even the distant murmur of traffic, and he discovered he was lost without it.

He felt terribly alone. Terribly *exposed*. It was an unfamiliar feeling, and he desperately wished it would go away. Suddenly he didn't want to be there anymore, over the water, in the city. He wanted to be anywhere else.

Where the fuck *was* everyone?

When he noticed someone walking over the bridge towards him, he felt a great rush of relief. He wasn't alone after all. The world was still there. The city was.

He resumed his journey.

But there was something odd about the person approaching; something not quite right. Pete couldn't immediately identify what it was, but it frightened him. He didn't like being frightened; it made him angry. As the person approached, heels clattering on the frozen pavement, Pete straightened up and strode forward, ready.

"Oi, you! What the fuck is going on? Where is everyone?"

"Silence, whelp!"

The man spoke with such authority that Pete, who'd never done what he was told in his life, obeyed instantly.

"You have taken something that belongs to me."

Pete tried to deny it, but the horn dug into his ribs as if of its own accord, and he yelped with pain.

"Give it to me."

Pete was desperate to do it, to hand over the dreadful thing at once; but something stopped him. Something like a voice in his head, though the words it spoke made no sense:

*The flesh ballad of sacrifice in the threads of Mir-Ghal'ai...*

The man took a step forward, and Pete was horrified to realise that his feet weren't feet at all, but *hooves*.

"Give it to me."

Without thinking, Pete unhooked the horn from his shoulder, reached it towards the other...

*We deign!*

...and then, equally unthinkingly, snatched it back. Placed it to his lips. Blew.

The sound it made was the sound of blood pumping in your ears, the sound of your own tears, the sound of the hateful, rejoicing laughter of enemies celebrating your misfortunes. A low, mournful keening that passed through flesh and bone and into the depths of Pete's soul. His insides turned to ice water...

...and the streetlamps went out.

An answering horn sounded. Then another. The ground throbbed with the thundering of hooves, the air with the baying of hounds. In the brittle moonlight, Herla looked twenty feet tall. He sighed.

"Run then, foolish child. Run, and we shall have our sport."

Pete ran.

He ran for his life; ran like all the demons of Hell were at his back—and they were. The impact of each step drove up through his legs, his heartbeat grew faster and faster. The horn, the *fucking* horn, was still in his hand, but he wasn't even aware of it. He ran.

Around him, the city seemed to change, its whole geography shifting, silently, imperceptibly: now you see it, now you don't. The bridge was gone, and the Embankment, and the buildings. The river wound sedately away to the south, wide and languid, its waters soaking the marshy land on all sides. The skyscrapers, the cathedral, hovered vaguely in the sky, but they were mirages. Reality was the soggy ground underfoot, the reeds and the shrubs, and the sounds of pursuit.

The icy air was no longer still. A breeze sprang up, gentle at first, but strengthening and with a bitter edge. Pete ran into it blindly. He didn't know where he was anymore, his trusted landmarks had deserted him. All he had was the sound of pursuit and the need to escape it. Everything was monochrome in the moonlight. The shapes he raced through, the brambles and branches that flayed him, the uneven ground, it all had an air of unreality, like an old black and white movie. But the agony in his legs was real, the clutching of his chest. His throat was raw from breathing hard, but the hounds and horses sounded ever louder, ever closer. Each time he turned to avoid a ditch or sinkhole, it seemed he was being nudged back toward his pursuers. There were voices on the wind, great passionate shouts in a language he couldn't understand, and the baying, and the whinnying, until he couldn't think. Couldn't make sense of this experience; because it made no sense.

He was somewhere around Smithfields when the Hunt burst upon him. He could see, just about, the other world in which the Holborn Viaduct bridged Farringdon Street, but he was no longer in that world, could no more reach it than touch the moon with his outstretched hands. The hounds surrounded him first, great slavering beasts like wolves, raging about him like the waters of a terrible flood, baying and prancing, around and around in a joyous gyre. And then the horsemen, huge and black, plaited hair flying behind them, earth shaking at their gallop, air vibrant with their calls.

"To me! To me! Ride, Einheriar of the Herlathing! Ride!"

"We ride! We ride!"

There was nowhere left for Pete to run, and he stopped, panting and defiant. His chest was on fire, his head throbbing, but the Hunt was upon him and he stood his ground. Overhead, the ghosts of lorries and taxi cabs purred across the ghosts of roads that would not be built for many hundreds of years. Pete finally understood that no help would come from that quarter.

The horn was still in his hand, and he held it up.

"You want this, motherfuckers? Then have it! Fucking have it!"

With all his might, he hurled the horn into the throng... but even as it left his hand, it dissolved into mist. The riders didn't even flinch.

For a few moments, they stood like that. Pete faced off against the Wild Hunt, surrounded and helpless, waiting for the axe to fall.

And then it fell.

The Hunt surged forward, horses leaping over the baying hounds, swords flashing in the moonlight. Then nothing of the night remained but the lust for blood. The Hunt went about its work with joy, and its prey was no more.



*With no regrets, with no backwards glance.*

Shorn of another identity, the man who had been John flitted across the landscape like a shadow; a shadow driven by rage.

He wasn't enraged by the loss of self; that person was easy to let go of. He had invested so little in John to begin with; had always known he was temporary. Just a bookshelf with no books.

Just a bit part.

He wasn't enraged by the work left unfinished. Disappointed, perhaps. There was still so much he wanted to show the child, so much left to say before the end, but none of that really mattered. There would be other children, other lessons. The individuals didn't matter. All that mattered was the work.

But he *was* enraged by the fates that had betrayed him, by the stupid turns of circumstance. He deserved better than that. He was doing the gods' work, after all. It was tough, but someone had to. The fates had brought him to this role, and it was capricious of them to turn on him so suddenly. He hated that.

But it had happened. He accepted it. Learned from it. It happened for a reason. It happened to make him stronger.

He still thought himself untouchable. And he still remained untouched.

His next identity would have to be more solid. He had allowed too much uncertainty, left too much to chance. Chance was a fickle mistress. He would not make that mistake again.

And so he fled across the city, away from the venue of his failure. Away from the place he had treated as home for so long without ever making it so. Away from the little terraced house surrounded by police lines and photographers and blazing lights. Away from the crowds of onlookers and the rumours that would soon become legends, away from the wellspring of his immortality. Away, with no regrets, with no backward glance.

Away.

He'd known this moment would come; been aware of the possibility, at least. Had even made arrangements for it, though it was now clear those arrangements had been hopelessly inadequate. He'd made some preparations, but didn't have anything like a new life to slip discreetly into. He'd made some preparations, but would be starting anew, and that would be conspicuous. It was a mistake he would learn from; a mistake he would not make again.

In the meantime, he would have to make do. He flitted westwards across the city to pick up the fragments of his prepared identity. It was a start, something to build on, somewhere to hide out for a while. Somewhere secluded and secure, somewhere he might remain undisturbed as he reinvented himself, as he rebuilt his future.

He put his old self behind him, and embraced this newfound anonymity. He revelled in the impersonality of the city, the disconnection of its people and its modes of transport. Quietly, safely, he lost himself amongst the millions.

He walked among them and they did not know him.

Quietly, safely, he fled to the factory, where he would be safely undisturbed. It was a place no-one ever went, not since the fire.

It was somewhere to hide out for a while. A fortress of solitude.

It was his sanctuary.

# 25

## You

*Nothing but a frayed, unravelling end.*

Everything starts and ends in the middle.

You drift across the city, over it and under and through; upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber; and your attention never holds for long. Caught by a little flare of passion here, the glint of a diamond there, you tumble into one role after another, immersing yourself in each for a moment only to be tugged on to the next and the next.

You don't remember who you are or how you got here.

Sometimes it seems as if you can follow a single thread from one scene to another, pick out connections, sense a bigger picture. Sometimes you almost understand its shape before the thread runs out between your imaginary fingers and you are left with nothing but a frayed, unravelling end.

Forget that, and take up another.

Look, over here: someone is calling your name. Whatever your name is, they are calling it. What might they be saying?

"Come back to me, baby. I don't know what to do without you."

You remember that from somewhere; remember saying it, almost. But it has no context, and so means nothing. It slips away.

"If he's more than ten minutes, let's send out a search party."

Have you been more than ten minutes? You have no idea. You find yourself hoping so, hoping someone will come and rescue you, show you the way. Show you who you are and where to go.

"I can show you, ma'am. Yes, I can show you."

But she doesn't. They never do, and soon you forget they were meant to.

You swoop down low over the houses, now, over the rooftops and the alleyways. Voices clamour up from all sides, talking and laughing and pleading. Each is a thread that weaves in and out of the others, winding this way and that, knotting and twisting and tangled, impossible to trace. Each sparkles and sags and wears thin.

Each breaks.

Voices clamour up from all sides. You don't know who you are or how you got here, but neither do they. Slowly it dawns on you that you are simply another anonymous voice in the fugue. Not listening to it, not following the stories, not rising above. Just singing.

"In the threads of Mir-Ghal'ai."

You don't know the words. You don't know the tune. You can't even hear your own voice amongst all the others. It doesn't matter. Sing.

Make it up as you go.

*I've been impersonating someone else for all this time.*

It is almost dawn as Zoe and Becky make their way along the river, hand in hand. It has been a long night and both are tired and a little drunk. The lightening sky is perfectly clear, and chill air seeps into their smoky, sweat-damp clothes, but they don't feel cold.

The great brick bulk of the art gallery looms up beside them and they turn onto the bridge, strolling across in comfortable silence, thinking of all other times they've made this walk, of how reassuring it is to make it again.

Someone is standing at the midpoint, leaning on the railing, gazing east. As they get nearer they recognise Lucy.

"Hello, you two. I thought you might turn up."

"Creatures of habit, I guess."

They exchange hugs.

"Been out dancing?"

"First time in ages. It felt great."

"We've been celebrating my suspension."

"Zoe mentioned something about that. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. That felt great too. I should have done it years ago."

"Beaten up a suspect? Are you turning into The Freak?"

"Not anymore. I don't know, perhaps I was. It was a terrible night."

"Yeah, the story's been all over the papers."

"That's just the stuff they made public. There's a lot more. Really awful, unbearable things. It was... upsetting."

"And that was why you punched this guy?"

"He was going on about queers and perverts and how this proved that Pete was right all along and they should all be driven out and locked up and such."

"Who's Pete?"

"Seems to be the ringleader of a gang of thugs this lad hangs around with. We haven't found him yet. It's all a bit unclear. But I remembered something Adam said about the night he was bashed, and I just got the impression this guy was one of the ones who did it."

"Shit."

"Don't get yourself worked up about it, baby."

"It's okay, I'm not. But I'm glad I hit him. It was like reclaiming myself, you know? Like I've been impersonating someone else for all this time. The truth is, I fucking hate that job."

"Amen, sister. Here's to saying goodbye to jobs you hate."

"Talking of which, how's yours?"

"No idea. They all trooped off to some stupid photo shoot today, but I played hooky. Just switched off my mobile and went out and about enjoying myself. With any luck the whole thing was a complete disaster."

"Yay!"

"Didn't feel like going home to bed; that would be too much like giving real life permission to start again. So I came down to watch the sunrise."

"And the word said hey, it's a brand new day."

"Exactly."

Someone glides past on rollerblades. The three women stare out at the river and the city and the empty sky. After a minute or two, Zoe turns to her lover.

"You know what I feel like, right now? Dancing."

“Babe, we’ve been dancing all night. Aren’t you worn out?”

“Yes. But I still feel like it.” She offers her hand. “Dance with me?”

Becky blushes, but nods. A little awkwardly, she takes Zoe in her arms. They manage a few faltering steps.

“But we haven’t any music.”

Lucy laughs. “Of course you do, silly. Listen.”

And she’s right.

So they dance, slowly, gently, twirling each other around, arms entwined, cheek to cheek.

They dance the patterns of love and sorrow and bitterness and boredom, and around them the city wakes, and the sun rises, and there is music on the wind.