

# **SpinTrap: The Lonely City**

*Book One of the SpinTrap saga, by*

***Rik Roots***

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Smashwords Edition

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I dedicate this book to ***you***

for having faith in my storytelling abilities.

You are more important to me than you will ever know.

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## **Author's note**

This book is the first part of a two book series, **SpinTrap** – a story that grew out of a simple question I found myself asking one day: *what, exactly, makes us human?*

Such questions have a habit of breeding new questions; soon enough I found myself wondering how a person from the Stone Age would cope with our modern world. And then, how would such a person be able to experience our world?

And thus evolved Kal, born in (what would become) London some 6,000 years ago, who stumbled into a terrible secret at a young age through no fault of his own and has been paying the price for his – bad – luck ever since.

I make no apologies for Kal: he is a product of environments beyond our common understanding. I can only hope you will join him in his journey to relearn, and regain, his lost humanity.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

# 1. Westminster

Tonight I'm alone, or as alone as anyone can be in the Lonely City.

That's my name for this place – the Lonely City. I've heard various other names for it: London; Londres; Lundenwic. For a while I called it Londinium, prior to the legions being called back to their fat lands in the east and south.

I lived in Londinium for five – no, six – years before catching a fatal brick to the back of the head. It was a city of lonely people then, and little has happened since to change my mind about the place.

My fingers are itching. Or rather, these fingers are itching. I resist the urge to scratch at the fleshy webbing as I push the pub door open and move into the gloom.

Falc's instructions were to meet him in this bar, at this hour. A quick glance around the worn, nicotine-brown room is enough to confirm his absence. Rather than head back out into the late-rush-hour roar and the spit-cold rain, I blank my host and order myself a pint – warm bitter with a skim of froth – then search for a panelled snug tucked away from the door to settle into.

The last time I was here – in this city I mean, not this particular public house – would have been after the locals murdered their king, after the madness of their civil war. I must have missed the Restoration by less than a year, which is a pity. Restoration London sounds like it was fun, if the history books are to be trusted. I met a lover under amber skies who told me she had enjoyed many evenings in the company of Mr. David Garrick and his King's Men, but I doubt she was being honest with me.

How did I die that time? Cramp colic, or maybe the French pox. Possibly both; there was no surgeon or apothecary around to offer a diagnosis. I recall it was a gruesome pain.

Give me a brick in the back of the head any time rather than suffer those agonies again.

The fingers wrapped around my pint are a touch too long for my taste; I'm used to stubbier digits with wider nail beds. There's enough light from the dust-tasselled wall lamp for me to examine the hand in more detail: up close there does appear to be a faint rash between the fingers. Scabies would explain the itch.

## 2. Westminster

Falc pushes through the heavy door, dragging in the evening chill, as I drain the last of the beer from my glass. I check his heat before he spots me in the snug, attempting to read the tufts and spirals of colours and energies emerging from his chest and head. When our eyes lock, I raise the empty vessel; he takes the hint, catches the attention of the bored barmaid and buys two more pints.

"You still hate German lager?"

I keep silent as I reach for the glass he holds out for me.

"Nice outfit," he says, settling into the bench opposite me.

"It makes a change to be given something fit and clean to wear."

Falc's smile is as crooked as his finger; he's guessed that I'm not happy to be here. He wears an older body, recently from the streets by the smell of the skin and hair, though he's attempted to wash it.

"Well, I'm here," I say. "Why am I here?"

"We've got a special job for you, Kal. The Band needs a new Guardian."

"You want *me* to become the Guardian?" My surprise is genuine – mostly I'm pulled here to help the Guardian do his or her job, not take over the work.

Falc chooses to ignore my question. "So I take it you've recovered," he says.

"I've saddled the host and ridden him here, if that's what you mean. Have you been out long?"

"Almost a month." The man takes a moment to rub his hand across the stubble on his cheek.

"Bull brought me through just before Spar lifted the Band from him."

A cock of my head is enough to let Falc know I don't understand. He reaches for his drink, gulps a good third of it in a second.

"Bull brought a dozen of us through in one go." He shrugs away my disbelieving stare.

"When Spar found out she freaked, clubbed him down with an iron bar and rendered him on the spot."

"You're joking with me. Spar rendered Bull?" The idea makes me smile. "The woman has a temper; those two can feud for months on end, but she doesn't care for violence – that much I know."

He frowns and nods. "I know, I know. But she had her reasons."

"You say Bull pulled a dozen of us to the Outer World in one go?"

"It happened, man! Don't ask me how, or why. You know the drill: deal with the situation, keep the Band safe. Do the minimum necessary and stay low."

I can't comprehend what Falc is telling me. "Bull is Bull," I say. "He's one of the best of us. Why would he do something so dangerous? And Spar render Bull? No, those two might as well share the same skull, they've been together for so long. They always render together – I've seen them do it. You're making no sense."

Falc takes my denials as an opportunity to sip more slowly at his beer. "Bull did what he did, man. He must have had his reasons; he don't do risks."

"What reasons?"

"No idea. By the time I'd broken my host and tracked him down, Bull was gone and Spar had the Band."

"And she's saying nothing?"

"Not a bloody word. And she ain't taking chances. She might as well be living in the sewers."

"We've all done that before." I shrug. "So why did she pull me here? Bull's the one she needs, yes? He's good at clearing up his own messes."

The silence is noticeable, even though we've been talking in whispers.

"She hasn't bounced him back out?"

"It's not that, Kal ..."

Something cold rummages the length of my host's spine. "Spill it, Falc! What's happened to Bull?"

The man's sigh could write a whole story. I prod at his glass to make him look at me.

"Kal – the thing is, well, Bull missed his stone on the render. We think he missed it, anyway. Spar knows the truth of it, but she goes monkey-mad every time someone mentions his name."

"Shit!"

"Shit," he agrees. "Those two had been together for a long time ..."

"Enemies, friends, lovers, partners." I remember the last time I had seen the two of them, stranded somewhere in the irrigated backwaters of the Punjab – Sangrur, perhaps – arguing like tomcats about the best way to steal a buffalo. "They must have been half of each other's story."

We lift our glasses together, our need for alcohol mutual.

"But missing your stone – it happens! You say Spar has the Band? She'll know which stone caught him. So why hasn't she pulled him through again? Bull's stronger than us two together – he can handle two journeys in a month."

Falc's silence is ominous.

"Go on," I urge him. "I need to know what's going on if you want me to become Guardian."

He's shaking his head, letting his lank, grey hair escape from the confining collar of his padded jacket.

"Listen, Kal. He ain't coming back ... something went badly wrong with the render – like I said, we don't know what. But it was a nasty business all round that evening, lots of impossible things coming together all at once. And the stench" – he scrunches his face as if chewing a wasp sat on a lemon – "it was wrong, Kal. Wrong!"

"Some stone caught him, yes?" Because there's always a stone to welcome us back to the Band. "Which stone was it? Tincas? Ounous?"

There's no need for Falc to answer: I can taste the sear of his pain, his fear, sparking from the heat draped about his shoulders.

If Spoy, the stone of the grey depths, has caught him then Bull is beyond all help: he might as well be dead.

### **3. Thames**

It is well past midnight as I walk through the back streets of Pimlico towards Vauxhall Bridge.

After our less-than-happy meeting, Falc went off to take care of some business, leaving me in the drab pub to drug my host towards a more permanent oblivion.

I tried my best. If the flesh had been older, or younger, or possibly female, maybe I would have succeeded in becalming the brain's alchemical storms in smooth spirits. But no, this one is in the peak of condition, with an alcoholic capacity that can outperform an elephant. Within ten minutes of bidding farewell to the bored barmaid – I was her sole customer for most of the evening – the host was sober enough to skip in straight lines.

I could have lifted a metal carriage and driven around town: a quick riff of his memories told me that my man knows the mechanics of joy-riding, but I chose to walk. I had no will to risk an unnecessary rendering, not after hearing about Bull.

These streets are made for wandering. There's little in the way of traffic beyond the main roads connecting Victoria Station and the river; even the cheap hotels are quiet tonight. Apart from dodging an occasional drunk huddled beneath a bus-stop awning or slumped in a pavement puddle, the only disturbance comes from the chorus of urban birds who break the raindrop patter with their bickers.

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Falc waits for me at Pimlico tube station, close to the bridge; I find him sheltering from the river's wind inside the sloping entrance with its decorative wall paintings. I like art, I remember, as I stare at the crudely reproduced images, or maybe my last host was an art lover. I've never been able to work out how to stop the slow seepage of tastes and preferences from my hosts to myself.

"We're set," says Falc.

"Are you going to tell me what we're set for?"

"I thought I had!"

I shake my head, not caring if he can see my response in the dim, sulphur street light. Though I won't admit it, I'm still a little sore from my journey to the Outer World.

"We need to render, Kal. All of us. We need be away from this place."

"So what's the problem? I'm sure you can find a knife or two." The night's chill is beginning to rag my patience. "All you have to do is stick each other: the Band and the stones will do the rest."

"Spar's being tricky," says Falc, his voice muffled in scarves. "Come on, let's walk."

"Talk to me, Falc! You're making no sense!" I draw my coat tighter round this muscled torso, daring the cold wind to raise hairs on the skin.



Rather than stop, Falc turns to me and starts walking backwards. "Bull's not the only one who missed his stone. Four of us have tried to make it back since, and they each failed. It's as if – well, it's like Spar's influencing the Band."

"There you go again, claiming the impossible is true!" Though I cannot see his mouth, Falc's heat appears to be sincere. "None of us can influence the Band."

"These are impossible times. Have you ever heard of five people failing to be well-caught after they've rendered their flesh, Kal? It can't be chance, not five of us, one straight after another."

I can feel the implications of the unspecified task forming around me. But I still have to ask the question.

"You still haven't told me why Spar chose me to be the new Guardian."

As we reach Vauxhall Bridge, the steel in this icy river wind starts chiselling at my face. Falc, too, feels the cold, pulling the hood of his thick fleece fully over his head.

"You've got to take her place."

"Why isn't she telling me this herself?"

"She took a club to Bull's head, remember? Anyway, she doesn't know you're here." He stares at my face for a second, then adds: "It'll probably be best if she keeps on not knowing you're here."

An after-tremor from my recent translation merges with my ongoing jaw-shake. I let Falc's unfathomable comment go. "So you want Spar out of the way so you can all render home, leaving me here? Alone?"

"Until it's safe, yes."

"Safe from impossibilities? I've not seen you so keen to run from a challenge before. What's spooking you, man?"

"You can't taste it?"

"Taste what?"

"The fear ... the air ..." He turns forward again as we pass the mid-point of the bridge. "It's like the rain and the mud don't want us here. It grates at my bones, Kal!"

I can tell he's nodding to his own words by the way his hood folds at the neck as he walks ahead of me.

"Dammit, Falc! Why summon me?"

"Because this is your place, Kal. You're the best person for the job; these are the soils and waters of your birth."

He's talking magic – but that sort of magic doesn't work, not here in the Outer World. That's what I've always assumed, anyway. But what if he's right? Of all the places I've been to, the Lonely City is where I feel most ... alive, and real.

The idea doesn't stop me swearing at his bobbing, sodden back for the next few minutes.



The house Falc leads me to is neat (in the small sense), with a carefully tended front garden. Checking the host's memories tells me the architecture is Victorian terrace: London has grown immensely since my last visit, with much of the growth made up of this low, sashed, bayed, nondescript housing.

No attempt has been made to alter this place, or neglect it, beyond what the adjoining properties will tolerate. This is a house that wants to merge into its neighbours, with its tidy blue door and unassuming nets hiding the rooms within.

Before Falc can reach his once-broken finger to the doorbell, I pull on his shoulder.

"How long has – had – Bull been here?" I ask him.

"Thirty years, perhaps." Falc shrugs my hand from his body. "Forty, maybe."

"Forty ...?" By any standards, that was a good run for a Guardianship. My personal best is just over six years, though I've only been the Guardian twice.

"Could be, could be," says Falc. "Bull and Spar made themselves a pretty life here – built themselves a family ..."

"You're joking, yes?"

"It's a problem?"

"You know it's a problem!" Because there's always more questions when there's a family involved. "How many kids?" I ask.

"There's one son, for sure."

"Is he still around?"

"You're wearing him. Can we go inside now?"

## 4. Southwark

Bull's former host sits and watches a low, wide, glittering pane in the corner of the parlour. He looks old: early sixties, flabby where the muscles have run to fat, but not particularly unfit. He has vacant eyes, unfocussed, nonplussed.

Bull was never one to ride his host lightly; now he's gone, the host seems lost.

Spar's host is a little younger, a little more careful with her appearance – slim, petite, her brown hair cut short in a middle aged way that seems to be the fashion. Not that I've had much time to catch up with current trends.

I've been away from the Outer World too long. Already I miss Mescwar's amber skies.

I assume Spar is in full control of her host – her heat is wide and deep. If she and Bull bred during their latest stint here then it's safe to guess they both kept their hosts on tight leashes.

Earlier, Falc had suggested that Spar doesn't know I'm here. The assertion disturbs me for reasons beyond my grasp. I wish I could pin a lie to the wall, test its meaning. But it takes more than a day for things to settle – I still ache from the summoning.

Since arriving in the early hours of the morning I've played my host lightly, not seeding his memory with cloaks and spins. My first proper ruse on him was suggesting the solo drinking session – alcohol always helps ease the initial mounting.

I had made my decision reflexively, I realise, before Spar answered the door. Rapidly, I had drawn in my heat and receded into the deep places within her son's skull, keeping only the sparest tendrils tangled within his sightlines and soundtrails. I planted a cloak to cover the host's memory loss as we passed over the threshold. This skill, at least, remains true: within moments the man was back behind his eyes and teeth.

The desire to ask Spar questions coppers the juices around my tongue, but instead I choose to trust my reflexes. All I can do now is watch, and listen, and think.

"Mum? Are you okay?" He asks the question easily as he follows his mother into a small, clean kitchen.

"Have you had another row, Sam?"

"No, no," my man is saying. "Marc's away for the week – a training course. I was having a drink after work and then I thought ... I thought ... well, I got worried."

*Marc?*

"Worried? There's nothing to worry about, sweet. I would have called you if something was wrong."

"Why is Dad watching the telly?"

"He can't sleep – you know how he gets. I was just making us some hot chocolate; I'll make you some too, yes?"

"Okay."

There's nothing in her eyes, her voice, her stance, to suggest that she sees me; her heat is the opposite of mine: it wafts like sheets of cigarette smoke around her head and chest.

I feel my host wonder about the gauzy colours: I risk a moment's intervention to flick his head to the kitchen door; thankfully his body twists to follow and he moves back to the parlour and the muted murmurs emerging from the flat ghosts trapped within the rainbow window.

This Sam's mind fits me surprisingly well!

Falc knows I've withdrawn. The smile he offers my host is uncertain – an acquaintance of a smile, an 'I don't bite ... yet' sort of smile. I know he understands that scaring the man at this point in time would not please me.

Sam sits us down next to the shell of Bull, leans forward as if to try to talk to him. Another momentary ruse persuades him not to bother.

I risk a brief rummage through Sam's recent memories, checking for interactions with Falc. Apparently, they're strangers – there's no tang of recognition that I can identify. More surprisingly, to my mind, is that this doesn't seem to worry Sam. It's as if finding himself in the sudden company of a strange man is something he's used to – looks forward to, even – with no glint of guilt intermixed in the chemical struts of his mind or libido.

Architectural styles are not the only change in the Lonely City since my last visit, it seems.

Within a minute Spar carries a tray with four steaming mugs into the cozy room. I watch her as she hands out the drinks to Falc and then Sam, before placing the third mug on the old, oat-shaded carpet between former-Bull's socked feet.

When she lifts the last mug from the tray and settles herself into the armchair I catch sight of the Band hung on a chain around her wrist.

As I see it, I feel it. That familiar tug, like a hook through the splay of my nose pulling me, playing me deftly towards the net of its metals and stones. Buried as deeply as I am in the folds of another's mind, still I am caught.

"You're wearing Dad's ring."

Sam said that, not me. A bland statement of fact, yet tensed with a history of fact and family fable. Spar sits too close to me; her heat has a tendril around her son's sternum, his shoulders, his skull. Resisting the Band, passively negating the physicality of its call, is all I can do – even to think at this moment is to risk discovery.

## **5. Southwark**

Sam smokes. Normally the host's predilection for various drugs has little impact on me, yet I get to share the joys of nicotine. While I would rather not have the edges of me fuzzed, a host whose flesh needs tobacco gets more difficult to ride without it.

We're standing in a small back yard, with a small square lawn and an (acceptably) unkempt herbaceous border. Tattered stalks, tangled leaves and un-plucked seed pods tell of a winter's end.

Spar does not approve of her son's smoking habit, and this is the closest thing to an ashtray on offer.

"How are you going to do it?" asks Falc.

I scratch at the webbing between my fingers. "I suppose I could smack her down and choke her out of the woman."

Falc is shaking his head.

"What's wrong with that?"

"It'll leave bruises, and bruises attract attention in these days."

"Didn't they always?"

He lifts the cigarette pack out of Sam's shirt pocket, fondles a stick of tobacco into the gap between his lips. "When were you last out?"

I have to think back to answer this one; keeping the memories in order can be tricky.

"Greece, I think. Or maybe the Empire – is it called Turkey now? Just after the big war: I was helping us escape the chaos of their little war – the one that took out Smyrna."

"Not one I remember. Were there cars around? Tanks? Planes?"

"A few cars, yes. No planes." I had seen my first aeroplane this morning, low in the sky over London – the spectacle had left me witless. "No tall buildings, no smooth roads, not much concrete ... the Germans and Russians had lost their kings ..."

"Maybe coming up for a century then. You've got a lot of learning ahead of you."

I take a drag on the stub of my cigarette in agreement. "What do I need to know now?"

"The police are not what they used to be. They're sharper, quicker on the uptake and much more thorough. And people seem to care a lot more about death; they die older, expect to live a lot longer than before. There's more fear of death, I think."

"So?"

"So you can't dump the bodies and not expect any comeback. They'll be sniffing around, asking questions – the last thing you'll be needing." He gives me a long, knowing look.

I think about this for a while, drop the spent stick onto the lawn and grind it into the mud with my heel.

"We don't have to kill her. Bull's host still lives."

"I'm listening," says Falc.

"Well, kill Spar just a little, just enough for the render. Then leave the hosts to it."

"I don't know ..." Falc takes a moment to draw smoke into his lungs before continuing.

"There's official busybodies around nowadays, 'Social Workers' they call themselves. I don't like them: too many questions. You've seen the state of Bull's host; he barely knows how to put a cup to his mouth."

More to the point, I remember, Sam has seen the state of his Dad. A worried host is not something I want to put up with for the next few weeks, or even months.

A grieving host, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter.

I make a decision.

"This is your problem, Falc. If there's murder to be done, then you or some of the others need to do it. I can't be involved, not if these police are as good as you say. Once you get the Band to me you can all start rendering back – tactful, mind; I've no interest in being associated with a mass suicide, or a decimation!"

He doesn't look happy to hear my words, but it's too late; already I'm receding back into Sam, and I'm not planning to emerge again until he brings me the Band.

## 6. Within

He's chasing me, though I can't see him.

I'm in a wasteland, grass clumps withered in heat, dust covering my calves, my knees, the sweat of my scrotum as I run.

This is a road, my naked feet tell me, with tyre marks in the dirt and upright flints ripe for the tripping. Don't look down! Don't look back! Let fly the plume of my speed behind me, unseen, unknown.

He's chasing me; I can't see his dust.

In this place the sounds are yellow: dirty clangs of golden bells; ochre drum-rolls beating my heart, pounding my gasps. Smells are yellow, too, a burning incense of old flames in rusty kegs.

I see traffic to my right – buses accelerate past me. I can't keep up with the speeding faces, manikins in windows mouthing a mantra: *look he runs, look he runs, chasing, chasing, look he runs.*

He's chasing me. Is he close yet? Is he close?

This is not my dream!

He dreams me, running, chasing, tripping. He dreams this road, this dust, these bells, that bus, those mouths. His dream, not mine!

I reach out a hand, grasp a fist of wind. Rip it: wrap it.

I'm in a warehouse, a factory. Now I walk, no sound of bells to keep step. Links clank in the shadows. Industrious chains, hauled into a weave by faceless strangers above my head.

A net? He wants to trap me?

I smile as I wave away the web, walk through a swing of doors into the wafts of a canteen.

The serving station is immaculate in its chrome. Each trough heaps with produce: dumplings white as Thassos marble, lapped by rich, brown broth; broccoli trees bursting to bloom, the yellow of petals merging with the fallow of butter; whole new potatoes weaving runes in their new-boiled steam; half-cut pies, each thick with frayed meat; a smirk of fruit custard tartlets.

Gold-baked bread rolls chime as they rock in their baskets.

*Pocket food*, I think.

I have no pockets: I remain naked beneath my gossamer of dust. Crowds of seated diners stare as I turn from the counter and walk the length of the hall towards doors. When the canteen attempts to stretch the doors away from me I snap my fingers, reach out my palms and push the hinged wood wide.

Beyond, a new space, huge in its dimensioned arrays. Polished rock sparkles across the expansive floor, black circles cut into the white field. There are shops around me: I ignore them.

Instead I head to a shabby stall trapped in the midst of crowds. Across its plank slats stack blue shirts and white shorts, socks and caps. Each bears the motif of a lion, leaping and roaring. I finger the material, feel its sensuous smoothness slip across my nails. Looking around, I see the stall-owner, Bull-shaped, a radio clamped to one ear and a look of pain sketched across his eyes and mouth: Millwall must be losing again, I think.

I take a pair of shorts, step into them as I walk away. I drag a shirt by its short arm behind me.

This is a busy place. I wander for a while, admiring the imagination of Sam's dream: few hosts can fit so many distinct man-shapes into a single scene. Though much of the detail is blurred – a feeling of presence rather than a fact, sparkling into resolution only when I gaze that way. Somehow the unreal space muzzles noise, damps it to murmurs.

I find him in a warm place, next to a void of steps heading down to darkness.

"I need a drink," he says, unsmiling. "Will you join me? We'll be safe down there: no women allowed."



I shake my head, turn and walk away. This is Sam's dream, not mine. Now I am clothed I have choices.

I break the dream to oblivion.

## **7. City of London**

Sam works in an office – a clerk of some sort. He sits in front of a thin screen pushing buttons on an angled pad, an action which spatters letters and numbers into existence, each replicate glyph drawn by an invisible hand. Even better fun, when he moves his feather-light wheels-and-button contraption over the desk an arrow skates across the bright picture.

One lunchtime, when nobody was around, I rused my host to turn the screen sideways so I could observe both planes as he pressed keys. Later that evening I rummaged Sam's learning to discover the trick of it – to little avail: it is an electrical magic; it means nothing more to him.

Telephones – I know about telephones. I met them when I was in Greece, or Turkey. Sam carries his telephone in his trouser pocket like a baby's comforter; he panics whenever he loses sight or touch of it. It works without wires, though he connects it to a set of holes in the wall of his kitchen each night – then it has a wire. More electric trickery: a telephone merged into a radio, and all so tiny as to fit into the curve of his palm!

I remember the concept of radio waves near broke me the last time I came to the Outer World, but somehow I survived my fright long enough to perform my tasks. By the time I rendered back I had learned that whatever dark force stood behind radios and magnets and telephones, it was no threat to me. So confident was I in my reasoning that I rendered from the host by making him hold live wires.

So much to describe – the noise of this world ... it's wild! So much music: in the air, in the ear – and so different from the tunes I've learned before.

Or take plastic. A substance I've never encountered before and yet, in this age, it is ubiquitous: hard and sharp to bear the weight of camels and yet soft enough to wrap water. Rubber I know from other times, and canvas, and leather, and wood and steel and brick and clay and silk ... plastic is all of those, and more. And the people around Sam think nothing of it. Nothing! Not a care, nor a sweat.

I am deeply impressed by their trust of ignorance.

Sam's office – how they can describe this cavern as an 'office' is beyond me. Vast, archless spaces stacked one upon another; neck-sore palaces of lines parallel and perpendicular, erupted from the earth by – what? Concrete? I thought concrete was gone forever, and the Latins never dreamed of shaping and slabbing the liquid stone as they do today. They've also rediscovered the idea of warming their buildings with roasted air; the hearth may be the home, but huddling beside one on a winter's evening was always a choice of freezing one side to burn the other. The blessings of warm gases – it chokes me with pleasure!

I could go on all day. Now that I am paying proper attention, it seems like every moment holds some new delight. When I first saw Sam's washing machine in action I had to blank him to let me sit in front of it for over an hour, watching cloth spin in suds.

I like Sam. I adore this new-wrought world!

## **8. Tower Hamlets**

"You look dirty," I tell Falc as soon as we are close enough to talk.

Falc must have spotted Sam as we walked through the office block's magic open-and-shut glass doors; he was upon us before I noticed his aura. I had to stun Sam to blankness quickly, take control of his body before Falc spoke – an annoyance as the host had been talking on his pocket telephone to his 'boyfriend' at that moment.

"Just walk," Falc replies as I fumble for the disconnect button. He refuses to look at me directly: "I can't be seen meeting you – there's cameras everywhere. We'll talk in the gardens around the corner in five minutes."

As we walk past each other, I'm already planting new ruses in Sam's dammed thought stream before I withdraw away; he can let the boyfriend know he's going to be late for their lunch meeting.

They're still chatting on the phone when we reach the green space with its formal borders and clipped shrubbery – a Victorian remnant hidden amid old Bethlem's spired modernity. I see Falc sat on the cold, hard grass; another deft ruse gets Sam to bring the conversation to a close before I blank him again.

"Is here safe enough for you?"

He nods, still not looking at me. "Go look in the grass just over there," he tells me. "I brought a present for you."

I don't need to see it to feel its play, like a harpoon latched to my skull, reeling me towards it. I lean down and scoop the cool metal loop into my palm, resisting a muscle memory temptation to slip it onto my finger.

Falc looks dirty today, I notice, his angled bones jutting awkwardly across his cheeks to show a low, endured pain.

"What happened?" I ask him.

"Best if you don't know, yes? The police will be knocking on your door in the next few days – if you don't hear from them by Sunday then you'll have to go to the house and call them yourself. They'll get suspicious if you leave it much later than that."

So it had been done.

As the Band warms itself within my fist I catch a sumac whiff of recent activity.

"Is Spar safe?" I ask.

Falc nods. His shoulders are beginning to relax now his task is complete.

"There was no problem with her rendering. Nor with the three that followed – it's been a busy couple of days for me."

"How many are left here?"

"With you and me? Six. But I want to get back quickly ..."

"What's the hurry?"

Now he looks at me, stares straight into my face. Around his unkempt hair his aura bunches into knots; his left hand massages his host's crooked finger like a worry-stick.

"There's something ... wrong, Kal. Being so close to the Band makes it worse. I feel – I feel defiled!" His stare weakens, slips away from my eyes and into the distance. "I need to go home. I want to be safe."

"Is this feeling the thing that scared Bull? Spar?"

Another nod. "I suppose so. I never asked her about it." Then, "You're stronger than me, Kal. This is your place. You're the best one for the job."

With a start, he jumps up and walks away, heading for the gates and the busy road beyond.

I don't see him leap in front of the van. But I feel him render to the Band before the first pedestrian screams reach my ears.

## **9. Islington**

Marc annoys me in many small ways.

For a start, he's much older than Sam – at least twelve years older – and this seems to scare him. He dresses like a young man, like Sam, and spends much time in the bathroom with his potions and lotions attempting to recreate a young man's skin across his face. His bleached hair is receding, too, and his attempts to copy Sam's gelled, scrunched hairstyle makes him look even more ridiculous.

We must all worship young people in the youth of this fresh millennium, it seems.

But he does love Sam. I cannot doubt that.

From the moment the police arrived with the news, he has been at Sam's side, helping him, consoling him through the shock and disbelief, the befuddlement and rage. It was Marc who fielded the phone calls, who led Sam to the morgue and back again. He even cooked for Sam, fortunately just the once.

When Sam screamed at the ceiling, Marc held him hard and secure. When Sam sat staring at the walls, he gave him space and peace.

I can appreciate the usefulness of my host's lover, but I don't like him.

He'll have to go.

As for me, I've not seen the need to interfere beyond the essential tweak. I'm happy to stay detached, let the chemical imbalances rush around me – a smooth stone hidden in the midst of the flash-floods of grief. My only role as Guardian of the Band is to keep the stones in their metal hoop hidden, and safe.

Sam still does not know that he has his father's ring in his pocket: a grieving host is so much more easily misled.

## 10. Within

I find Sam in a warm place next to a void of stairs heading downwards into darkness.

"I need a drink," he says, unsmiling. "Will you join me? We'll be safe down there: no women allowed."

I shake my head, turn and walk away. This is Sam's dream, not mine.

Sam likes me naked: I cannot permit it. A muzzy man has a jacket slung over his shoulders; I relieve him of it. A pair of shorts appear by my feet when I command it; I step into them and pull them over my groin and buttocks in one easy motion.

I catch my reflection in a conveniently placed shop window – Sam likes his ideal man to be toned and muscled, which is nice, though the bright red skin and horns that he's chosen to decorate me with are a sign of potential trouble.

Not that it matters in a dream. Hosts can believe they're possessed by a devil or demon if they wish; trouble only comes when others start believing that too.

Now I am clothed I have choices. I choose height, start walking across the immense market, looking for ladders.

Sam is following me. He calls to me in a monotone: I pretend to ignore him, though I keep a check on how far behind he trails me, slowing when the surroundings begin to lose their sharpness and clarity so that he can catch up. This is entirely Sam's dream.

Why am I here in Sam's dream? Why do I taste the memory of coins – asses, sesterce – on the sides of my tongue?

The questions feel lazy, of little consequence. I dismiss them without thought.

Instead of the expected stairs or escalators I find a lift, or rather a place of elevation. Between five great pillars runs a crack in the veined floor. I step into the pentagon along with the crowds, smile to myself as the floor disengages and rises towards the ceiling.

As each new floor passes people gather at the edge, turn and wave as a smaller pentagon emerges to carry the rest of us further up. On each occasion I watch the decor of the surrounding space, watch as elegance is replaced with austerity, baroque becomes sparseness.

Another floor, and another. The breeze from air conditioning vents gusts stronger, more forceful. By the time the last of the crowd has abandoned the open-sided elevator the gale is constant, strong enough to make me crouch, my hands splayed across the marble-veined ice.

I reach a flat of concrete set high in a tower. Around me geometries are marked out by scaffolding – a work-in-progress reaching to touch the clouds far above. Now the gales sing, their notes stinging my eyes. Looking around I spot another lift, ancient in its design: a set of open coffins strapped to a chain running up to the place where the spiralling struts meet. The coffins take their turn to emerge from a hole in the ground, their progress upwards just slow enough to allow a body to step in.

"I'm scared," says Sam from behind me. "Why won't you stop? Tell me your name!"

"No," I say. "This is not my dream."

We stare at each other for a while, the clack of each emerging coffin a bark in the melody of the winds.

"I can't go higher," he says. "I don't know where to go. Tell me where to go."

I shake my head, the outlandish bull-horns heavy on my skull. These are Sam's worries, not mine.

With a sigh, I break the dream to oblivion.

## **11. Southwark**

Sam's childhood home no longer blends in with its neighbours. The front door shows signs of a battering where somebody forced it, no doubt when searching for a crime scene. Ribbons of blue-and-white 'do not enter' tape still tangle in the untrimmed hedge. Some flower bunches wilt on the doorstep.

The sweet, catch-in-the-throat smell that makes Sam wrinkle his nose is the whiff of attar, corpse gas. The bodies had been decomposing for two days before they were discovered – by a man coming round to test the gas boiler, of all things – which has given the fumes time to percolate into the fabric of the carpets and curtains.

Yet no beetles or flies had answered the pheromonic siren call, according to the woman who took us to identify the bodies in the morgue. Sam's grief allows him to ask some very strange questions.

Sam tells Marc to give him some time alone, upstairs. The watery glint of pity in the boyfriend's eyes is missed by Sam, but manages to annoy me. As Sam climbs the stairs to the bedroom where Falc had hung Bull's former body I reach out and take control, easing my host into a thoughtless oblivion.

I avoid the first bedroom instinctively: I do not need to rifle Sam's memory to know this was Spar's nest; I can taste the fading residue of her heat, and Bull's, through the part-closed door. Instead I continue along the length of the dim landing, past the bathroom to the room at the end – Sam's room.

Spar has never been the sentimental sort: the room is not as Sam remembers it. Replacing his bed is a litter of boxes and discarded furnishings, piles of old clothes in plastic shopping bags awaiting their never-completed journeys to the second-hand shop, or the tip. Stacks of magazines and papers, junk mail layering yellowed invoices, pile on his old desk. All that seems to remain of Sam's long occupation of this space are a couple of Millwall Football Club team posters – though I doubt my host's interest in the players extended to their sporting ability.

I pull a crate up to the desk and clear a space, drawing the Band out of Sam's trouser pocket and placing it on the aged wood as I sit down.

It has changed since I was last responsible for it.

We call it 'the Band', those of us who are tasked with guarding it. We could call it the ring, or the bangle, or the necklace – I have seen it take each of those shapes over the years. Currently it is in the shape of a large ring – a thumb ring – and its metal is hard and tight, with no stretch in it.

I take it in my fingers and consider its condition.

It has no artistic merit. The metal is thick and plain, more grey than silver, with no shine – a dull pewter, or maybe gunmetal. Around its outer side sit the stones, those that remain: seven ovals of corundum in various colours, smooth, not cut, with little lustre to them. They seem quite prominent this time around, only half-buried in their cuddling substrate; the first time I had guarded it, in the form of a double-looped pendant hung from a grass-weave string around my neck, the stones had been barely visible.

If it had been my choice I would have chosen beryl stones, or maybe diamond. Beryl comes in a good variety of colours, each with their own name, though they lack the hardness. Diamonds are more than tough enough for the job of holding a world within their lattices, but

I doubt I could survive under such a dazzling sky. So I suppose the Powers knew what they were doing when they gave us corundum stones to live in: hard enough to keep us safe; pretty enough to keep us sane.

Seven stones in nine settings equally spaced around the curve; I refuse to think about the missing worlds.

Instead I search for Mescwar, my home stone. The world in which I truly live.

An urge to take a knife to my throat and render myself into Mescwar's treacle-gold depths sparks inside my chest like a pain, a bruise. I hold the desire for a moment in my thoughts, before dismissing it.

Duty comes first.

I slowly touch the Band through a complete circuit of its degrees, naming each stone as it faces me. I don't need to do this – there is no magic involved in its protection – but I feel the need to check it, catalogue its attributes:

- amber Mescwar, to which I'll soon return;
  - green Fuebe, heavy in its populations;
  - Uekh, corn yellow like table wine;
  - a space for my first stone, Fol Huun, its lavender sky now gone;
  - sky blue Onuun;
  - bloody Tincas;
  - legendary Spoy, once as clear as spring water, now washed grey by lost souls;
  - Oounous, ink blue like the Mediterranean, for a time my prison, and also my release;
  - rosy Tintuum, lost before my first breath;
- ... and Mescwar once more – however hard I stare, I cannot see the lives I know it contains.

I close my eyes as I push the Band over the knuckle of my thumb. When my nerves incinerate, I scream!



## 12. Southwark

"Sam? Sam? What's wrong, love? Talk to me!"

I'm lying on the floor – I think. As patterns and blurs begin to fall into focus I can see a face. I should know this face, but the story of it doesn't flow immediately to my mind.

The pain is immaculate, a pure rush of venom carving lines through my flesh and across my skin. A part of me thinks: *this has never happened before*.

Marc – this face has a name, and the name is Marc. The set of the face tastes like lilac. Lost within the fractures of myself, I somehow manage to nod. I hold up a hand like a child waiting to be hoisted into comforting arms. I feel the man grasp my wrist, feel him tug me forward.

"Put your legs under your arse. You're too heavy for me to lift."

"Okay! Don't nag!" Nevertheless, I follow his instructions, help him to help me back to my feet.

"What happened? Why did you scream?"

"Lost my balance."

I can't tell him the truth. He must not see my agony. "You fuss too much. I'm fine, honest!"

A glint of anger flares in the curl of his eyes; the look tastes like citrus, and mint.

"You're not fine, Sam. I told you it was too early to come here!"

So I have a name.

No, the host has a name. I can't remember my name.

Knowing that I have a host reminds me that I am not my host. I am in the Outer World now. What have I done with my host's mind? I can't remember – the roast of my nerves consumes my coherence.

"I needed to come here, you know that."

Marc is shaking his head. He brings up his arm and cradles his palm around the base of my skull, massages the skin and hair with his thumb and finger.

"You're not ready! Why did you scream?"

"I don't know. I just did."

"I'm worried about you, love. Did you black out again?"

Has the host been fainting? I don't remember ...

"Black out?"

"You told me about it: losing time, you said. Just before – this. Before your Mum died."

My mother's dead? Yes, I suppose she must be. I remember watching the big man with red hair drive a spear through her chest.

"I want you to go to the doctor. Promise me you'll go, yes?"

"Yes, okay," I say. I'll agree to anything at this point if it helps rid the reek of aniseed from my tongue. "Just take me home, will you? I don't want to be here anymore."

My name is Kal. I remember my mother screaming my name as the big man attacked her.

Marc is talking in platitudes now. He guides me to the entrance, towards the passage and the steps and the fresh, cold air that I hope I will find beyond the confines of this strange box.

As I walk I feel the pain recede, like seagulls abandoning the mudflats to seek the salt-tang comforts of the sea. As I walk, assisted, I glance down at my left hand, spot a metal ring clamped tight around the base of the thumb.

... And everything resolves.

My name is Kal and I am the Guardian of that ring. I call it the Band. I am in the Outer World, in a host called Sam. Sam is asleep: I made Sam sleep before I pushed the Band onto my thumb.

All I need to do is cloak a few key thoughts in Sam's memory and then I can recede, leave the host to deal with this problem.

Except ... Sam isn't asleep.

The balance within my ears yaws at the shock of his awareness, his knowledge of my presence in his skull.

### 13. Islington

There is evil in the world, and it comes packaged in the form of pretty little capsules.

Marc ... I'm beginning to think of him as my gaoler. He took Sam to see a doctor, all loose tie and top button undone in slacks and petrol blue brogues: doctors have no sense of theatricality any more. The consultation took less than ten minutes and resulted in a handwritten scribble across a form alongside instructions to visit a particular apothecary – no, I mean pharmacist – who was serving late that night. In exchange for the note Sam was given a rattling plastic bottle, brown, with a lid as complex as a puzzle box for the opening.

That first pill almost rendered me home! It took every fragment of my concentration to keep hold of the host's mind as the chords of his senses eased to a gelatinous slime and the sharp escarpments of his memories eroded.

A second slip of paper from the doctor was more welcome: a 'sick note' which allows Sam to stay away from work for a fortnight and still be paid by his employer. The concept ... astonishes me.

Marc insists on watching Sam take each pill before he goes to work, and again when he comes home and once more before he and Sam bed down for the night. I let Sam swallow the last pill; the risk is necessary if I'm to learn how to control and overcome this sorcerous medication. It also means that Marc doesn't get an opportunity to molest us; all I'm willing to tolerate at the moment is skin contact, nothing more.

When I'm free of the boyfriend's ministrations, I mostly sit by the window in the main room, where I can watch the street. What I should be doing is studying, learning. If the Outer World has managed to develop drugs that can render me home, what other surprises have evolved to snare me?

But I don't have time. Sam's *awareness* of me is my most immediate concern.

It's like we're in a race: each time I attempt to cloak or ruse or spin, he fights back. He's learning not to trust himself, and through his un-trust, he is learning discernment.

The one trick that offers me a few moments of peace is distraction: I've uncovered a streak of compulsiveness within Sam, and I am playing it as hard as I have to.

Sam likes a clean home.

So whenever he parries my will too cleverly, whenever he gets too close, I distract him. The whole apartment – including the bathroom and kitchen area – is carpeted, a rough-textured weave in small repeating patterns of creams and pastels. Knocking over a plant pot, or gravy granules, or talcum powder, is enough to take Sam to the storage closet where he keeps his

prized vacuum cleaner; once one part of the carpet is clean the rest has to be equally clean, giving me ten minutes of noisy respite.

Sugar or milk spilt across the work surfaces in the kitchen – which for some reason is once again part of the main living area, not a separate room or building – is enough to trigger a bout of general wiping and dusting, though unfortunately this doesn't take too long: Sam's home is sorely lacking in dust-collecting shelves and baubles.

Clothes washing is done daily, and the bed sheets every third day. One day I managed to distract him for over three hours by persuading him to sort through his wardrobe and drawers, folding and discarding. He even sorted Marc's storage spaces, which led to a sulking fit of staggering proportions on the part of the boyfriend once the deed was discovered.

That was a good evening.

I hadn't realised how rich the Outer World had become until that incident. How many clothes does one person need? This new social paradigm (like the kitchen, Greek and Latin words have made a welcome return to the current language, though their meanings have slipped from what I remember) seems centred on consumption, the need to own, possess, eat, wear, use, discard. The fact that Sam does not think it unusual, or wasteful, leaves me flummoxed.

Twice I've made Sam reorder his collection of rainbow-shiny disks, and sometimes I even convince him to sit down and watch a film or two. But I don't trust the television: there's too much glamour-magic in that box. I have to remain fully aware as the film or programme progresses, keeping its enthrallment of me under control.

Because Sam has learned he can distract me, too, with the television. It's at those moments, when I'm lost in the story, that he tries to question me, search me, force me to admit that I exist.

When it gets too much, all I can do is blank him into oblivion; he has no defence against that spin. Then I sit beside the window and watch the street.

## **14. Hackney**

"I tell you, those damned vampires are everywhere. Everywhere! Can't squat for a shit without some bugger walking by and trying to probe for a lick of force. Make my days hell, I tell you! Is that all the food you've brought me?"

Mada doesn't change, ever. The first time I met her she was a querulous biddy; she could be wearing the body of a teenage princess and she'd still sound like a crone.

This time round the body matches the personality riding it; a mass of uncut grey curls and knots frame her air-dried face, with piercing blue eyes nailing the rest of the features steady. She's made no attempt to clean the host – "I ain't got nothing against a few lice, keep me company at night, they do, remind me I'm still living!" – nor the host's attire: a rambling collection of cardigans and dresses, slips and old stockings, all enclosed in a massive, dirty great-coat with high visibility stripes over the shoulders and back.

"I've got you some nuts: peanuts, cashews." I read the labels of the packs as I hand them over to her. "If you tell me what you want, I can bring it with me tomorrow."

"These are good," she says. "I got plenty of pockets, see? Maybe some bread, a bit of cheese – handy things. Pocket food. This bag of bones ain't used to big meals."

I nod, choosing not to wonder about the state of the flesh beneath the bulk of linens and knits.

"I don't mind if you render back, you know."

"I do, lad. I can see you've got problems. Can feel them myself, truth be told. What sort of mate buggers off at the first sign of trouble, heh?"

The comment hits me harder than I expect. I look around for a moment, give myself a few seconds to arrange my thoughts, test possible words.

We sit in the grounds of an abandoned church, close to where Sam lives in Islington. By the look of the place, it has been derelict for quite a while; most of the windows above us are smashed, though there's little in the way of wall-scrawling. The thin border of grass on this side of the building has a sparse scattering of condoms and needles: Mada may not care where she settles, but I've chosen to crouch down out of the wind with my back against the wall and my buttocks clear of the litter.

"They had their reasons, all of them." I shuffle a twinge of cramp from my thigh. "Falc was near witless with fear the last time we met."

"Scared is as scared does, is all I'm saying."

"You don't feel scared?"

The eyes which lock with mine are the exact shade of Onuun, an icy blue to match the chill in the air.

"Something's amiss, lad, yes. There's no denying that."

"What do you think it is?"

She sniffs the air with a nose which, without its fine network of veins across its flanks, could be considered delicate, well formed.

"It smells like ... endings. Yes, endings. The Band is ... edgy, yes? Concerned? Like a wolf in the snow what sees the stag behind its horns. There's a hunger that drives us towards a dangerous place ...

"Well," she finishes, "that's what it feels like, though it don't make no sense."

"No, it doesn't make any sense," I agree. "You make it sound as if the Band has a personality of its own."

"Don't it?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I've never thought of it like that. It's never talked to me."

"Don't be silly! Things don't talk ..."

"So what makes you say that it's edgy?"

"This language they talks round these parts, it ain't got enough words for what I want to say, it don't cover the hows and whys of stuff like this!"

Mada marks the end of this strand of the conversation by noisily pulling at the bag of cashew nuts, attempting to tear into the foil packet with her teeth.

I let my eyes wander around the wasteland again. I'm surprised to notice that what I had originally taken for grass clumps are actually part of a wide, dense swathe of daffodil leaves. The flower heads are evident, still sheathed in their green paper wraps, but a few have already dropped away from their sky-pointing, crooked themselves into their final angles ready for the bloom.

It's not even March, I remember. Still four weeks away from the equinox.

"It burned me," I say.

Mada lifts her face away from the nuts to look at me.

"The Band. When I put it on my thumb, it burned me."

Her eyes widen. "That's interesting. Has it changed in any way?"

I show her my thumb. "It's tightened up a little. I can't slip it off, not even with soap."

"Maybe that's it, then: the change caused the burning, being so close to the flesh. I don't recall ever seeing it change shape, though I know it's tricky like that. Most Guardians choose not to put flesh within the loop."

She tips the last of the nuts into her mouth, beckons with her spare hand. "Let's have a closer look, lad!"

She takes my hand, pulls it hard to her face and swivels it around the wrist to examine the stones.

~ *Cataracts*, a voice whispers inside me.

~ *Like Mrs Jones next door got. Her eyes went stone white.*

I block Sam's attempt at conversation by starting my own. "You're from Fuebe, yes?"

"Too many bloody people!" says Mada. "Too many bloody trees!"

"I've never been there."

"I've never been anywhere else lad, except here."

"There's plenty of people here, Mada, and plenty of trees too."

"Didn't used to be crowds in the Outer World, not like in these days. At least the trees stay put in their spot and don't talk at you!"

"I'm from Mescwar," I tell her.

"I know," she says. "Fat lot of good it's done you, heh?"

She thrusts my hand away from her face, suddenly.

"Whatever it is lad, it's not the Band. As sure as my bladder's fit for pissing. No, there's something wrong here. Here in the Outer World."

I hazard a guess: "Vampires?"

"Didn't think you believed in them!"

"You never asked me!"

"Don't need to, lad. You never bother raising even a simple shield round the host."

"I can't see those energies, Mada. Not like you or the others."

"Can't you? Well, there's a tale for the camp-fires! How do you cope?"

I shrug my shoulders.

"Well, it ain't vampires. They're just folks who need to lift a little energy from those around them, helps them keep up with the rest of the world. No vampire's ever noticed me for a fact, however many times they've tapped my hosts for a lick. The Band keeps us out of their sight."

"So what else could it be?"

She gives me a grin. "Bring me some food tomorrow. I need a chance to think, heh? Pocket food, mind. None of that fancy stuff they chew on nowadays. I ain't got the teeth for the posh!"

## **15. Within**

"I'm scared," says Sam from behind me. "Why won't you stop? Tell me your name!"

"No," I say. "This is not my dream."

As I step into the coffin and fold my arms across my chest, I feel the thin plywood creak, protest at my weight. I do not look down: the time for looking down has not yet come.

I admire the clouds for a while, watch the storm-winds twist their strands into sigils and logographs.

Slow heartbeats pass. When the time comes I step away from the box onto a wooden plank that juts into a space beyond the last of the scaffold. Here the clouds are close to me, like a tapestry of fog swirling from right to left just beyond my reach.

"Look at me, please. Look at me!" says Sam to my back. "Tell me I'm going mad. Tell me you don't exist!"

"If you want to know me," I say to the mist wall, "then follow me."

Two strides along the sagging plank take me into the cloud. I can feel the lignin texture of the damp, rough cut wood on my heels, my footpads, my toes. Another step. Another. And another.



A bassoon shock of waves crashing on boulders surges into my ears, and a faint trace of salt crystallises like rime on the rims of my nostrils.

I know this place. This is my dream.

There are no clouds in this place, no bank of mist behind me. Above me arches a lavender sky, already beginning to bruise towards the purples and aubergines of sleep. Directly ahead lies the wooden lookout. I walk towards it across coarse-woven grass, push open the brine-battered door and start to climb.

The space within is mostly dark – gaps in the plank cladding permit the tinted light to reach me. The stairs follow the circle of the cone structure, with a door on each twentieth step offering access to the interior: I ignore them all; only when one of the doors opens do I stop.

"You cannot continue," says the monster before me.

I take a moment to admire the bulk of the beast, the curve of its muzzle, the sheen of its scales. The two eyes set in a horizontal rift above the snout are black, unblinking.

"You cannot stop me," I say.

"Your plan is stupidity. Madness!"

"I know."

I reach out with one hand and rip its face away, drop it to the floor. As the beast collapses I step onto its cool body, feel my toes sink into the yielding flesh.

More steps, more doors.

And then I am at the top of the watchtower, stood on the edge of its cliff. Above me, the lilacs of sky; beneath me, the deep-churned blues and mauves of the sea.

I am not the only one who watches.

She stands on her rock, the rock that angles itself beyond the cut of the cliff, jutting up and out. Around her billows a great white cloak, silken in its breezy flatter, yet sturdy enough to bear her weight when she chooses to extend her arms and glide into the wind, as I had seen her do so many times.

Unlike the cloak, she is still. I can make out her profile when the warm gusts lift the tousle of black hair away from her face. She doesn't turn to look at me.

I do not call out to her.

Behind me I can hear sobbing, scrabbling, the sounds of a man confronting monsters in dark places. I watch strands of mauve mist etch portents across the lilac sky.

When he enters, he is on his hands and knees: a crawling supplicant, as is only right.

"Help me! Please help me!"

"Stand up, Sam," I say. "There is nothing to fear here."

"I can't ... I can't do it! Let me go!"

"Stand up, Sam. You'll miss the race."

This cliff is a headland. Beyond the woman lies a sandy bay. Two long cabins stand on stilts just ahead of the tree line that circles the white of the beach, but nobody is there. I turn my head to the left, wait for the boats to appear.

"Where is this place?"

"Nowhere on Earth, Sam. This is my dream."

"What are you doing to me?"

"As little as possible, believe me. Look now, the logs are coming."

From this height, they seem tiny, nothing more than sticks. But I remember their masses – vast, hollowed trunks cut to shape a passage through the water. In each of them sit eighteen men, rowing, pulling, pulling on oars shaped from lopped boughs, straining to haul their timber towards the beach, towards victory.

Once I was one of them. There was a time when my only desire was to shape wood – and my body, and the bodies of my team-mates – into a machine capable of winning this race.

Sam has stopped crying, moved forwards to the edge of the platform to look down and out at the two teams, competing to slice each wave more skilfully than their opponents, forcing their muscles and sinews to heave their boat home first.

"You're brave," I say. "This is a good thing."

"Who are you?" he whispers. "Who are they? What are they doing?"

"They're racing. They race for her. Do you see the pole in the middle of the beach? The first team to tie their colours to the pole wins the race. And after the race she will fly down to congratulate them all, and they shall be exalted in her pleasure, all of them, winners and losers alike."

Sam looks around him, sees the beach, the woman.

"And then," I continue, "as the clouds rebuild their stacks, each team will take axes to their boat and hew it to splinters, and the wood will be steepled around the pole. She will accept their gift, set flames to the pyre. She will accept the kiss of the winning team's captain, watch him climb into the fire, watch him immolate himself for her eternal glory."

"This is madness. I'm going mad!"

Now I turn to look at him properly. He's shaking, shivering despite the warm air; his face looks too old.

"Stand up, Sam. Let me warm you."

"Madness," he whispers, shaking his head. "Madness!"

I pull the football shirt over my head, let the breeze catch it like a flag, let it flee my grip.

"It is not madness, Sam. This was a good place."

"Where is this place?"

"Lost."

"Am I lost, too?"

"No, Sam," I say as I let my shorts slide from my hips. "You're cold, not lost. Come here. Let me hug some warmth into you."

Below us, the shouts of the captains urging their teams on to victory sound like the piercing caterwauls of her great gull guardians. I reach out, take the man's hands in mine and pull him to his feet.

"This is my dream, Sam. Not yours." I wrap my arms around his shivering shoulders, reach my hands across his back and clasp him to me. "There's nothing to fear here."

I can feel his tears, damp on my shoulder.

"Don't let me fall," he begs my neck. "Tell me your name."

"I won't let you fall, Sam. My name is Kal."

As I rock the man in my embrace, I watch the woman on her plinth. She turns, smiles at me.

*AN INTRODUCTION I □ ALWAYS □ WELCOME, she whispers. WELL MET INDEED!*

## 16. Islington

The clouds are dense and low this afternoon, casting a monochrome gloom over the Lonely City; beyond the double-glass window the street is damp, with outline ghosts of buildings and cars cast across grey-tone surfaces. Unlike the daffodils in the churchyard, I can see that the closest trees are keeping their leaves sheathed within tough buds, refusing to be tricked by the occasional grift of warm sunshine.

Sam, too, is sheathed. This morning he refused to talk to the boyfriend – I still struggle with that word – and, when Marc gave him the tranquilliser, Sam surprised me, triggering his swallowing reflex as I was manoeuvring the tablet under his tongue.

I had to choke his throat.

The coughing fit was almost enough to keep Marc from leaving, but Sam persuaded him to go; neither of us wanted to tolerate the man's fussing today.

We shared dreams last night, Sam and me. I took his dream and made it mine. Have I ever done that before with a host? I don't know; there's no copper tang of recollection tapping my back teeth when I consider the idea. Yet tampering with the dream felt like the right thing to do.

I wish Sam could comprehend that I was trying to help him. Now that he's learned how to dodge my attempts to blank him, I need his quiet acceptance of our unexpected situation. I can't spend all my time guarding against him: one moment of stupidity and we'll both be gone from this body.

... There's heat in the street outside: just for a moment I spot it, a flick quickly pulled back.

~ *What's that?*

I ignore the question; I don't want Sam knowing I can hear his thoughts. But the point is a good one: this needs investigating.

It takes me a few moments to sever the man's control of his flesh, to push his Vital Breath up, and up, and quarantine him in the caverns behind his brow. Short of knitting him into the wheels of his hidden eye it's the best I can do at such short notice.

Then to the kitchen area to pick up a weapon – a small paring knife is the sharpest I can find – and onwards to the shoe rack to force my feet into an old pair of canvas boots. No time to bother with laces and knots; no time to worry about a coat. I remember to pat-check for keys in Sam's jeans as the apartment door swings shut.

There's my heat in the Outer World, and there's Mada's heat. Two of us left here: all the others have rendered home. So whose heat is hiding in the bushes along the street?

Not Mada, I'm certain of that. When I think of her my mind tugs eastwards towards Hackney, and the thought feels smooth and worn, distant. There's at least a mile between us.

I ignore the lift in the communal area and head instead for the stairwell where I toe-spring down the steps two, three at a time. Grabbing the banister at each turn swings me quickly to the head of each flight – one, two, three, four, five – and I'm at ground level, bashing through the swing door to the foyer and the world beyond.

This is a good body: I'm barely out of breath!

My right knee locks as I reach the street. At the speed I'm travelling I have no choice except to tumble. As the pavement beckons I extend my arms ... which spasm!

Pain blooms in my/Sam's face as the cheek takes the full impact.

Sam is everywhere, in every sinew, melding to each nerve – a revolt of silent, aggressive determination. As the tumble carries us over the shoulder and onto the back I pull inwards, concentrate my Vital Breath ...

And punch! Here. And here. And here.

*~ ... get out get out getout ofME!*

*~ No!*

I pursue and strike at the essence of Sam; who flails at me in return. Here a pain; here a convulsion; here a shove and a twist and a thrust of bad memory into his persona.

*~ ... getOUT!*

*~ No!*

The body we fight for convulses: a judder of shakes to loosen my tendrils from Sam's mind. I ... slip! Lose sight as he pushes me away from his eyes; immediately I transition, let the energies of pulsars and sonars acquire the colour of rainbows, hues and saturations beyond count.

Again I slip! But it is not Sam who pushes. The Band, sat over the flesh of Sam's thumb, knows that I'm starting to render; it comes to reclaim its own, to reel me in like a pike on the hook. I slip!

*~ OutOfMeNow!*

*~ For the sake of all you love, Sam. Don't do this! Don't become like me!*

As my rendering stretches me to a taper along the sinews of the arm I hear a voice. It flares amid the fusions of dancing spectra: "Stop it. Stop it now!"

Confusion. Distraction. A strand of me lassos a ganglion ... and shrinks, winching me towards the calcium-gristle of ball-cup shoulder, up to the last vestige of thymus-in-fat over the heart.

"Samuel Lewis, if you don't stop fighting I promise I'll jag this knife through your sodding throat!"

... and the cellular masses around me sag, relax.

I can't free myself from the Band, but I feel its gravity reel slacken: the angler playing with its pet pike. I have no time to think: tired and part-rent, I squirm along lymphatic pipes and through gossamer walls to haul myself once more into the enfolding sheets of Sam's brain.

I take control of the limbs, fisting fingers around thumbs. I take a deep breath and steady the pulsing slabs of the heart. I wheel the eyeballs in their sockets to bring the pupils back in line with the lids, then crack open my flesh-sight.

A brown blob resolves into a face – the face of a child. Messed brown hair fringed over an unwashed, dirt-tracked brow. Brown eyes in soft, tight, wrinkle-free skin look into mine. An angry stare. A captain's stare amid the billowing fuzz of heat, fierce as to burn the sun from the sky.

*~ Boude?*

I know this heat!

I have to concentrate. Sam has wrapped himself tight like the buds on a tree, but could burst from his self-imposed protections without warning. It takes more than a moment for me to calm the incoherent blusters of this brain's storm, bring it towards a rhythm steady enough to let me reach outwards to formulate the complex patterns required of speech - lips tight and larynx tensed and tongue aligned in its cave ... and relax the lung's cage ...

"Boude?"

"What the fuck do you think you're playing at, Kal? Is this your idea of a good game?"

Oh Boude, I've missed you too!

## 17. Islington

The knife on the table is three times the size of the vegetable peeler still in my pocket. A smudge of blood colours its cutting edge: Boude never carries a weapon for show. Thankfully it's not Sam's blood; the spillings from our fight lie diluted on the pavement outside.

After Boude, in her girl-on-the-cusp suit, had helped me back into the building and the comforts of the warm apartment, I'd taken to the bathroom to check the damage on Sam's face. An asphalt scrape had lifted skin from his left cheek, easily cleaned. The cut across the eyebrow was more difficult to staunch.

"Have you blanked him?" asked Boude as she searched for a fresh flannel to wet. I could only shake my head; Sam had hidden himself in spaces so dense I could barely smell his fear, and my first concern was to try and dampen the lambent flicks of alchemical stews still threatening to set muscles to the shiver.

And now I'm sitting at the breakfast bar opposite a being who should not be in this world, with a keen knife between us.

"You're going to have to talk to me," she says. "I can't read your thoughts."

"Why are you here, Boude?"

She looks rough, a jumble of angles in dirty clothes: a tight t-shirt, jeans, small lace-up boots, cardigan and scarf wrapped over a thin body. In spite of her current circumstances she presents me with a very adult gaze expressed through her child eyes.

"You know why I'm here."

I shake my head.

"Falc said he explained it to you."

"Obviously he lied."

"About Bull's moment of madness? How he brought a dozen of us through before Spar rendered him?"

It's my turn to crease my sore brow with confusion lines.

"Everybody's accounted for," I tell her.

"You're making no sense, Kal. Have you forgotten how to count?" Her host's narrow throat struggles to carry the tone of her words – a reedy statement of fact rather than a question.

"I can count. Spar and Bull make two, and a dozen more, plus me. Bull was gone before I was pulled here, along with four of the twelve. Ten of us left. You want water?"

She nods, giving me an opportunity to verify my figures as I slide from the stool to find two tumblers. As the tap runs I raise my voice a little.

"Falc rendered Spar; three more of the twelve followed, then Falc himself after bringing the Band to me." I settle back onto the stool, pushing the cold tumbler towards Boude. "That left five of us here. The last three renders came within an hour of Falc's traffic accident. I've pulled nobody through since then. There's two of us here, and now there's you."

"You and who?"

"Mada."

"Mada? What's that stupid bitch doing here?"

The foul mouths of children have never shocked me; when Sam overheard a boy, no more than six or so, tell an old woman to 'fuck off' in the middle of the street his subliminal surprise had bewildered me. It left me wondering: at what point in recent history did the kids turn into a separate species? I can only suppose it must be something to do with England's conversion to this weird Cult of Youth.

"No, Boude. What are you doing here?"

"Surviving, Kal. That and saving your sad, sorry nuts! Have you talked to Mada? What has she got to say for herself?"

"Enough to know she's no threat to me. You came at me with a fucking knife!"

"You were in the middle of a fight with a host! Did you allow him to slip the reins for fun?"

"I was ..."



But for some reason I don't want Boude to know the truth of the matter – not yet, at least. Not until I have some answers from her.

Thinking of the fight reminds me of something: "How do you know Sam's name?"

She doesn't pause in her answer, nor blink: "I've met that host of yours before."

"When was that?"

"Ten years ago. Just about the time that he was giving Bull and Spar a hard time. They brought me through to keep him out of trouble."

"Trouble? You rode Sam?"

Such a history might explain why Sam knows me – I've never heard of a host being ridden twice ...

"No," says Boude. "I took one of young Sam's joyriding mates. Got the boy to crash and die while Sam was in the back of the car."

Sam himself might be shut tight, but I can access his memories. The incident is quick to rise in my mind, proof enough that it forms a solid cornerstone on which the man has built his narrative home.

"How long did you stay?"

"Three, maybe four days. A quick job. Bull only pulls people here when he has specific tasks to be done."

"Bull's gone," I say.

"I know that. Spar ..."

"No. Bull's gone for good."

She widens her eyes to a full roundness, prompting me to supply more details. As I repeat what Falc had told me I watch her heat. Boude has a deft knack for controlling a host's facial muscles, and has always been quick to pick up the local non-verbal chats; she has no trouble hiding her fibs and feelings, unlike many. But the heat can't lie, not in the essentials: it is what we are.

When I mention Spoy her heat freezes and bleaches, just for a moment, barely long enough to notice before the sways and swirls resume their patterns.

"You didn't know?"

The look she gives me is calculating; the shake of her head is sparse.

"What have you been up to, Boude? Where have you been?"

"Last time I was here," she says, "I had a bath – you know I've not had a bath like that since Salona. You remember Salona? Water fit for scalding and perfumed oils."

"You're dodging me."

"I'm cold, Kal. Cold and tired and dirty and hungry, very hungry. Judge me later: right now I want a bath!"

## **18. Islington**

"What do you think you were doing, bringing her here?"

"She needed some help. I don't see what the problem is."

"The problem, Sam, is that she's a kid. In our home. People might talk, for Christ's sake!"

"Is that it? Is that what you're worried about? What the bloody neighbours think?"

"You know what it's like! People talk. Especially when it comes to kids! Child protection and paedophilia; they don't think, Sam. They open their mouths and talk and make up stories in their own heads and tell each other about it and then someone will be calling the Social or the Police or ..."

"What are you talking about, Marc? That's ... that's sick, that is! You think I brought her here so I could fuck her?"

"What am I supposed to think! I walk in the house and there she is! Naked! In our fucking bathroom!"

"She's taking a bath! Of course she's going to be naked! And if you'd agreed to let me put a lock on the door you wouldn't have walked in on her like that."

"So it's my fault now, that there's a naked child in our bathroom!"

"Oh, great! Come on Marc, fan those flames. I enjoy the smell of burning martyr before dinner!"

[Silence. Retorts forming and dying in throats.]

"You know what? It does stink in here. Look at the state of the carpet; scuffs and scrapes – what is that? Mud? Shit?"

"I'll clean it up. I always clean up the mess: my mess and your mess and ..."

"That's not the sodding point. You don't even know who she is?"

"Of course I know who she is. Do you think I'd let a complete stranger into the house?"

"You've done it before! What about that plasterer you picked up last year ..."

"Oh here we fucking go ..."

"It's a fact, Sam: you've got form ..."

"I'm not going to fuck the girl, Marc! I know her!"

"How? How do you know her?"

"Her Mum knows my Mum! They go to ... used to go to bingo together. I've known ..."

*~ Her name's Cathy, Sam. Don't ask why she's decided to be called Cathy; Boude has a thing about strangers hearing her real name. Cathy, Sam. Cathy.*

"I've known Cathy since she was in fucking nappies! So she's having problems with her parents, something about drinking and smoking and there was a big fight ... she was wandering around the streets, no coat, nothing! She'd just walked out in what she was wearing. I told her she could come and stay here for a few days ..."

"Without asking me first? Jesus Christ, Sam, we're cremating your bloody Mother in three days time! We don't need this ... Sam? Sam. No, you don't! You don't go fucking moody on me right in the middle of this discussion!"

"She. Needs. My. Help! So piss off down the pub or something and throw a couple of gins down your fucking neck and start realising that – Cathy – is going to be sleeping on our sofa for the next few days!"

[Silence, interspersed with an occasional, forced clatter to signal continuing volumes of anger between the combatants.]

"Has she phoned her parents yet?"

"Haven't asked her."

"They ought to know ... they ought to be told that she's safe, not harmed, you know ..."

"That's up to her."

"She's a kid. Kids don't understand ..."

"She's old enough to make that decision herself."

[A shorter silence.]

"What about food? We haven't ..."

"I've been shopping. Look, everything will be fine! It's only for a few days, and she really does need our help – a little bit of space to work things out in her head, you know? She's been sleeping rough, Marc! At her age! I'll talk to her, help her sort out this problem with her Mum. It's something for me to do, yes?"

[A moment's silence, intense.]

"You're such fucking hard work at times!"

"I know I am," says Sam. "And still you love me."

"So ... what happened to your face again?"

## **19. Within**

The scenes that Sam spills across my vision are stunning – rarely have I come across a host who dreams so vividly, brightly. He uses the full palette, and adds almost-realistic detail to objects as they come close to his point of view; it's like watching Hans Bol create a landscape while being within the canvas, and on the brush, at the same time.

Boude wouldn't understand my fascination with the dreaming mind, nor Mada or Falc or any of the others. As far as I can tell they avoid the fugue state, preferring to work their ruses and cloaks on the subconscious froth from which the emergent voice rises. Yet for me the most effective work can only be performed at the cusp.

As much as I want to enjoy the unfolding beauty, I have chores to perform tonight. With a deft entanglement of images in archetypes I plant my ruse and watch it germinate; within moments Sam's dream evolves.

... Me and my host, we need to talk.

We sit together in the back of a speeding car whose driver can be no more than fifteen or sixteen. The colour of this sequence seems leached, drained – greys tinged with red. The boy with the shaved head behind the car wheel is talking loudly, but indistinctly; his words are not important, it seems.

"I remember when Lee died," says Sam.

Just as I had planned – a direct memory pulled from the folds, coloured by emotions rather than imagination.

"Is that Lee?"

"Yeah, that's Lee. He's about to die again. I don't want to watch. Take me somewhere else."

"Think of a different place," I tell him.

"I ... I can't. Not with this dream." Despite the apparent drama of the action around us, Sam is quite calm and relaxed. "I'll wake up before we hit the lamp post," he continues.

"You liked Lee, yes?" The language needs to be precise at this point. "You wanted to kiss Lee? You wanted to hug and hold and strain and sweat and lick Lee?"

I'm attempting a cloak, a realignment of Sam's recent memory that will, hopefully, lessen his desire to fight me. Boude gave me the idea of using the childhood friend as the lever, and to prime the fulcrum I had encouraged Sam to seduce Marc before they slept.

It has been a while since one of my hosts has engaged in the anal; I had forgotten how pleasurable it can be, when performed with skill.

It takes a few seconds, but slowly the dreamscape dissolves|resolves into a new space. A boat on water builds around us, and around that a lake with close shores. To the left an island of reeds and ducks sketches itself into existence while further away to the right the bricks and frames of a cafe erect themselves on the ledge of a bank.

"Can we go for a drink?"

"No," I say. "It's better for you if I stay away from your structures. Put some clothes on, yes?"

"How?"

From the lake's shallow bed a trolley emerges, its shopping load draped in pond weeds and muds. As it floats by us I reach in and clutch at one the bags – not a simple operation, given the talons Sam has set on my fingers – and extract the ubiquitous Millwall shirt and shorts.

"That should do." I give him the clothes, which he carelessly pulls on.

"Lee didn't die, did he. Lee was murdered."

"How do you mean, murdered?" I ask.

"It wasn't Lee who was driving that night. It was that girl, one of you. Lee had a demon in his head."

I say nothing.

Sam's staring at me now, his face up close to mine.

"What's it like, being a monster?"

I can feel the muscles of my mouth pull into a smile over vampire fangs.

"The hours are crap, and we don't get sick leave."

This answer upsets him. "You're playing with me. Stop it!"

I shrug.

"Sometimes I think you're real," he says, "like you're an alien body snatcher."

He wipes the sun's sweat from his hair, lets his hand fall and dangle in the water: no ripples form from his fingers.

I take my chance.

"Stress can do strange things to a person's mind," I say.

"No, you're real." A wake quietly rises around his digits, rebuffing the cloak. "An evil demon inside my head."

I can only accept the failure. "Even if I am real, I won't be here forever."

"Are you going to kill me?"

The question is posed without any emotional overtone.

"Why would I kill you?"

"Lee's demon killed him. That's what your girl said. She got into his head and made him die – to teach me a lesson, she said. Why are you all interested in me? Am I special?"

"No," I tell him. "You were loved. Mums and Dads – they do strange things to protect their kids from danger."

Sam considers the idea. To my side a duck surfaces from a dive, the water beading atop her black-tan back feathers before rolling across the wings back to the lake. I can see her yellow paddles churning sunshine and shadow within the crystal liquids.

"Was there a demon in my Dad's head, when he killed Mum? Did one of your monster mates make him hang himself?"

I don't speak for a while, and neither does Sam. The question hangs in front of us, a dim mist of yearning forming midway between our chests – as if he's inviting me to weave the cloak to him as he watches.

"Your Mum and Dad, they loved you, yes?"

Sam nods, slowly.

"If they had really been demons, all the time, since before you were born, would that change your feelings for them?"

"Maybe. I don't know." He looks beneath the mist, examines the wooden planks keeled under his bare feet. "Dad still murdered Mum."

I make a decision, abandon the cloak.

"No, he didn't. Your Dad didn't kill your Mum. Someone else did that. Somebody else killed them."

Sam's eyes snap back to mine. "Another monster?"

I nod my head.

"Dad was normal, then. It wasn't his fault. Maybe he tried to stop the demons ..."

I shake my head. "He was gone already." Damn it, Bull! I haven't had time to grieve for you properly. "Your Dad was gone before you last saw him, when you visited them both at home. What you met then was just ... just flesh, nothing more."

This information seems to numb him. I watch as he clasps his arms around his chest. Between us the mist billows and thins, escapes our tension and heads towards the reed island.

"Why did you argue with Marc?" I ask him. "Why did you let Cathy stay?"

He smiles as he lifts his head to look me directly in the eye: "It had to be done," he says. "I need her too."

## **20. Hackney**

The Band is warm today, almost hot; it's clenching ever tighter around the thumb. Sam doesn't seem to notice: he has ignored the Band since I first slipped it over the knuckle. The fact gives me hope: a possible chance for the man I wear to survive this misadventure relatively unharmed – as long as he takes no interest in the Band.

Boude had been up early this morning. Sam chose to stay in bed while Marc prepared for work, and I was happy to go along with his laziness.

When we finally arose, it was to find Boude sat at the breakfast bar staring at an unopened box of supermarket cornflakes. "He's a strange one, that Marc," she announced. "Are you going to make me eat this cardboard shit, or fix me some toast?"

Sam was still dozy, leaving me to answer: "The cardboard shit is called 'cornflakes' – thought the own-brand stuff isn't as good as the real thing. What's wrong with Marc?"

However many times I come through to the Outer World, and see one of us wearing a new host, it still gives me the shivers to see a friend operating through an entirely inappropriate body. Boude does not belong in a twelve year old girl: she's too athletic, hard-nosed and, to be frank about it, raunchy. Trying to project those attributes through a juvenile face spins me.

Mada, on the other hand, is entirely fitted to the looks of her current host. Old, abrupt, grumpy, knowledgeable about too many things – and keen to make you realise it, uncaring of herself or her surroundings. Delicacies are wasted on that one.

"I don't know," she continued. "It's like the pair of them are trying to be a normal, contented couple. That Marc wants to be a husband to you. Or a wife." Her leer added a pinch of pitch to my inner balance.

"To Sam, not me. I doubt I'm his type. Anyway, things have changed – men can marry each other nowadays, or almost marry."

"That's a change?"



"They used to hang sodomites a few hundred years back. I remember watching a couple of lads swing for it, last time I was in this city."

Boude shrugged her shoulders, reached across the table for the carton of milk.

"They never used to have problems – all the boys together guarding their goats while the older men had the choice of the women. You were doing some good work last night."

"How do you mean?"

"That argument. Takes a lot of delicate riding to convince the close ones that the host isn't going mad."

"Oh, that wasn't me," I said. "That was all Sam."

"Really? Not even a ruse to bring me back here?"

I had shaken my head, leaned forward with my elbows resting across the breakfast bar. "He seems to have taken an interest in you."

She spooned cornflakes into her mouth, grimaced as she chewed. "Nothing I can't handle. I've got a knife, remember? So what do we do now?"

What do we do indeed!



The churchyard is much as I remember it from my last visit. The cold snap in the weather has stalled the daffodil bloom, though a few buds have coloured up, as if to entice the sun back into the sky through the magic of imitation.

"This is where she sleeps?"

"I'm sure of it," I say.

"But she's not here now."

I confirm her statement with a furrowed nod. "She's south at the moment, across water."

"There won't be anything here, then."

Boude has been suspicious of my motives since I suggested we explore Mada's den; she made a point of tucking her knife into the band of her jeans, hiding it under her t-shirt, before we left the apartment.

"You can read heat echoes," I explain. "Maybe she's left some hint of her intentions."

"She's a wily bitch, Kal. She won't be leaving us clues."

Nevertheless I insist on walking around the abandoned building, checking doors and windows – all blocked and locked as far as I can tell.

We take shelter from the thin rain next to a stack of old gravestones. I've remembered to bring pocket food – in case my reading of the Band is faulty. As Boude settles onto her thighs I throw her a packet of peanuts; she catches it with an absent hand, not even bothering to check its trajectory.

"What do you remember of coming through?" I ask her.

Her heat swirls and colours around her shoulders, mauves seeping through marines within the ever-folding pleats. She's been expecting this question for a while.

"Of the mount," she says, pointing a finger to her chest, "not much. But the pull was ... unexpected."

I leave a silence for her to fill. I know it can take a little time to formulate the words to describe the journey from the Band. Each summoning is different.

"We were mid-game – were you there?"

"No. I was mud-bound after our last victory – I remember you visiting me. You didn't return from the next game, but people weren't talking. I assumed you had taken a beating."

Boude picks up a needle she spots next to her boot, twists it between her fingers as she examines it.

"I tell you, I've never been pulled mid-game," she says. "Never known any of us to be brought through during a festivity – the dragons don't permit it."

"Were dragons there?"

"Oh, yes," she nods. "It was a good game, going our way. All eight gates shut and five balls beyond the whore-lovers' reach. Their runner was going spare: it was a show to make us proud! I remember three dragons circling, ready for the offerings, and snap-finger stamp-foot I was gone – whistles and rainbows all over the place, and the stench of pains, and the next thing I remember is hooping through the Band and landing in this." She throws the needle away from her. "Whatever else Bull was doing that night, I know his aim was fucking lousy!"

I have to grin. Bull's departure had saved him a tongue lashing. But thinking of Bull soon sours my face.

"So you had no chance to talk to him?"

"No," she says. "We were pulled through by Waterloo Bridge. I remember seeing shapes of vagabonds taking hits. This one" – again her finger jabs her chest – "was walking on the bridge with her parents. They were on a day trip; her last memories were theatres and actors. By the time I'd gathered and mounted we were already on a train heading out. Bastards live thirty miles away – too close to my limit: I could barely ruse through the agonies!"

I know what Boude means. The Band doesn't like us to stray too far. My limit is around 22 miles, after which the pain sets in; much further than that and the Band will render me in tatters.

A brick to the back of the head is a far more attractive option.

But her explanation makes sense. Dragged so far from the Band in the body of a child, Boude would have been forced to make some hard choices to get back to safety.

I ask her: "Did the parents survive?"

She nods again. "I slipped them drugs in their evening wine and made away with cash and the knife. Tried to get transport, but this one's been too closeted – she barely knows the way to the end of her street. The Mother drove her everywhere. So I walked it."

"They'll be looking for the kid."

Her hair sways as she shakes her head. "I told the old woman next door that I was running away. Forced some tears out and said I didn't want to kiss daddy's pecker anymore."

"Are you mad? People will be desperate to find her now."

Again the shake of the head. "That's not a problem for me, Kal. I can stay out of sight."

Sometimes Boude's certainty about her abilities exasperates me.

"So whose blood was on the knife?"

"Well, there's a couple of thugs in Enfield," she says as she opens the peanut pack, "who won't be so keen to pick on little girls in the future."

## 21. Southwark

For someone who has been around since the Stone Age, who walked the streets of Carthage before the Romans destroyed it, who has lost his apparent life more than once in the Lonely City, I haven't been to many funerals.

Bull and Spar – known as Jim and Mary in this incarnation – had both lived quiet yet sociable lives, if the size of the crowd gathered to pray for Spar's immortal soul can be considered an accurate measure of sociability. Both of them had worked: he had an office job of some description, a step above the mailroom but not much further up; she cleaned people's houses.

Though the size of the crowd was perhaps more a product of the news coverage. The story of the murder-suicide had attracted the attention of journalists and media outlets; not a lead story by any means, but a news item nonetheless. Sam's decision to only hold a funeral for his Mum had added a new dimension to the story: there were photographers at the gates of the crematorium, and no doubt a few in the audience around us, too.

Can strangers – acquaintances even – mourn? Do photographers feel a stone of grief in their bellies as they snap the carefully dressed crowds? The sympathy of Spar's neighbours seemed more honest to my mind. They at least recognised Sam, gripped his hand with a more genuine grasp.

My own reactions to this morning's events necessarily mark me out as a voyeur. As the service progressed I found myself grinning – I had to check to make sure my lack of solemnity hadn't transferred over to Sam's face. If only these people knew the truth of the matter: I knew exactly where Spar's 'soul' was, and the embrace of a 'loving Father' was not part of that reality.

I remember the very first funeral I attended was a cremation. The choice of burning or burying the corpse seems to swing according to the fashions of the day; when I was a child burials were reserved for people who had earned such honours. Lesser folk were placed on a pyre and burned, though the ceremonies surrounding the event were just as complex and heartfelt as the burial of any king in his mound.

This cremation was shallow by comparison. A routine yet shameful function of life, an event to be endured: forty minutes of officious mourning followed by the secretive disposal of the flesh. The modern world has many magical touches, but its failure to embrace the facts of death – the realities of death – as part of the living world strikes me as ... strange, disjointed.

Why are people ashamed of death nowadays? Is it seen as a sort of failure? Or maybe a betrayal? I can tell that the service meant little to Sam; the man at the front might as well have been talking about anybody, so little did he know of Spar's time in this place – her

hopes, desires, frustrations and achievements. Just another corpse to be committed to the flame before lunch time.

*Whatever*, as Sam would say.

After the service, we were driven to a pub, closer to the crematorium than the family home, for drinks and sandwiches. Here, people were more themselves – relieved to be away from the formalities of mourning the departed, more willing to remember and reminisce. A few of the guests even managed to laugh, and Sam laughed too as the next door neighbours recalled Spar's reactions to some of his more adventurous pranks.

And then another car, a taxi, back across the river to Islington, to the small one-bedroom apartment Sam and Marc call home. They talked of little things during the journey, leaving me to wonder at the surreality of the day.

When Marc unlocks the front door I notice an envelope on the mat, a note from Boude. Sam sees it too, reaches down to pick it up and pocket it – Marc has been wondering why Boude was not at the service.

"Do you want a drink? Tea? Something stronger?"

"Tea sounds good," says Sam. "I need to get out of these clothes."

He walks quickly to the bedroom, closes the door behind him. He doesn't need a ruse from me to bring out the envelope and open it.

The message is simple: *We're being hunted*.

Sam turns over the paper, but it contains no other marks, no secret messages for his eyes, or mine.

Carefully, he refolds the paper and scrunches it back into the envelope, stashing it within the word-laden weight of a pile of magazines by his side of the bed. Then he takes off his new jacket and throws it carelessly to the floor. As he loosens his tie, the first tears of the day seep into his eyes and dampen his cheek.

He makes no sound as he cries, and I make no attempt to comfort him: this is his grief; his alone.

## 22. Lambeth

"This ain't no time for doubt, Kal!"

"Why are you here, Mada? No," I wave down the anger I can see growing in her shoulders. "I need an answer. The last time we met, you told me that we were the only ones left in the Outer World: everyone else had deserted me, you said ... so imagine my surprise when Boude turns up on my doorstep!"

For once the woman is flummoxed, letting the shapes of her next phrase leach from her face. I pause to let a lemon pulse of attentiveness sweep and settle across the fringe of her heat.

"She says she's the last of the dozen that Bull brought through, before Spar rendered him. I trust her word on this."

She sighs, patting the tension out of her shoulder with a hand as filthy as the cardigan she wears.

"Is that the problem? You've tracked me across London for this?"

I nod, my lips deliberately thinned and straight.

"Idiot!" she says, now brushing dirt from the knit lagging her arm. "I was pulled here ages before then. I'm the one what brought Bull and Spar through – handed the Band over to Bull for guarding while I went on to have a bit of fun."

"I don't believe you."

"Don't have to believe me, lad. It's all in the Band, for those that can see it."

"Which I can't – as you well remember!"

"Then you'll have to trust me on this, yes? I've been riding this body for over fifty years now – she's done me well, I can tell you! Can you at least tell how long a person has been riding their host?"

She doesn't wait for me to shake my head. "Course not – they ain't great at the learning, not them in Mescwar. You need to see the colours in the flicker right down at the base of the heat, right at the merge." She points quickly in turn to the forehead, throat and solar plexus. "The darker the hues, the longer the host's been ridden."

Against my better judgement, I squint and bring her heat into clearer focus: now I know what I'm looking for I can see the colours she's talking about – a deep emerald stain at the roots of the gauze sheets.

"Why should I believe you? Like you say, they don't teach us much in Mescwar, not about the Outer World."

"Most of 'em forget it exists: 'ooh, pretty dragons – let's play catch-the-ball for them!' Idiots, the lot of you."

"Fucked any good trees lately, Mada? Are the rising saps dampening your panties?"

"Cheap shot, laddie. You can do much better than that."

She's right. This isn't getting us anywhere.

I can feel Sam's frown from where he snuggles in the arch of our brow cavern. There was no fight in him when I took control of the body this morning, as if he was eager to hand over responsibility for flesh that still ached from the crying. But he's listening and watching, and on guard against any attempt I might make to blank him.

"You're going to have to earn my trust, Mada. Tell me what happened that night."

Tell me why Bull was performing such an impossible act.

She offers me a brief nod. "Trust is good, yes, but earned trust is better. I was checking out vampires."

"Huh? You said they were harmless."

"They can have their uses. I like a good crowd – easy to not be noticed in a crowd – and the vampires like crowds too; lots of energy being thrown off in a crowd which they can sip at, lots of frustrations gathered round those bridges as the rush hour merges into the night. It's like a big, free, safe soup kitchen for them."

Sam has picked up on the word 'vampire': I suppress the images he calls up, fangs and opera cloaks.

I know she's trying to distract me, but I go with the flow: "So how do you use them?"

"I count 'em. They tend to cluster when things are going well in the world. Wondered if maybe the monkeys were picking up on what we've been feeling."

Sam bristles at the 'monkey' word. I wonder for a moment if the label had ever upset me.

"You're talking about Falc's dread, yes? And?"

"No more than the usual numbers. Stupid idea, now I think on it."

"At least we know the dread is specific to us, then."

"Some of us, heh?" Which is a good point; I still can't feel this danger, whatever it is. "Maybe Spar was doing something right when she decided you'd be a good Guardian. This is your soil, your waters – not ours. You got any nibbles on you, lad?"

I reach into a pocket and pull out a Mars Bar. She doesn't grasp for it, and I don't offer.

"So you're down at the South Bank Centre, assaying vampires ..."

*~ Be quiet, Sam!*

"... and along comes Bull?"

"He was fair marching along when he turned up. Very much in a hurry!"

"Why?"

"Not a clue, lad. Now give us the sodding choccie bar."

As soon as I hand it over she rips the paper from one end with her teeth, spits and bites.

"What I do know," she continues, talking and chewing at the same time, "is that he walked right into the middle of a huddle of winos and pulled through a mob of us in less than ten seconds. And ten seconds after that Spar charged up to him and clobbered the back of his head with an iron pole. Then there's winos charging all over the place, screams and barking dogs and somehow Spar's got Bull over her shoulder and they're stumbling away."

"Did you help her?"

"I couldn't move," she says, swallowing the mass in her mouth before biting another chunk from the bar. "From the moment I saw Bull I was paralysed!"

I take a moment to look around us, checking in case anyone has entered the alley into which I'd pushed Mada when I found her. There's nobody: only wet bricks and cracked tarmac to hear us.

"Boude said the pull was different this time round. Too immediate."

Mada nods as she chews. "There was nothing normal about the whole thing. Want to know what I think?"

She leans towards me and, against my better judgement, I lower my head towards hers.

"It weren't Bull, is what I think. His heat weren't right."

"Who, then?"



She leans back and pops the last of the chocolate into her mouth. "Don't know. But Spar's tap wasn't enough to render anyone home. I reckon Bull was already gone."

## **23. Islington**

This is my soil.

These are my waters.

Bull told me that, long after the man with red hair turned mad and slaughtered my Mother and Father, my cousins, the magician from over the sea.

This is my soil. These are my waters.

"Where the fuck have you been, Kal?"

By the look of her hair, Boude has been hiding in bushes. She's wearing a pair of Sam's knee-length combat jeans, cinching the ridiculously over-large waist with a heavy belt and holding the leg ends around her boots with elastic bands. The pullover she filched from Marc's wardrobe (at my insistence – he loves that jumper) hangs like a shapeless mass around her neck; thorns have tugged at the knit-loops in several places.

"Visiting an old friend. And you?"

"I've been working, and now I need a bath. Open the sodding door before these tit-buds freeze off!"

I do as I'm told, fiddling the ring of keys and cards in my pocket onto my fingers and pressing the building pass against the flat metal plate by the main entrance. The magic clicks its acknowledgement and I push the door wide.

"I want to go in the lift," says Boude.

"You shouldn't ride that host to exhaustion."

"You leave worrying about my host to me. I want to go in the lift because it's fun."

"Go on then. Press the button."

One of Sam's neighbours bangs through the stairwell door as we wait: she's a Hindi housewife, home-kept by her husband even though all three of her children are in school. She doesn't approve of Sam and Marc: I can tell this by the way she tightens the hem of her sari closer to her neck each time she sees them.

I make a point of smiling at her as she passes us. Boude doesn't notice: she's watching the numbers flick on the panel above the lift call button.

"I saw your photo in the paper."

"So?"

"She was a pretty girl before you got your heat in her head. Her parents are really worried; there's even a reward."

"Bollocks!"

Soon enough I hear the lift engines grind to a halt. Another neighbour – young and Brazilian, I know, as Sam has been dreaming up scenarios to seduce him for ages – moves through the doors before they are fully open. He doesn't look at us.

We take our turn in the metal box. Boude lets the doors close before she presses the button for our floor.

"I'll shave my head, maybe a short mohican. Get rid of the earrings, spasm some muscles around the jaw – they won't have a clue. You've got some of those cigarettes – the smoke will help when I roughen the voice."

"Admit it, Boude. You always wanted to be a boy."

"Fuck. Which one of you was visiting friends? If it's Sam, I don't want to know! Have you blanked him?"

I shake my head as the doors open.

"You're too lazy, Kal. You're supposed to be the fucking Guardian."

Once inside the apartment Boude makes straight for the bathroom. As I fill the kettle I can hear the muffled sound of clothes being discarded. Soon enough she reappears, wrapped in a blanket-size towel.

"Does lover boy know?"

"About the newspaper report?" I flip open the caddy lid and dump teabags into two mugs.

"No. Sam chose to hide it before Marc could read it. You're not on the front page yet."

"Good," she says, hauling herself onto a breakfast bar stool. "I want to watch him explode when he finds out."

I finish making the tea, remembering to add plenty of milk to Boude's cup.

"So what have you been up to?" I ask her, settling onto the other stool. "We found your note."

"I've been investigating. Detectoring. There's some weird shit going on and I want answers."

"Same here. I've been talking to Mada this morning. She saw you arrive."

Boude sips at her tea as I relate the conversation. Already I can see her face changing as muscles are re-tensioned around her jaw line and eye sockets, subtly emphasising the boy over the girl in the juvenile flesh. Boude can play a host like a harp.

Once I finish, she asks: "Do you believe her?"

"It fits." I consider my arguments and order them. "You get pulled from the middle of a game: something I've never heard happening before, from any of the stones. Mada somehow witnesses Bull pull through a full dozen of us to the Outer World in the space of a few seconds – which is impossible. And everybody is running around desperate to render back to the Band because of some mighty fear that I can't feel."

"You don't feel it?"

"No. Nothing out of the ordinary. Do you want biscuits?"

"I'm fine; I stole a roll earlier," she says as her ears judder forward into a more prominent, wing-nut formation.

"Tell me about the fear."

She swallows the last of her tea. Around her head her heat slips between knots as she searches for words.

"Have you ever licked lead? There's a taste of lead in the air, each breath adding to the taste and the more you breathe the stronger it gets but it hasn't reached a limit. Burnt lemon rinds in the throat, and lead. The hairs across the body lift, thin waves of ice-wind brushing across the skin – but not regular: you can't predict where the next wave will start, or where it will travel. And there's a lightness tucked in just under the heart. At first I didn't notice it, what with the pain from being so far from the Band, but while that pain went away as I walked here these others – they got worse. The closer I get to you, the more I want to throw myself out of a window."

As she talks, her heat bleaches to a sweat of pastels.

"It's the Band," she finishes. "It has to be. Even looking at it makes my eyes scratch. And there's you sitting there with your bloody thumb stuck through its hoop!"

For some reason, I check on Sam. He remains folded within his cave and, as far as I can tell, he's unconscious – almost as if I had blanked him.

"It burns to wear it," I confess. "I was only going to slip it on for a moment but as soon as it went over the thumb knuckle it shrank. And it has no plans to release me."

"No wonder Sam rebelled."

"Sam doesn't seem to notice it." And I don't want to talk about it anymore; thinking so hard about the Band is starting to tap on my balance, squeezing the belly. "Why did you say we were 'being hunted' in your note?"

"Because I think we're being hunted – or followed. At least you are."

"I know there were a couple of reporters sniffing around. Some of the newspapers offered Sam cash for an exclusive interview."

Boude is shaking her head: "That don't feel right. It don't *feel* like a monkey thing. I think these people are interested in you, not Sam."

## 24. Anamnesis

I had been so proud when my father announced he would be taking me on the journey. My mother had been less keen on the idea: even though the trek to the henge by the sea would take no more than a quarter moon, and another quarter for the return, she worried about the dangers, argued that I was too young. Father told her that it would be good experience for me to see the world beyond our valley, learn how to hunt in new forests, trade and negotiate with other families.

I, of course, agreed with him. I was a full six summers old and perfectly capable of looking after myself. The old men took his side too, leaving mother no choice except to daub sharp travel wards in stinking woad across my back and cheeks.

She didn't give up, though. She made father agree to take her along as hearth-keeper and seer; she had the backing of the valley's soothsayer so he also had no choice, not once the old woman had blessed the suggestion.

The danger was not in the travelling. Many folk travelled in those days: to the woody rings and henges for the barter; to the springs and wells for the worship. And father was known to the families and elders that lay between our valley and the henge by the sea. No, the only true danger would be that which waited for us at those immense timber structures set above the muds and salts of the whale road.

Why am I thinking about this journey?

I'll blame it on Sam. Following his ninety minute row with Marc, who had found the Boude/Cathy photo in a discarded newspaper on his tube journey home from work, my host has been thinking constantly about his Mum and Dad, his home, his first friends – the tart-sweet moments of memory around which he builds the struts and cladding of his persona.

I have no wish to experience a borrowed childhood tonight. Marc has gone for the evening and Sam is content to stew in his bed with malt whisky. It's so rare to get a moment to myself – a precious gift of Outer World time.

Yes. I had a mother once, and a father too. I can't remember when I last honoured their lives in my thoughts.

It was an important journey for everyone involved. My father had been chosen to lead it after long consideration. We were going to collect a magician: a trade which had cost the folk of our valley a good three year's fortune in hides and bones and flints. The trade had been debated for a full circle of moons, man against man, priestess against elder, but in the end the profit of the trade had won out against the danger it brought to the valley.

Metal. The magicians had the know of it.

Stronger than the bones we shaped into scrapers, or the flints we knapped into daggers and arrows. Harder than the rocks it was sung from. Everlasting, shape-forming, glamour-full. The magicians even wove thin, patterned sheets of the best metals, yellow as the barley, into their hair: I'd seen that with my own eyes!

In truth, this was not the first magician to cross the whale road, but their numbers were few and the value of the goods they could whistle from the soil and the flame was beyond calculation. To have the know of metal would make us notable folk of the first rank, worthy of widespread honour and respect.

I remember our days of walking, keeping the ever broadening river to our right until at some point the southern bank disappeared, drowning the horizon in blue-green waves. We hunted gulls with my sling, and the small deer that hid in the woods above the marshes. With permission from the families who tended their areas, we gathered the last of the hazelnuts, already being buried under new foliage – the equinox had gone and a new summer would soon burst across the world.

And then we were at the circles of the henge, a little inland from the foreshore, wood-built: a good place to trade with the folk across the sea. Payment for the trade had already been delivered – it took many weeks to transport that amount of hide and bone and flint – and our magician was waiting for us, with his companions.

One of them was an astonishing sight: a huge man with bright red hair, coarse across his head and his face.

"He's cursed!" my mother had said on seeing him. "An abomination to the ancestors. He wears a fire on his shoulders!"

"These magicians, they worship the hot flame," my father had told us all. "No harm has come of it yet. Fire, too, has its place in the world."

Oh mother, father! I would give an eternity of honours for a chance to shed just one more tear – my own tear! – to commemorate the wrong committed upon you.

I should have loaded my sling with sharp flint, let fly the spinning edge into the face of that murderer! But I was too young, too young, and knew nothing of danger beyond the charging boar.

Our magician, he wore a dull grey amulet of metal, dangled from reed-string to rest over his heart.

One of its pretty stones was already missing.

## 25. Hackney

"This reminds me of better times," says Mada, checking out the range of köfte, döner, börek, dolme and gözleme dishes listed in the menu taped to the big display window just above Boude's head. "I ain't no lover of cold winds, but Bull and Spar were too settled to wander much."

Everybody calls this part of the Lonely City 'Stokie'. I *think* I first knew it as the place where my father went to barter for new axe heads, though I could be wrong – so many rivers and streams have been buried or filled and, without that web of reference lines, I lose my bearings. Neither of the churches looks familiar so I doubt that I ventured this far north during the Commonwealth.

The wealth of dots over vowels on the menu tells me (well, it tells Sam: the last time I dealt with Turks they were using the Araby script) that this is a Turkish cafe. Or it could be Kurdish-owned. From what I can gather, from snippets in newspapers that Sam glances at, then immediately forgets, those folks have been at each other's throats for decades back in their own lands, but somehow they seem to co-exist with little apparent fuss in this space. The Lonely City has that effect on people: a place of refuge, of business, of reinvention. An oasis in world affairs where all tribes agree to an informal truce, whatever their differences. Most of the time, anyway.

The cafe owner had not been willing to let us inside his establishment and, to be honest, I can't blame him. Both Boude and Mada have been living as vagrants; they carry the marks and aromas that encourage people to look the other way as they pass. Not that the High Street is particularly busy this afternoon.

Boude and I had walked here from Islington, picking up Mada along the way at her broken church. The journey was fairly tranquil – my companions are not close friends; they've been nurturing a feud between them that dates back centuries. Both seemed happy with my suggestion that we walk rather than talk, until our aimless wanderings bought us here to this table and the three cooling mugs set between us.

"Have you told Mada about our chat, and your little problem?" asks Boude, her hands wrapped around her mug as she sips the under-milked tea within it.

I scowl my answer. Mada seems to be concentrating on the progress of a drunken man beyond the traffic on the other side of the road.

"Then what's this all about?"

"I've been thinking about things," I say. "Stuff you might have answers for."

"Tell me about the little problem," says Mada, still watching the drunk.

I shrug my shoulders – there seems to be no danger around us, no harm done by delaying the important stuff.

"It's this host of mine. You know who he is?"

"I told them they were being stupid, having a kid."

"Something you'd never do?" asks Boude.

"Something I've learned not to do. It's a lot easier to rid the host of its babbies, nowadays. Less blood; less questions."

Boude keeps her head down, close to the mug.

"So? You got landed in their kid. Monkeys is monkeys, heh? You ride 'em till the job's done."

"This one, he's ... well, he's aware of me. All-the-time aware."

Mada switches her full attention to me. "How?"

"How should I know? I thought you two might have heard of something like this before, or maybe know some tricks to help me deal with the problem."

"Crush the little bugger; extinguish him!" Already her eyes are moving back to the drunken man. "Keep the memories, of course. They can be useful sometimes, heh?"

Boude, too, is watching the drunk: "Is he doing what I think he's doing?"

"He's very clever, ain't he," says Mada.

"What are you two talking about?"

"That drunk across the road, with the stripy tall hat and knotty hair," says Boude. "Well, he isn't drunk."

"No?"

"Nope," agrees Mada. "He's feeding. Each time he goes near someone, they let off a little bolt of fear. He's very good at catching the flares."

"Like he knows exactly what he's doing," says Boude, taking another sip of tea.

"An intelligent vampire, that one. You sure you can't see it, Kal? Try squeezing them eyes, like when you were checking my heat."

I shake my head: I know my limits. "Have you ever had to ride a vampire?"

"Yes," says Boude. "I don't enjoy it. That's when you've got to work hard on the cloaking and rusing and spinning. But you can't evict them: the flesh has to get extra energy from somewhere, and I've never been able to figure out how they do it."

"Slippery buggers, vampires. Make me itch!"

"But they're still people," I say.

Mada drains her tea noisily, looks into the mug as if hoping it will refill itself. I take the hint, picking up the trio of chipped cups before pushing into the warm cafe to order a second round.



When I return I can see my companions have been talking about something. Because of the way they stop and look at me as I step through the door, I know they've been discussing me.

"So when are you planning to render me?" I ask.

After a short silence, Boude smiles. "We've decided to let you stay. I like watching you wrestle with young Sam."

"Good," I say, banging the mugs onto the wooden table. "I've got other questions."

As I settle down I pull a pack of cigarettes from my pocket. Sam is still being very quiet, as if numbed by the facts of his Mum's funeral and the ongoing argument – conducted today by text over the phone – with Marc; the one thing that rouses him is his nicotine addiction.

"Ask some questions, then," says Boude. She reaches over and snatches a white stick from the pack before I can close and hide it. I shrug and offer her the lighter – Sam had stolen his first 'fag' (orally, not sexually) when he was nine.

"This 'fear': you said the other day that it's coming from the Band. Have you ever felt anything like this before?"

Before she can answer, Boude doubles over in a heap of coughs: "Fuck, that's vile!" Within moments the cigarette is arching a path into the road.

"I have," says Mada.

"When?" Boude can barely spit the question out between gasps.

"In Keftiu – them islanders who worshipped snakes and jumped over bulls. Way back, it was: I was having some good times on that island. But as soon as I felt the fear I bolted."

An icy chill runs the length of my spine: it has nothing to do with rain seeping through the back of my jacket. It takes all of my effort to stop my face, or heat, displaying my surprise.

"I've never heard of it happening before," says Boude, her chokes finally under control.

Mada shrugs. "It ain't no fib. The Band spent a good few years on that island – a safe place, it was. A good place. At times there would be dozens of us in the Outer World, for the fun of it. But we all dashed straight back to the Band when the fear came."

"Who was the Guardian?" I ask.

"Dunno." In one lift and gulp Mada drinks half of her tea.

She doesn't need to answer. As soon as the question is asked, I recall the identity of the last Guardian on Crete; recall that I, too, had briefly – momentarily – been present on that island at a time of crisis. The knowledge scares me.

I veer the subject to safer waters: "Do you know how long we've been here? I mean the Band. How long has the Band been here in the Outer World?"

"It's been here forever, hasn't it?"

"Now you got me thinking," says Mada. "I don't have the know of how the Band works, or what it does; none do now, not since Spoy turned grey. It is, and we guards it! But I do recall things were different, once."

"How different?"

"Monkeys were monkeys, for a start. They had the chat, and fire – they knew how to start and stop the flames. But none of this!"

Her arm circles wide, taking in everything surrounding us. Boude is frowning, she has a distant look in her eyes as if trying to remember a time before time.

"I remember ice," she finally says. "That feels like a different place, though"

"Probably before the sea swelled up," agrees Mada. "Ice and sea always bickering about which gets to smother the land. The air was thicker, too."

I let my gaze wander around the street scene. The sky above us is low, murky with abscess clouds dampening the already dim light and muting the sparkle of early rush-hour cars, vans and buses parading along the road. There's more people around, too, brisk in their solitary walks as they head to the shops, or the pubs, or home. I spot the rasta-man again, the one that had caught the attention of the women before, this time on our side of the road.

The discussion has stalled. "We need to make a move," I announce. "This place will be shutting soon."

But Boude is staring at the vampire, as is Mada. And the vampire is staring straight back at us.

## 26. Islington

This computer is newer than the one Sam uses at work. It's Marc's computer really: Sam's main interest in the machine before my arrival seemed to be playing games and, occasionally, visiting gay porn sites – an activity he has resumed since the fireworks of their latest argument.

That argument still rumbles, conducted mostly by magic as the boyfriend is currently at some conference in some northern town – Manchester, maybe, or Harrogate. Which does allow Sam unimpeded access to the internet and gives me an opportunity to ruse him into searching for the information I need, in the gaps between endless snaps of Recon men capturing images of themselves in mirrors with their phone cameras.

*~ Switch on the computer, Sam. Let's go surfing!*

Where to start?

I'm not sure. How old is the Band? What is its purpose?

Who made it?

Already I have too many questions. I start with the simplest.

Mada talked of ice and water, each taking their turn to cover the land. Even Sam knows that the last Ice Age ended thousands of years ago, long before my birth.

I've been to many places in the Outer World, sometimes for months or years, though more often my stay has been limited to days: do whatever task needs to be performed and render back to Mescwar. When I have lingered here, I've listened to stories.

I like stories and, thinking back on it, there will often be a story about a great inundation. The hero will take a different name whenever I hear the story again: Dardanus; Deucalion; Dwyfan and Dwyfach; Tumbanot; Bergalmir; Manu, son of the Sun; Lip-long; Ziusudra; Atrahasis; Yima; Noah; Du-hu; Pawpaw Nan-chung with his sister Chang-ko. Each builds a boat, or a raft, or hollows out a log to save themselves, their friends and some favourite animals from the rising waters.

The glamour caught in the machine's black tower takes its time to bring light to the stiff, warm, flat sheet in front of me. Sam has his own portion of the spell, separate from Marc's and guarded with secret enchantments. He enters the data deftly, clicks on icons and waits for the pin-boards to paint themselves alive.

As the browser opens I can taste the words Sam plans to type into the searching box: 'vampires' and 'energy'. I take a few moments to ruse his thoughts, plant a desire within him to investigate 'ice age' and 'maps' instead. Then we wait.

After we had wandered away from the cafe, after Boude had doubled back to follow the rasta-man for some reason only she knew, I had asked Mada more questions about her earliest memories of places she had visited, before Spoy changed.

"I were never around before all that. Spoy's always been grey as far as I know: sometimes I think the old ones were lying to us about the whole palaver."

"What are your first memories here? Did you ever see the great ice sheets?"

"We were away from all that," she replied. "We kept to the warm places for the most part, where most of the monkeys lived – our monkeys, mind, not the ones that liked the cold. I remember our monkeys made much better pots. Heh. We stuck to the edge of the land in those days, next to the ocean that gave birth to the sun. But that's all gone: the water's much higher now."

Once the link list arrives, I let Sam go to work. His preference is to look at climate change stuff, which is everywhere – each fresh page talking about how the world is heating up and everyone is going to die. Though this seems to be a new trope; some of the links he tries talk about the start of a new ice age. The conflicting views don't surprise me: either we'll burn or we'll freeze. People have always liked their prophecies to be resolutely apocalyptic.

I take more interest when he finally locates a series of maps charting changes in plant distributions over time. The language is too technical for me – I'm happiest knowing the location of a rich grove of hazelnuts – but the maps, they seem to make sense.

One map in particular shows the world around thirteen thousand years ago. There's no England on this map, no Ireland; the coastlines have been drawn to include them with the continental mass to the east. And there's a pale blue threat reaching down from the top of the image to cover much of that area.

Sam enlarges the map when I suggest it to him; he uses the plastic contraption on the desk to navigate south and east, looking for greener colours.

The green ribbon, centred on the equator, is much narrower than on today's maps. Three areas look interesting: the eastern coast of South America, and of Africa. And also a great peninsula of land to the south of China, joining Siam and Malaya to the Spice Isles of Java and Sumatra, Borneo and Celebes, and northwards around the South China Sea to – possibly – include the Philippine Isles.

I send Sam on another search: 'pottery philippines ice age' – a stab in the dark, but the volume of information contained in this mage-built network never fails to amaze me. Sure enough,

the second link on the search results leads to a page that informs me that humans were indeed using pottery in Japan and in Burma at that time. The earliest date for the Philippines is eight thousand years ago, but then the earlier shards could have been drowned, what with the melting ice caps and everything.

A quick check tells me that the oldest African pot seems to come from the wrong side of the continent, two thousand years too late.

How do they come up with these dates, for a bit of old clay?

I don't have time to worry about that – Sam's beginning to think about vampires again. A second check on South America offers nothing useful.

I had asked Mada if she knew what the Band was for. Perhaps the 'monkeys' had built it?

"Who knows? Does the flea ask the dog why it eats mutton instead of rabbit? Does the rock ask the sea why it runs away twice a day? What I do know is I ain't no sodding monkey! And neither are you, not no more."

"Not even the wrong sort of monkey?"

"Heh. No, lad. Though what you *are* has always been a puzzle to me."

This is getting me nowhere. I sigh and lean back, release the ruse. Immediately Sam starts typing words into the searching box: 'vampires' and 'energy'.

Thinking about the Band for so long has given me an ache, like a faint rattle of the rendering pain. Learning about vampires might not be such a bad idea after all.

## 27. Anamnesis

"It wasn't his fault," I say. "I realise that now."

«*I know*», she says.

The world around me is a pattern of silvers and blacks – a moonlit world, not the drained imaginings of memory. I'm lying on my belly in the underbrush, about a dozen long paces from the dark glow of the hearth, and the shape of my mother beyond.

The big man with red hair has moved on, searching for monsters. The others have scattered, those that remain alive. Somewhere out there is my father, possibly hiding like me, though in my young heart I can feel a certainty beyond the terror that he would not hide: rather he is already sorting through his flints, fixing a sharp head to a spear haft, or an axe handle, preparations necessary to bring down this giant and rescue me from my unmanly terror.

Another scream erupts to my left. I hear the sound of flight and pursuit heading again towards the clearing. Through my teeth I chant a song of calming, bring the ease-full waters of the goddess's springs at the head of our valley into my head. My unplanned impulse is simple: when the giant breaks into the clearing I shall run at him, trip him up with my body so that my father's task can be made simple.

Courage comes to those who seek it, the Elders tell us. I shall seize my courage with shivering bones.

Closer comes the hunt, louder the shouts. I shake my head, pull myself away from the cool leaf mould to bring my legs beneath my belly, ready to sprint and lunge.

He breaks into my sight. I have no thoughts in my ears as I launch forward. Nor do I have a scream in my throat. Like the wolf I sprint towards the runner's legs; like the boar I curl my head down to my chest as I push myself into the quarry's path.

The impact is harsh against my back; a foot lands in my face as the body tumbles. Behind us I hear a foreign roar, a triumph of a cry as the man with red hair sees his victim fall to the ground. As the spear descends, I detach from my boy-flesh and watch myself faint.

"He was bitten by a dog," I say. "Before he even stepped ashore he was doomed to this madness. They call it rabies, now." A capsule of evil intent packaged in proteins and passed from saliva to blood and flesh, and nerve, slowly inching its way towards the brain day after day until there is no choice but to succumb to the madness.

«*I know*», she says.

I am not unconscious long. Just long enough for the foreign demon to finish his slaughter and head downhill towards the marshes and the river beyond. Even so I remain motionless, refusing to move a single joint until the last of the man's tearing screams are swallowed by the sprouting woods.

There are words to be said, I know, for the cousin who lies still beside me. I don't have time to utter them. There is a cold numbness within me, an unreality, and alongside them there is an anger. The words I want to say are for my father's ears, not for the luckless dead. I lever myself to my knees, look over the hearth stones at my mother's unmoving form. And then I stand and turn my back on her.

There are several bodies scattered in the surrounding copse, each bearing a black slick of blood, shimmered by moonlight. My father's corpse is the fourth.

"He was a good man, my father," I say. "There was nothing he could do. We were all asleep when the madness came to the giant; we thought we were in a safe place. He wasn't running away: he would never run away!"

«*I know*», she says.

I have no idea how long I stand looking down at the corpse. My search through the bracken, once it resumes, is slower than before.

When I find the magician, he is barely alive. He's taken several blows to the head, and the giant's shorter spear has pinned his shoulder to the bole of the tree behind him. He doesn't share our words, our tongue, but I understand his feeble gesture. I crouch and move towards him, not knowing how to help him.

He reaches out with his free arm, quicker than should have been possible. I dodge back, remain out of grasping reach. He smiles, a sad smile, the movements of muscle within the face bring a dribble of blood to the angle of his lips.

Again he gestures, slower this time, and nods his head. Against my better judgement, I comply with his request. As his smile broadens, the blood at his mouth becomes a stream, a stoat sniffing a trail through the grey whiskers down towards his chin.

He doesn't grab me. Instead, he reaches for the talisman that hangs on a weave of grasses around his neck. I watch as he hauls at the string, pulls the talisman up and over his head until with one final grunt the necklace swings free. He spreads his fingers wide within the loop, pushes the noose towards me.

I remember thinking: this is a gift. He wants me to take his magic back to our valley. I lower my head and allow him to place his hand on the crest of my skull, let the string fall around my neck, let the amulet dangle ahead of my navel.

"It was no gift," I say. "It was my doom."

My gift should have been the giant's longer spear, protecting my mother from his thrust, rather than scurrying away from its slender prick.

«*I know*», she says.

«*Find me!*» she says.

## 28. Islington

Sam is still engrossed in his search for psychic vampires when the door buzzer rings; he drags himself from the screen with some reluctance to answer the call.

"Kal, are you there?"

"Cathy? What are you doing here?"

"Sam?"

"Yeah, it's me, Sam. Are you in trouble again?"

"Sam, can you come down here for a minute. There's some things we need to talk about."

Why do I feel content?

The chaotic images of that terrible night are pulling away, dandelion danders peeled free by the breeze. Only the bitter-sweet saudade of memory remains in me as the relaxing breath soothes the bile and calms the fright-fight surge.

I barely notice as Sam exits the apartment and heads for the lift.

A taste of old coins along the edge of my tongue jiggles me.

What games we play, we who ride the planktonic storms of the human imagination. I have always ridden my hosts lightly, something my companions have never understood. Boude, for instance, is a captain in Mescwar – my captain – and is not happy unless every facet of the job is understood, ordered and tightly controlled. Little Cathy almost certainly died weeks ago, that day she came with her parents on a trip to London; should the child survive Boude's render, she will be nothing more than a husk.

I was going to suggest the tranquillizers to Boude. But it will be better, perhaps, for the parents to grieve over a dead corpse, not a live one.

There's cold rain on my face, hard rain.

It's not important right now. There's something I need to think about.

"Cathy? Where are you?"

"Here, Sam. Come over here, quickly."



"Why?"

"It's important. Get out of the light now!"

*Aurichalcum*, the Romans called it. The zing of sestertes in the mouth is unmistakable.

"Cool. No problem. Though I'm not going nowhere tonight – I've got things to do."

"I've got something for Kal to do," says Boude. Thorns scratch at Sam's arms as he forces his way through municipal shrubbery to reach the patch of grass where the girl crouches.

"Demon stuff?"

"Yeah. Demon stuff. Listen to me, Kal, I need you to get out of whatever crevice you've snuggled into and pay attention. Mada will be here any minute with that vampire and we need to know what he knows. You know what to do."

"He's not listening," says Sam. "What's he going to do?"

Mada is worse than Boude when it comes to riding hosts. At least Boude takes care to keep the unfortunates blanked at all times, until they wither. Mada crushes them, not caring for their conscious state. Sometimes she'll even play them, like a kitten with a beetle. It entertains her to take her hosts into situations they'll loathe, and let them watch.

"Kal, you need to listen to me. We need to do this now!"

I could never crush a host of mine. Blanking them to oblivion is a better solution, but I lack Boude's control: it takes a lot of effort to keep someone blanked.

Mada's laugh is unmistakable. I can hear her away up the street. I wonder for a moment how long she's been riding her current host – decades, I think she had said. Her woman would have embraced the madness a long time ago.

I can smell the brass as well as taste it.

I was a host, once.

[Now there's a dark thought.]

Boude has ducked away somewhere, leaving Sam tense and cold amid the bushes. There's voices across the street: I ignore them. I have a harsh recollection to consider.

I learned about the various strategies a rider will use on the host during the time I first bore the Band, back in the age of flint blades and metal-singing magicians, though I only learned the words and terms later.

Blanking is obvious: Sam was aware he was being blanked even before I pushed the Band over the thumb knuckle; he'd said as much to Marc. Cloaking – amending the host's memories – was less obvious, but rarely done by my rider with sufficient finesse to keep me ignorant of the changes.

"What's the problem with him?" Mada makes no attempt to sidle past the bushes; rather she swims through them. Sam is backing away from her approach even before she reaches the sodden lawn.

"Look at his heat!"

Rusing was more difficult to spot. A good ruse leaves the host convinced that the planted suggestion is entirely their own idea and, played well, the strategy can be the most effective method of riding him or her. I remember the first time I felt the electric stroke of zincous copper along the sides of my tongue: that was the siren to signal a ruse, that ideas I had at such times were not necessarily my own.

There's a hand at Sam's throat. "Are you playing games, Sammy boy? Cause I ain't got time for nonsense: back off and let Kal through!"

In the end my first rider had resorted to spin – the confusion of my senses – to assert control. Spin doesn't do much in itself, but it does wonders to reinforce a cloak or a ruse.

Her name was Grussa, I remember. She came to my flesh within moments of the magician's final breath. Grussa was too eager to crush and spin; she was angry at being pulled from her stone, incensed to learn her host was a pre-pubescent male.

*~ For fuck's sake, man. Where are you? The old biddy's hurting me!*

*~ Sod off, Sam, I'm busy. Just deal with it, yes?*

"Look at his fucking heat, Mada."

A set of eyes click into my view. These optics are ancient, their edges fringed by an accumulation of jaundice while their centres translate the pupil voids to a milky grey.

"Heh. It ain't right. You got that knife of yours handy?"

I fought Grussa, long and hard. That was the second mistake of my life. If only I had had the courage of my parents, to accept the terror of the murderer's deadly thrusts.

Who must I find?

Sam's in a panic for some reason: "What the fuck are you doing with that? No!"

"It's for your own good, lad. You hear me, Kal? You get here now!"

... and steel slices flesh.

## 29. Within

"How old are you?" asks Sam.

"I don't know," I say. "After a while, age doesn't seem important."

In an emergency I can deploy a special trick, one that I'm sure Boude, Mada, nor any of the others would ever think of using. At the instant of danger I'll tap the host's secret eye, tricking it to release its potent sleep potion; these little chemicals take a few moments to kick through the brain's comfort blankets – just enough time for me to isolate the surrounding chambers where the senses blend: a very hands-on approach to blanking the host, with the significant disadvantage of risking my own trip to the fields of oblivion.

Then it's a quick dash to the lizard regions in the sumps of the skull where I can dampen the battle-locked winds upon whose fronts the host's Vital Breath feeds: for the best results the western, calming zephyr needs to prevail over its stronger siblings. Once those pulsing summer breezes are established I can send spindle-songs of deep sleep swirling through the mental atmosphere.

Mix, and bake.

The result (so I'm told) is a spectacular episode of narcolepsy, with the host collapsing from full alertness to utter dormancy in less than two seconds; it also has the benefit of extinguishing my heat in the outer world, which is good for avoiding confrontations and unpleasant tasks. The side effects can be possible damage to the host's flesh (easily fixed) and, should I trigger the manoeuvre when the host is perched high above the ground, a potential self-render.

Assuming I survive, the only way to bring the host back to consciousness is to lead him (or her) through the dream state. Managing that journey requires some deft manipulations of the blood's salty messengers to trigger an easement of the muscles across the body, after which I can corral the spindle spikes and edge the host's mental climate away from metronomic regularity, shaping the developing storm-fronts as they chop through each other towards the memory chords that most interest me.

I need to talk to my host urgently.

This time we shall meet on my turf, not his – and certainly not *hers*.

Sam seems relaxed. To lay the dream's foundations I've spliced a handful of my memories into the weave of his brain's own cloak, hoping his visual and aural artistry can complete the scene. I have to admit, he's done a good job.

"Are you scared of me?" I ask.

We sit together with our legs dangling over the edge of a small pier, a little distance from the main village. Behind us the island gathers into a grasp of low hills, brown under this sky; a patchwork of terraced fields amble across the slopes, their green crops hedged in by the darker purples of untended brush. Nobody tills them in this scene: the selected memory is of a time when my neighbours were visiting another island for a Game, leaving me in solitude to recover from injuries earned during a previous challenge.

The amber sky above us ripples like fresh-cut pine beneath water. There is no sun here; there is never a sun in Mescwar, just times when the sky lightens and times when it dims, with no guessing when the transformation will take place. Time has little significance here; a sequence of events, nothing more.

"I don't know," he says. "I think I should be frightened of you."

"But you're not?"

He shrugs. "Everything's been strange since Mum ... died."

I've included an extra snippet of my memory in the dream's footings: two dragons float high above us, circling through the sky without the need to beat their wings.

Mescwar wouldn't be Mescwar if there were no dragons in the sky.

"Like there's a blanket between me and the world," Sam continues. "I read that book Marc bought me – the one about grieving. It's like I'm stuck in the numb stage and don't know how to move on to the other stuff."

"You've felt anger though. And sadness. And the physical pain, yes?"

"Yeah, I feel them, sort of." He shrugs his bare shoulders as he stares across the bay. He has a habit of softly chewing the side of his cheek when he's thinking. "But they're not important," he concludes.

My feet dangle bare inches above the thigh-deep waters of the bay. No wind ruffles the lemon-tinted liquids, giving me a crystal view to the underlying muds and the outlines of

people forming and reforming within them. Seeing the healing clays of this bay so clearly recalls feelings of warmth and comfort, safety.

This is a good thing; I have unhappy questions to ask.

Sam's gaze has not yet left the pontoon bridge that starts, unseen, at the village hidden behind the bay's low headland and then meanders across the bay towards the near horizon.

"You're still taking the tranquillisers the doctor gave you ..."

"You don't like them," he says, finally turning his face away from the path and onto me.

Now it's my turn to shrug. "You should keep taking them at night. They help you sleep."

"You're planning to do something with them. Use them as an overdose." It's a statement of fact, nothing more. He's already losing interest in me, letting his eyes rest once more on the curve of the bridge. "Where does that road go?"

"It goes across the sea to other islands, like this one. It's easier to walk to them than it is to row."

He leans forward now, letting his elbows settle onto toned thighs. One hand reaches down to cup his tackle – but I don't have time to indulge him: we are not here for a sexual fantasy.

"Maybe you should talk to me," I suggest, taking his wrist and laying his wandering fingers between my palms. "Maybe I can help you."

He turns towards me and rests his jaw along the line of his shoulder – a winsome look that lets me know that this is still his dream, his mind. Not mine.

"How many other islands are there?"

"It varies," I say. "Sometimes there's a few more, sometimes a few less. We only bother with the islands closest to us."

"It's a boring place." His lips tighten as a challenge, an enticement to kiss them.

"There's worse places to be."

"Really? What about that other place you took me to? Is that a better place, or a worse place?"

"You remember that place? The dream?"

His head, still balanced on the shoulder, wobbles side to side. His eyes, a spackle of darker and lighter blues wheeled around the jet pupil, hint at smiles to come.

"It's ... well, it's a different place," I say.

"You told me it was lost. That woman wants you to find her."

"What woman?" I ask, keeping my tone even.

"The one on the cliff in that other place. She really needs your help."

"How do you know this?"

"She told me."

"When?"

The threatened smile buds on his lips. "I like her: she doesn't try to force me out, not like you do, sometimes."

Even though I know this is no more than a dream, I can feel a ghostly sheen of sweat starting to form across my nape, where the hairs have just sprung to attention.

"What else do I do to you?"

"You make suggestions like all of the time – sometimes it pisses me off. I could help you, you know. We could fight the vampires together."

I can't help but return his smile. "We don't need to fight vampires: they're not a danger to us."

"She says they know where the book is. She says we've got to get it back. Together."

*She says?*

Even though Sam has supplied me with smooth limbs for this dream, I can feel hairs puckering and fluffing across my forearms.

"Is she here with us, now?"

Again the shaking of the head draped over the shoulder. "What's that road made of?" he asks. "Glass?"

He's talking about the bridge to the horizon. "The struts are crystal," I tell him. "They're dragon bones."

He sits up and rearranges his weight onto his free arm, then offers me a mock stare – mouth half open and eyes a little wider. I point upwards. He pulls his lips to a thin close, but obliges me. A few seconds pass before I hear him empty his lungs in exclamation.

"Fuck! That's cool! Do you ride them like in the books?"

"No," I say after a brief pause to ream his memories for the reference. "This isn't Westeros."

I let Sam follow the lazy loops of the beasts for a couple of minutes. I need these moments to think about what he's been telling me.

"This woman," I say, finally. "Has she told you anything else?"

"Oh, lots of stuff."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Sometimes she says funny things about people, how stupid they are, or when I ought to listen to what they say. She's a bit like my Mum looking out for me, though she likes it when I get into trouble. She doesn't mind about the sex, not like you!"

"Does she talk to you a lot? Has she said anything about me?"

"No, just now and then. She said you can be a bit stupid at times. But I'm not to get in your way too much because you've got to go and find her."

"How long have you known about her, Sam?"

"Oh, forever! She's always been there – sort of like an invisible friend when you're a kid, except mine never went away. But I never saw her, not until you took me to that other place."

*Shit!*

"She says we've got to get a book from that vampire."

Finally his eyes return to mine. The hand that has lain between mine tightens around my fingers – a solid, slow tensing of phantom flesh on flesh.

"She also says the old biddy – the one who cut us – that one knows some things, though she's probably too close to the stuff she's done to realise it."

He smiles a little wider, letting a slip of a gap part his lips. "So if you don't ride these dragons, what do you do with them?"

I take a moment to calm myself: a slow breath, and another; I will the invisible hairs puckering my skin to relax and flatten.

"We eat them," I tell him, "and they eat us." Which isn't too far from the truth, I suppose.

"I could eat you," he says, letting his face roll closer to mine.

"Maybe," I whisper as our lips touch.

### **30. Hackney**

Inside, the church echoes like the cave it has become. Most of the woodwork – pews, altar, tabernacle – has gone, thieved or reclaimed or maybe sold; all that remains is the shape of this space. The first, damp gloam of morning flits through stained windows and, slightly more brightly, through the gaps where glass had once hung. The detritus of previous visitors litters the floor and scorch marks on the wall tell of a recent bonfire; the air carries the scent of burnt offerings wound around the must of pigeons.

The main doors are still intact, and locked: Boude and I had entered through the small vestry door forced open, and then carefully blocked again, by Mada.

The old woman has set up home in a corner of the great space, not far from the apse, but away from the guano highway laid down by the pigeons flying between the thin vaults of the rear window and the rafters. Home, for Mada, consists of around a half-dozen supermarket bags, some stuffed with rags, others with news sheets, one with wires and string spilling from the toppled carrier. Props, she claims: part of the act for people who see but don't watch.

The three of us sit in a ring on an old blanket. For once, both women look tired: Mada has the stoop of a crone across her shoulders while Boude's face bears testimony to the ruddy energies released by the Band when it was attacked. I, too, have wounds – I pick like my ape ancestors at the rough bandage lagged around my left hand.

Mada's attempt last night to rouse me has left a deep gash at the base of the thumb. The wound needs stitches, but we cannot risk a visit to the hospital; in any case thews and brawn can be repaired – even before I rose from the dream I had taken a few moments to constrict the blood flow from the nicked vein, and part of me is still busy orchestrating an accelerated healing.

My companions have been bickering for most of the night. The sudden evolution of our trinket has shocked them both, leaving them fearful. Earlier this morning Boude almost managed to render herself home, swallowing the stash of tranquillisers I had been saving; she raged when Mada forced salt water down her throat, though personally I think she should be grateful to her adversary: I doubt the render would have gone well for my captain.



I can feel metals and stones against the bones in my arm, stretched from the elbow to the wrist like a surgeon's plate. When the knife had approached it, the Band chose to burrow deep into my flesh, its shape-change releasing a nasty blast of dark radiation; so far I haven't had the nerve to examine the damn thing directly, much to Mada's disgust.

"Tell me about the Powers," I say.

Boude flinches at the request, her eyes wide and wary. Mada glowers in her slump: only her incessant pinching and plucking at the blanket we sit on shows her uncertainties.

"Look, we're all scared, yes? None of us knows what's happening, or why. But I've learned things that might be able to help us."

"What things?"

In the strengthening light I can see that Boude has abandoned control of her host's face, revealing her resemblance to the pictures of the missing girl being printed in ever-increasing numbers by the daily papers.

"Scary things," I say. "Tell me about the Powers. Do they ever come here, to the Outer World?"

"No," says Mada. "They don't come here. They ain't got no business here."

"Why would they come here?" adds Boude. "It's our job to guard them."

"Like prisoners?"

"They're Powers, not prisoners. Ain't you learned nothing, monkey?"

"No, Mada. Us monkeys can't learn unless people tell us stuff, or show us."

My response is not appreciated.

"You should've taken them pills, heh? We'll all be safer when you piss off back to your swamps."

"Did I ask to be here? Did I fuck! But I'm here with a sodding prison embedded in my arm and people running round telling me the sky's going to fall down ..."

"Worst decision Spar ever made, bringing you through. That bitch was going mental, keeping babbies and making a life here, but this ..."

"Be quiet, the both of you!"

Boude has a knack for command, and I comply instinctively. Surprisingly, so does Mada.

"Kal," she continues, her girl-eyes wide, "we won't survive this dragon's talons unless we work as a team. Mada, we need you. I hate to admit it, but there's the facts."

*~ Mum never brought you here. She'd never do that to me.*

Sam has been dozing for most of the night, ever since our dream. I hadn't heard him stir into consciousness.

*~ So who did, Sam? Who brought me here?*

*~ I dunno. That bloke must have done some magic on me. The one with the gippy finger.*

"Okay, if I tell you what I know, will you tell me about the Powers?"

The women consider the offer, then nod their agreement.

"I've been talking to Sam ..."

"How, heh?"

Boude offers Mada a quick scowl before turning back to me: "Have you been doing your dream tricks with him?"

I ignore Mada's spit of disdain. "It's how I operate; it's a good way to plant the cloaks deep enough to hold."

"No, you don't," says Boude. "You only do it when you're forced to, like when you trigger that collapsing trick of yours. Every time we meet up out here you spend most of your time moaning about your host's dreams."

I have no answer for Boude. I'm certain she's wrong, but ...

"So tell us, then. What has young Sam been whispering to you?"

I take a deep breath to give myself a moment to compose my response.

"Sam's got an invisible friend. A voice in his head that's not his own, which has been with him since his first memories."

"He's mad, heh? It's a bugger when you land in a skull to find a tribe of monkeys living there already. I had to deal with four of 'em in this head when I got pulled through."

"This friend of Sam's ... I don't think she's human."

Boude frowns as she hears my words. "Maybe a ghost?" she suggests.

"Can ghosts ruse their hosts?"

"Ghosties is remnants, echoes. One good thing about vampires is they like chomping on ghosties."

"That's true enough," agrees Boude. "So not a ghost."

I hadn't considered the possibility of Sam being haunted, not before Boude mentioned it. But I accept the women's quick dismissal of the idea: ghosts are like midges, annoying little memory capsules that may occasionally distract or irritate a host, but nothing more dangerous.

"So what about jinni or elohim? Are they still around?"

Mada dismisses my suggestion with a shake of her hand: "Them buggers can't form unless folks believe in 'em. One of the reasons I brought the Band back to this place was to get some peace and quiet."

"Look around you, Kal," adds Boude. "Does this look like a place that can generate angels and demons? There's thousands of abandoned churches across this island, and more converted into houses and shops."

"Ain't come across one in decades. Screechy eechie mumbo rumpo ... putting up with car alarms and sirens is a bed of camomile compared to that nonsense." Disgusted, Mada starts to pick at her muddy nails with her teeth.

"They're nothing more than a collection of wishes and hopes, anyway." Boude tilts her head to one side as she looks at me. "They might muck up the heads of the people who create them, but they're no danger to us."

"If you keep up a shield, heh, which is something our lad here never does. '*Can't see their energies*' – that's what you told me, Kal-boy, ain't it the truth?"

"Sam's convinced I'm a jinn," I say. I have no interest in listening to the women get into a discussion about my shortcomings and failings. "He even gives me red skin and goat horns when we mix dreams."

Boude still has her eyes fastened to my face: "You don't think it's an ephemeral, no?"

"No," I agree, and as the word emerges I realise the truth in it.

"You know what this thing is. You know who it is."

"Yes," I admit.

"Fess up then, lad," says Mada, her mouth half-blocked by fingers. "Who's your house guest?"

I dither for a moment, as if saying the name might make it real. But I know that that sort of thinking is nonsense – this isn't kiddy magic: saying the name won't sprout *her* ghost.

A small breath, then: "I don't know how, or why. But I'm certain that Sam's invisible friend is ... it's Fol Huun."

### **31. Islington**

"I don't want to go back to work, not yet."

"Why not? It would be good for you, get your mind off things. Get yourself back into a routine."

"Working at that place isn't a routine ..."

"You've got to start somewhere – at least you know the people there."

"But everything's changed. It's all different now."

"It's not all different. You've still got me; still got our friends. A job – you've worked in worse places. Remember that packing factory?"

"It feels like you're pushing me back into the world. I don't like it!"

"It's not healthy, you sitting around here all day. Going back to work will get you out again."

"I don't want people to see me crying. It's embarrassing!"

"The funeral was a week ago, Sam. Anyway, they'll understand ..."

"Fuck will they! They'll be as embarrassed as me. I've seen it happen, like when Sid's wife died – everyone avoided him for weeks. We even made bets about when he'd break down ..."

"Who's Sid?"

"He worked in the acquisitions team across the corridor from me. Fat bloke, always going on about Arsenal – until his wife died. I told you about it last year. I don't want people running a book on me."

"It won't be like that, Sam. Anyway, you're stronger than that; everyone likes you."

"Yeah, I'm the fucking celebrity now. Got my photo in the papers and everything. I'm not going back to work yet, okay? I've already talked to Sue and she told me to take as much time off as I needed. She gave me the number for the welfare officer ..."

"Are you going to talk to them? The police gave us the number of a counsellor and you threw it away."

"I've still got this number – maybe I will talk to them. Sue said I'd be able to work part-time for a while, perhaps, or do some work at home – just go in for meetings. That sort of stuff."

"I wish I worked for your firm ..."

"Yeah, Marc. Whatever. I want to be right in my head when I go back, you know? Not like Sid – Sue said he came back to work too soon. He resigned in the end, a couple of weeks before Christmas. Told his boss where to stick the in-tray and walked out."

"When was the last time you had a shower, Sam?"

"Changing the subject, Marc?"

"No."

"Yesterday."

"And before then?"

"I shower every fucking day!"

"Really? Some days over the past couple of weeks you've not even bothered to clean your teeth. You can't sit around here much longer – you're letting this thing turn you into a ... a vegetable. What is it you do all day? Watch telly?"

"Oh fuck off, Marc! I'm taking the pills like the doctor told me. I go out for walks, do some shopping, you know, stuff. I'm not a sodding layabout!"

"I'm not accusing you ..."

"You want me to go back to what I was like before all ... before Dad killed Mum. I can't do it! I can't click my fingers and make everything better like it never happened."

"Look ..."

"I'm beginning to sort things out in my head, but I'm not there yet. I still need a bit more time to ... to pull myself together."

"Okay, okay! I hear you!"

"Maybe you're right, though. Maybe I ought to get out of this place for a while. Get away. Go somewhere different for a couple of weeks ..."

"You mean like a holiday?"

"Yeah. No, not a holiday. Just somewhere out of London ..."

"I suppose you could go and visit Jeannie – I'm sure she'd be willing to let you stay for a few days ..."

"No, not your sister. She's worse than you for the fussing."

"What about staying with friends?"

"They'd be the same. I don't want people looking after me, like I'm an invalid or a nutter or something. I'm sure I could book a room somewhere ..."

"I could wrangle a couple more days off from work ... we could go for a long weekend in Amsterdam, or Berlin ..."

"I was thinking maybe a couple of weeks ..."

"A proper holiday? I can't get that sort of time off work, Sam. I've used all my days up already with this business, and some. Not until May at the earliest. Plus I've got the conference in Manchester ..."

"I could go on my own."

"... I mean, if you could bear to wait a few weeks, we could go off to the Canaries for a fortnight, yes? Pete's got an apartment over there – you remember Pete and Luke? I'm sure they'd be happy for us to use it for a couple of weeks ..."

"It's not a holiday I need, Marc. I just need time away from here. You're not listening to me!"

"I am listening, Sam. I just don't understand ..."

"You don't have to understand."

"I don't want you to be on your own, not now ..."

"What, you're scared I'll do something stupid?"

"Yes. No! Of course not. We've got through this together so far. Running away from it now is a really, really bad idea, okay? Talk to the welfare people. Talk to your boss about part-time working or whatever. Then in May we can go somewhere special – Florida! You've always wanted to go there ..."

"Oh, Marc. You just don't see it, do you? Mickey Mouse isn't going to solve my problems. Tinkerbell isn't going to sprinkle some magic dust and take the pain away."

"I never said that ..."

"I know you didn't. See, I've got to solve my problems in my own way and I can't do it here, or at work, or with friends. I've got to do it on my own."

"Shit, Sam ..."

"On my own! Just for a little while."

"You know, some days you do my fucking head in!"

Sam smiles. "Now you're listening to me."

## **32. Lambeth**

This room has never been loved. The bed is a rust of metal struts cast around a stack of blankets upon a mound of folded mattress – the time-limited rental does not include niceties such as making it fit for sleep. By its side stoops the carcass of a bedside table, which wobbles, and a shadeless stick of plastic sidelight. A larger light swings at the end of a wire suspended from the ceiling which, thankfully, works; the sky beyond the grimy window set above the washstand on the other side of the room is already deepening towards the purple bruises of evening.

Surprisingly, the state of our temporary accommodation does not seem to worry Sam. I can feel the wake of his emotions as he unpacks his haversack and attempts to hang clothes in a mock-victorian wardrobe that almost blocks the doorway: he's scared and excited; unsure of, and yet certain about, what we are here to do.

Tonight we shall hunt vampires.

I leave him to his conjectures: I have other thoughts to worry about.

The argument seems to be over for now; apology-sex was undertaken and enjoyed by both parties. Sam told his boyfriend that he wanted time away from London while he was getting ready for work – sharp ties and sharp suits – and, again surprisingly, Marc agreed. He thinks we're heading towards Blackpool at the moment. Sam has even remembered to turn off the GPS locator on his mobile phone, which makes me a little suspicious about whose idea this really is: Sam's; or *hers*.



Boude had flatly refused to believe my assertion in the abandoned church: "Powers live in the stones, Kal, not beyond them!" Mada, however, had been more willing to entertain the idea.

"That was a messy affair all around."

"What affair?" asked Boude.

"Keftiu."

She meant Crete. The word was enough to silence my captain. All who venture to the Outer World are aware of the bones of that story, though most choose not to discuss it.

"But how do you *know* it's her, heh? You got caught long after all that."

"I'm older than you think, Mada. Fol Huun was my first stone."

"Ounous was your first stone. Bull told me that ages ago – where was it? Miletus. All them straight streets and that pokey little market place. They were worshipping Apollo, built him a bloody great temple overlooking the sea. That's where you first turned up, pulled through by Bull. So I asks him about you and he said he met you when he stumbled into Ounous one time – I didn't ask why – and you seemed like an inquisitive sort, which is more than you can say for most dolphins: they're nasty little buggers if you ask me."

Boude rediscovered her voice at that point and the discussion had meandered for a while. I joined in where I could, though much of the discussion had been about stones I have never been to.

Mada is not a great traveller. I remember her insistence that the only places she went to were green Fuebe and here, the Outer World. I've met a number of people from that stone and they are not as dismissive of the place as Mada.

I think Fuebe sounds rather pleasant: the land is mostly wooded and hilly, with small rivers running down to a central lake. The folks of that stone live in compact hamlets scattered across the forest; their main task is to organise for the dancing contests which take place on



the lake shore every now and then. Most of the injuries that occur in Fuebe, so those others told me, are a result of excessive partying between dances – their only other duties are to pluck food from the trees and brew intoxicants. Healing takes place among the roots of Fuebe, The Ancient Oak, who grows on an island in the middle of the lake. Their guardians are dryads, or elves – something ephemeral and menacing, which provide the voices of the trees that Mada so regularly complains about.

I compare those facts to Mescwar, my Flame Drake. He has no truck with anything ephemeral: the dragons who act as his guardians are very nastily solid, and we have to work hard to grow enough food from the deliberately poor soils covering the hills.

Boude admitted that she had missed her stone on a number of occasions following a render. "Tincas was nasty," she told us, "a mess of ravines and geysers."

"Falc is from Tincas," I said. "He didn't talk about the place much."

"I can't blame him, what with a Power that likes to present as a bloody great amphibian and uses giants as guardians."

"They have to fight each other on poles slung across lava-filled pits. Whatever else you might say about Falc, he has a fine head for heights."

"There's good eating on a frog, if you've got the patience," said Mada. "Though I never tried baked salamander. Did you two think to bring food, heh?"

~~~~~

Sam is checking the time on his mobile phone. He's eager to be out of this place, keen to start sweeping the streets for our vampire.

~ *Phone Marc.*

My host considers the suggestion, then sits on the edge of the unmade bed and starts stabbing at the magic screen to make the contact.

This room had been my choice. I can smell a knocking shop from a fair distance, even one which rents rooms by the hour. I have good memories of such places, both as client and whore: for the most part they were safe places to work and sleep, safer than the streets beyond the door. Though that depends on the pimp, I suppose, and the quality of the establishment. During my last Guardianship, here in England, I had worked the body of a whore-shop matron (who had been a pious Christian woman before I arrived in her head: *christiani ad leones, christianae ad lenones*) in a town a few days west of the Lonely City. Like I say, good memories.

~~~~~

"So you've met Fol Hoon before?" Boude had stood as the chatting progressed, and it hadn't surprised me that she was the one to return to the subject we had been avoiding.

I nodded my agreement, though part of me wanted to deny the fact.

"Tell us about her."

"You already know."

"Remind me."

"This is a test, yes? What do you want to know?"

"What did her folk call her?" said Mada. "Who were her guardians? What was her lodestone, and where was it?"

"We called her the Lone Wanderer as she often took the form of a great gull, though at the time of the Race she would appear to us as a woman. Her guardians were sea birds. But you know I can't tell you about the lodestone."

"Risk it, laddie," had been Mada's retort.

"It's not as if she's part of the Band anymore," added Boude. "You'll be safe."

I remember shrugging my shoulders. They had a valid point.

"But you can't validate my answer. Neither of you ever saw Fol Huun."

"Well," said Mada, looking a little more shifty than usual. "Maybe I've missed my stone once or twice." When I offered her a quizzical look she mimicked my shrug. "The thought of going back to those bastard trees and their stupid edicts – sometimes it's enough to drive anyone off-course, heh?"

"But even so ..."

"I knows what Fol Huun's lodestone was, lad. The question is: do you?"

I gave up and told her. "She called it her Hearth, the 'Hearth above the Cliff'. She kept it at the top of a great, wooden tower – I suppose it was wooden; nobody could reach it without wings."

Mada was nodding her head. "That's right. That's the one. Though there's ways to reach it without having to grow a set of feathers."

"You saw it?" Boude's mouth was almost as circular as her eyes.

"Course I saw it. Had to use it, didn't I. There was me, stuck in the middle of the most boring stone in the Band and no fucker over here was going to pull me back through – I'd been a bit too 'honest' with too many people while Outside. I needed to heal properly under Fuebe's roots, and the only way was through the big birdy's lodestone."

The admission had fascinated me, but Boude beat me to the question: "what do you mean?"

"See, I said it before and I'll say it again: all that comes out of Mescwar is stupid people! What do them dragons do when they munch on your bones? Suck out the brains first? You don't need to be pulled here to move between stones; that's what the lodestones is for – if you've got the know for using them, of course."

### **33. Lambeth**

Items required for the hunting of vampires:

- Clothing appropriate for the season, and time of day;
- A pair of walking boots, or training shoes (comfortable);
- One baggy hoodie, essential – operate with hood pulled over head at all times;
- One pack of cigarettes, for self;
- One lighter, for offering to others;
- One vampire spotter, preferably of an affable nature;
- Change for coffee and pocket food (to keep vampire spotter happy).

Our vampire is called Marton, Mada says, and on the day the women had first befriended him, in Stokie, he had let slip that he rarely ventured north of the river. Streatham had been mentioned in the flow of conversation, so Streatham is where we began our search earlier this evening.

"He won't stray too far from the main roads, that one," Mada had explained as we swayed in unison on the bus heading south. "We can start in the town then head up the Hill and back down to Brixton. I knows what he looks like, but he may well be hiding from us – he was

quick enough to scamper the other night. So we'll have to track down vampires who might know him, ask questions and stuff."

Sam was excited. He had come to terms with the idea that our hunt wouldn't involve silver crosses, holy water or wooden stakes, though I noticed him slipping a bulb of garlic into the hoodie pocket before we left the hotel room.

His problem, and mine, is that neither of us knows what we're looking for: Mada and Boude have the knack of seeing the aethers surrounding the living things of this world, but our eyes cannot spot beyond the electromagnetic spectrum.

I can *feel* the Band's energies, somehow, and I can *see* a rider's heat – something else that fascinates Sam, though concentrating on that magic display for too long gives him a headache. I've always thought of this 'third' sight as a gift from sapphire Ounous, where all light is dark. I could be wrong about that.

Not being able to see human auras annoys me and pleases me in equal amounts. Most humans can't see the aethers in which they live and die: sharing this disability reminds me that I'm still human, whatever the others may say. But I wish I didn't have to rely on others to spot vampires sipping the aether from those around them.

Mada is not in an affable mood tonight ... I'm tempted to take a brick to her head.

The streets of Streatham had been wide, noisy and busy. The shops along the High Road were all illuminated, which annoyed Mada: *'I can't get a good look-see with all this shiny noise!'* Sam had wondered whether she needed glasses, to which Mada had stood on tiptoe before him and done her eyeball-inversion trick and then, for good measure, cleared the cataract from one eye: *'... so I'll have no lip from you, Sammy lad, heh?'*

We did a lap of Tooting Bec Common, *'just in case, heh?'* Then we did a quicker lap of Streatham Common after Sam suggested Mada didn't know what she was doing – no doubt a punishment for doubting the old woman.

After that we trailed Mada like a kid on a promise of lollipops, past the station and across the road junction aswirl with commuting crowds, past the knots of joywalk jockeys taunting the traffic rushing along the A23. Several times we switched from one side of the street to the other as Mada spotted potential probes, only to be disappointed time and time again.

Finally I rebelled, shrugging off the hoodie top as Sam lit a cigarette. "It's over two hours and you haven't seen anything useful yet?"

"They ain't here, not a one of 'em!"

"So we go up the Hill?"

"We go up the hill, Sammy," she agreed, though it had been me asking the question.

"Maybe they don't like Mondays," I said. To which she grunted.

We trudged upwards towards Streatham Hill without exchanging words. Whenever Mada wanted to investigate something she'd wave us towards a wall – or railing, or hedge – while she huddled herself deeper into her coats and concentrated. Six times so far: six nibbles, no bites.



And now she's doing it again. I'm beginning to think the old woman might need a lick of energy herself.

It has been threatening to rain all evening; luckily the clouds have held off, with only the occasional spit. When Mada signals us to stop Sam takes advantage to loosen his hair from the hoodie top and pull another cigarette from its carton.

"There must be an easier way to do this," I say.

"Who's asking?"

"Kal. We've been wandering around for three hours now."

She raises herself up as if to start a lecture, but something distracts her. "There's one of them bus shelters over there," she says, sagging back into her hunch. "These feet won't moan about a little up-time, heh."

It takes us a minute to reach the shelter. There's a red plastic bench beneath the awning, one that allows people to lean into it rather than sit; Mada ignores the option, instead sliding to the pavement with her back resting against a shattered-yet-whole glass pane.

I settle onto the seat. "How many vampires are there in London, Mada? You never did say. A hundred? A thousand?"

"Lots." Mada doesn't bother to look up as she answers; she's too busy tugging off one of her shoes for an examination. "All monkeys have a touch of the vampire about 'em, lifting energies from each other like a whore's excuse-me."

"So we're wasting our time?"

"Course not. We need to find us a proper vampire, one who knows what they're doing."

"Why?"

"Cause they all know each other. Vampire goes round lifting energies off strangers on purpose, they know when someone lifts energies from them – or tries it, anyhow. Any vampire that wants to gather enough energies to get themselves out of bed soon learns about shields and stuff."

"So you're hunting for shielded people?"

She chooses this moment to smack her shoe against the pavement. "Sort of. Will you look at the state of this? I've had 'em for less than a month and they're bust already. Should've stolen some cash to get a good pair rather than accept a charity handout!"

"So how many vampires, Mada?"

"In this town? Maybe a thousand or so. They come and go."

*~ She knows where he is already.*

*~ She's up to something, Sam. I don't know what.*

*~ Ask her about the book.*

It's a good suggestion, so I do it.

"What book, heh?" Now she's busy working her other shoe from its foot.

"I've been hearing rumours about a book."

"Rumours, is it? What's this book called, then? Not that I have the know of books: this one" – she jabs her thumb into her chest – "never got round to learning to read, not English anyhow. A bit of Dutch is all."

Mada is good, but I make sure I'm squinting as I ask the question. The silver pulse that shivers momentarily through her heat is enough to confirm that she knows something.

"I don't know what the book is called, but I've heard whispers that this Marton might know something about it."

"What, the vampire?" She looks up at me with one eye closed as she starts to beat the other shoe against the pavement. "Remember to ask about it once you've pulled someone into his skull."

"But it's quicker to ask you, Mada. So I've been told."

The stare between us lasts several seconds.

"Fuck it! Who's been whispering what, heh?"

"You-know-who told Sam, who told me."

"Her? What's she got to do with that book? Though the more I think about it, the more I reckon she might well be a jinn."

"Why?"

"Cause, laddie, that's what the sodding book is about – if we're talking about the same book: angels and demons and shaping the aethers. It's all bollocks, mind: monkey stuff, nothing more."

"So you know about the book."

"If it really is *that* book you're talking about, then you'll be right: I knows about it." She takes a moment to spit before starting the job of fixing her feet back into the shot leather of her beaten shoes.

"And?"

Sam asked that question. Since our last dream we seem to be developing a rapport, learning when to take up the controls and when to step back. Given that Sam knows as much about this 'book' as I do, there's no reason why he shouldn't be in charge of discovering more about it.

"It pisses me off, is all. Every time I run across it, there's trouble."

"Not cool. How old is it then, this Demon book?"

"How old, heh?" Mada stops mid-lace to consider the question. "You know, I reckon it's been knocking around since them Romans was here. Maybe longer. Not in the same form, mind. First time I clapped eyes on it, it was a scroll covered in Latin words, wrapped round a pretty stick."

"So what's bad about it?"

"Makes you monkeys fight, Sammy lad. Don't ask me why: I ain't got the know of that. Maybe when Kal does the dirty on the vampire he should pull one of his Tincas mates through. Those bloody frog lovers are always messing about with that book. I won't go near it, me! Too much blood. Too many people taking an *interest* in us."

Something is sucking at my nape. The lightest of touches, barely noticeable.

"You gotta spare light there, boss?"

The voice is right by my ear. As an electric shock runs from my stomach through flesh to tighten fingers and toes I feel another stroke ... a lick ... soft as a kiss at the base of my neck.

"Finally," says Mada, finishing off the knot in her lace. "What kept you so long, heh Marton? My arse is froze to the slabs here!"

### 34. Lambeth

"You's in danger, man, hear me?"

The steel at my throat feels small. It's enough to panic Sam: he's shouting thoughts at me, darting his eyes between Mada, still sat on the ground, and the hand by his cheek holding the penknife. My only intervention has been to slow his heartbeat and ease his breathing, cajoling those muscles and nerves to ignore the chemical cloudbursts coursing through my host's veins.

"Marton, lad, you're scaring him. You really need that blade, heh?"

"Protection, innit. You aks me here, suggest it be in *my interest* to come by, but I don't know you, hear?"

"I've got ears, laddie."

"I don't know you and I don't know *your interest*, innit. We need to discuss things before we talk, boss."

In the end, it all boils down to trust.

There's a man with a knife at Sam's – no, my – jugular who (apparently) needs to trust me, but I cannot be trusted: my loyalties are bound elsewhere. By placing that edge against my throat the man has signed his own death warrant; all I can do now is try to surf the energies of the Band's reaction to the threat, all I can offer the vampire is an easy rider.

I hate this part of the job. So much can go wrong, and a wrong move can bring great pain. The risks lessen if I can get into the right state of mind before approaching the Band with the translation call. I need to be calm, and confident. I need to trust in my instincts, and the Band's loyalty to its current Guardian.

And I need to trust Sam and Mada not to do anything stupid while I concentrate on this task. This is a bitter thought: Sam has no experience of knife fighting, or being mugged – the



chances of him trying to be heroic are strong. I know I should ruse him before I start, but there is no time.

As for Mada, she has no future here in the Outer World. I swear by all the Powers that should I survive this moment I will tie her to a bed and *torture* her into rendering. I promise I will take pleasure in stretching out those agonies over *days*.

But right now, right at this moment, I have to trust the bitch.

I form a tight hook and tether myself to the base of the reptilian regions – the slightest of contacts to the flesh that keeps a heart beating and makes sure the blood stays sweet. Then slowly, with trust, I disentangle my Vital Breath from the folds of Sam's mind: let go and let slip and let fall away and ... I float.

Now is the time to send my anger elsewhere, to settle my thoughts within the calm slicks of acceptance and humility. Each translation is a request – a prayer in which I seek the Band's benediction and grace. There can be no ego in this interaction.

I have lost Sam's eyes, and Sam's ears: I have no direct means of knowing how the situation progresses outside. As I slide beyond the sinus walls into the nasal cavity, then the throat and wind pipe, I can taste Sam's sour bile and salt blood. There's no sign yet of a surge in flesh-damage signals, nor any hint of a drop in blood pressure, though I'm barely a second gone.

When I reach the level of the clavicles I stop manoeuvring – from this point I can trust the Band to bring me to it, like a nail to the magnet.

I don't understand the mechanics of what is happening, what is real. Sometimes Sam had to look at charts, when he was working; there was this one picture of three interlocking circles, each coloured differently – in some places one circle overlapped another, and in the centre all the circles merged.

This is what I think: say the red circle is flesh and the blue is aether. Most animals live in the red, while the ephemerals – angels and demons and ghosts and stuff – inhabit the blue. People live in the purple area where the two circles meet.

Me, I live in the green circle, the Band, and sometimes I am pulled through to the white centre where I get to ride a host. But I'm blind to the blue world, and my affinity with the red world is not as strong as it used to be.

Maybe another second, or ten, has ticked by: I cannot tell. As I let the stones draw me closer, inch-by-inch along Sam's left arm, the realms of the flesh and the aether become less important to me: now is the time when I must trust my tethering skills.

And the stones are bright, so bright and warm and welcoming. They lay in a line along the longer bone of Sam's forearm, amid the filigree net of metals which the Band has become. They pulse across the spectrum of dark light in turn: here the azure bloom of Onuun, the encircling snake guarded by her merfolk; next the shimmering golds of Uekh's great prairies flare, reminding me of stories told by Bull and Spar of taunting centaurs; then emerald Fuebe flashes, before giving way to an amber spark nestled on my horizon, close to the wrist – my beloved Mescwar, its healing muds beneath shallow waves a siren calling to my soul.

I ache to be home.

As I move closer the whispered whines of ghosts refine into voices. The Band lives in all worlds, I remember; these sounds are probably the voices of people in the Outer World, close to the host.

*"Heh, I enjoy a good natter. But you've got a little sword parked against my lad's neck. It ain't a fair start to a conversation."*

*"Roll with the dice, woman. I's here to warn you, innit."*

*"Tell me why you're tracking the lad."*

*"This one? I know things, me. I look with wide eyes and listen with big ears. Sometimes I aks questions, innit, but not about him."*

*"Read any good books lately?"*

*"So you is in this mess! I knew it. What's your name, man – Sam? I's heard your folks call you that but the women call you different at times. You listen hard, Sam: this woman is bad news, innit, and that wanted girl, too – she who turns her face into a boyface."*

*"Looks like you got your tool against the wrong neck."*

Size is relative as far as the Band is concerned. I cannot feel myself shrink, yet the stones grow larger the closer I come to them. Should I approach too close, a stone will become a sky and I risk incinerating my Vital Breath to a long, harsh regeneration.

Now is the time for decisions.

I remember Mada talked about Tincas, how the people of that stone had taken an interest in the book. Thinking about the stone draws me towards its depths and soon I find myself above an endless ruby expanse. As the first embers of the translation agony start to scintillate across my skin, I consider names.

One sigil appears larger than any other in my mind: the crimson sweeps that spell 'Falc'.

All I need to do is voice the name and the mounting agony will be banished from my Vital Breath ...

Something stops me.

A doubt. Not Falc. I have too many unanswered questions about that man.

The pain is swelling in sweeps and shudders – if I look too closely I can see mountain ranges beneath me. I have to act fast.

Not Mescwar: that stone would grasp me before I could utter a syllable.

I think of Bull, and of Uekh, his home stone ... but Bull is lost ...

The stone that looms ahead of me now is a swirl of marbled ices ... great Spoy stirs and reaches up towards me.

Fever-tremors rumble through me, and again, and again. I panic! I must cast Spoy from my thoughts, but nothing will supplant it. In desperation I blank my vision and tune my entire Vital Breath to the ghosts of whispers beyond Spoy's avalanche roar ...

*"Listen good, man, cuz as soon as I say my words I's gone. There's people who want you dead, same as your mum and dad. Call themselves The Company, and they wierd like all fuck!"*

*"So they're still going strong, heh. Mebbe Yorga was right: we should have sorted them when we had the chance. But why would they employ you, Marton? You ain't their type at all: they only like white skins, not black or brown, or dirty like me."*

*"I don't work for no fucker, woman."*

*"And here you stand telling me you know all about 'em. Bollocks, is what I say to that!"*

*"I know what I know. I find stuff out, innit. Whispers in warehouses, hints on the streets. The Company wants you dead, Sam, you hear?"*

I hear ... Spoy. He wants to consume me ...

... I was consumed once before. It is a tiny memory, but I grasp at it with the last cinder of my energy. A blue world, as dark as the North Sea under moonlight ... a great beast far beyond my understanding ...

*« Ounous – help one who loved you once. Please! »*

... and my horizons turn sapphire.

*"So these people, they still worshipping that book of theirs, heh?"*

*"I ain't got time for you aksing stuff. You gotta get away, Sam. Hear? Don't trust nobody: not the women; not that battyboy you shacked up with. Pack a bag and run far away cuz they got plans for you, innit! They want your blood in a bowl to pour on that book and they getting desperate, man."*

*"You listen to the vampire, Sam. Mebbe he's talking sense."*

*"Course I's talking sense. You ripping me up, woman!"*

I must think of a name, quickly. I am so weak: I am ready for the render and doubt I have any strength left to get back to Sam and the Outer World. But the names are buried so deep, so deep.

I had a mentor, I remember, during those earliest days of my exile here. He had a name, a good name ...

*« Aherrket. Aherrket! »*

... and once more:

*« Aherrket! Take my place in this time of harsh work! »*

From the still ocean arises a flume, a great spout of cold salt water that arcs into the heavens, towards me – and I am engulfed, energised, pushed far and hard away from the Band and its metal entanglements, beyond the flesh of Sam's left arm. As a mote I thunder between soot particles and fog droplets ...

... Straight into the skull of the vampire!

I collide with the first nerve sock and my reflexes kick in, my Vital Breath shafting to barbs ready for the implantation.

This is not where I am meant to be!

As soon as the Band realises it has lost its Guardian it will draw forth another – a random choice.

It could kill Sam in seconds!

I fight my nature, force myself towards bone. Memories and thoughts snare on my surface as I surge through tissue – I cannot shake them loose.

*Think, Kal. Think!*

The tether!

It's still there, a gossamar energy stretching beyond this new head. I grab at it and haul, and haul, and haul again. More effort pushes me through the brain blankets and past pulsing vessels and into the sponge of bone.

I haul with every last stipple of my being and, reluctantly, Marton's flesh relinquishes me. Faster than champagne corks I skewer through the air, back to the safety of Sam.

## 35. Islington

I am – more – than I used to be.

I can barely remember my last illness. Oh, the host can have maladies and, for want of something better to do, I may on occasion share in those shivers and flushes: they remind me that I live.

But this is my illness, not Sam's.

I can't recall what happened after our encounter with the vampire. I know that Sam is back safe in his apartment, in the arms of his lover, but I have no idea how our trip to South London ended, or what Mada may have told Sam. The cheap hotel room might as well be the fag-end of a lost dream to me.

I know more about Marton the vampire than I ever wanted to know. Part of me *is Marton*; images and scenes of growing up in Brixton have melded into my most nurtured and cherished memories. Which is true? Gathering nuts around a small settlement, close to here, that I once called home? Or learning to thief from stallholders along Electric Avenue?

These new memories are like a virus. They contaminate and confuse me, they shake the core of my Vital Breath and all I can do is curl between synapses and fight for what I think I am.

I concentrate on one fact: the book. Before the encounter I knew almost nothing concerning the book. Yet Marton does know of it. He obsesses about it. He's even seen it. Any thoughts I have on that subject are almost certainly not mine; I need to separate and quarantine those memories ...

> Scene: a bench amid greenery, warm sunlight bleaching the wooden struts supporting my buttocks; two men talk nearby ... *there are ways of staying young without needing*

*lotions and scalpels ... I don't believe in magic ... think of it more as a state of grace ... sounds like freemasons ... such a hot day; my hair hangs heavily from my scalp ... don't have the time to muck about with that sort of thing ... more of a self-help club, except we help each other ...*

> Scene: a cavernous, oblong, unlit space shaped as much by echoes as by walls and partitions; my bare feet scrabble against a concrete ledge as I reach up to unlatch a window – I can taste fear, and blood, where I've bitten my tongue – voices are getting closer; don't listen, don't get caught!

As each memory rises into focus I catch it, draw it into a space within me which is not me. These thoughts are too immediate for me, too raw: no flesh stands between me and their absolute reality.

> Scene: two women and a man sitting on damp grass; a child toddling towards daffodils that reach up to his chest; a woman *talks ... stay low, is all I'm saying ... no, keep to yourselves and don't go mucking around with them ... I can sort it for you, I'll keep an eye on things, heh ... it kills people is all I know: Heszic and Yorga are watching them ...*

> Scene: late evening and frost is beginning to rime puddles; two old men arguing in whispers outside a West End pub; across the street, huge hoardings lie about stage plays ... *I ain't got it ... I don't want nothing to do with it ... you ain't had my dreams ... I step close and sip at one as he grows angrier ... they'll kill me ... I got a gun, that's what I got, and I ain't afraid to use it!*

> Scene: police at the door of a house of bedsits; a familiar place – Islington – but dirtier, shoddy front yards and shoddy curtains with a mull of shoddy people checking out the action ... *I heard one of them took a hammer to the other ... I heard they did more than share a room ... didn't one of them write a play ... this is what happens when you let them sodomites loose ...*

These latest memories feels different to those that have gone before. They feel granier, more watchful, like loose change in my cheek-pocket. Is this the Marton-me or some other me?

> Scene: a damp night; an old woman and a younger man waiting for a bus; a safe weight of knife in my palm, I swivel the knife clear of its sheath with my thumbnail ... *What kept you so long, heh?*

> Scene: a table supported on drawers, wooden; I need to look at it; no time, no time; four drawers, all locked; someone's coming up the stairs ...

I saw the book: I can't remember it.

This is spin of the first order!

I taste the soft-sharp shapes of poppies as Sam reaches his climax. Tonight he is the man, his limbs twined taut around his lover as they pant and sweat their troth. I too have a desire: to block the viral memories from soaking into his recollection webs. I need to check everything: everything that was, or is – or pretends to be – me.

> Scene: morning mist; salt tangs the air; my bark shift is too tight around my buttocks – her preference and we always obey; her voice is calling out for me: vital, and lost ...

### 36. City of London

Do people think bereavement is contagious?

I can only assume they do. Since Sam returned to work two days ago I have been amazed by the measures people will take to avoid him.

His line manager, Sue, managed a brief commiseration speech during their one-on-one meeting yesterday morning, followed swiftly by the advice for Sam to bury himself in work – *'to take your mind off things'*. Sam is developing a good repertoire of wry smiles as a way of thanking people for their concern, and a few stock phrases to help make those around him less fearful. Even he believes it's his fault for bringing his dead baggage to work.

The office is open plan, divvied into allotments by low plastic walls and filing cabinets. People tend to sit at cross-like desks facing each other, though the woman on Sam's left has made an effort to build an additional wall of files between them. The man on Sam's right talks incessantly about football – he supports Arsenal, though his real passion is a hatred for all things Tottenham; Sam, as a proud supporter of Millwall Football Club, is more than happy to join in the tirades against foreign owners, foreign managers and foreign players who earn more cash in a week that Sam earns in two years. According to the man, Arsenal's French-born manager doesn't count as foreign on account of him being the Arsenal manager.

Boude mentioned once that she spent over a decade in a French skull. There was no football at that time, so local rivalries had to be sated by the English, Dutch, Flemish and French folks hopping across (or along) the whale road – no, the English Channel – and burning each other's towns and villages. I missed all that. I missed a fair amount of the Middle Ages now I come to think about it. The Guardian usually chooses who gets pulled through: they only thought of me when something brutish and quick needed to be done.

Sam suspects that his football friend is the one who's running a book on how many days he will last before losing his cool; he's arranged with a smoking pal to bet on 8.5 days, as long as the odds are good.

The desk diagonally opposite Sam is empty, a redundancy or early retirement who has not yet been replaced. It's a good reminder that most people in the office have more to worry about than offending Sam by chance chat about parental health or familial visits. Yet there's been several occasions when a conversation stalled as Sam reached the tea point, or collected printouts from the big colour photocopier at the centre of this low, over-wide space.

I reckon it must be a gift, the way people can substitute trivial worries for serious problems. It's not just Sam that his colleagues are avoiding.

A fortnight has flitted by, butterfly-like, since we went hunting for vampires; for much of that time I've been recovering. What happened to me was – unprecedented.

Yes, that's a good word for it. Unprecedented!

Never have I heard of someone being bounced by the Band into a different host while still retaining a link to their original host. Nor has anyone, as far as I can tell, travelled directly between two skulls.

I wouldn't recommend it: for the first week after, there were times when I was convinced my name was Marton, not Kal, or that I was Kal living in Marton who was living in Sam – a terrible mess of matryoshkas at once containing and being contained by each other. Eight days it took me to sift my memories and suture myself back into a coherent story.

Sam, too, suffered – though he did everything in his power to hide his shattering from Mada and – especially – Marc. I had to leave him to cope on his own; only in the past few days have I managed to cloak the worst of those memories from his mind. Even then I performed the cloakings in the old fashioned way, synapse by synapse. I can't risk entering Sam's dreams while I still hold Marton's memories in quarantine. At least now he believes that the hunt was a failure.

The one thing I can't cloak from Sam's mind is me.

Sam refuses to let me go; he's building an ideal of me into the structures of his personality and there's nothing I can do to stop him. It's like he wants to possess me, ingest me – but not in the way I tried to seize him when I first arrived in his mind. This is different.

Are there other forces playing in this skull's arena? Is *she* here?

The idea – as outrageous and impossible as it is – terrifies me.



## 37. Islington

Boude was in a foul mood when she finally returned to the apartment. She refused to answer any questions, demanding instead that I run her a deep bath, with extra bubbles, immediately.

She is my captain, so I complied without fuss. Sam was happy enough to catch items of clothing as they were flung from the bathroom, gathering them together for a heavy wash. I think he's being optimistic: I doubt that Marc's old sweater will survive the caress of detergents and conditioners as it tumbles.

Marc is not home, which worries Sam. The boyfriend likes his routines and is rarely late returning from work. He's also punctilious about phoning to let Sam know that he's left the office, or still waiting for a bus, or passing the supermarket – should he get something for dinner? Tonight the phone has remained stubbornly silent, and Sam's calls to Marc are redirecting to voicemail.

"Are you okay in there?"

No answer. I've no wish to see Boude naked in her current body, so I suggest to Sam that he starts making tea.

Sam is a much better cook than his boyfriend, though for the most part a Sam-meal consists of taking stuff out of wrappers and either heating it on the electrical stove, or baking it in the electrical oven, or putting it on a turntable to spin for a couple of minutes in the 'microwave' – an electromagnetic box that sings as it heats.

I like Sam's kitchen. It reminds me of how things used to be, when the preparing of food was done in the same place as the eating of it. Looking back, the Tudors ruined more than just monasteries: if ridding England of the communal bath-house was not enough, they also insisted that the slice-and-skewer should be separated from the plate-and-serve, much as a king holds his distance from the serfs. I'm amazed that it's taken so long for this country to recover from such barbarities.

"What are you making, Kal?"

Boude has rubbed her face and scalp almost raw and, from the shining blush of her skin, she must have skimped on the cold water tap, too.

Sam waves some packaging at Boude and invites me to take control of the conversation.

"Chicken, I think. Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I need to ask you a favour."

"What?"

"How many of those tablets have you got left?"

"The tranquillizers?"

Boude nods as she settles onto a stool on the living space side of the breakfast bar. She tightens the belt around the bathrobe without taking her eyes from mine.

"Enough for an emergency, I think."

"I need them. I can't stay here."

"You're going to run out on me?"

To her credit, she doesn't look away. After a few long, silent seconds she speaks: "Are you better now?"

"What makes you think I've been ill?"

"I watched you and Mada traipsing round Streatham, that day." She shrugs her shoulders.

"Mada says your heat has been very ragged this past fortnight."

I thought Mada had been keeping an eye on me, though we've not talked for a while. "I'm better," I admit. "Where have you been?"

Pointedly, she looks at my forearm where the Band has settled itself deeply within the longer bone. I know what she means.

"I can't keep tabs on you through that. You've been staying south of the river is all I can tell."

"Got any milk?"

It takes Sam a moment to pull on the fridge door and locate a carton of un-sour-able milk – his very pointed method of showing me that I might have the loan of his throat, but the rest of the body is very firmly under his control.

Boude reaches over the table to take the carton from Sam's hand. "Mostly I've been hiding. There's too many people taking an interest in the little one here."

She gives herself a moment to suck at the carton, before pulling a dirty cup towards her and filling it with milk.

"There's a lot of interest in you, too. And Mada."

"I haven't noticed anything." With the food cooking and the kettle snugged into its cradle to boil, I suggest to Sam that we settle our flesh onto a stool. "You've told me nothing to be scared about yet."

"I thought you liked Sam, Kal. He almost had his throat sliced a couple of weeks back, remember?"

I don't answer her challenge. She has a point.

"Seriously, Kal, you need to get Mada to teach you how to build a shield. People suspect that there's more to Sam, if you know what I mean. And Sam knows about you – more intimately than I do! Whoever's watching Sam can learn about you from him; a vampire's lick could well be enough to put us all in danger."

I'm shaking my head as I listen to her. "The Band won't allow it – even if I'm rendered they'll have to flay the arm to get to the stones, and before they finish the first cut they'll have one of us in their heads ..."

"Kal – no. Listen! Nothing's normal anymore. The Band ... it's playing by different rules. You *know* this!"

"Why? Why's it all different now?"

The question sits between us, threatening to take physical form. I quickly check on Sam; rather than paying close attention our conversation he's choosing to fret about Marc's tardiness.

Behind me, the kettle comes to its boil. When Sam shifts our hips to stand Boude reaches out and grabs at our wrist, her small hands barely managing to form a circle around the bones.

"I've found out where that book might be."

She has my full attention! And Sam's too. "Where?" he blurts, the suddenness of his interest overriding my control of our throat.

"How did you find it?" I add.

"Our pet vampire. Do you have any idea what you did to him?"

I shrug. "I know what he did to me."

"Well," says Boude, "you brain-raped the man. He managed to hold himself together for a few days – surprisingly strong, that one – but he's lost the game now: the full closedown, all eight gates shut and nowhere left for him to run."

"Have you got it?"

Boude's stare is intense; I can tell she's checking my heat for abnormalities. I can't blame her, either: for the second time Sam has over-ridden me, eager to ask a question.

I sense the shape of a clipped coin as if it presses into the soft slick of my cheek.

To cover Sam's indiscretion, I prompt her. "Well?"

She shakes her head, a small movement. "I've got a key to Marton's flat. I grabbed it from him before he tried to throw himself under a train."

"Tried?"

"He tripped, poor sod. Clipped his head on the platform and got his legs crushed."

"And the book's there? In the flat?"

*~ Sam! Stop it!*

"No," says Boude. "Not when I searched his room. But the man is obsessive; he's been tracking the book – and those who hoard it – for decades, I reckon."

Which reminds me: "What makes you want to render? Not that I'll help you. I need you here!"

"I don't care what you want," says the girl, reaching again for the milk carton. "I've read his journals. Whatever's coming ... it's bad, I can taste that much. But I can't face it in this body."

As she talks, she stands. "The little one – her flesh was damaged before I got to her: the blood is wrong and there's growths in her bones. If you want my help you'll have to let me render back, and pull me out again in a few days' time, yes?"

I can see the good in her argument. Now I look at her flesh, the skin around her neck, I can see it sagging – a loose necklace where before there had been puppy fat.

"So find those tablets and leave them on the table," she finishes. "I want a nap, and maybe one last bath. The quicker you head over the river, the better, yes? You'll find the key in those trousers."

## 38. Southwark

According to Boude, Marton the vampire has been living in a warehouse in Southwark. It's not for me to question a person's choice of abode, though Sam finds the idea strange. For him the division between places of work and not-work is absolute: people are allowed to live and sleep above the shop, not in it.

This apportionment of space must be a recent thing; the man whose head I inhabited on my last visit to the Outer World, in Smyrna, had no issue with bedding down in the workspace – he kept a well-appointed alcove in the midst of the piles of leather and wood that he turned into boots.

Whatever. It's not cobbler shops I have to consider at the moment. I'm staring at a pub which squats on the corner of two shabby backstreets. I used to know the maze of lanes surrounding Southwark and Borough, away from the river, but not any more: the changes that have been wrought in this part of town over the years have paid scant attention to the needs of the map maker. The South Bank is being gentrified into yet another tourist trap, whether it wants it or not.

It's barely dawn, yet the pub doors are wide open for business. There's something about the South Bank soil which encourages a disregard of rules and regulations to germinate in all who stay more than a few hours here. Southwark was always the place to go for rough pleasures; I remember losing a lot of money in this neighbourhood, more than once, betting on the wrong cock or the wrong dog.

Not even Cromwell's puritans could shut the place down, the last time I was here in the Lonely City. The tourist hoards will stand no chance.

Time is pressing: the clouds above me have jaundiced in the past few minutes.

The warehouse is tucked behind the pub. It looks much younger than its neighbour, with ranks of steel-framed windows a dozen feet above the path. But while the pub is open and operational, this place has a feeling of neglect, abandonment even, about it. The only fresh thing I can see is the padlock and chain across the bars ahead of its entrance.

*~I can get in there, no problem. I know this place.*

Sam is eager for action and, reluctantly, I decide to let him assume the lead – though I can feel no sharp triangulations of a plan forming in his thoughts. It takes a bare moment for me

to sink back into the folds of Sam's brain. As he settles his full control over our flesh I scent his concentration.

~~~~~

"Oi, mate! Can you give me a hand here?"

I don't believe this is happening. By the look on the man's face, neither can he.

"You're naked," he says, all open mouth in unshaved jowls.

"My girlfriend's turfed me out, innit! Shoved me out of the door and won't let me back in. She says she's calling the Bill if I make a scene!"

Sam had spent a couple of minutes gazing at the warehouse frontage, his mind a wallow of considerations and possibilities too lax for me to follow in any detail. Then without warning he had stripped naked and hidden his clothes under the wheels of a van parked a dozen metres down the side road.

"What do you want me to do?"

I watch the man's surprise meld into a smile across his face.

"Can you help me get into this place? I've got some overalls in there, but the key's in my trouser pocket and my trousers ..."

Now he's grinning. "This is a joke, innit! You got cameras stashed somewhere."

"No, mate, honest!"

There's no doubting my host's ability to lie with sincerity, but I can feel an acid of panic start to form in Sam's stomach as the man pulls a ring of keys out of his own pocket and jangles them.

"I don't know what's going on, but I do know you ain't got no clothes stashed in my building. So tell me what this is all about, hmm?"

Whatever else, Sam knows how to think his way in and out of danger very quickly.

"I know you," he says.

"You do?"

I feel Sam nodding our head, though he keeps his eyes open and innocent. "I followed you out of the Bears Club – the one in Vauxhall – a few months back. You were busy with some other bloke, that time. Bought him back here ..."

Acids in our gut tell me that my host is lying. But the man has the keys in his hands and I, unlike Sam, know how to brawl.

"Does your girlfriend know about the places you go?"

Sam smiles ... and I feel it: a sudden, cool slice of static between his eyes and his heart, skin, mouth – like a spit of iced rain foretelling the storm to come. He calls it 'gaydar'. I call it spooky, the way a person can identify others attracted to him, or her; a microsecond change in the chemical balances of both bodies – a means of communication beyond my understanding, or even intuition. And yet it happens all the time, and it has just happened here.

Sam is standing naked in the street, chancing his luck – and the man who stares at him likes what he sees.

"You know there's nothing worth nicking in here," says the man. "And I ain't got nothing worth taking neither."

"I'll get my clothes, then."

"No. Leave 'em where you hid 'em. Teach you a lesson, yeah?"

~~~~~

Is it truly possible for someone like me to love? Can I sip at those essential springs first hand?

In situations such as this one, I find it easier to concentrate on the big questions; let the details sort themselves out.

At the moment Sam is staring at taps. We're in a small, grubby kitchen area with magnolia walls and the sort of tiles you find in public toilets. The sink is shallow, metallic, stained in circles where cups have been left to drain after a perfunctory rinse – too messy for my host, I expect. So instead he concentrates on the shape of the taps: bulbous affairs whose brass-plating has almost gone, the handles a set of dumbbells atop industrial screws. They remind me of a Rubens sketch – now there was a man who had no interest in painting the emaciated form.

Sam doesn't understand art. For him the tap pipes are something to grasp, and to stare at. He barely notices that one of the shafts is burning his hand while the other freezes. He's wondering whether they might snap as he uses them to brace his body against the arrhythmic thrusts behind us.

Sam stares at the taps because he doesn't want to be distracted by the mess around him as his cells and blood absorb the chemical pleasures of the rectal intrusion. And I ask big questions because sex, for me in the Outer World, can only ever be a second-hand distraction.

So ... love. What is the gift of LakshmiLadaStarteFreyaBastetIndraRati to me?

I can say with some certainty that it is not a flesh-mediated emotion. Because I have loved, and I have been loved, and when I recall those times I become swathed in the eye-stretching, chest-scrunching, stomach-trembling, limb-heating entirety of that state.

A state ... yes.

*~ Oh yeahhh!*

Thank you, Sam. Yes, love is a place of becoming and remaining, I think: an almost physical location where the Vital Breath is shifted just an atom's breadth away from synchronicity with the flesh – enough to blur the world into primary colours, to ease irregularities and faults from the eye's sight. Smells turn from being a matter of sharp or putrid, sweet or smoked and become the clasp on a pouch of taut memories. A touch is felt before fingers twine together; balance can buck and scrabble like a stag to the must and still feel ... stable, somehow right.

Love blooms and fruits in spite of what the flesh will sense. Thus it is possible for me to love, and I have breached the borders of that place more than once.

As the taps jerk nearer and further and nearer and further from Sam's intense, muscle-flexed face I use these moments to recall a few of my particular loves. My parents, for instance, murdered by the flame-haired madman in a wood on a half-moon night. My love for them remains primal, the bedrock upon which my Vital Breath has been established, fashioned, enlarged, refashioned, challenged and collapsed and restored. When I think of that love there is no time between then and now – much as my time in the sapphire seas of Ounous was timeless, a click of the fingers measured across the spans between stars, both equal and yet irrelevant.

Sam is beginning to lose coherence within his skull as the frictions of his moment take precedence. My moment of action draws closer, too; I must hurry to remember other things that I have loved:

- a woman nuzzles her head on my shoulder – early morning sunlight embosses the pillars and lintels of a new-carved Lycian cliff tomb – honey and gold, her lips, her whispers of eternity – we are strong and full mates;
- a heat of rain on my back – I sit in a tree, a deer passing beneath my spear – my eyes lock with those of the tiger, no more than a dozen yards from me – we are each other's danger, we know this – she is the still beauty: an instant, feral love;
- a sunset rushes over the scrub-desert beyond salt-ploughed Carthage – five of us crouch together, our wide heats splitting the heads and chests of our peasants – we discuss cloaking strategies – each of us lost-found, brothers and sisters beyond the comfort of death.



I remember that Boude had been the one who had brought me through to Carthage. She's gone now. She left the flat last night wearing her original clothes, her hand wrapped around the last of the tranquillizers – her passport back to Mescwar. The render happened after midnight, somewhere to the north of Islington. I have no idea whether the child's flesh survived; such cares are meaningless to me.

I can't afford to think of Boude now. I have a more important task to perform.

~~~~~

The man behind us is slightly taller than Sam, and much bulkier – his stomach is a warm blanket against Sam's hips and lower back as he thrusts, one hand cupped over Sam's bladder and the other clutched on the shoulder to fasten his forearm across my host's chest. Sam himself is rigid, his conscious mind-chat now gusted to tatters in the blusters of blood-borne potions and philtres.

It makes what I need to do next a lot easier, for both of us.

I can't afford another fiasco.

I can sense the weave of the Band within Sam's forearm. The stones are barely 'visible' at the moment, though that is not an issue for my purpose. As ever, I can feel the hook of its attraction deep in my Vital Breath, its soft tug inviting me to release my hold on Sam's mind and return home: another sort of love, I suppose, an inbuilt impulse that cannot be refused.

Carefully, I untangle my tendrils, let slither my roots, enfold myself within me. Float beyond the neck's nape, a moil of essences and intentions bound for home.

If only it was that easy to render! Already I can feel Sam's mind reacting, his unconscious patterns and drives shafting through the ball of my Vital Breath, each thrust driving the barbs of possession deeper into my ephemeral structures.

Pain, like love, is not bound to the flesh. Now I must rely on the ruse I have placed within myself to blunt the agony as I am stretched between the skull and the Band. I remember my loves: the tiger, the tomb.

The Band wants to wind me between its lattices.

I can feel the heat of the stones as I approach them, each an individual point of comfort, a welcome. Mescwar reaches out to embrace me, hoist me to safety. Now I must recall the opposite of love. Now I must loathe the wrongs done to me; I must resurrect the red-haired hunter and watch his bloody spear plunge into my mother's chest.

I gather myself tight, become a needle point to penetrate the skin of the elbow, to pass beyond derma and tendon and muscle, to skim the length of bone, to bring myself to balance within the confines of the Band's complex frets – each stone a moon tethering me to stability.

If I had lungs, I'd scream. About me now is the sapphire prison of Ounous and the malevolent lie of Spoy, the fire of Tincas and the ice of Onuun; beyond me lie Mescwar and Uekh, each offering its own interpretation of gold certainty, bracketing the heavy populations of emerald Fuebe.

I can feel the question forming across the splices of my being: call forth, sing the vibrations. Choose!

*« Tincas! Your abject servant craves a boon. »*

I project the command through a jumble of brutal jabs, each a grim burn.

*« Falc! Hear my call. Come to me now. Come once more to this realm of dreams! »*

The siren stones are mesmerising me. I must detest them. I must abhor what has become of me, what I am reduced to. I must be a morphic resonance of equal repulsion to that which would once more consume me. Still the vice of Sam's thoughtless mind clutches at my attenuated essence, binds me to him as a bitch to the howling dog.

As I snap back to the comforts of a living skull the man behind us convulses, jerks to his climax and drops to the floor. The air Sam gasps into his lungs carries a faint taint of ozone within it, a hint of garlic and balsam and chert to mark the unwilling passage of a sentience brought through to the Outer World.

Sam turns to see what has become of his casual lover. As I settle back into my crevices a first, thin, twisting tendril of heat emerges from the man's chest.

*« Welcome back, Falc. I hope you like your new host! »*

## **39. Southwark**

*~ What is that? Some kind of writing?*

Beyond the untidy kitchen the warehouse vaults over us, an abbey's space of wrought iron and plastered brickwork. The light from thin windows a dozen feet above us is dim, hinting at

recent neglect. The floor is a mess of crate-wood and tarpaulins, discrete piles of detritus abandoned by the last occupants – as worthless as much of what passes for art these days.

The marks that have attracted Sam's attention are in a corner furthest from where we stand. By rights Sam should not be able to see them: Boude has scribed her thoughts and instructions in energies that have no place here in the Outer World.

I should probably worry about that.

The instructions, set in lines and loops of glitter dug into the plasterboard wall, are fairly simple: directions to Marton the vampire's lair above the kitchen block; a list of what I should look for. Boude must have used her host's fading recollections of handwriting lessons to form the neat, large, unjoined letters.

Reading, for me, has always been a tough endeavour; it's not something I was born to do. From what I can work out, the concept of writing arrived in my part of the Outer World a long while after I had left it. For sure, the Kemet folk had been scribbling on plaster and papyrus for centuries, just as the Sangiga tribes had been prodding sticks into clay to make their lists, but they were not my people.

When I first arrived in Mescwar I might as well have been a monkey, for all the intellectual skills I possessed. In my defence, you don't need much learning to gather hazelnuts or shoot ducks. Boude had laughed at me when I admitted my ignorance, after that the Game had taken over my life just as the Race had consumed me in Fol Huun. All in all, my learning to translate shapes into sounds had been a slow progress over the centuries and millennia.

*~ It's so cool, like Christmas lights on acid.*

I can tell that Sam is not talking about Boude's to-do list.

My captain had also cast a shimmering tapestry of ideas and ideals in the air between floor and ceiling. I know instinctively that the discrete pictures – as obtuse as a Picasso profile yet as expressive as any altar board by Old Theotokópoulos – are an attempt at a story.

Though *picture* is the wrong word. What was it Mada said to me? The English language hasn't got the words to cover the hows and whys of stuff like this.

It can be really annoying when that bitch is right about something.

Sam asks me to translate the message, but I can't do it. I try to tell him how each symbol, each minimal collection of curves, captures the essence of a thing – much like the trenches dug into the chalks above Uffingham attempt to hold the entire meaning of 'horse'. He doesn't follow my explanation.

Here, for instance, Boude has drawn two sigils; five strokes in a glistening, bruised blue that form the essence of a many-handed warrior set atop the silvery outline of a great horse charging towards the centre of the room. Below, almost to the floor and some distance to the left, a second set of glyphs – a skeletal squiggle standing atop gilt-outlined twins, pulling an egg from between the lifeless forms.

Other clusters form similar struggles: above us, a jester astride a giant who tramples through the scarlet lines of a great hall; lower and to the right, but not as far right as the warrior, armies march upon a mountain.

But it is the central set of glyphs that holds my attention. Within a great circle Boude had carefully drawn another pair of prone forms – giants, the sub-glyphs seem to suggest – with the feet of each at the head of the other. Beyond the circle, the lords of wealth and creativity reign; within it, the chaos of nature held secure. The circle is complete, and incomplete, and full-round once more – changing as the seconds flick by. The colours of the whole are heavy, a mutating swirl of ochres and rubies and fecund greens; the more I stare at the patterns, the more Sam's stomach churns, the more his chest tightens as the glands above the kidneys pump tinctures of fear into his blood.

Oh, how the flesh can ferret out danger! In my throat I taste a smoke of burnt lemon rinds; a heavy tang of weathered lead slips along the sides of my tongue. Suddenly, for no reason, I want to run away: far away, as fast as Sam's strong legs will take me.

~~~~~

Instead of listening to my suggestion that we get out of the warehouse, Sam follows Boude's simpler directions to the room tucked above the kitchen.

*~ Shit! It looks like a robbery.*

The sight that greets us at the top of the narrow concrete stairwell appears chaotic. The door has been kicked in with some force; I take a moment to examine the locks torn from their wood. Beyond the wrecked entrance, the space can best be described as a series of heaps.

*~ Not a robbery, Sam. Boude told us where to look.*

*~ He lives like this? Shit! How can he live like this?*

If there's a bed in this place, I can't spot it. One of the heaps by the wall has the shape of sheets and pillows about it but, given how other heaps gather around it, I doubt it has been used recently.

*~ There's order here. Look at how the piles on the right are separated: shirts; trousers; socks and pants.*

I leave Sam to seek patterns within the mess, instead turning my concentration to a sequence of boxes stacked in the far corner.

After identifying the route to this place, and the area to search, Boude's instructions had been vague about what we need to look for. 'Clues' she had written in her child-script, as if we were detectives seeking evidence of a crime.

I suggest to Sam that we move towards the boxes. He complies eagerly, following a snake's path between the vampire's life-goods, muttering outrage at the shambles around us.

*~ What are we looking for?*

The boxes seem to form a library. We crouch down beside the largest container and start rifling through paper. The main part is made up of newspaper scrapbooks, dates scribbled on the covers. We lift one out at random: it has the year "1967" marked on its cover. Glued into the first few pages are clippings about the death of a man called Joe Meek.

"Killed himself," says Sam, aloud. "Shot his landlady, then topped himself. Saw a film about it last year."

We rifle the pages, catching headlines. "Here's another one," continues Sam as we near the end of the book. His finger stops the clatter of pages, opens the scrapbook wide. "Joe Orton, murdered by his lover."

*~ So?*

*~ Marc's obsessed by Joe Orton. I tried reading the diaries; dirty fucker he was. 'Prick up your arse' – that's the title of his biography.»*

*~ ... So?*

*~ What was it his lover wrote? 'If you want to know why, read the book'.*

So this is what a clue looks like? Sam must have been paying attention when Mada was talking about the book.

I'm not convinced.

I ask Sam whether the other bloke – Joe Meek – ever talked about a book, but Sam is already reaching out to another box. He's seen something.

"Photos," he says. Then, "Hey, That's a photo of me!"

I stare at the snapshot, feel its padded plastic at the top and bottom. Although the colours are faded I can make out a family sat on a park bench somewhere. The adults resemble Bull and

Spar's last hosts, younger and fitter. And between them, held in place by gripping hands, a scowling child with Sam's wide eyes.

## 40. Hackney

I can spot Mada's approach to the disused church without needing to seek her heat. She has a rich set of curses to distribute to the collection of kids following her along the road, easily matching their volume with her own.

*~ Should we go rescue her?*

*~ No. She can handle it.*

*~ At least we'll fit in, this time.*

Sam is not happy. Whatever joy he had taken from gaining entry to the warehouse – and the unexpected trade and discoveries afterwards – it had melted like snow under salt when he went searching for his clothes. I could have warned him, I suppose, but the shock of his actions had left me wordless at the time.

Some things don't change in the Lonely City. Piling your clothes, unguarded, on the street is an open invitation for them to be stolen, along with any keys, cards, wallets and phones that may have been left in pockets. Surprisingly, to my mind, it's the loss of his mobile that most upsets my host – though the rag-tag assemblage of unwashed clothing that we had to take from Marton's stash runs a close second in Sam's list of injustices. I don't know why he cares: the boots may be on the large side but they are sturdy and well-broken, and the layers of wool were ample protection against the cold wind on our long walk back through the town.

It's been a while since I last met Mada here, I realise; the daffodils surrounding the church have all browned and withered on their stems.

*~ Can't this wait? I need to get back home.*

*~ I wish it could, Sam. But I know Mada: she'll render as soon as she realises what we're up to.*

*~ I wish you'd talk proper. I'm not a demon like you.*

I manage to keep my immediate response silent.

*~ Go and work out how we're going to break into your house, yes? Let me handle the biddy.*

I wait until Mada rids herself of her audience. We're hunched amid daffodil remnants and sprouting weeds, and I've made sure to wind my heat in close, so I'm confident she hasn't spotted us. Only when she reaches the vestry entrance and is fiddling her way into the building do I break cover and make my move.

Marton's knife is small, but well balanced. As the old woman pushes the door wide I flick the blade free of its sheath and bring it to her throat.

"Quiet, Mada. No sudden moves, yes?"

She takes the assault well, though I keep my arms at a stretch: one hand grasped in her hair and the other steady on her shoulder. Almost immediately I feel her muscles in their padded layers relax.

"You never did have no manners, laddie."

"I've got reasons."

"If you wanted me to go home, you could've asked me nicely. But it'll probably go better if you let me render inside, heh? Last thing a Guardian needs is a lynch mob at their back."

I let a tight smile show itself in my voice. "Oh, Mada. You're not ready to render yet. You've still got things to do. Plans to finalise; people to see."

I feel her neck tense before she thrusts her fist backwards, aiming – as I guessed she would – for our groin. I react reflexively, booting at the crease of her knee and moving the knife away as she collapses through the door. Immediately I follow her, grabbing her wrist and folding it behind her as she completes her fall. Then I pull backwards, lifting her to the vertical again as I twist my hips to catch at the door's edge. Our combined weights push the warped wood back into its hole.

"You never were a lady."

"Fuck you, Kal!"

"See?" It takes me a moment to shift her bulk, to let me bring the knife back into play. "You might be a tough bitch, but I know your moves. And you know I'm from Mescwar: we train hard in that stone to play the Game, and we're good at the fighting. We even get to fight dragons – believe me, there's no talon you could have up your sleeve that would match theirs. So we can do this easy and civilised ... or we can do this your way."

"Your choice. Innit."

Moments pass, then seconds. When she finally drops the angle of her free shoulder I know that, this time, she accepts the situation. Without ceremony I push her away; as she regains her balance and turns, I hold the knife in the air and slowly click it back into its sheath.

"Friends?"

Despite the anger that widens her eyes and threatens to break past her lips, she manages to nod her head.

"Good. I like it better when we can be friends."



It takes us a few minutes to agree the terms of our negotiations. Mada is sitting down on bare flagstone away from her accumulation of shopping bags, and her blankets. I have to trust that she won't use any tools she may have hidden within her cardigans to attack me, or her own flesh. If Marton's guesses are correct, the woman has a stake in staying around to see how things play out – and I've made her fully aware that should she choose to render, I'll be happy to leave her festering in the forests of her home stone, unable to influence what happens here in the Outer World.

It is a weak position, for sure, but I have to play this game with the pieces I've been left.

"Tell me about this *Company*."

The stare she offers me is stark.

"Come on, Mada! I know that there's a group of people who call themselves *The Company* – with proper conspiratorial capital letters and secret handshakes and stuff. I know they have a book, which they seem to worship in their own strange way."

I reach into my pocket and pull out a chocolate bar. "The thing I don't know is why we should care, or how they can possibly be a danger to us."

Still she stares. "You think I'm a doggie to be rewarded, heh?"

I don't answer, letting the silence build between us.

Then she shrugs, pulling her head down into her shoulders. "They ain't no danger, as such. More of an annoyance, if you get me. Things go easier for us if we keep our distance, is all."

"So tell me about them."



"They ain't your concern, laddie. You're the Guardian: your job is to keep the Band safe. If people like them start causing you difficulties, you pull out some help and let us deal with it. Nothing's changed."

I shake my head. "I've been to Marton's home; I've seen what he's been up to all these years – his obsession with The Company. I've been in that poor bastard's skull, Mada. I know what he thinks ... I know that you and him have been friends for a while, and how you arranged for us to bump into him in Stokie, and again in Brixton.

"What I want to know is: why?"

She struggles to contain her anger: it shows in the spots of emerald spiking through her heat.

"Idiot! Course I knows the vampire. It's my fucking job to know 'im, same as it's my job to keep tabs on those idiots with that idiot book of theirs. If you'd done your sodding job right, we wouldn't be here having this chat."

She takes a moment to spit. "Twice I bought the man to you. Twice! And all you had to do was pull someone into him so we could find out the full details of what he knew. Twice, for fuck's sake! And both times you managed to bugger it up!"

I let her bile blow past me. "Poor Marton wasn't the complete feast; the man had problems working out when the voice in his head was his own, or God's. He hated taking the potions the doctors ordered for him. He thought they were conspiring against him, that they wanted to keep him tame and use him in their rituals."

Unbidden, a memory that is not mine floats into my attention: a conversation between a teenage boy's consultant and another doctor, whispered words which the boy heard as he held his ear to a mostly-closed door ... secret words about eternal life.

"Marton knew stuff," I conclude, flipping the chocolate bar into the air and catching it, "but for the wrong reasons. Tell me about The Company, Mada. Tell me who they really are, and what they really want, yes?"

"I guessed he might be a bit ... touched." She watches the sweet bar twist in the air as I throw it up and catch it. "Vampires, they's more prone to that sort of trouble."

"Tell me about The Company."

"What, from the beginning? Once upon a sodding time?"

"If you want. I'm in no hurry."

Sam disagrees with me. He's remembered that one of his neighbours has a spare key for the flat and he's desperate to get home, to shower and change into decent, Sam-sized clothes. But

he wants answers, too. Reluctantly he agrees to leave me in control of the flesh for a little while longer.

Mada sighs. "Stop torturing me and throw us the choccie bar, heh?"

As soon as she has it in her hands she rips the wrapping from it with her teeth.

"It's your fault," she starts, chewing as she speaks. "You're too soft on your hosts, like you feel sorry for 'em. Well, you were before you met them Romans. Fact is, you have to kill 'em to render. It don't matter how many cloaks and spins you put in 'em, some will remember what's happened. Some recover, heh, get past the screaming and the painting on walls with shit, pull themselves together and make it back out into the world. And your hosts, those ones remembered, Kal. They never forgot the taste of your feet in their head, and they did something about it."

"Don't blame me, Mada! I always finish business before I go home."

"Accidents happen, Kal. When the Band goes a-travelling, folks can get left behind. What's your limit, heh? Thirty miles? Forty?"

"Even then ..."

"Some hosts live, is all. Accidents happen, and they'll survive the render. Poor sods. But you – you rode your early ones too lightly, Kal. You let 'em take the bit in their mouths, let 'em keep their heads and only blank and ruse 'em when you needed to. Some of 'em remembered."

"And that's your 'Once upon a time' story, is it?"

"Pretty much," she says, taking another bite. "Time here in the Outer World, it runs *different* – what for us in the Band might be moments is out here hundreds of years. Plenty of time for a story to put on some weight, get passed down through the generations. Though monkeys, being monkeys, the stories they tell each other change as they grow. Like the story about a magic ring that can give its wearer years of life long beyond their due time."

I consider the idea. I can see the sense in it.

"And that's where The Company comes in, yes?"

"You're not so stupid after all, lad."

"But it doesn't answer my question: why should we care? The Band is what it is; it's not something that can be used. As soon as any human touches it, they condemn themselves to horrors."

As I can remember all too well.

Mada cocks her head to one side, as if reading my thoughts. "Mebbe they hope for what you has, Kal. Mebbe the know of mortality drives 'em to grab any chance for a few more breaths of air."

"Then they're welcome to it! This ... this *shit* is not life!"

The force of the words surprises me even as I say them. They affect Mada, too: for the first time since I pushed her through the door, her stare softens a little.

"Whatever," she says. "They don't know what they wish for, heh?"

I cannot afford to be sidetracked by her sympathy.

"So The Company are a group of idiots who know about the existence of the Band. They want it because they think it will save them from death. But I still don't see the problem. Why don't we just walk over and hand it to them, let them learn the truth of the matter."

"Snotty-nosed bastards, more like," says Mada, "but you're on the right tracks there, Kal."

"So let's do it! Where can I find them?"

"Except ..."

*~ Tell her to get a move on!*

*~ Patience, Sam. Please.*

"What's the problem, Mada? Something else you haven't told me?"

Whatever sympathy the woman may have felt for me quickly evaporates.

"What's the point of being a Guardian if you go and give it away, heh? No ..." she waves away the protest forming on my face. "Don't argue the toss, lad. You do your job, keep your head down. And keep away from the Bad Men."

"Why?"

*~ Sam – for the sake of all you love, stay out of this!*

"I don't know why. That's the way things are. If you want more answers, I ain't got 'em. I does as I'm told, and I does it proper. That's the way I likes it, and I ain't changing it for nobody, hear?"

"Yeah. I hear you, Mada. Now you hear me. Your talk is – bollocks! Okay, I'll buy into your fairy story about why The Company exists, and maybe I'll believe your theory about how

they came to be. But the fact remains: I've never heard of these people before, not in all the centuries I've been coming back to the Outer World. And when I finally learn of their existence, the Outer World goes raging mad."

I hit my stride, letting my voice fill the wide space beneath the rotting vault. "No, sit down and listen up! Something bad is going on. You know it. I know it. And it all starts with Bull performing some impossible tricks ..."

Mada's mouth is working like a fish, trying to find words to stopper my volume.

"... and Spar renders Bull? You said it yourself: it's like he was already gone when the dozen were pulled through. Boude was summoned from the middle of a fucking Game and I can tell you here and now that Mescwar – may his glorious scales rot for eternity – *does not permit any interference during a Game! Ever!*"

I take a moment to draw breath. "Then - then Falc claims, to my face, that he pulled me through. But Falc wasn't the Guardian: Spar had the Band – I saw that with my own eyes. Falc insisted that I hide my presence from Spar and, for some reason I still don't get, I went along with it. Why?"

"Ask him," says Mada.

"I will," I agree. "Now that I've dragged his sorry bastard arse back out. Which brings me to the summoning disasters I've suffered. Twice you brought the vampire to me. The first time I didn't know what was going on, *like I was a host being spun on a stick*. The second time ... the second time I get bounced. Fucking bounced by the Band itself! In and out and straight through another person's skull ..."

"You pulled Falc through?"

The question catches me mid-torrent. Distracted from the course of my invective, I nod.

"Idiot! That one has the brain of a salamander. It's the horsies you should have gone to – Heszic or Yorga. Them folks from Uekh, they hates The Company."

"Why?" asks Sam.

"I don't have that know, lad. There's bad business between them. Whereas the Tincas folks – I don't know. I've never trusted 'em. You should've left Falc where he was, is all."

"Then I wouldn't have been able to 'ask him'," I say, keeping my tone even as I gently push Sam away from our face and throat. "Because whatever you tell me, whatever you claim, there's something badly wrong with this whole situation – and it's up to *me*, not *you*, to deal with it!"

Now Mada is thinking. I can tell she's considering serious options by the way the arrhythmic pulses and blusters of her heat slow and ease. As if on cue, my stomach rumbles; all I've had to eat today is one of the three chocolate bars that Sam had managed to liberate from a newspaper kiosk during our long walk. Realising that there is still one bar left, I reach into the pocket of the vampire's tatty woolen cardigan. My fingers find it tangled in the folds of a well-creased plastic bag.

~ *Bonus!*

I take a moment to glance at the items in my hand.

~ *Why?*

~ *It's weed!*

"Triads," says Mada, as if whispering the word to herself as a mantra.

"What, the Chinese gangs?" Sam likes watching all kinds of action movies.

She looks into my eyes. The word 'idiot' might as well be painted onto her brow, a permanent reminder of her summation of me.

"Heh. Them would be easy."

And then her heat flutters and smooths. Decisions have been made.

"Yorga always insisted that problems like The Company should be left to the Uekh folk. Me, I was happy to let 'em take the work – did you know that me and Yorga, we were like Bull and Spar for a while. A long time back, but them feelings ... they don't disappear. Is you going to share the choccie?"

With some reluctance, I separate the bar from the bag and toss it to her.

"I ain't thought about triads for ages, not for a long time."

"I've never heard of triads. Not in the Band."

"I don't doubt it!" As if unsure of where to start, she juggles the sweet from hand to hand. 'It's old stuff: rumours; whispers to warm a long, cold night.'

"So tell me, yes?"

The smile she offers me is condescending. "The stones – the Powers – they comes in threes. Triads. Like they're all in themselves unique, but each has a particular ... affinity ... for the stones in its triad."

She spots the confusion I must wear on my face.

"Me, I'm from Fuebe. Not proud of it, but them's the way things are. And I don't much like anyone else, but I have a better liking for people such as Yorga. Because my stone and his are part of a triad, along with the folks of Onuun.

"Now you," she continues, "you waste most of your time in Mescwar. And Mescwar forms a triad with Ounous and Tintuun ..."

"But Tintuun – that stone was lost before my time. Before your time too, you told me."

Mada nods her head. "Heh, gone like a legend. But Ounous you know – you told me that not too long ago."

Ounous: my prison; and my salvation.

"They're connected, Kal. Even though Tintuun is lost, there's still the connection between your current stone and your old one."

"Which means that Tincas ..."

"... is part of the other triad: Tincas, Spoy ..."

"... and Fol Huun."

Mada barks a laugh. "Hah! One lost in Keftiu, one fucked beyond repair – and one playing silly buggers while the world goes to pot!"

## **41. Islington**

"You were mugged?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus Christ, Sam! When? How?"

"This morning. Bastard took my phone, my wallet. My keys ended up in a drain."

"... In a drain?"

"Yeah. He was getting away so I threw my keys at him and ..."

"Oh shit. Shit!"

"No worries, though. I've got the spare set from Marcia downstairs."

"Were you hurt? Did he hurt you?"

"No, it was too quick."

"So that's why you didn't go to work?"

"Couldn't, could I. I had to go to the police and report it. Then I had to walk all the way back here. I've phoned Gary – he said he'll come round and change the locks for us, but it'll be a couple of days."

"Shit! Were there witnesses? What did he look like?"

"He was in a hoodie. Didn't see his face. But there's plenty of cameras in the street – police said they'd check them."

"Cool – no, it's not cool. Fuck, Sam!"

"And I've told the bank – they've cancelled the cards already."

"But – how can you be so calm, man?"

"It happened, 'kay? It's over. Now get us a beer and tell me about your trip. How's the nightlife in Newcastle these days?"

## **42. Westminster**

The pub is much changed from the last time I was here. For a start, it's packed with Friday night office types keen to start their weekend with a drink and a bitch about their work, their bosses, their partners ... anything that comes to a mind marinated in alcohol.

Somehow Falc has managed to grab the same snug where we met on that cold February night. It seems so long ago: much has happened in the past three months. The air I pull into the space this time is much warmer, with hints of eager growth and blossoms wound within its vortices.

Falc's heat, too, is a swirl of vortices. I can tell without the need for close inspection that the man is not happy to be here. I make an effort at a genuine smile as I approach him.

"You gave me a sodomite to ride? You know I hate sodomites!"

His whisper is loud enough to draw the frowning attention of the closest drinkers.

"Behave, Falc. I'll get you a lager, yes?"

Clumsily, he pushes his empty glass across the table. He's not yet used to the bulk of the outfit he wears. I dread to imagine how the poor security guard suffers within him.

"Why here?"

I ignore the question and turn towards the bar, letting Sam take control of our flesh – he has a knack of getting quick service in even the most crowded venue.

Why here? I don't really know. For me, the pulling of a Vital Breath into the Outer World is hard work. The last part of the job is to plant a ruse in the nascent heat – a location where the Guardian and the newly arrived rider can meet to discuss tasks to be performed. The rusing needs to be done quickly, too, before both Vital Breaths settle into their respective minds.

Maybe I thought Falc liked this place. At least the barmaid is more cheery this time round.

Sam buys four pints, grabs a passing tray and propels us back through the scrummage to the relative safety of the snug. Falc takes a glass as soon as it is within his shaky reach and necks the drink in half a dozen gulps.

"I thought that host might prove to be feisty. Shift over: you know I prefer my back to the wall."

The stare he casts at me is almost feral. When he finally slides along the padded bench, he does it grudgingly. I ignore his outrage, slip into the gap and ease myself down. It's a tight fit, possibly too close for Falc's comfort, but the less space between us, the less chance of people overhearing our conversation.

"You reek!" he whispers.

"You mean physically?"

The man shakes his head as he reaches for a second beer. "Not the flesh. Another source." A second later and the glass in his hand is half-emptied. "I can feel you still have it."



"The Band? Oh yes. I've developed an intimate relationship with it." I hold out my arm for his inspection, watch his eyes as they sense for the weave of metal and stone wedded to my bones.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me! It's in the flesh? What have you done, Kal?"

"I've been surviving, Falc. No thanks to you."

"How?"

I can tell he has no interest in my well being. The creases across his broad brow and the juddering cycles of his heat tell me that he's already considering the implications and possibilities arising from the Band's unexpected location. "How the hell are you going to pass it on to the next Guardian?"

"It is what it is; it does as it sees fit."

"We could sever the arm, extract the bone. Pretend that it's a saint's relic ..."

"It burrowed its way there. I expect it'll pop back out again when it's ready. So why do you hate sodomites?"

I throw him the question to distract him. I remember how the Band had tugged at my Vital Breath, that night when we had visited Spar and the Bull-shell so soon after my own summoning.

I can't afford to let him slip the clasps of his host's mind, not yet.

"Huh? Oh, I got hanged for it a while back. Let the bastard I was riding have a couple of hours of fun with his friends before I finished up and headed back home. But the place got raided and everything turned into a circus."

"Shit, Falc. I'm sorry. But a render's a render, however it's done."

"Twenty minutes I dangled on the end of that rope. At least twenty minutes. Maybe half an hour. It *hurt*, Kal! Bastard hangman knew exactly how to string up a body for the best entertainment, and bugged if I could render while that flesh still fought for breath."

The memory must have re-triggered his need for alcohol. He remembers to wipe the ale's froth from his mouth before he makes a start on the third pint.

"They say a hanging teaches lessons. It taught me to loathe sodomites!"

I take a sip from the last pint before my companion can thief it. The movement of the Band is enough to pull him away from his painful reverie.

"So why am I here? What needs to be done? I take it we're still in London"

"You're here because I need some answers from you."

"Fuck! I ain't in no state for quizzes, Kal. Not tonight. I'm stuck in the head of a shit-stabber who lives in the worst cesspit this planet has ever managed to grow and the bastard ..." he points at his chest "... turns out to be stronger than most. I need a couple more days to break him ..."

"Do I look interested in your problems?"

If there was venom in the man's stare before, its potency doubles now.

"You abandoned me, Falc, without a fucking clue about what was going down. *'These are the soils and waters of your birth, Kal,'* – that's what you told me, as if I had some sort of magic trick to sort out the problem. You fed me a pile of bollocks and, like the idiot monkey I am, I swallowed each and every one of them."

I'm still whispering, but I'm aware the whisper is growing louder. I don't bother to check if the crowds around us are taking an interest in our argument; I'm enjoying this passion of facts.

"You are going to answer my questions, and you are going to answer them here and now, yes?"

I can't read his mind, but his heat, this close, is an open book to me. I can see the lie of agreement forming in its folds split moments before his neck muscles ready the head for a nod.

"Oh, Falc. You need to be more honest with me!" I take the opportunity to lean on his broad shoulder, bringing my lips close to his ear.

"This is the way things are going to go. You are not going to calm me down with platitudes and wait for your chance to walk out of that door and into the traffic. You are not going to render, because if you do then I will bounce you straight back out, you hear me? And I promise you this: the body I pull you into will be secured so you can't move, not even to piss or shit. And then I'll get on one of those wonderful trains of which this wonderful city has so many and I'll travel – what, thirty miles? forty? – and I will *torture* you. I will torture you in your fleshy suit for *days* and ..."

I grasp his shoulder more tightly. "And if I accidentally render you before I'm done I'll bounce you back out again and *repeat* the process. You understand me, Falc? I will keep on torturing you until you beg me for the sweet bliss of a hangman's noose. And then I will ask you my questions, and you will answer them: fully; and truthfully."

I lean away and take another sip from the glass still in my hand.

"Because, my friend," I conclude, "this monkey is done with being fucked up the arse by tossers like you!"

~~~~~

Whatever interest Falc had in sousing his host's flesh in alcohol has gone. The silence between us stretches to near ten minutes before he raises his eyes from their contemplation of the table's chipped varnish and brings them to face me.

In a voice that is almost as calm as his heat, he asks: "What do you want to know?"

"How did you manage to summon me?"

I'm fairly certain I know the answer already – modern day tranquillisers are such useful potions. While my reading of heat is good enough to spot the broad lies, I'm not so certain that I can catch an essential lie wrapped in a yarn of truths.

I need to hear, as well as see, that Falc has been persuaded of my earnestness. I need to calibrate his answers against the facts.

"I can pull people through when I need them. I don't need to be close to the Band, I don't need to be its Guardian. I needed you here, and ... I pulled you through."

The impossibility of his claim drops my jaw. Yet his heat remains serene.

"No," I protest. "Spar would have sensed ..."

He's shaking his head. "Tincas helps. She ... I don't know how ... she shields the release of energies, somehow. The Guardian never knows."

A buzz of chemical shock moves from my belly to my extremities, tightening skin and raising hairs as it passes.

"You mean to say that while we've been sitting here you could have been pulling people through and I wouldn't know it?"

*"You think I haven't been trying?"* The wave of scarlet anger across his heat is immediate, and almost as immediately quenched. A hint of rue twists at one side of his mouth. "It's blocking me. Something in the Band, or maybe your flesh ... I don't know. Something will not permit me to do it."

I have no thoughts to utter. I can only react: "Is this your magic or can others ...?"

"It is my birthright, Tincas's gift to her own. We don't talk of it."

"Shit!"

It takes me at least a full minute to come to terms with what Falc has told me. To his credit, the man doesn't take the opportunity of my shock to escape.

Yet the claim does make sense.

"Why did you bring me through into this body?"

Again the rueful smile. "I wasn't thinking too clear at the time, Kal. The fear – it was growing stronger, and Bull's actions that night when he brought us all through ... it made no sense! Spar had asked me to keep an eye on her boy and, when I made my decision, the boy was the closest flesh to aim you at. I knew the stupidity of it as soon as I'd done it, but by then you were here and it was too late."

The shock of the revelation begins to wear off as Falc offers his explanation. With a little nudge from Sam, who can barely follow the gist of our exchanges, I start to order my thoughts and fears and consider the questions I need to ask.

"Why did you bring *me* through?"

"I wasn't lying, Kal. We all know that this city – this is your city, your place, your waters. I ... well, I took a risk. Whatever's happening, it's happening here, in this city. And I guessed maybe you had a birthright, too: some secret magic that only you knew about, which could help us."

"You guessed wrong ..."

"Did I? Kal, the Band is embedded in your fucking *flesh* – never have I heard of such a thing happening. Never! And never has anyone ever managed to prevent me using *my* birthright. You've got a bucket load of magic going on in you, whether you're aware of it or not."

I have to smile when the realisation hits me: Falc has no idea about what has been happening since his last render. He certainly can't know about Sam.

I take a final sip from my neglected beer, now sadly flat, and pass the remainder to Falc. He doesn't refuse the peace offering, quickly pouring the liquid into his own half-empty glass.

"If you're lying," I say, "I can't spot it."

"I'm not your enemy, Kal. I want you to sort this problem – whatever it is."

"Okay, then. Let's start with the immediate problem. What can you tell me about The Company. Like: who are they; and why are they after the Band?"

## 43. Westminster

Soho didn't exist, the last time I was here in the Lonely City. At that time, the land north and west of the ramshackle labyrinth that was Whitehall Palace was mostly farmed: cattle; chickens; cabbages – except for the spaces enclosed for the King's hunt, of course, though there was no King available for hunting during the Commonwealth.

Because I've seen maps of the modern city, and because of my ready access to Sam's memories – his many nocturnal adventures in Earl's Court – I can comprehend the speed of the city's westwards march along the Thames. But until today I hadn't seen it for myself.

The spirit of old Southwark never died; instead it crossed the river and moved west with the rest of the city, coming to roost here amid this jumble of wide avenues and narrow alleys. Everywhere I look I see hawkers and entertainers, shops spattered with visitors mouthing a thousand different tongues. The pleasure palaces are gaudy and ornate, their bright lights sparkling and flashing even when their doors are closed and bolted. Ale houses bolster against hostelryes serving foods I haven't tasted in centuries ... again, this new world overwhelms me!

Sam thinks the whole experience is tawdry: too many tourists gorging on overpriced tat celebrating a country, now called Britain, that none of the locals really believe in – a set of colours and patterns and symbols designed mainly to help milk coins from purses.

My host is not in the mood to give me time to wander these streets collecting sights and sounds and smells. No, the man has other business here today: angry business. In the three months I've been back in the Outer World, I've witnessed him run through the complete dictionary of temperaments. But never has he nurtured an emotion to such an intensity as this.

I'm going to enjoy witnessing Sam *eviscerate* his lover.

~~~

Three nights ago I had asked Falc: "What can you tell me about The Company," and the story he offered me was marvellous.

"I first came across them," he started, relaxing into the distraction of story, "in Kemet – Egypt as it is now – in the sedge lands where the river mazes itself."

"Before or after Keftiu?"

"Some time after, I reckon. They were all fighting each other, and their gods were multiplying like maggots in dung – a good place for us to live. At first we thought The Company was just another religious sect, nothing to care about, though they worshipped a form of Ishtar and she certainly came to the sedge lands from the East."

"Keeping track of human pantheons is not one of my strengths," I admitted.

Falc had gazed at me with condescending eyes – a first for that evening's meeting. "It's enough to know that the Band was in the Akkadian lands before it fetched west."

From the start The Company were, as Mada had said, a nuisance: their worship of a Goddess who could be both amorous and spiteful within the same breath, and who allegedly resurrected herself after death, combined with rumours of a magic ring that offered its wearer the gift of resurrection, was a popular mix. Unlike Mada, Falc chose not to blame me for originating these stories.

"They sound harmless," I said.

"That's what I thought, too," admitted Falc, "except that they had a weird knack of finding us."

"Humans can't see the Band's energies."

"You can."

"Not always. You've made enough jokes about my clumsy readings over the years to make that point clear."

Falc shrugged. "The fact remains, these Company men – always men they are, never women – can track us, or maybe they can read something in the host's own auras ..."

"... which again I cannot see."

"How many different kinds of blindness do you cultivate, Kal?"

"Enough. So they can spot us. Can they resist a mounting?"

"No. Riding them is easy – a hundred percent human in that respect."

"You've ridden one?"

"The simplest way to cull their numbers is to ride them and render back out."

I had frowned at my empty glass. "I still don't see the danger."

"Oh, that comes when they capture one of us. They have this ritual, see – don't ask me what it involves because I don't know. None of us do. All we do know is that at the end of the ritual the flesh dies and the Vital Breath renders ... straight into the clutches of Spoy."

~~~~

"Watch where you're going, mate: you near pushed me in the fucking gutter there!"

The commotion pulls me away from my reverie. A quick check of the blood confirms that Sam is letting his anger fester, the constant re-run of conversations and assumptions giving the body's briny liquids an ochre tang like allspice and cumin.

I launch demands at the reptile regions squatting atop the spinal pole: an ease of breathing, a moderation of heartbeat.

*~ Slow down, Sam. Save your temper for those who deserve it, yes?*

If the man hears me, he chooses not to acknowledge my advice. Nevertheless, he swerves past the next pedestrian rather than barging into them.

Marc works in an office somewhere off Berwick Street – a hub of creative talents within this most diverse and bohemian district. Sam has the address but, surprisingly, he's never visited his partner's alleged workspace: he prefers to meet his man in the gay bars of Old Compton Street rather than await his attendance outside the office block.

As far as I can tell, Sam's current state of mind has nothing to do with any of my activities. No, the trigger for this ongoing rage had been the mobile phone.

My host and his boyfriend had parted this morning on relatively good terms. Sam has something called 'flexi-time', which seems to mean that he can turn up at his office whenever he feels like it and, if the calculations work in his favour, he can leave early, too. Marc, on the other hand, keeps to more regular hours and usually leaves the flat before eight o'clock. The arrangements allow them to stagger their morning routines – a good thing as neither man reaches his social peak before midday.

Sam found the mobile phone tucked far to the back of a deep drawer, wrapped in one of Marc's scruffier hoodies. I was surprised that he had not discovered it before, given his addiction to neatness in all things. I should have been more surprised by the idea that Marc owned anything as common as an unbranded, shapeless grey sweater.

Modern magic, as much as I love it, has its downsides. Sam had been struggling to extract a replacement handset from his telephone provider for days. Marc's suggestion that they got the insurance company to pay for a new phone had not been welcomed with open arms by the lad, who had to develop additional elaborations to buttress his initial lie; telling the insurance folks about his 'mugging' is not on his list of Things To Do.

Instead he went out and bought himself a 'pay-as-you-go' chip – the terminology defeats me: I've never been comfortable with coins and contracts – to put in his old handset. Which was missing. Which led to the flat being strip-searched. Which, long after Sam should have been heading to work, resulted in the discovery of Marc's hidden phone.

Then the stew thickened.

Rather than fix the phone and rush out of the door, Sam had sat down and scrolled through the text messages stored on the handset. Then he had listened to the voicemail messages. After that, he checked through the address book before returning to the texts – this time with a paper calendar on his lap.

Were there tears at this point? I'm not sure: to be honest I wasn't paying much attention. I had – and still have – other things to worry about. Sam had the will of his mind and body; what he chose to do with it was his own business.

His first phone call had been to Marc's employers: "He's not picking up his calls and I need to reach him urgently," he had claimed.

"I'm afraid Mr Gelder no longer works here."

"What do you mean? He's been working with you for five years."

"I'm sorry, but he's not in the directory."

Alerted by the sudden clench in Sam's stomach, my interest in the unfolding drama perked up. It took me a moment to realise that my host was holding his breath, as if unwilling to release words into the plastic at his mouth. Sam is a good swimmer – he can hold his breath comfortably for over a minute – but as the pause in the conversation became more uncomfortable I triggered his diaphragm, emptying his lungs in a slow whistle.

It was enough to rouse him from his shock. A minute later he scrawled the number of Marc's boss across the calendar still draped over his knee.

*~ Do you know what questions you want to ask?*

*~ Fuck off, demon.*

*~ Here's the plan: make tea; drink tea; think of some questions; phone boss.*



*~ I told you to shut up and fuck off!*

*~ You're no good to me dead. At least remember to breathe.*

The second phone call was made with one hand, the other being wrapped tightly around the barrel of a hot cup. The boss – Steve, who apparently conforms to Sam's age and type preferences, but also had the (mis)fortune to be a happy father to two toddling kids – was surprised to receive Sam's call.

"He hasn't worked here for six months, mate. He took redundancy. Hey – does this mean you two have split up? Marc never said anything, but I wondered why you weren't there at his leaving do ..."

"No ... well, we still share the flat ..."

"Can't be comfortable ..."

"We cope ... it's cheaper ..."

"Hey, weren't you in the papers a few weeks back? I'm sure I read your name ..."

"Yeah, maybe ..."

"You must be chuffed ... was it the Mirror? Might have been the Standard. Yeah, that's right: there was a photo of you ..."

"My Dad killed my Mum."

To his credit, my host can say these words out loud without tone or hiatus catching at his throat. He seems to take a small dose of amusement from the reaction of those hearing the phrase.

"Oh ... Shit! Listen man – shit! I didn't mean ..."

"That's okay, Steve. Nothing to apologise for."

"Fucking twat – can't believe I said ..."

"Honest, there's nothing to worry about."

"I'm so sorry, Sam. About your parents, I mean. That's ... terrible! And you just separated from Marc ..."

"He was about to move out when it all went down ... I'm glad he stuck around – he was a big help."

"I can't believe he didn't tell you about the redundancy, mate."

"Well, maybe he did. My mind's been all over the place these past few weeks. I probably forgot ..."

"I can understand that. Shit!"

"Did he join another firm, then?"

"Not that I've heard – not in this neck of the woods, anyway."

"So you don't have a number for him?"

"Sorry, mate, I don't. Only his mobile. Actually, you've reminded me! When he left, he asked me to look after some stuff for him. The thing is, I'm finishing up here next week – I've got a new job ..."

"That's fantastic news," said Sam, spilling a scald of tea over his hand. "Is it a promotion?"

"It's a fair whack more money, yeah. But I've got to clear out my space. I'll need to get hold of him so he can come and pick it up."

"Is there much of it? I can pop over and get it for him ..."

"There's a box of papers – oh, and a briefcase. Hey, if you could pick it up that'd be fantastic ..."

"No problem, Steve. It'll get me out of the house."

"I'm sure he won't mind – it's mainly drawings and stuff."

"I can be there before lunch if that's good for you."

~~~~~

Thinking about Marc makes me itch – like a rash in the ears: too difficult to scratch and yet too irritating to ignore.

Until today Sam had not taken much interest in how his lover earned his wage. The technicalities of graphic design leaves him cold, and Marc's office gossip was centred on commissions and accounts rather than Sam's more racy 'who's fucking who for a promotion' chat.

The man is in a hurry to reach the office before midday: he is very keen to see what Marc's box and briefcase contain, looking for any scrap of evidence that might help support his

current working hypothesis. He has convinced himself that Marc is having an affair – and nothing I can say, or do, will dislodge that thought from the centre of his head.

Under other circumstances – a normal host, for instance – I would not have put up with such an obsession. There's things I need to be doing, people I need to see. But I can't blank Sam anymore, and any attempt to overwhelm his senses with spin could lead to us both being harmed. I could still ruse him, replacing his fixation with a new outlet, but I doubt the deception would last for more than a few minutes. No, it's much better that I leave him be for now: much safer that Marc remains the focus of his passion.

This level of anger – it could unseat me, render me, leaving Sam alone in this skull.

Just like I rendered Grussa so many centuries ago.

I cannot – must not – let Sam repeat my defining mistake!

~~~~~

Back in the pub, three days ago, I had asked Falc: "Did you see Boude's drawings?"

His story finished, and more beer procured from the bar, Falc had settled and relaxed. The tremor had left his hands and his heat was growing stronger, signs that the battle taking place within the security guard's flesh was drawing towards its inevitable conclusion.

"Did Boude draw them?"

"Yes ... unless there's others of us here, others pulled out by one of you Tincas folk while I wasn't looking."

He winced as he took hold of my arm and turned it this way and that, examining the buried artifact.

"Three threads," he had announced. "You and me, for certain. The third is drawn out a fair distance ... but the anchorage is wrong for Tincas. Fuebe, maybe? But Boude's like you: Mescwar."

"Mada's here in London still."

His face told me plainly that the news was unwelcome. Which begs a question: how can one woman manage to upset so many?

"Mada lacks the skills for such artwork."

"So do I. Which leaves Boude as the only artist available."

"It was subtle work," he said, snatching up a half-full bag of crisps left abandoned on our table by an over-drunk office worker. "But I don't recall her leaving such messages before. She's happiest telling people what she thinks, not hinting at it."

For some reason, his assertion had troubled me. "She told me she had left instructions."

"That's what I mean. I don't doubt she scrawled the message on the wall – typically blunt of the woman: go here; do this. But the sketches – I can't dangle a mark in the free air. I wouldn't know how to start such work. I'd need a solid surface ..."

"... like a wall."

He had gulped at his beer and nodded his agreement at the same time, careful not to spill a drop. "Maybe she's been learning some magic of her own?"

"Maybe. But could you make sense of them?"

He had shaken his head, though his eyes had been cast towards the table's patterns of grain and knot. Then, looking up: "The feeling that comes to me, when I call them back to memory ... it's like a regret and a hope, both at the same time. Things ending, and things beginning. Like winter must die so spring may return."

The idea still worries me. Endings. Beginnings. Maybe Boude has always had an artist's inspiration in her fingers, but Falc is right: it's not like her to keep secrets – especially not from her own kind. She is still my Captain.

I have to abandon these thoughts. After some searching and backtracking of steps Sam has finally located the entrance to Marc's former offices. Already he's talking to the acne-pocked receptionist.

As we were parting, I had asked Falc if any of The Company had been tracking Sam, before I had been pulled through.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I thought there might be, but the signs ... they didn't tally right. I'd need to do more checking."

"Tell me," I had said, keeping the tone of my order even, a small reminder of my earlier threats.

Already halfway out of the door, he had turned and offered me a long, careful stare.

"Cuis custodiet custodiens, Kal?"

*Cuis custodiet custodiens* ... remembering his words, I feel a sudden desire blossom within my Vital Breath. I, too, want to know what treasures may lie hidden within Marc's abandoned box and briefcase.

## 44. Hackney

Falc has managed to find Mada with no help from me. As I push my way through the reluctant door and enter the musty space I spot them sitting together on Mada's blankets. Neither looks up as I push the door wider and pull through my recently acquired box of papers, with the remnants of the briefcase balanced on top of it.

Their lack of interest surprises me. "I've got a problem," I announce as I pitch the box to the floor. The briefcase clatters on the stone slabs as it parts company with its temporary shelf.

"Heh. We got a problem too." says Mada, finally looking up in my direction.

"This one's important." Having deposited the paperwork, I head back outside to retrieve the two rucksacks I've brought with me. Falc stands up as I push the door closed and dump the bags at my feet; he makes no effort to help me.

"Have you seen today's newspapers?"

"This morning's? Yeah."

"No, the later ones."

Rather than join in the conversation, Mada ruffles the newspaper they had been reading back into its folds and holds it up for me to see.

"Front page, Kal," says Mada. "Big headlines. I ain't got the know of the little words yet, but the first one says: 'Murder', with one of them question thingies tucked on the end."

*~ Fuck! Isn't that your girl ...?*

This isn't how I had plotted the course of this encounter; a minute in and already my personal agenda has been derailed.

A couple of dozen quick strides brings me to the rug. Even before I reach out and take the paper from Mada's outstretched hand I can gather the gist of the story: missing girl

discovered in wasteland – autopsy to be performed – witnesses called for – foul play not ruled out ...

"Mada says this is Boude's host. How did she die?"

"I thought you could read, Falc."

He shakes his head. I can see by his heat and his stance that he has achieved utter control of his host. "In this body? No, he can't focus on the words well enough for me to make them out. The letters keep on dancing around."

~ *Dyslexia.*

Sam's internal explanation quickly supplies me with details of this novel medical condition.

*~ A couple of teachers thought I had it, once. They didn't get it: it was more fun pretending I couldn't read than writing some stupid stories for them.*

It seems I have the luck of the damned.

I answer Falc's question: "She was planning to overdose on tranquillisers. She told me the host was moving towards death in any case."

"Tranquillisers, huh? Where did she get them from?"

"From me."

Mada is rocking her chin deep enough to touch her chest. "Did you give her a bottle? Them bottles are tricky buggers: they come with your name and address printed on 'em." She reaches out to snatch the paper back. "Not that I ever had an address, mind. But I've seen it on bottles I found, here and there."

I pull up the memory of my last meeting with Boude.

"No bottle," I confirm. "She took them loose. She was clean when she left me, wearing her original clothes. She emptied her pockets before she went, too. She knew what she was doing. So why the concern, Falc?"

"Mada tells me that this isn't the first time Boude got her photo in the papers."

"Missing girlie," agrees Mada. "It was turning into quite a story, heh. Folks round here love a good missing girlie story."

"Did anyone see you with her?"

I spend a minute summarising Boude's last sojourn in the Outer World, for Falc's benefit, and the steps she had taken to disguise herself.

"But she only changed her face after the first reports, huh?"

"Yes ..."

"And she visited you before? Was she wearing the girl's own clothes then?"

My unhappy scowl is all the answer he needs: "Then we've got a problem, Kal. You can bet your dragon's bollocks that some neighbour will have seen her near your rooms, maybe talking or walking with you ... it only takes one monkey to connect the fruit to the tree and you'll find yourself served up as the centrepiece at the feast."

"Maybe ... but there must have been plenty of places she could have been seen before she took counter-measures. Around here, for instance."

My last assertion is a guess; I had never thought to ask Boude about the detail of her movements, or where she had met Mada. She is my Captain: my trust in her is implicit.

Mada dismisses the idea with a wave of the newspaper. "What about young Sammy's lover boy? I knows he saw Boude: she told me the problems she'd been causing them love birds."

"Who's Sammy?" asks Falc. And then: "Oh, you mean Kal's host ..."

"How closely did you watch him, the last time you were here?"

"I never talked to the man. I saw him with Sam a few times, out and about. He wasn't my first concern ... there was something about him that made me itch."

"He's going to tell," I agree. "If he hasn't already. But I don't think it'll be the police he'll run to."

Mada looks confused, but the glance Falc offers me is enough to bring me to a decision.

"So what do we do?"

"You ain't making sense, either of you!" Despite her apparent age, Mada is quick to bring herself to her feet. "I ain't got the patience for games, you hear me? I need the full story if you wants my help, Kal."

"Here's not safe," says Falc.

"Nowhere's safe," I say, ignoring Mada's growing frustration.

"That would explain the bags and boxes, then."

"Dammit Kal! You talks to me! You both tell me what the fuck is going on. Cuz I got a good hidey hole here and if you's two think I'm going to abandon it on a whim ..."

## **45. Southwark**

The suggestion to move south of the river came from Falc: "The place is secure and I've got the keys."

"You sure about that, heh?" Mada was still unhappy about moving out of her church. "I knows there was a vampire nesting in that place until a few days back. Who's to say there ain't others with keys to your locks?"

"I've already changed the locks. The vampire won't be coming back."

"Say that again, laddie."

To help hasten our departure, Falc and I treat ourselves to a minicab. Mada refuses to countenance such a mode of transport so we leave her muttering vague promises to make her own way to the warehouse before the end of the day. She has already turned to the task of sorting through her many bags, separating her more useful garbage from its detritus padding, when we exit the church.

We don't talk during the journey. At Falc's insistence, the cab driver drops us at the south side of Tower Bridge, leaving us a good half hour walk to our final destination. I wait until the cab has pulled away before handing Falc one of my rucksacks.

"There's something I want you to do."

"I'm listening," he says.

"The guardian's guard ... I want you to pull someone into his head."

Falc is already walking. "How am I going to do that, Kal? You've got the Band."

"You told me the other night. About Tincas's gift, yes? I want you to use your special magic ..."



Watching the colour leach out of Falc's face is as fascinating as watching the man's heat bleach and shrivel. His shock is almost total; to his credit, he remembers to keep on walking, one foot in front of the other.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What, you let the alcohol seep beyond the flesh? It's a simple request. I need to know how much of a threat that person is to me – to us – and the only way to get that information is through you."

Falc doesn't answer. We walk the rest of the way in a wordless silence.

~~~

He attacks me immediately after securing the chain and padlock to the inside of the warehouse doors. Without thought I duck, employing one of Sam's old signature moves on the rugby pitch to leave the man grasping air as he flies over our back. Straight away we're back on our feet and leaping after him. As he rolls onto his back Sam brings our legs up so that when we make contact with his chest the full weight of our body pins his upper arms to the floor.

Sam wants to hit him, hit him hard in the face to knock teeth loose. The anger that he's been saving for Marc has festered too long; it needs a release.

*~ Leave him to me, yes? I agreed to let you sort Marc with no interference; now let me sort this one my way.*

Our fist connects with Falc's chin, but Sam pulls the weight of the strike at the last moment.

*~ Marc is mine to hurt, demon! Don't you dare think I don't know what you're planning!*

Already Falc is squirming, trying to throw us from our seat on his chest. Casually, Sam straightens our hips, bringing our full weight to rest on the man's shoulders. He considers punching the man again, but then shrugs and relents.

*~ Do it your way.*

I assume the flesh and move my hand from his chin to his forehead, where I press down hard with the open palm. At the same time I bring my left arm level with his eyes.

"Does it still reek?"

It takes an effort for him to focus his sight away from the Band. The look he gives me is rage-laden but his heat, swirling around and through the concrete floor, speaks of fear.

"Why did you attack me?"

Spittle edges across his lips as his tongue searches for words.

"The thing is, Falc, you can't freak out on me. Not now, yes?"

"You can't know! You mustn't! Nobody ... no one! How ...?"

"You told me."

His heat flares with refusal. His neck would shake his head, if I let it.

"Do you remember our meeting? In the pub?"

I interpret his snort as an affirmative.

"We chatted about your dislike of sodomites, remember? And then I told you what would happen if you chose not to stick around. I hope you remember that."

"Yeah." His teeth are tight and his lips pulled taut in a grimace.

"Good. By the end of that chat, you had drunk three or four beers. You fumed for a while, spent a good half hour trying to pull someone through from the Band. But that didn't work, so we moved on to discuss how – and why – you pulled me into this body."

His eyes are widened to full circles, their whites a flash of horror.

"No! You lie! How can you know ...?"

"Then we talked about The Company. Do you remember telling me that story?"

"The Company ... yeah."

"So you remember the sodomites and the threats, yes? And The Company."

"Yes! Get off! My fucking arms ..."

"But you don't remember Tincas's gift."

His face screws, maybe from pain, maybe disgust. I don't care much about the source. "Didn't happen!" he protests.

"Which bit didn't happen, Falc? The bit where you tried pulling someone through, or the bit where we discussed secret magic powers?"

"None of it!"

For some reason, I believe him. And yet I am certain of my memory – the taste of Roman coppers is entirely absent from the sides of my tongue ...

"Listen, Falc, and listen good. I think I know what's going on here. I think we're both right."

It takes a couple of seconds for my words to register. I wait until the angles of his face relax towards puzzlement.

"Do this for me: close your eyes and call back the memory of our meeting. I want you to remember the pub, the snug we sat in. Do it now, yes?"

"Get your fucking arm out of my face!"

It is a start. Slowly I move my left arm, and the Band within it, away. I see relief dampen his eyeballs to a shine before he closes his lids.

"We're in the pub, together, sat side-by-side in the snug. It's crowded, many strangers. You drink a beer, and another. Visualise it, Falc. Hear the noises, recall the smells."

"I'm there."

"Why do you hate sodomites?"

"Because they hanged me for it."

"And then I threaten you. Check your recollection, Falc. Check for things out of place. Noises. Stenches. Colours out of kilter. What happens next?"

"We're talking about The Company – about Kemet."

"How do we get from my threats – which pissed you off – to your story?"

"You just change the subject."

"Suddenly?"

"Yeah. Like the flick of a switch."

"What can you see, Falc? What are you tasting? What touches you?"

"Crowds. The Band – of course. Beer, seats, the table ... it's a fucking pub, Kal!"

"What can you hear?"

"Chatter. Horses."

"Horses?"

"Yeah, horses. From outside. Hooves on the cobbles ..."

"Now I want you to think, Falc. I want you to concentrate as hard as you can on my threats, and the story of The Company. Keep both instances in your head, yes? And the sound of horses."

"Yeah ..."

"Falc ... when was the last time you saw a fucking horse in London? Open your ears, and open them again. Listen for the real sounds. Car engines. Police sirens. Brake pads. You hear them, you know you can hear them. Not horses. There were no horses in that part of London. You know this. You can remember it. Push against the hooves, Falc. Force your thoughts into the crack ..."

The moment the man spasms I push myself clear of his body. I keep in a crouch to one side of him, ready to react to any attack he may throw at me. But in the space of three fast heartbeats I relax and slow my breathing, sit back onto the concrete and watch.

Watching the human form in full fit, I can start to appreciate the artistic nature of the affliction: the shapes that the individual parts of the limbs throw as muscles strain and shake against their joists and joints. The knock of the former security guard's head against the harsh, flat concrete is arrhythmic and, after a short while, bloody.

*~ Jesus, man! What did you do to him?*

The spectacular performance has achieved what I was not able to do. Sam is forgetting his anger, letting slip the pressures of hate inflating his sinuses. When the blood spatter splashes closer, he moves our foot out of the way and shuffles further back.

I ignore his question. My thoughts are entirely with Falc, not the form he wears. Physical injuries can be healed.

All of us from the stones have been caught in a fit – mounting a new host is not without risks to the rider. Triggering a fit is an occupational hazard; I'm confident Falc can survive this without rendering.

But the pain ... I remember the pain. To ride the mind of a human is an act of supreme balance, a judgement of when to let the currents and counter-currents of electrical impulses break across the Vital Breath, or pass around, or bob us between shallow and deep. For the most part I do not need to consider my immediate environment, and only think of it when planning a ruse, or a cloak. An effective blank is a question of matching the weft of my Vital Breath to the host's internal weather and then superimposing my desired climate across synapses so that I can loosen the host's spirit and place it somewhere safe. Even spin – where

the host's senses and thoughts are mixed – relies on the brain's impulses not losing their raw coherence.

Coherence is the key to everything, and it is coherence that is lost when the brain fits. The loss of relativity, the arrival of random spark – it burns! Where once the mind, and the Vital Breath linked to it, controlled the flesh, now the flesh imposes its own rebellion on nerve and synapse. The great rivers of sight and sound and smell and taste and touch and balance and heat overflow their courses to scourge across memory and thought. Each new contraction punches at the rider, every spasm returns to us as a rapture of incineration.

There is no place to hide in such a storm: even the reptile regions, normally buffered against the ebbs and flows of the wider mind as they continue their metronymic activities of lung-pull and heartbeat, even those regions react to the seizure, forcing lances through the Vital Breath as they fight to maintain control.

The first time a host of mine fitted, I tried to escape the pain by rendering. It took me the best part of a century to repair my tattered essences and restore the story of me to myself.

Sometimes even I learn from my mistakes.

## **46. Southwark**

"Well, it ain't Boude's work. She ain't got the tact, not the skills, for it."

There's a dread within me, like a hollow tugging at my intestines. Hearing Mada's conclusion, I can feel the pull on my guts intensify.

Falc remains unconscious, his heat no more than a shimmer tight on the skin of his host. I had expected an inquisition from the old woman when she arrived, but the shine of the glyphs still floating in the warehouse's space had quickly caught her attention.

"Who does have such skills?"

"Yorga is good; Heszie is better – all the horsies have a good eye for line. But none of 'em has the force to make the lines stick together for long."

"What about the other folks? How about Fuebe?"

"Them?" Mada takes the opportunity to spit her contempt across the concrete. "No. The same with your lot – you got the strength to make something stick to the air for more than a day, but you ain't got the talent, heh."

Still my stomach knots.

"What about Falc?"

She shakes her head, loosening curls of matted grey hair from her coat collar's grasp.

"Tincas? Their art lies in movement – probably all that time they spend dancing on poles and ropes. This ..." she spits again "... this is solid."

She waves her hand through the closest pattern to demonstrate. "See? Don't move an inch. What did you do to 'im, anyways?"

How do I explain this to Mada?

"How different are we from each other?" I start. "Not you and me – I know our differences: I like washing myself. I mean how different are the folks from different stones. How much does our home stone affect who we are and what we can do?"

"Now there's a big question, with big boots for the lacing. What's this got to do with your punchbag over there, heh?"

"Well, like these glyphs. I asked who could do such work and you talk about people's abilities according to their home stone, not themselves. Does it go further than how well we can write and what we can write on?"

"I've got my ears on, lad. Spit it out."

I take a couple of deep breaths, hoping that the action will loosen my dread from its tightening coil.

"Falc revealed a secret to me, the last time we met. 'Tincas's gift', he called it." The puzzle on Mada's face is clear, and her heat suggests that her feeling is genuine. "It's an – ability – that I've never heard about before."

"I'm buying extra ears for this one, Kal. Go on, spill it! You knows you want to."

"It's not the ability that worries me," I lie, making a special effort to keep my heat clean.

"Rather the fact that such abilities might exist."

Mada stays silent for a few seconds, letting her eyes unfocus as she considers the question.

"I need some help here. Nothing's right at the moment, something is going – or about to go – badly wrong and I still don't know how to deal with it."

The begging tone has an effect, bringing her eyes back into focus on me.

"The fishes could do this."

"What, someone from Ounous?"

She takes a moment to start unbuttoning her heavy overcoat. "Heh. They can write in water, and the message'll stick for days. Or so I hear – can't abide the wet, myself."

It makes sense, but: "I've never brought through someone from that stone. I don't recall anyone from there coming here."

"On occasion it happens, laddie. But only when needed, mind. Them folk can be nasty when stuck into a monkey. It's the legs: they can't get used to 'em."

Now it's my turn to look puzzled.

"Dolphins," she continues. "Whales. They're a sight more intelligent than monkeys, and less of a problem to ride. They like things to be simple and predictable, which suits me fine. But the Ounous folk are better at dealing with that sort of flesh."

"Why would we ever need to ride dolphins?"

"There you go, Kal, you and your monkey superiorities. 'Tain't pretty, nor clever, lad. Sometimes the Band likes to go swimming – it was the easiest way to get from place to place, before boats. Though other times the Band likes to move quick and will use birdies ..."

"... which is when someone from Onuun gets pulled through?"

"See? you can be clever sometimes. Heh!"

"It can't be much fun being stuck in a bird, though." I remember on one occasion being pulled through into the head of a dog – not even a wolf, but some mutt somewhere hot and damp.

"There you go again, lad, assuming the only mind worth having is a monkey mind. Some birdies have very clear thoughts about what they are and where they need to be. Starlings, for instance: too damn clever by half, them birdies."

*~ You're quite thick, for a demon. She's leading you down the garden path and you don't even notice. Were you really a dog, once? That could be cool!*

My host has a non-canine point.

"So maybe Onuun and Ounous give their folks extra gifts, like Tincas?"

"Mebbe so."

"And Fuebe?"

"We're the basic model, Kal. We're what the rest of you folks differ from. You still ain't told what special magic Falc can do, nor why you beat the shit out of him."

I glance at the prostrate form close by the warehouse door. He hasn't moved, beyond breathing. Without the benefit of his heat, I can't tell how Falc is coping inside the exhausted flesh.

I trust the woman less than I trust my own memories, but she is the only person around who might have a clue about what's going on.

"Falc claimed that he can summon people from the Band, without the Guardian being aware of it ..."

"Fuck off! He's lying!"

"... but when I mentioned it to him today, asked him to use his gift – the man went spare!"

"He must have been joking at you. No reason to damage him."

"Have you ever seen Falc crack a joke?"

Mada's shock is a mirror of Falc's earlier outrage. Unlike him, she appears to ride the tsunami of refusals rather than drown in it. Within seconds her heat loses its bleach as she reasserts control over her thoughts and emotions.

"To admit such a thing ... heh! You knows, I always said there's something not right about them Tincas folk ... but this?"

"Is such a thing possible?"

"Who knows, Kal! The Band, it's a pot of impossibilities as it is. Heh! I shouldn't be surprised at what it does." She takes a moment to drop her coat from her shoulders, letting it fold in great pleats to the floor. "Look at it now, wound around bones as it is. I never seen it change shape before that day, I can tell you for truth. Them burns still ache my eyes!"

Something in my heat must have caught her attention. It takes her three strides to bring her within my reach. I feel Sam prepare our muscles and balance our weight, ready to spring away from any attack, but she makes no attempt to touch or punch, or even look at our face.



"You ain't telling the full story," she says, clicking her head from side to side as she peers at the heat folding around my head. "I reckon you wants to, but – you're scared of it, laddie."

She steps back and sets her stare to javelin my eyes.

"Boude's mostly right about me. You knows it's true. And I'm saying this even though I can't stand being near the muscled bitch and all her moral certainties. But whatever else, Kal, you have to know – understand – I ain't got no plots in me. What you sees is what you gets, heh? I am what I am, and what I 'am' is a woman of Fuebe pulled through to the Outer World to protect the Band and its Guardian."

Carefully, she reaches out her hand to ours and takes our fingers into the curl of her palm. "Someone's put the fear in you; you're struggling to keep your shit together."

I want to tell her, trust her.

"What is Fuebe's gift to you?"

Her smile is soft, showing more in her eyes than her lips.

"We's got the know of energies, Kal. We can see the tides and eddies of life in the Outer World through the patterns the plants and birdies and animals make with rocks and soils. We can see the energies of belief and grief that come unbidden from monkeys and starlings alike. We can read the pulse of the Band like you reads a book. And we're good at it, Kal, the best. What we don't do is keep it a secret."

"So did Falc lie to me?"

She considers the question: "There's times the Band – it don't quite make sense, even to the best of us. Hints of actions beyond the story it tells. I've never heard a whisper of what you says Falc told ... but there's space for such magic, if you hear me clear."

It's enough for me. That and the absence of a copper tell in my mouth.

"You know my story," I start. "The important bits, at least. You know about Grussa."

"You're a burrow of mysteries, heh. We spent many a party in Fuebe, those of us who travel here, talking about how you broke into the Band, and what it might mean."

"From the moment Grussa mounted me, I could tell things were wrong. She could ruse me and cloak me, but they left traces – a sting of copper and bronze along the side of my tongue. That's how I learned when not to trust my thoughts, when to question my memory."

"Always the same, was it? This 'trace' of yours?"

"Yeah," I agree. "Do you remember what we talked about, that morning after the Band ... changed?"

She lets my hand slip from her grasp and returns to the mound of her coat, upon which she eases herself down. "That was a long walk today, what with them bags and all. I remember our chat: ghosties and ephemerals and stuff."

"That's it."

"You were worried someone – other than Sammy boy here – was playing in your head." She starts unlacing her boot, then halts mid-tug. "Ah! You tasted some copper, yes? Jumped to some conclusions – I has to say, not much of that chat made sense to me at the time."

"Something – some one – has been trying to ride me. I know you don't believe me ..."

"Didn't believe you. I don't rightly know what to believe now, what with the Band playing up and Falc's little secret and stuff."

"Falc didn't remember telling me about Tincas's gift. He got very passionate about it. I had to pin him down to talk to him."

Mada's eyes widen, as if she can already guess where I'm going with this.

"So we talked about that meeting: what I remembered of it, what he remembered. There's no doubt that we each believed our recollections. But while there was no bad tastes in my mouth, Falc ... someone had tampered with his memory: a cloak to suppress any mention of Tincas's gift."

"I'm struggling with this idea more than I'm struggling with my boots. Can you be sure?"

I shake my head. "Somehow I got him to question that point of his memory, and what he found was a tell ..."

"He tasted metals?"

"He said he heard horses, hooves on cobblestones. So I pushed him and he ... he broke the cloak, if that's what it was."

"Bugger me! I can see why such an idea might piss him off. Then he attacked you?"

I check on the man's body again. Like a fallen statue, he remains where he toppled.

"Falc did it to himself. Man had a seizure." Now the secret is out I can feel the pain in my midriff begin to lessen. Following Mada's lead, I sit down next to her, legs crossed. "The idea that something – some one – could cloak his memory ... it pole-axed him."

Mada keeps her eyes down, staring at concrete as she pulls the boot away from her foot. There's nothing in her heat, this time, to suggest that she doubts the honesty of my words, though what she thinks of them remains hidden to me.

"Some thing has tried to cloak me, and now some thing is trying to cloak Falc. Some thing that is not us. And the writing here in this space: we know Boude was here, yet you – you and Falc both – you say that this work is beyond her skill."

"Go on, lad. I reckon you're almost there."

"What if some thing used Boude to make this message? Some thing linked to the Band yet far stronger than any of us?"

## 47. Southwark

Marton's bolthole has been cleared; the only reminder of my previous visit here is the broken door frame and lock.

More positively, if any welcome thing can be found in our current plight, Falc is neither dead nor rendered. His recovery from the fit is taking some time; he regained consciousness within minutes of me sitting down, but even now his heat has the stability of a lamb staggering on its newborn legs. The shake has also returned to his hands.

The man is not happy: he seems to treat the idea of some power beyond his control tampering with his core memories as akin to physical rape – an assault so personal that he can barely hold the fact of it in his mind.

I don't think I've ever met someone from the Band as broken as Falc. I almost pity him.

He kept his flesh awake for a short time before returning it to thoughtless sleep, long enough to confirm that he had found three other instances of hoofbeats in his recent memory. He doubts that his host has changed the locks on the building, nor that he has spent most of his time clearing out the Vampire's room: "Not on my own," he told us, "but whenever I think of another person in the warehouse with me, I hear *that sound*."

As we helped him struggle up the bare steps to our newest refuge I asked him why the security guard had let Marton stay here. He scowled as he fought to recover his host's memories of the man.

"They ... they knew each other? I don't know – these memories are ... are scattered."

The decision to move into this space, this now de-cluttered room, was Mada's. She has convinced herself, and me, that the warehouse is a trap. Her first impulse had been to run back to Hackney.

"I'm not going without Falc," I told her.

Give the woman her due: she listened to me, accepted my arguments and then took control, telling me to move Falc upstairs before leading a thorough investigation of the entire building, checking and securing all possible points of entry.

It's hard to judge the age of her host – the flesh could be more than seventy years of age – yet she retains the nimbleness of a woman half a century younger, moving planks and building platforms so she could reach and check the high windows in the great space.

It was a relief when she tasked me with moving the papers that Sam and I had recovered only this morning upstairs. "You're getting in my way, lad. You ain't got a clue how to bolt these windows shut! You go get your evidence in order so you can show me it."

Sorting Marc's papers and drawings is a distraction for both of us; seeing the evidence has allowed Sam to re-kindle his passion and determination to learn the truth about his boyfriend.

He has had time to consider the implications; he no longer believes that Marc is having an affair. The re-evaluation has allowed him to temper his rage at the man; it gives his mind some clarity as he considers other possibilities. He's handling the problem like one of his office casework files, ordering and reordering papers into piles as he searches for the threads of a story between them.

His concentration gives me time to consider my own pile of worries, to which the man himself has added a new item.

Sam doesn't remember having sex with the security guard. He has no memory of stripping naked in the street, nor of the act itself, nor even discovering and exploring this room. In place of those memories stands the story he had told Marc, of being mugged on the way to work. I can recall the images and senses of the mugging from his recollections and they have the same tastes and shapes as any other memory.

When I compare his story to mine, both chime as genuine. When I visualise each scene, from his perspective and from mine, I taste no tang of metal, no outline of clipped coins.

Either Sam has found a way to check my ability to cloak his mind.

Or somebody has patched a very effective cloak to his autobiography.

~~~

I feel a – pain – in the tattered extremes of my heat, like a fine-tooth saw dragging across bone.

*« Open your eyes, Kal. »*

Sam has settled into the deep sleep where his mind's weather pulses in regular gusts, a giant's even breath rocking me in my living nest. My instinct is to resist the call: unlike my host I do not need the ease of dreamless rest, but I appreciate the solitude it advances me.

*« Open your eyes, Kal! »*

Against my preference I rouse myself to action, persuade the ocular muscles to align Sam's eyeballs forward, and tap his eyelids open.

The room in which we hide is lightless, a black canvas so total that no shape or outline can be detected. Not even the Lonely City's sulphur glare penetrates the dirt of the two windows tucked beneath the eaves of the ceiling. I can feel flat concrete running the length of Sam's left side, and his head rests awkwardly on one of his lumpy rucksacks. A sweet balm of chemicals has started to build in the reptile regions – soon they will separate most of his muscles from their nervy reins, a necessary preparation for another bout of dreaming. But not yet.

I rearrange my shape within his mind, detaching myself from my habitual hooks and clasps, and plough fresh furrows between my phantom eyes and my own weather patterns. As the connections settle, the room transforms into a rainbow of auroras: the purple-grey-green skirts outlining Mada's host and the ruddy muds of Falc's recovering form contrasting sharply with my own lemon-citrus exhibit. Seen directly, without the mediation of Sam's flesh, the display is strong and loud: the space between air molecules fills with fizzing echoes, like a boiling kettle heard through the jaw.

Again the rasp of the sharp saw nicks at my heat.

*« You took your time, lad. I needs some words with you. »*

Mada has extended a thread of her heat and hooked it to a hem of mine – a direct connection that allows me to hear her thoughts. To answer her I need to form my own thread and make a second connection.

Heat does not meld with heat; in the Outer World our energies repulse each other, refusing to touch even when our fleshy suits entwine and penetrate each other. And my control of my Heat is as clumsy as my ability to read the gossamer flares – I can spread my Vital Breath

into the aethers, and withdraw it into the flesh, and I have learned some skills to check the flutter of colours across fans and tendrils ... greater finesse defeats me.

Knowing the hurt I am about to inflict on myself, I wrap a flap of me into a stubby pole and thrust it in Mada's direction, trusting that she will catch its blunt tip and deal with the details of anchorage.

*« Bugger it, Kal! Don't you ever learn? »*

*« No. This ravages me! You've got five minutes, no more. »*

*« Give me Falc's collapse. »*

Sam has been told that the human mind is like a computer. If only it was! It would make my work so much easier, being able to sit at some central keyboard and type|click commands for him to interpret and act on. I can imagine him now, pulling up a list of memories and selecting one to send through cables to some remote location – an almost instantaneous transaction.

No, the human mind is not a computer, and memories are not sequences of sounds and images.

I don't know how Mada constructs the saddle that sits between her self and her host, nor how Boude or Falc or any of the others approach the task. I do know that the minds of different species of animal require different approaches: it took me an age to come to terms with my dog host, that one time – days of confusion and befuddlement before I worked out how to convince the beast to throw itself into the river and drown.

I am certain the folks of the Band are not human. Sometimes I think they are not of this Earth. It is my luck that the Band seems to have a preference for human hosts, and that the folks of the Band have spent millennia coming to terms with the monkey view of the world, long before I was caught. Otherwise, how could we communicate?

Mada wants to see/feel/empathise with my|Sam's recollection of the events leading up to Falc's fit. I can locate my memory of the showdown within a breath's moment, but finding the equivalent sequence in Sam's memory requires much more work.

Pursing my metaphorical lips, I take my imagination to the place of the marshlands.

Around me a visualisation of endless swamps takes shape – a thousand thousand pools, each separate and yet connected, each a repeating form of the others, differing only in size. Here a pool subdivides as the roots of a tree spreads across its surface, breaking and marking the different waters until each tessellation shines; fish dart within and between the smallest pools – each a gist of an instance, never set, never still.

I draw away, let the tessellations merge back to their pools, let pools become ponds, and ponds become streams, and streams become the story of Sam. Now the trees and bushes that pucker this ecology take shape. Birds in the branches carry a chorus of triggers in their throats; butterflies tabulate colours while branches and lianas correlate shapes and outlines. Flowers bear the scent of a million different situations while the barks they erupt from echo the sensations of touch and temperature and dampness.

I work at my task, letting the physics of experiences draw me from this spot to that place to another. I am like the spider, a part of this landscape, and yet apart: where I drift high, I sense the pull of sensory triggers; when I descend, I catch the splash of instants. Using my recall of the events as a template, I weave a thread behind me, spinning a net that will bag me Sam's interpretation of Falc's collapse.

The task takes time –more than half a minute passes before I'm in a position to splice the two memories and let them spiral through my heat.

*« Got it. »*

The points where we touch, our heats scratching against each other, are beginning to ache and bruise.

*« Anything else? »*

*« I ain't happy here. We can't stay. »*

*« Falc seems stronger. We should be able to move tomorrow. »*

*« Good! Where? »*

I don't know where we need to go next, but the intensive retrieval work springs an idea in my head.

*« Marton's chattels might be gone, but part of him is still here. »*

*« Heh? »*

*« I was bounced into the man's head, remember? I brought some of him back with me. Maybe he can tell us what the Company folk have been up to, where he felt safe from them ... that sort of thing. »*

I feel her shrug ripple through my heat.

*« Try it. Mebbe I knows some safer places too, if you ain't got a problem with getting out of this town ... »*

The relief that floods across my heat, my Vital Breath, when our mutual touches break – it is almost orgasmic!

## 48. Within

I stand within a maze of derelictions. Above me the sky burns an electric blue: cloudless, still. The smells of uncollected garbage surround me, though the stonework of pavements and alleys is clear of rubbish and mud. Wasps buzz between the twigs of stunted bushes and the drought-dried remnants of late-summer weeds.

The closest building – roofless and empty – beckons me to enter through its door-less entrance. Sunlight illuminates the interior beyond the frame, radiates among the collections of toys and gifts stacked in piles across the floorboards. More of Marton's childhood has been tacked to the walls whose thin daubs crack where pins have been pressed.

In this place I am a man – I wear the form I would have grown into if my original flesh had not succumbed to starvation and frostbite. When a wasp lands on my arm to lick at salt sweat, I crush it with my pink and entirely human hand.

The drones of hidden insects are whispers, remnants of phrases caught beyond time and left to call to each other, searching for a semblance of coherence. I ignore them.

I need to find a bigger story here.

I turn my back on the childhood shack and start walking uphill. The street I follow is lined by houses and spaces that seem to jostle for their position – though no brick or stone moves. The steepness of the hill allows some rooms to use other rooms as their foundations. A few buildings build upon themselves, tempting me with offers to explore their attics and cellars. I ignore their schoolyard chants and market stall calls.

I know this place. I recognise the cut of the hills and mountains surrounding it, and the flat sea that sits at one end of this shallow valley.

Why did I choose to quarantine Marton's memories in Gournia?

Now that I am here, questing through ruins, I have to wonder at my choice. My own memories of the town are fraught and unhappy; I rarely recall my few days in this place.



Keftiu, Crete ... Mada claims that some of her fondest memories were made on this island. Many had come here, she had told me, to taste the airs and soils of the Outer World – far more than would be needed to guard the Band from danger. For a while it had been the centre of the world, a place of trade and safety: the seas which were this civilisation's highways also acting as their island-wide city wall.

That was before the disaster.

At the road's end lies a junction. Both forks continue uphill: one leads to the market square while the other curls around the steepest part of the hill towards the citadel. The buildings here are complete ruins, the remnants of their washed out mud bricks outlining squares and rectangles where once hearths burned and women sat chatting as they brushed goat-wool with bone combs, repaired cloaks with fish needles and flax threads. Either destination will suit my purposes, so I set my bare feet on the path to the citadel: it offers good views of the coast.

Mada remembers nothing of the disaster – she rendered herself back to Fuebe as soon as she felt the danger. Others have told me some of what happened, though their stories are conflicting and self-serving. If anyone does know the the full story then I've never met them, or they've kept the details to themselves.

Perhaps Bull knows the story; he was summoned to the Outer World within hours of the catastrophe. I know this because he pulled me here after the ground had ceased its roils, after the black pillar in the north had collapsed, after the waves had smashed through harbours and fields.

It was my first summoning.

I remember the shock of my return to the Outer World – to the real world.

Fol Huun had been my world. Preparing for, and taking part in, the Race was my only purpose in life. Whatever memories I may have had of my earlier life – my first life ... they had been buried in the woods and cliffs beneath that stone's lilac skies. And then I was here, in the smoking ruins of this little town, in the body of an old man with a broken leg – both of us numbed to near catatonia by the absolute loss of our realms.

Bull saved me. He taught me the rudiments of mounting a host. He showed me how to use another being's senses, introduced me to the intricacies of a living mind and how to turn it into a shelter against the deluge of energies thrashing through my heat, my Vital Breath. He brought old bread and dirty water, raw fish and rescued olives, to my dying host and, when the putrescence in the man's leg finally overwhelmed his blood and his body, he guided me as I rendered away from the shaking flesh back to the Band ... to the sapphire seas of Ounous.

Not Fol Huun. Ounous.

My home stone was gone, stripped from the Band's embrace like the cities of Keftiu had been wiped from their landscape.



Cracks run the lengths of the citadel's once sturdy walls, in some places leaving its bricks curved and leaning while in other places the walls have tumbled downhill into the surrounding town. The crest itself is bare: nothing survived the fires started up here by the toppled braziers.

As I walk along the ridge I look down upon the remnants of Marton the vampire. After visiting his skull I had spent many days separating his memories from my own, casting them into this place with no thought of where they landed. Yet from this vantage I can see the signs of unexpected organisation, a life ripped from its flesh – lost beyond sustenance within an alien memory – seeking to rebuild itself into the struts of a personality.

It reminds me of Marton's last room, the room in which we now hide, and how the man had tried to make sense of his life by piling and categorising his worldly belongings across that concrete space. I can discern from here how the memories of his childhood have collected near the town's main gates, and how the story of his illness branches eastwards towards the mountains that bracket this thin littoral. Around the marketplace I spot his relationships, both real and imagined – often sexual, mostly brief; part of me is glad that I chose not to come here by that route. The faces of teachers, policemen and social workers peer from the windows of the community halls and the temple overlooking the small processional steps. The smell of marijuana lingers over the shattered remains of workshops and houses leading to the small inlet.

I glance at the harbour sat by the wave-less water, and decide not to stare at it too closely: even vampires have their nightmares and monsters.

I find his obsessions clustered along the landward side of the hill, in a series of streets stepping down towards the dried-out stream running between the mountains and the citadel's footings. That neighbourhood seems to be more intact than the rest – I glimpse the body of a bloated goat on a roof, un-collapsed.

A wasp darts around my head: *rock star, innit!* I swat it away from my ears and start scrambling down the hill, heading inland.



Marc has been hiding some big secrets from his lover.

Sam had been in a hurry to check out the papers Marc had left with his former colleague – it was all I could do to persuade him not to start looking at them outside the office. By the time

he arrived home he was in a frenzy of conjectures; for the first time since I started sharing his head he didn't bother to remove his shoes when entering the flat.

In the box he found a dozen folders, each containing drawings and proposals for various commissions – the bread and butter of a graphic designer's work, I suppose. Whatever I might think of the boyfriend, I cannot deny that he has an eye for the line and knows how to work a palette. One of the folders held a set of landscapes, while another was stuffed with caricatures of various well-known celebrities – each had a caption and some of them were quite funny ... well, they almost made Sam smile.

The briefcase was locked, requiring the know of a combination number rather than a key. The lack of evidence so far had not dampened Sam's ire: with no thought towards future arguments he took a chisel and hammer to the bag's hinges.

Once compromised, the case revealed a further four folders, each carefully labelled.

Sam had lifted the flap of the top folder and emptied the contents across the carpet. "He told me about this one," he whispered. "He had to keep quiet about it. Freelance work." Within minutes the other three folders had shared a similar fate.

"Nothing here. Why is there nothing here? I know he's keeping secrets – he never went to Newcastle, for a start. Where are you hiding the bastard's details, Marc? You always write stuff down."

*~ Maybe the case has a secret drawer in it?*

*~ Fuck off, demon!*

The briefcase had a false bottom, discovered when Sam took his chisel to its patent leather panels. After ripping away more lining and card, Sam took out a thin sheaf of papers, some damaged by the chisel, and a slim school exercise book. The papers were mostly drawings, again, with notes made along the edges of the paper; my host wasted little time on them beyond carrying them to the breakfast counter and flicking through the sheets.

The notebook, however, was crammed with writing, though I couldn't make out any letters or words.

*~ It's shorthand. I can read it.*

*~ How?*

*~ He used to keep a diary – nothing special, but he'd use shorthand for the juicy bits. Like Joe Orton did. He's mad about Joe Orton.*

*~ You taught yourself this code, yes?*

~ *Course I did. Mum said: never trust a man with a secret code.*

He remembered to take off his coat at this point, slinging it towards the row of hooks by the door.

~ *Was the learning worth it?*

~ *It might be now.*

~~~~

The evidence of the sea's recent incursion comes into focus as I approach the squat of houses over the shallow valley: drying salt puddles within the clods of ploughed soils; boulders and shingles cast between the twisted, broken boles of the olive trees; more dead goats. Above me the sky remains blue and hot, while the lack of stretch in the shadows cast on the ground reminds me that this is a timeless memory, an instance cast beyond the rule of hours and days.

This section of the town follows a grid, with level streets intersected by steeper paths running down to the damaged groves. The houses here are small, sturdy constructions – some include spaces for windows, a few of which still retain their scraped hide coverings.

The space beyond the doorway of the first house I pass is dark; wasps are busy here, each with their own buzzed phrase as they fly in and out of the room. I make no attempt to hear individual words, trusting instead in my ear's ability to piece together a gist of meaning from scraps of noise.

*Secrets, say the wasps. They hide themselves in open places, public spaces. Watch and wait, watch and wait.*

I move on, turning left and right, aiming for the house with the loudest buzz.

~~~~

Sam had to work hard to decypher the lines and loops in the little exercise book. In his distracted state, I took the opportunity to ruse him into drinking some water to ease his building thirst, though he refused to empty his bladder.

The book was a diary: dates and times, observations, meetings and briefings.

The first entry was, according to Sam, some six weeks before he and Marc had met: a scrawled note of the address where Sam worked at that time. Then observations of Sam's comings and goings – who he met, who he took back to his bedsit when closing time was called at that night's gay bar, visits to his parent's home south of the river. The entry for the day the two men had finally met was curt: *contact established*.

"He was stalking me? But I picked him up that night – he was about to head off with some shaven-headed dwarf!"

The entries had continued: bullet point notes, cold observations – they went here, they did this. More space was given over to the times when the couple met Sam's parents; the initial meeting had merited a two page essay, hastily scribbled and barely translatable.

As Sam continued to convert the text into English a thought took shape within me: Marc was looking for someone, or something. He took a great interest in the trinkets worn by Bull and Spar, or kept around their home – each potential object described, some even drawn out in quick sketches.

The final few pages had been left blank. The last entry was dated two and a half years after the first and was, like most of the second half of the book, about Sam's parents: *Signs of d.p. remain suggestive, nothing more. No suspicious activity. No observed contact with other possible targets. Search for the device remains negative. Suggest to P.V. we discontinue this examination.*

"It's like he thinks he's a spy ... but why spy on me? On us?"

~~~~~

I find Marton's hollow shape in a house near the bottom of the valley. He sits in the middle of a dim room, an absence of flesh outlined by congregations of wasps.

"I aks you nicely, me! I warned you!"

"I'm sorry for what happened, Marton."

"No time. No night. No sleep! Give me sleep, Boss!"

"We can fix this ..."

The man-shape disappears as the volume of wasps expands to swirl around the room:  
*dead-dead-dead-dead-dead-dead ...*

"You're not dead. You're trapped. We can fix this."

"Fix it?"

I search through shadows until I find him – a head, no more, reassembling itself in the far corner of the room.

"Fix it, yes."

"How?"

A second head forms beneath the first. It echoes the word: *how – how – how ...*

"I know where you are, the real you. The you in the real world. You remember the real world, yes?"

"Time. Night."

*time – night ... time – night ...*

"That's it, Marton. The real world. The real you."

"You fix me. Fix me good, Boss. Innit."

*fix me – fix me – fix me ...*

"I'll fix you good, Marton. Make you whole. Make you real. But you must help me do it. I can't do this without your help."

The heads dissolve. Wasps rush to the doorway, as if stung towards a purpose. Rather than follow them, I decide to wait here in the gloom.

~~~~

*~ You never liked him.*

*~ No.*

*~ You knew about this?*

*~ No, Sam. I just thought he was a twat.*

My attempt at humour seemed to calm my host.

*~ He was after something, though. He stalked me!*

*~ Yes, he was after something. I think he loves you.*

*~ Fuck off, demon! No, don't fuck off. What is he after?*

*~ He's looking for your Dad's ring ...*

*~ I ain't got it no more. I had it, I think. But it's gone now. You reckon he stole it? Why would he steal it?*

*~ The people he's working with – they think the ring is magical.*

*~ Bollocks! We ain't in fucking Frodo land.*

It took me a moment to locate the reference: a set of books about elves and men and dwarves and hobbits – whatever they are. Sam didn't reckon much of the first book and never bothered to finish it, but he watched the films because he likes big battles.

*~ It's not my fault if people think there's magic in the world.*

*~ Well, he's got it now. Welcome to it.*

*~ I think his friends want to kill me.*

*~ Good!*

*~ No, Sam. Not good. To kill me ... they have to kill you.*

The conversation – as wonderfully lengthy as it had been – was not going the way I wanted it to go. On the turn of the moment, I decided to take a risk.

*~ I think they killed your Mum and Dad.*

*~ No. No! Dad killed Mum!*

*~ They probably thought there were demons hidden inside your Mum and Dad ...*

*~ You're fucking joking me!*

*~ And they had to kill the demons to get the ring. They think the ring can give them eternal life.*

The silence between us had stretched for an age, but I could feel that he hadn't disengaged from me. He started to rub the base of his left thumb as he considered my words, and the words in the exercise book, and the fact of the secret phone with its secret voice messages and texts.

*~ But we can kill them first, maybe. If you're not lying, demon! You could kill them. You must have murdered plenty of people. I hear your thoughts, sometimes. You killed a man – electrocuted him. You made that fat Christian whore-woman choke herself on a cock. You can kill them for me.*

*~ We don't have to kill them, Sam.*

*~ Isn't this the bit where you tell me that I have no choice but to kill my lover and his friends? That's what happens to mad people – they do what the voices in their heads tell them to do,*

*and you are as close to a voice in my head as I've ever had. Typical of my monster to forget the fucking plot ...*

*~ We don't have to kill them, but we do need to find them. They've got the book – you remember the book?*

*~ The book ... and they've got my Dad's ring, too. You and me against the bastards, yeah?*

*~ That's right, Sam. You and me against the world ...*

*~ So where do we find them?*

~~~

The bricks that make this room are good insulators. I watch the air outside shimmer in this never-ending noonday heat, while inside the room the air remains cool.

I cannot stay here forever. At some point I'm going to have to break this dream and open my eyes and take on the challenges that face me.

The decision seems to trigger a response. Without warning wasps flood through the doorway – dozens, hundreds, thousands of them – not only the common wasps in their yellow and black jackets, but also black spindled wasps, and fuzzy blue wasps with their impossible waists, and hornets. A nightmare of hornets!

The insects waste no time: They fly to the centre of the room and swirl to form the full shape of Marton in front of me – no hollow outline this time, but a solid memory of the body that these thoughts and experiences once occupied.

"Aks me your questions, Boss."

"Tell me where the book is," I ask. "Tell me where those bastards have hidden it."

## **49. Southwark**

"Who owns this warehouse? Who employs your suit?"

Falc lies where he collapsed last night after we had hauled his body upstairs. I can tell he still suffers by the jagged animation of his heat.



"I don't know, Kal ..."

"What, you don't know, or you don't trust yourself to know?"

He forces his flesh to sit up, tightens his fingers into fists in an attempt to control their tremors.

"I don't know what to trust ... my mind – it lies!"

I don't have time for this: the needs of the mystery has a hold on me. But these answers are important. Reluctantly I lift myself up from my knees and step out of the circle of papers scattered about the floor.

Falc flinches – flinches! – as I walk towards him.

"Take my hand. I'll pull you up, yes?"

He waves my offer away: "I don't want you touching me." With some effort, he rolls onto his knees and uses the wall beside him to clamber erect.

"Tell me what your host remembers about this place."

"What use is that? What if ...?"

"... someone else has cloaked his memory? Then we'll know what he – she, they – want us to know about this place, yes? And that's better than knowing nothing."

His heat has deepened to the hues of ruddy bruises – a battlefield of injuries and injustices inflicted on his defeated Vital Breath.

I'm not a spirit healer, or an apothecary of the mind. I don't know how to help him through this crisis.

"Falc – you're strong, man! You can get over this. I did."

"You're a fucking monkey, Kal! You ain't us. Nothing can change ... nobody is supposed to be able to do that ... not to me!"

I try to look him in the eye, but his gaze flinches away in a blur of a blink. All I can do is sigh, and turn back to the notes and drawings on the floor.

"Just tell me what he remembers about this place."

Rather than step back into the middle of the papers, I crouch down by the nearest pile. In our rush to get out of the flat, Sam had not bothered replacing sheets in their folders, instead

throwing everything into the box. Whatever order the drawings had possessed is long lost now.

The top drawing is a landscape – somewhere craggy.

*~ Scotland, maybe. We went to Pitlochry once. Stupid place to build a theatre.*

I cast the page to one side. Beneath it lies a caricature of a man ...

*~ Tony Blair*

... in frank congress with a woman ...

*~ Is that Glenda Jackson?*

... with a set of crossed out punchlines beneath them.

*~ Marc votes Tory. He tries to be normal, but he can't help himself. He went to a posh school.*

*~ And you live together in a one bedroom flat?*

*~ In Islington! We're North One Queens.*

I toss the page away, and the next one, and the next.

I hear a noise downstairs – a slam of a door, followed by the rustling of chains. Sam tenses our legs, preparing to rise and run.

"Bastard shopkeepers dare treat me like shit!"

Mada is back. In our rush to flee, we hadn't bothered to bring provisions. The plan had been to stock up from the local supermarket when we got here, but circumstances had intervened. Sam's nicotine craving has been building since last evening; by first light it was sharp enough to heckle the old woman out of the building and towards the nearest newsagent.

"He works for an agency."

I almost miss Falc's whisper. I look at him over my shoulder; he's still on his feet, slumped against the wall. His eyes are unfocussed, but his heat has relaxed into a gentle roil.

"Go on," I prompt.

"He was given this gig last year, started in September – maybe October. Just him. Unusual, that – he asked about it: normally they work in pairs or threes. Twelve hour shifts – days, not nights. Never nights."

"What did he do here?"

"Sit. Read comics. Wank – a lot of wanking. Not allowed to leave until the shift ended. Had to answer the phone if it rang."

"No one else came here?"

Falc looks at me, offers me a small shake of his head. "No one. These memories, they don't seem right."

I bypass his concern: "Why did he let Marton move in?"

"The vampire?" He scowls as he pushes towards a different set of memories. "They met in the street. Got talking. Vampire asked if he could crash here."

"And he just let him stay?"

Footsteps on the stairs remind me of Mada. When I see her reach the broken door frame behind Falc I raise my hand to her, wave her to silence. She's quick to take in the scene and nods her understanding to me. Then she plucks a box out of her pocket and throws it in an arc across the room – I let Sam catch the cigarettes. He starts working on unwinding their cellophane skin as soon as he has them in his hands.

"Yeah. Against orders, too. Nobody in or out. Nothing to be shifted or tidied up. But the vampire – no problem. Got a spare set of keys cut for him."

"Heh. Sounds like a ruse to me," says Mada.

Falc is shaking his head. "How could he be rused? Need a rider to ruse a monkey."

"Don't worry about it, yes? Maybe that memory's been tampered with."

Though I believe the memory to be true: it chimes well with what the Marton wasps had told me in the dream this morning.

"Maybe," says Falc. He doesn't seem happy with my suggestion.

"So did the phone ever ring?"

While the man considers the question Sam opens his packet and draws a stick out with his lips. He searches for his lighter, finds it in his back pocket. The first drag of smoke hits our lungs as Falc finds an answer.

"There were phone calls. Mostly from the agency, checking up on him."

"And the others?"

"Wrong numbers ... no, wait! He remembers a call – last year, it was, just before Christmas. Posh bloke. Told him to move some stuff downstairs, leave an hour early. He had to move it back again the next day – back to where it all was."

"Why? It's a fair jumble down there ..."

I wave Mada to silence as Sam takes a suck on his cigarette.

"No other calls, Falc, like that one?"

"No ..."

"What did he think about it? The phone call, the man? Was it strange?"

"No ... he don't remember another call like that, but the feeling he has – it's routine, part of the job. Not different."

"Does he remember moving stuff downstairs?"

"No ... no."

There must be a grin on my face.

"You've worked out, ain't you laddie," says Mada. "Spill it, then. We ain't got time to loiter."

"The man's been rused, and cloaked." Without thought I return to the scattered papers, start brushing through them with our free hand. "Someone's been riding him for a while – but they missed a memory. Whoever it is, they're not as good as they think they are."

"How do you mean?"

"Yeah – how?" Falc's voice sounds stronger now, more engaged.

I keep on flicking through the drawings, searching for one in particular. Sam helps by taking another throat's worth of smoke.

"This is the place. This is where they come and have their meetings. The Company, yes?"

And there it is! A line drawing, barely a sketch. A pub on a corner with the straight outlines of a much newer building behind it ... and beneath them, in much greater detail, a room.

I pick the paper up by its corner and wave it. "It's here! That's why Marton moved in: he was searching for a secret room. He found out where they were meeting – couldn't believe his luck when he discovered his old school friend was the security guard. Thought he could trust him. That fucking book is here!"

From downstairs comes the faint murmur of a telephone, ringing.

## 50. Southwark

As far as I can tell, Marton never found the secret door. He never had the advantage of Mada's eyes.

"Have you checked all the walls?"

She waves my question away, keeping her face close to the room's surfaces.

Sam doesn't believe in magic. I do. Since returning to the Outer World I have been assaulted and enchanted in equal measure by the magics of technology and science: radios and televisions; satellites and internets; plastics, ceramics, tarmacs; engines and circuit boards the size of a butterfly's egg – don't tell me that magic does not exist!

But it's not the only magic in the world. Nothing I've seen (or forced Sam to glance at) about modern sciences has hinted at the possibility of anything like the Band. Maybe it's quantum, or relative, or dark, or wrapped in a stringy loop of a super-symmetrical dimension ... I'd need to land in the head of a wheelchair-bound physicist to have a remote chance of visualising the possibilities.

"You sure the door's here, laddie? What about the alehouse next door?"

"It can't be in the walls – they're too thin. Marton is certain this is the place."

"Mebbe the vampire was *told* this is the place?"

She still thinks we're in the jaws of a trap.

I look around when Falc comes out of the little office-come-kitchen room. "Who was it?"

"Agency."

"You sure?"

He smiles – the first that he's managed all morning.

"No clip-clop ..."

"You up to moving some stuff, yes?"

The warehouse is littered with pallets and cover sheets, tins and boxes. I let Falc take the lead, hoping that his joints and muscles may remember which items the security guard most frequently shifted.

~~~~

"Here," she says.

The three of us stand in a circle beside the largest stack of detritus. To me, the concrete floor looks solid and even.

Falc is moving his head from side to side. When he gets down on his knees to peer closer, I follow his example.

"Yeah ... something's not right."

Mada must have spotted my doubt: 'You gotta use your real eyes, Kal.'

*~ You've got real eyes? What are you: demon or maggot?*

*~ Sorry, Sam. This might hurt a bit ...*

I could ruse his pain, but Mada is right: we don't have the time for niceties. I feel my host's sudden agony through the grit of our jaw as I disconnect my sight from his.

It is nothing compared to the pain I harvest when I open my *other* eyes.

Above me the ceiling, the roof, disintegrate in a deluge of raw, burning sunlight; the flesh shapes of my companions wither against the incendiary flicker of that stark radiance. Within my arm the energies of the Band and its cradled stones slash at my reason ... but I endure.

A second passes as I start the task of filtering out the most brutal sources of energy. As I block the sun and stars above me, and temper the wavering masses of Falc and Mada, other sources of unguessed energies begin to reveal themselves: power cables and pipework setting a cage around us, the grits in the concrete and the wood-chips in the pallets behind me offering new planes against which I can stand and lean. These, too, I cut from my *other* sight; our agony eases as they pitch away from my focus.

The Band is beyond shade or concealment; all I can do is move my arm up and behind me, a ghost-light source to illuminate the floor on which I kneel.

"Can you see it?"

I shake our head: all I see is concrete, its grains casting a fractal dance of annoying, translucent patterns.

A fuzz of finger flesh touches down on the floor, traces a rough oval in front of me ... and suddenly it resolves!

"I see it now," I whisper. And once seen, I cannot unsee the faint almost-lavender line cracked between grits, near atomic in its thickness.

*~ That's weird - like a manhole cover with a bright light underneath.*

*~ You can see it too, Sam?*

*~ She showed me that colour once. Why did you make the roof disappear? That bit hurt!*

The finger – Falc's I assume – moves closer to the impossible border, touches it ... and snatches away: "Ack! That's fucking vile!"

I ignore Falc, Sam – everything except the outline. As I bring our nose to the floor, I can discern the shapes of its construction, the intents of its purpose. I can see that if I reach ... here ... and push ... there ... and twist the channel ... over and across ... grasp that eddying flux just here ... and heave! Heave! ...

~~~~

Falc lies curled in a ball beyond the static glyphs still hanging in the air. I'm surprised by the volume of vomit he continues to bring up, given that he hasn't eaten, and barely drunk, anything in the past twenty four hours.

Mada's flesh is made of sturdier thews: she managed to control her reflex more quickly, though that didn't prevent her projecting her bile over poor Sam's shoulder. She, too, has retreated to the edge of the room.

"You can't smell it? Feel it even?" she gasps. "It's putrid. Evil!"

She's referring to the hole in front of Sam's knees. It's a very real hole, still half covered by the plate of smooth, circular concrete I've somehow managed to prise away from the floor.

"Sam says it smells like bad drains."

"I can't go down there. Even the thought of it ... it flays at my skin, my fronds!"

It doesn't seem much of a hole, to be honest. A little wider than Sam's shoulders, maybe. The lip appears like a concrete tube – a continuation of the floor, but rough. No sign of ladder rungs or climbing holes ...

*~ It don't look too deep. Is that a tunnel down there at the bottom?*

*~ You can get in there?*

Sam's loud snort is derisory. I get the sudden impression that he enjoys fitting himself into tight spaces.

"I'll go," I tell Mada, still staring into the depths of this new revelation. "You guard the exit, yes? And get Falc back on his feet!"

Sam's not waiting for a response; already he's sat us on the lip of the mystery, legs dangled.

An afterthought: "If anyone comes through that door I want him to try and use his special gift on them – Tincas's gift, remember? If he denies he has such abilities, hit him!"

There is no dignity in this situation. As Sam shuffles our hips forward and readies our bones for the drop, I taste my saliva for any hint of sharp brass: I understand myself well enough to know that the laugh caught in our throat may not belong to him, or me.

~~~~~

The drop is short, no more than a couple of metres. The tunnel is longer. If I were still human I would need to walk this passage with my arms outstretched before me – no earthly light penetrates further than the base of the drop.

I re-engage my real eyes, ignore Sam's annoyed shout at the return of the pain. Now I can see through the pitch dark: losing my humanity has given me some compensations.

I can visualize that the walls ahead of me, rough hewn and damp, bend first to the left and then to the right as the tunnel descends beyond the warehouse foundations.

Sam can see too:

*~ It's like a cave.*

*~ It should be bricks, or wood, or cobbles. There's no caves in London, not near the river.*

*~ How do you know?*

*~ I was born here, Sam. These are the soils and waters of my birth.*

*~ You were born here?*



*~ A long time ago.*

We keep walking downwards. As the passage curves again to the left it tightens, forcing us to shuffle forwards with our knees half-bent and shoulders sloped. Sam doesn't bother to place a protective hand over our head.

*~ What did you mean?*

*~ Huh?*

*~ 'She showed me that colour' - what did you mean by that?*

Another sharp, steep turn down to the right ...

*~ My imaginary friend, back when I was a kid.*

*~ Huh?*

*~ Well what's the point of having a made-up friend if you can't have made-up colours to go with her?*

The passage suddenly widens. The smell of drains is getting stronger – enough to increase the ache in our head. I stop Sam moving forward, subliminally hint that rubbing our temples might ease the pain.

*~ Me dulévis? What the fuck is an 'imaginary friend'?*

*~ It's a friend you make up. A secret friend. Lots of kids invent a friend when they're really young ... well probably not you. But then you're just a monster in my head. Maybe I made you up to be my anti-friend.*

I barely notice as the man starts walking forward again. I don't get what he's talking about – ghosts maybe? But his words have unsettled me: the colour he claims he made up, the one that outlined the tunnel's secret entrance – *that* colour – it's real enough ... just not here in the Outer World.

It's the colour of the skies I first saw, I suddenly realise, after the Band first claimed me.

The tunnel before us ends in a sharp twist to the right. Sam turns and ... I freeze us, foot aloft.

*~ What's up?*

*~ Skáse!*

I know these steps before us!

Where? Where do I know ... ah!

Yes! Krita - no more than a few days, that time. This memory returns clean and crisp. An in-and-out job, Spar had said. Let the host get on with whatever he was doing, just keep your eyes wide!

That host had been digging, those few days I rode him. He had a need to recover some trinkets from an old Keftiu grave punched into a hill overlooking an abandoned citrus grove. He'd dug hard for his treasure, shifting earth from each step through those cold February nights. His employer put a mallet through his face before he'd dug to the bottom of the steps, saving me the trouble of inventing an entertaining way to render back.

The steps are clear in my sight now ... is that darker patch near the bottom the blood pool from my man's murder?

*~ Éla tôte, Sam. Let's go see what that poor bastard was digging for!*

~~~

"Oh, wow!"

Sam is right. Marc's drawing could not hope to capture the beauty of this space!

It is a small place, no more than seven paces wide and five deep. Our eyes dart from surface to point as we try to gather its richness within our woven minds ...

Around the room's border runs a step-ledge, densely carved with trees and fruits, knee high with an ample width – enough to lay out a body in its shroud. The walls, which somehow glow, have been smoothed and covered in paintings: real paintings rendered in real pigments daubed into wet plaster, as pristine and vivid now as they must have been when first created.

Sam looks down, up, down. Beneath our feet splay the veins of polished orange marble, also aglow, smooth in the centre but cut into sharp frescoes nearer the walls: sailing ships and dolphins, dancers and tribute queues. Above, the ceiling drips with raw-cut crystals – a Rajah's treasure of sapphires and rubies to celebrate the complete spectrum of the rainbow ...

*~ No diamonds, no emeralds. Diamonds are too hard; emeralds too brittle.*

*~ What the fuck is this place? Are they real jewels?*

*~ It's a Keftiu - Minoan - tomb. But a lot posher.*

*~ Shit! How do you know?*

I don't know how I know; I've never been in a Keftiu tomb before. My only visits to Crete was both short, and (mostly) above ground ...

~ *Lucky guess.*

... There it is! An orichalcum tang of sesterces slicked along the blade of our tongue.

In the far corner of the room stands an old wooden desk. It has no place in this beautiful space; its presence angers me – *why does it anger me?* It must be smashed! Sam strides us across the space and raises his fists.

~ *Sam! What are you doing? What the fuck is happening?*

~ *She's here. She says: I've done very well.*

... His words are too casual. If I had a stomach it would be halfway to Hell by now.

~ *Who's here, Sam?*

~ *My imaginary friend. I haven't thought of her in decades and suddenly she's back!*

No-no-no-nono! She ...? It can't be! She ended millennia ago. They all ended – Leic, Geit, Achoa – all gone with her!

Sam is in danger. We're both in danger!

~ *Don't listen to her, Sam. Don't listen! You need to fight her. We need to fight!*

~ *Why? She likes me. She says you are weak.*

Buried in the flesh of our arm, the Band flares ...

« *NO! Falc!* »

... Images accompany the flight of a returning entity: men in uniform smashing at a door, men with blades and pipes storming through a battered entrance; a flash and bang and wet crimson streaks seeping from Falc's ruined face.

I can only watch as Falc's Vital Breath spirals towards the Band, watch as he struggles towards the stretching embrace of blood-bright Tincas. I scream wordless warnings to him when I see Spoy burst a bloom of ghost-grey tentacles towards his singularity.

I watch as that tomb stone snatches him; engulfs him. *Oh, Falc!*

~ *She says I must push you out, like pus from a boil. She says I can stay.*

She – Fol Hoon? – she's here!?

... Where is she? Why can I not sense her, beyond the taste of old bronze coppers in my cheek? Where ...

... *Stupid stupidStupid!* She is everywhere!

She is the honeycomb within the bones of Sam's skull. She is the voids between nerves in his brain. As soon as I realise her presence, I can feel her mauve caress through the fluids of Sam's spine, her corundum will amid the lymph between the cells of Sam's flesh.

*She's fucking EVERYWHERE!*

I cannot fight Fol Hoon! She is the Power; I am her tool.

*I am NOT her tool!* I am Mescwar's tool. I am Oounous's tool.

« NO! »

~ *No! No! NO!*

« *I am Kal of Tintuun, lost and born, and I WILL BE NO FUCKER'S TOOL!* »

She brings Sam's fists down, hard – too hard – on the weak wood of the tatty old desk; its spindle legs crumple to tinder just as bones in Sam's hand snaps. A heavy stamp of the foot, and another, cracks open the body of the inoffensive furniture. I watch rock-rigid as she bends Sam, leans him down towards the wreckage, watch as she reaches out Sam's broken hand and shakes a wood-bound book free from the kindling.

... I should be admiring the workmanship: fine-carved mahoganies depict a scene of kings and chattels prostrate before their goddess, their offerings highlighted by the thinnest sheets of pounded gold. I could take time, as she gets Sam to flick through the pages glued within it, to admire the calligraphies and decorations that cover each vellum sheet.

No time – I have work to do!

I have a prison to break free from.

The taste of metal in our mouth weakens – *is she losing interest in me? In Sam?*

"Sam? What the fuck are you doing here?"

There's other people in the room. I can still see through Sam's eyes, though for some unknowable reason the glowlight around us seems to be dimming. Two people.

Closest to us is an old man – I feel an adrenaline flash of recognition hit the base of our skull: Sam knows this man. He's met him several times. Marc's ... uncle? Yes, his uncle. Sam doesn't like him.

Behind the uncle stands Marc himself - mouth open, out of breath. A shock of recognition has widened his eyes.

"What have you done, Sam? You can't be here!"

"Impossible!" says the old man. He has a weapon in his hand. An old-fashioned revolver. It's muzzle points directly at Sam, his chest.

The gun – too loud it BOOMS!

I notice, bemused, that Marc seems to be frozen in place. The only things he can move are his eyes, ever widening as shock begins to display on his face.

*~ He shot me?*

Have I been shot in the chest before? It seems hard to remember ...

It's so hard to think. Sam ... isn't falling over. He isn't moaning, or screaming. Our flesh seems relaxed, at ease.

*~ That fucking bastard's shot me!*

*~ Sam? Where are you? I can't feel you!*

My hooks in Sam's mind ... slide, like ice in a fire. Dizziness spins me in all directions, all dimensions. I – I slip?

**« Kal of Tintuun. I have no more use for you. Go. Dissolve! »**

I cannot resist! A pressure grows around me, surrounding me. Flesh expands until I am crushed, squeezed. A sudden pain hammers across every mote of my Vital Breath. I – I slip!

I – break!?

*« What the fuck is that coming out of my head? »*

*« Sam? Is that you? »*

*« I'm flying! Who are you? »*

*« Sam? Sam! Where are you? »*

*« Woah - I'm over my body. I can see a big hole in me, in my back ... that cunt, he shot me! »*

*Oh ... fuck!*

*« Sam! Get back into your body! Dive into your head! »*

*« ... No chance! There's a bloody great worm coming out of my skull - it look vile! I ain't going near it. »*

*« Sam, please! You must get back to your flesh. Don't let it die without you. Please, listen - don't become like me! »*

*« ... I feel so light. Who are you? »*

*« I'm Kal. Do you remember me, Sam? I'm Kal! »*

As the last of me detaches from Sam's mind, the radiance of the universe assaults my every sense. So bright, the cosmos – it blinds me!

The tug of translation torments me, pulls me screaming from flesh and sinew. Each hook I generate slips against nerve and blood vessel as the tug of the Band tightens around me. I lose sight ... and the reach of eternities flood through my Vital Breath.

Some final noises – feral explosions to rip flesh. They're ... not important anymore, not now the Band's abyssal silence calls out my name.

This render is fast – faster than anything I have ever experienced before. I am hurled from Sam's flesh. Already the stones bound around the bones of Sam's arm sing to me. Mescwar blossoms, sending tendrils to collect me.

I am not alone! Others circle the Band alongside me.

*« Sam! I beg you! Go to your flesh! You have to DIE! »*

My vision turns amber.

My vision turns grey!

Spoy now competes with my home stone. It slashes at Mescwar's energies, thrusts faster and further in its eagerness to swallow me ...

I swerve like a comet around the sun. Spoy – misses!

I cannot stop: already my velocity curves a new path around the Band's unshakable gravity. I plunge through the chest of my former host as I reach my apogee.

Something reaches out. Lilac, not grey. A place to hide.

It is weak, so weak. Its tendrils are frail and brittle. But I know them. I remember them. I reach out to them, let them embrace me, slow my trajectory, lead me to the skies of my unlooked for saviour.

Spoy would steal me still! That stone's power is immense – it commands me to it ... but it is too far away, and my render is almost complete. Around me a sky builds; below me the sea, and rocks, and cliffs, and waves.

## **Here Ends Book One**

The story continues in Worlds Beyond Worlds,  
the second, and concluding, book of the SpinTrap saga.