

# Cracks in the Foundations

JY Saville

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Cracks in the Foundations presents twelve stories of disruption, destruction and breakdown, be it society, objects, people, or the hitherto reassuringly stable structure of time. From mundane science fiction to traditional fantasy by way of urban darkness, timeslip, and the uncategorisably odd, there should be something in the collection to satisfy a wide range of speculative fiction tastes.

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## **Failure is not an option**

Most people thought it was just a game show, assuming fairly reasonably that there were limits to what you could get away with. Hell, I thought it was just a game show before I went on it, right up till the end in fact, even beyond the moment they shut the doors behind me and I thought I understood the depth of meaning behind the neon flash of 'you lose'. But entertainment consultants need money, money comes from advertising, advertisers choose shows with high ratings, and when the net is saturated with entertainment in all forms, ratings are harder to come by and the stakes get higher. I should be thankful it wasn't straight execution. Although in some ways that might have been easier to deal with.

I don't know how they do it, I'm sure it can't be legal, but legally speaking I don't exist any more so what do I know? Apparently not much, certainly not enough general knowledge, I bombed in that round. And I should have known the hair-logo was a mistake. Any time you have to rely on public sympathy, never come down on one side or the other because that means you lose half the audience. I'll give you that advice for free. Not that I can accept credits anyway. Like I said, I don't

exist.

#

Not so long ago I had a good job designing synthetic scents for adverts. I had a life tenancy in the same sector as the warm-up man for *Throw Me a Lifeline*, that's how well I was doing. Trouble is, I got greedy. I thought if I got enough credits together I could trade up to the sector my cousin moved to last year, stop her from looking down on me at family parties. Someone pinged me at work — would I like to take part in *CryptoLink Challenge* — and it was too good to pass up. I had to say yes.

In case you're in the three percent of the population that doesn't tune in regularly I'll remind you how *CryptoLink Challenge* works. The contestants get a week in the solitary block of the city reformatory, twenty-four hour live feed to the net, mental challenges every six hours. I did ok on that, I'm a scientist — logical reasoning and complex mental exercises go with the territory. It was after that week, when I was taken to the arena for the final showdown, that things got tough.

I can't always remember trivia like dates of wars and who used to rule the old countries, so I wasn't looking forward to the finale. Not only do you have to answer all those questions standing on the little platforms that they tip down when you get

something wrong, at full stretch holding onto your neighbours for the human chain, but the big prize is so tantalisingly close it's a major distraction. I ached to win all those credits and raise my standing in the world. Of course, I didn't know how many would be in the pot until the first contestant was voted off, but I knew they didn't allow the poor to take part. It didn't make for tense enough shows.

Again, for that three percent I'll remind you that while we were in solitary, all those viewers watching our performance through the net were ranking us in the popularity contest, so when we got to the arena our places in the chain and the number of points in our handicap were determined by that. Like I said, I'd turned off half the audience with my choice of advertising but I'd been hoping for a bonus payment from the corpo when I won. It wasn't looking that likely when I started out in the centre of the chain, furthest from stability, and with the most points to gain to break even.

The height of two alpha males above the arena doesn't sound that high until you've fallen from it a few times. The floor's made of a material with some give, so there aren't usually any broken bones, but bruises and sprains can be painful enough. The first time my neighbours held on, either from slow reactions or thinking they were doing me a favour.

All that happened was I got my shoulders wrenched, and they fell with me. After that they let go and I took the dive alone. As the general knowledge round went on it happened more and more often, until all hope of winning went out of my mind and I just concentrated on not being the first to go.

More voting, including by the other contestants, and it was all over. The walk of shame across the not quite firm arena floor and I was outside in the dark. I was still wearing the grey all-in-one they'd given us in solitary so I looked for a way to get back in and reclaim my clothes but nothing doing. I understood why they kept the place sealed off until the show was over, but they could have designed the set so we got filtered into a backstage area. I didn't want to hang around, I'm not used to being outdoors at night for long, so I figured I'd come back in the morning after a long night of considering my stupidity.

*CryptoLink Challenge* was clearly devised by a business genius. The prize money can be colossal but none of it's provided by the entertainment company, it all comes from the first person to be voted off. The big loser. No doubt somewhere in the small print it had detailed how many credits they'd leave me to live on if I lost, but I wasn't going to lose so I didn't pay that much attention.

Now I wished I had, but all I could go on was the general idea that the winner would walk away with everything I had. I'd have to take on some extra projects at work, maybe record some more lectures to sell through the Distributed University. If I did it quick enough I might be able to capitalise on whatever notoriety attached itself to being such a spectacular public failure.

I crossed to the nearest cab-call point then wondered if it was too much of an extravagance given I didn't know my credit rating any more. The swipe window wouldn't read my thumbprint anyway so I decided to take a shuttle. If I hadn't been feeling so bleak it might have seemed like an adventure, riding on impersonal transport along a meandering route through the city, waiting in turn to be dropped off where I needed to be. I hadn't done it before but I'd seen other people flag a shuttle down and climb aboard so that was the easy part. Inside was a swipe window like the broken one for the cabs where they make you show you can pay before they'll waste time getting to you. I tried both thumbs but the machine was having none of it, which made me think maybe the cab swiper wasn't broken after all. I'd skinned my hands a little with all the falling but that shouldn't have been enough to stop the ID system from working. People were watching me from their seats

beyond the grille that wouldn't open, so I gave up thinking about it and stepped back down to the street.

It took me three hours to walk home. It wasn't just the distance, it was the detours. We'd had to leave anything net-connected with our clothes and it was harder than I thought finding my way by landmarks and half-remembered maps. I didn't even bother trying to activate the public infopads after the problems I'd had with the shuttle. I wasn't sure how I was going to get inside once I got there, but just seeing the building soothed me and I had hazy memories of a back-up retinal system in case of amputation so I didn't think I'd be locked out for long. It was only when I saw the tenant directory that I felt the first wave of panic. On the slowly scrolling list, right where my name should be, was the name of the company that makes *CryptoLink Challenge*.

I half-heartedly tried swiping my thumbs across the panel but I didn't bother with the retinal back-up. It was beginning to look like winner takes all was a bit more literal than I'd thought, and while I was still sure it was a mistake, the system wouldn't let me into a building I officially had no part of. Another long trek with throbbing ankle and aching limbs, to my parents. They've worked their way up into such a high-class sector there are

guardpoints on all the streets leading into it, and it occurred to me as I limped towards one that approaching on foot at this hour, wearing a one-piece from the reformatory, might be a good way to get shot.

“Please help!” I called. “I’ve been robbed, I need to get to my parents.”

The guard was holding a gun on me but not firing it, not even a tranquiliser, which was a good start. I came to a stop a cab-length away from her and gave her my father’s name and address.

“And you are..?”

I told her my name and she waved me over to the swiper.

“Do you have back-up systems?” I asked as I held out my right thumb. “I’ve been having problems with thumbprints this evening, it might —”

“Use this.”

I leaned in to the retinal scanner she’d uncovered with an efficient couple of flicks of her wrist, but that failed to register as well, even though I’d blinked away the tears. Had they done something to my eyes? I hadn’t seen myself in a mirror for over a week.

“Tell me your name again.” She searched the records, checked spelling and pseudonyms, came at it from my parents’ records, and drew a blank. “I’m

sorry, there's no active citizen of that name."

"No active..." My legs went from under me and if she hadn't grabbed my arm I'd have ended up on the floor.

"I'm going to have to ask you to move on."

She was being kind when she didn't have to, I understood that. She could have just shot me. If I didn't exist there was no moral question to answer, and no tiresome paperwork.

"Thank you," I said as I moved away, trying to come up with another plan.

I had no other family that was close enough to be obliged to help me in such circumstances, so I had little choice but to wait for one of my parents to emerge from their enclave and try and intercept their cab. And in the meantime all I had to do was avoid charges of loitering, and find a way to eat without paying. Simple.

Food soon seemed a minor consideration, it was only about twelve hours since I'd eaten and I knew I could waste a lot of time and energy on a fruitless search. Whereas if I made contact with my parents, they would have enough to spare to give me a reasonable meal. I tried to remember what either of them did on a daily basis, where they might go, then picked a likely approach road and settled in to watch. I was far enough from the guardpoints not to attract attention, but still close

enough to that sector that there weren't many places to hide. I knew I'd have a few hours to wait, even if I'd chosen well.

I had nothing much to do but sit and rest my ankle, and think. Not a helpful pastime, in the circumstances. I'd been working on the premise that the entertainment company had overstepped the mark, or possibly that I'd overlooked some of the small print. Either way, nothing a good lawyer couldn't sort out, and I could pay my parents back for his services once I had an identity again. Then I started wondering how to prove I'd ever had one. Well, there must be archived records on the government servers, the good lawyer could persuade them to dig the relevant ones out and reinstate me. Fine. But what if they weren't there? I hadn't just lost all my credits and possessions and my tenancy, the company behind *CryptoLink Challenge* had somehow wiped me from the system. The guard hadn't turned me up as a creditless drifter, she hadn't turned me up at all. My thumbprint and retinal data were owned by the government. No company would be able to destroy them.

I had a while, long enough for the sky to lighten, where I didn't think at all, where my mind was a silent scream of terror. I was relatively young, I was facing most of my life on the fringes, no way

to get a job, a spouse, a home of my own. What would happen when my parents died? Then I started scrabbling for reasons, things I could publicly retract or go against in the hope the government would reinstate me. It made sense that they were behind this, I couldn't believe I'd accepted that an entertainment company would choose me for a game show at random. One of my most popular lectures recently had presented an alternative way of allocating resources in the city. For me it was an intellectual exercise arising from statistical work I'd done on molecular diffusion, but it had been accessed by members of the underground and maybe that was enough to make me complicit in a proto-rebellion.

Some time after that I was pretty sure I saw my father in a cab but I didn't manage to attract his attention. Cabs move fast, and he wouldn't be expecting to see me here. I had to move on when the day got busier, and since then I've tried several of the approaches and seen both my parents go by, but so far had no luck with flagging them down. I did think my mother saw me once but I must have been mistaken. Food stopped being such a minor consideration on the second day, but I don't want to miss a chance to let my parents know what's happened. For now I'm keeping up my watch and trying not to think. Thinking only brings trouble.

## Waiting for Boothroyd

“I’ll leave you here then,” said Bert. “I expect his train’s delayed.” He nodded at the closed office door.

“Right,” said George, brightly. “Thanks.” He smiled but Bert had already turned for the stairs and missed George’s move towards a handshake. George shrugged, crossed to the door and entered.

“Have you never heard of knocking?” The man behind the desk was about George’s age but with an air of surly solidness usually found in someone older.

George hesitated, then smiled again but it didn’t seem to help. “I’m George Oakenfold.”

“That’s nice for you.” The desk-bound stranger folded his arms and frowned at George.

“Bert said to come in here.”

“Who the hell’s Bert?”

That threw George, and for a moment he wondered if he’d been shown upstairs by a passing lunatic.

“He’s the sort of porter chap, lurks in the hallway in a brown overall.”

“Oh, him. Why?”

“I’m the new planning assistant,” George explained. “Working for Mr Boothroyd.” He couldn’t suppress a triumphant smile as he said it.

“He’s next door.”

“There was no answer; the door was locked.” George was becoming warm in his overcoat and his new briefcase was weighing his arm down. “Bert thought I might be going to work in this room.”

“Oh he did, did he? First I’ve heard of it.” The surly man must have noticed George’s face fall, because he sighed and said, “You can sit down and wait for Boothroyd, if you must. Only don’t talk, I’m busy.”

“Right you are,” said George, quietly so as not to count as talking. He sat down behind the other desk wedged into the small room, and looked around, bright-eyed. There wasn’t much to look at, not even a coat-hook as far as George could see, so he carefully took off his overcoat and folded it over the back of the chair.

“And don’t get comfy,” snapped the man whose name George still didn’t know.

“Sorry,” George whispered, and sat twiddling his thumbs for ten minutes, trying to crane far enough over to see more than a wall through the window opposite the door.

Eventually the other man sighed theatrically and stood up.

“I can’t work with you breathing down my neck. Let’s see if we can find someone who can get you started.”

George followed the man along the corridor and waited as he rapped upon a frosted glass door panel and awaited an answer.

“He’s not in either,” said George’s new colleague. “Bloody typical.”

“Sorry,” said George, “But I don’t know your —”

“Tony,” said Tony brusquely, and before George could shift his briefcase and folded overcoat suitably to shake hands, Tony had walked back the way they had come.

They reached the stairs and Tony started up them, plodding and holding the banister. George hurried lightly up the stairs behind him and followed him down a similar dim corridor with dark green woodwork.

“Wait here,” said Tony, holding a hand up as they reached the first door. He marched down the length of the corridor and knocked on a solid door; George watched him open it, stick his head round, then walk through and close it behind him.

Ten minutes later Tony reappeared. George smiled encouragingly at him, despite the long wait with a heavy briefcase in a deserted corridor with not so much as a postcard or a polite notice to break the monotony of the walls.

“He says try maintenance,” announced Tony, without revealing his source.

“But I’m planning,” said George.

Tony shrugged. “Same difference. You have to plan what you’re going to maintain, don’t you?”

“Hadn’t we better wait for Mr Boothroyd?”

“Who?” asked Tony distractedly. “Come on, I’ll show you where maintenance live and then I’ll be shut of you.”

George trailed obediently along the identical corridor at the opposite side of the stairwell. He wondered if unspooling string along his route would seem excessive, the first time he was abroad in the building by himself.

“In you go,” said Tony, jerking his thumb towards the closed double doors at the end, then headed back the way they had come.

“Thank you,” George called after him, without provoking any reaction. He pushed through the double doors and found himself on another landing like the one Tony’s office had been on. There were no signs of life, no clack of typewriters or rumble of machinery, so George picked out the door in the same position as Boothroyd’s had been in and knocked.

“Looking for someone?” asked a man beside him and George gave a start. He turned with a smile and began to reply then faltered.

“Cat got your tongue?” said the man with grim amusement, and it was only through noticing small

details that George convinced himself this wasn't Tony playing a trick.

"Sorry," said George with his smile back in place, "I thought you were Tony for a moment."

The man looked back at him blankly as though he'd never heard of Tony, but after the initial surprise George had assumed they were related, so close was the resemblance.

"I wanted Mr Boothroyd," said George.

"Train must be late," said the man who wasn't Tony.

"Oh, no, sorry," said George, shaking his head and becoming flustered. "I didn't mean Boothroyd, I—" He broke off as he registered the reply.

"I haven't got all day," said the man. "Do you know who you're looking for or don't you?"

"Maintenance," blurted George. "I was told to ask at maintenance."

"For who?"

"George Oakenfold."

"Never heard of him — have you tried planning?"

"No," said George, "I'm George Oakenfold, I was—"

"Timewasters," snapped the man and strode into his office, slamming the door.

George decided on a systematic search of the building for someone who might know where he

should go or who he should report to in Mr Boothroyd's absence. If it took long enough, Boothroyd himself might turn up and the whole thing could be sorted out. George went up one flight and tried the Boothroyd door, as he'd come to think of it. No answer, so with some trepidation he tried the Tony door, and got no response there either.

On the next floor up there was again no answer at the Boothroyd door but his knock on the Tony door produced a terse "Yes?"

George opened the door and put his head warily round it. Behind one of the two desks in the room was a man who resembled Tony, but not closely enough that George could mistake one for the other.

"My name's George Oakenfold."

"Is it," said the man behind the desk, looking back down at the ledger his pen was poised above.

"I'm supposed to start work here today."

"Well they'll be docking your wages; it must be nearly half-past."

George glanced round the room but the walls were bare, as they had been in Tony's office. He couldn't see a wrist-watch on either arm, despite the man's pushed back sleeves.

"I haven't been able to find where to go, yet," said George.

“What do I look like — a sherpa?”

“I’m supposed to be in planning, I think.”

“That’s not this floor.”

“What is this floor?”

“It’s not planning,” said the man firmly, looking up. “Some of us have got work to do, and we’re in the right place to do it.”

George gave a polite nod which the man didn’t see, and closed the door softly. He thought for a moment, knocked and quickly opened it again.

“Mr Boothroyd doesn’t appear to be in,” he said.

“I don’t keep his appointment book,” exclaimed the man behind the desk. “Try him later.”

George thanked him and closed the door again, puzzled.

The floor above was as far as the staircase reached, and since both the Boothroyd and Tony doors remained closed at George’s knock, he moved on to the corridor that ran behind, like the one Tony had taken him down first of all. The silence was broken only by the buzz of a strip-light; George found himself creeping in an exaggerated fashion, trying not to make any noise. He knocked softly at a couple of doors but soon hurried back to the stairs before the walls could close in on him; he hadn’t realised how constricted his chest felt until

he returned to the landing.

He tried a couple more corridors on the way down, with equal lack of success, and was fairly sure he was back where he'd started. Although he was still feeling something of the glow that went with the start of a new job, George couldn't help wishing that Mr Boothroyd hadn't been late today, or that he'd had his name on his door so that George needn't feel so uncertain and unsettled as he knocked. There was no response; George even placed his ear to the door but couldn't hear any stirrings within. He turned back to Tony's office, George's own potential office, knocked and entered.

"Yes?" said Tony, without stopping what he was doing.

"Mr Boothroyd's still not in," said George.

"He'll have knocked off for the day," said Tony, still not looking up. "Try tomorrow."

George opened his mouth to reply but the light did look different. He moved around the empty desk until he could look out of the window at a patch of sky. He made to look at his watch then remembered he'd left it on his bed.

"The whole day can't have gone," said George.

"If you've been stood gawping out of windows it doesn't surprise me. What was it you wanted?"

"I'm still looking for Mr Boothroyd."

“There’s no Boothroyd here. Have you tried Accounts?” He looked up after a moment when George didn’t answer. “Who did you say you were?”

“George Oakenfold,” said George, though he wasn’t as sure about it as he had been that morning.

“Well Mr Oakenfold I suggest you come back tomorrow and try Accounts. I can’t help you.” So saying, Tony returned to his work.

“We met this morning,” said George, sounding too loud to himself in the small office. “I’m the new planning assistant.” He expected, or perhaps only hoped for, some sign of recognition. Even the admission of a practical joke would have soothed George at this point. “I’m working for...” He hesitated. “Mr Boothby.” That didn’t sound quite right to George. Was it Boothden? It had been a long day.

“How do you expect me to work with your chat?” demanded Tony. “A fine time you’ll have in Accounts, wanting to be nattering, and gawping out of windows.”

“Sorry,” whispered George, and left the room aware of a sheen of clammy sweat on his forehead. He leaned against the wall with his overcoat draped over his briefcase arm then made his way downstairs.

“Night Mr Boothroyd.”

“Goodnight Bert,” replied George absently. He paused outside the front door, one foot poised above the step, frowning in remembrance. He shook his head; he couldn’t recall what he’d just been talking about but it couldn’t have been important. He put his overcoat on against the evening air and set off down the street. At the corner, he turned to look at the building that dominated not only that street but the surrounding area. It was dark now, no lights in the windows, but George smiled to himself. Tomorrow he would begin his new job there; he’d heard it was an interesting place.

## Alone Again Or

Franklin lounged across the padded chairs in the mess room, sharing a joke with Halford and Green. They were winding down after a hair-raising moment with an air circulator pump and had left the ship to Harris. It didn't take much running, it had been built for efficiency — a small craft for quick runs between research stations and mining orbitals, though quick could still mean weeks. Long enough for the effects of being cooped up to kick in.

#

Haverah Harris slowed down as he neared the mess room. He could hear voices, though all of them must be Dean Franklin because there was no-one else on board. Telling jokes this time, which was better than arguing with himself; the previous week it had looked like it might come to blows. Try explaining that to head office. Still, probably best to give Dean a wide berth for a while longer; Haverah would prefer it if one of them stayed sane.

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The room fell silent as they watched Harris slink past the open doorway.

“What’s his problem?”

“He’s decided we’re all figments of his imagination.”

“Except me,” said Franklin. And laughed.

## Cracks in the Foundations

Priestley looked again at the figures in red on his display. He swore under his breath and looked furtively around the office, but the three accounts supervisors were intent on their own displays and paid no attention. If anyone had seen this data the factory would be bustling with damage-limitation lawyers and worried managers; Priestley's job was safe for the moment and he planned to keep it that way.

John Priestley closed the door behind him and declined to sit before the managing director's desk. He had arranged the meeting here rather than in his own office on the pretence of confidentiality, but the truth was he didn't want anyone seeing the quality control data until he'd had a chance to analyse it properly, and he knew the managers' computer system couldn't handle the files he used for it. That, after all, was why he used them.

"How slight is 'a slight problem'?" asked Scammonden.

"Well sir, it's barely tipped into the red; we're talking about one extra failure in every ten thousand components." Priestley tried a reassuring smile but it was frozen by Scammonden's cool gaze.

"And you have informed me immediately?"

“As soon as I saw the figures had gone into the red, sir,” replied Priestley with deceptive truthfulness.

“I’ll need the data for the Limiters.” Priestley took this as a dismissal and left the room.

Back in his office, acting calmly for the benefit of his neighbours, Priestley scanned the columns of data he should have been monitoring remotely over the weekend. The first time in his three years in the job that bone fracture frequency had gone over the safe limit, and it had to be on a weekend when he’d been away. He’d rigged an automatic log-in from home every couple of hours during Saturday and Sunday to hide his absence, but the last time he’d looked at the figures had been Friday at noon. He hoped the problem had only surfaced that morning, but he was quickly disappointed.

With the figures from the same weeks last year inserted into the preceding fortnight, Priestley reformatted his data for the management system and released it to the MD for his damage limitation exercise. Only today’s data was untouched, and now it seemed like a sudden anomaly. To Priestley’s horror, the real figures told a different story.

John Priestley was the sole member of the quality control team at Osteoprise, and he believed the company line that their methods were so precise that even he was not strictly necessary. In

the early days he'd been more conscientious, but the monotony of unwaveringly small failure rates took their toll and he ceased to notice the details, only caring whether the figures turned red, which they never had. Until Friday afternoon. When he'd checked the weekend's data, row after row of red numbers stared back accusingly, and he knew his job was on the line.

The fracture rates in the bone structures grown downstairs had been rising steadily for two weeks but Priestley's complacency meant he hadn't noticed, and now he had to find out what had been happening before the powers that be realised he'd been lying to them. He hurried to the testing labs, walking briskly like a man on important business rather than adopting the panicked run that came naturally.

"Evans, what do we know about these fractures?"

The technician looked up as Priestley strode into the room. "Which fractures in particular?"

"This morning. Overnight," replied Priestley, trying not to show his irritation.

"Same as all the ones over the weekend, I think." Evans stood impassively, watching Priestley's face, waiting for the bluff.

"I'm only really interested in the fractures since last night; it's this morning that the rate's

started getting dangerous.”

“Really.” It wasn’t a question; Evans knew there had been a higher fracture rate in his samples on Saturday than there had been overnight, and he drew his own conclusions. “Well I couldn’t really say, Mr Priestley. You’d need to get the doctors in to tell you what’s caused them.”

Priestley paused, realising Evans must have done most of the tests since there were few technicians assigned to the testing lab. It wouldn’t do to alienate him.

“In your opinion,” began Priestley carefully, “Purely unofficial speculation: is there some systematic cause underlying this? Did they share the same characteristics?”

Evans looked at the bench, apparently set on straightening a pile of papers. Every day, a random sample of components was pulled from the factory floor and tested for strength and versatility. There were always one or two failures, but the rate was so low as to be negligible, and a whole industry had grown on the back of that safety record. It had started in the early 2000s with novel wedding rings grown from each partner’s bone samples, but within thirty years every arm of industry from car manufacture to construction and designer furniture was using specially grown bone. The timber industry had diverted into biofuels, but

Osteoprise had virtually killed off recycled steel.

“I couldn’t possibly say, Mr Priestley,” Evans reiterated. “I just carry out the tests.” He smiled in a way Priestley didn’t like, and withdrew to an inner office to log his latest data.

Furious but outwardly calm, Priestley made his way to the upper relaxation room, the place where in theory the higher office staff like himself went to unwind. As usual he was alone amid the armchairs; he ordered a coffee and sat frowning and thinking in the shadow of a potted palm. He was reluctant to call in the experts, preferring to determine the cause alone if possible to give himself the opportunity to cover his tracks before the Limiters stopped worrying about PR and started asking for explanations. If he’d been fully alert a fortnight ago, he could have stopped all of this from coming to light.

Muffled footsteps announced the imminent arrival of the refreshment delivery operative, absolutely never to be called a tea-lady (or tea-boy), even as a joke. Priestley was glad the company had re-introduced the personal service though; his inconsequential chats with the ref-ops were often the only human interaction he had at work.

“Morning John,” grinned Tabitha. “Slacking as usual, I see.”

Priestley smiled back, overlooking the lack of

respect as he always did because she had a hypnotic smile and eyes to match. The low-level flirtation that no doubt appeared in every similar encounter in Tabitha's working day made Priestley relax as they swapped one-liners over the coffee and change.

"Listen, can you do something for me?" he asked.

"Maybe." Caution narrowed her eyes.

"Can you keep a look-out for anything unusual? New arrivals, extra overtime... whispers."

"OK," she nodded, intrigued.

"Don't say anything to anyone. If you find anything out, you can bring me a toasted teacake as a cover."

Priestley smiled again, and she laughed and left with a wave, feeling important and patronised at the same time.

Alone again, Priestley sipped his drink and worked through his jumbled thoughts. He was hoping for a one-off act of sabotage by someone with a grudge: a person he could point the finger at while still being able to claim the basic soundness of the process. If it wasn't sabotage, then the company had failed, had systematically produced substandard goods, jeopardising public safety, and had knowingly ignored the problem. The cost in replacement machinery, not to mention the public

relations campaign, would be astronomical. And there was no way Priestley could hang on to his job.

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In the research director's office Priestley leaned against a low bookcase and wished he'd listened more attentively three years ago. Dr Radnor swivelled his chair slowly back and forth as he droned on about cell cultures and bone density, tensile strength and calcium levels, doing his best to give the quality control man a refresher course on the company processes in simple terms. It was still mainly too technical for Priestley — his field was statistics not biotechnology — and it was hard for him to concentrate with so much else to think about. He interrupted Radnor's flow:

“In a nutshell then, these bones are grown on a large scale the same way the ones in our body are on a small scale: they get nutrients like we get in our blood, the right levels of vitamins and minerals and so on, and they just get on with it. But they're just as susceptible to disease?”

Radnor sighed, realising he'd been talking to himself for five minutes. “They would be, in theory, but they don't have to deal with the vagaries of human existence: no drugs, alcohol, bad diet, infections. Nutrient levels are constantly monitored and adjusted, and the chances of a serious virus...”

“Thanks,” Priestley cut in as he opened the door. “You’ve been most helpful.”

#

Evans looked up as Priestley returned to his lab, but didn’t seem surprised. He waited for the quality control man to formulate a discreet question, not wanting to help him out.

“What do you know about bone diseases, Evans?”

“I’m not a doctor, Mr Priestley, you know that.”

“But you test bones, you must know what you’re testing for, what to look out for?”

“This is related to the fractures since last night, is it?”

“For God’s sake, Evans!” Priestley saw the technician’s mouth twitch in amusement, and took a deep breath before continuing. “Look, Evans, you know as well as I do that there’s something unusual happening. There’s no cause for alarm, we’re still talking about a very tiny number of defects and it’s only just happened.” He saw Evans suppress another smile, and ploughed on. “We have to find out why this has occurred and stop it from progressing. Can you please tell me what you know about bone diseases?”

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why do you need to know? I test the samples, you look at my results and if you find something you don’t like you call the doctors in. That’s how it works. I don’t bypass you and call the doctors in if I think there’s something funny going on. If I did, they’d have been looking into this at least a week ago.”

“I could have your job for this,” growled Priestley.

“You’ll probably need one soon,” Evans replied as the door slammed.

In the upper corridor, Tabitha was contemplating eating the toasted teacake herself when she saw John Priestley emerge from the lift. She waved at the scowling figure and he joined her.

“No unusual overtime or sick leave, no juicy gossip, and no new arrivals,” she announced. “They haven’t even replaced Greg yet.”

“Greg?”

“Guy in charge of one of the nutrient chambers. He left about a month ago when his wife got a new job and they moved away.”

Alarm bells started ringing in Priestley’s overloaded brain. The defects had become apparent more recently than a month ago but bones didn’t grow overnight; nutrient levels were monitored so couldn’t easily be decreased, but a

nutrient chamber was a good place to introduce infection. “Do you know that for certain? I mean his wife really did get a new job? He really is married?”

Tabitha eyed him warily. “He got married about six months ago, you probably even signed the card. Mariannita was a trainee nurse, she’s now qualified and works in a hospital in Glasgow, which I think is where she came from.”

Priestley’s alarm bells were beginning to deafen him, but he was still amazed at the way Tabitha picked up this kind of information.

“I talk to people. It’s called human interaction,” she said.

“How many Glaswegian women named Mariannita do you think there are round here?”

“Well, one less than a month ago. I don’t know, you’re the one that identifies trends for a living. I just carry cold toast around.”

Priestley gestured at the teacake, “Have it, I’m not hungry.” He thought for a moment, still hoping for coincidence. “You don’t know her surname?”

“What do you want, blood?” exclaimed Tabitha. “What’s this about?”

“A nurse might have access to a virus, don’t you think? Something to weaken bones.”

“You don’t need a virus to weaken bones, you

can get that from bad diet, genes, lack of exercise... If you're talking vat-grown bones you could have a low level of something like calcium in the nutrient supply, or you could have some extra ingredient that stops the good stuff being absorbed."

"Human interaction?"

Tabitha smiled. "Half a year of sports science at college. Nutrition's important."

#

Priestley left the building without returning to his office; there was nothing personal in there. He had no proof but he was sure in his own mind that Mariannita Palacios was behind this, he wouldn't even put it past her to have married Greg purely to put this plan into action. She'd probably intended Osteoprise to get rattled as soon as the changes showed up two weeks ago. Greg wouldn't be charged if there was only circumstantial evidence, and the slow-down in production as Osteoprise checked their processes, with maybe a judicious rumour or two, would cause them serious damage in the market. Priestley's own inaction had made the damage irreparable and he knew there was no way to talk his way out of this; even at the cost of his own job, Evans seemed likely to publicise the two-week delay before long, and when the management inevitably found out about Priestley's

prior connection with Mariannita...

Five years ago John Priestley had been the spoilt teenager's latest toy, and would have married her if her father hadn't taken out a restraining order. Of course that was before the Palacios steel empire finally fell due to the continued rise of natural, sustainable, eco-friendly (and guaranteed safe) bone. As Priestley drove out through the main gate for the last time he wondered if he should have told someone else his suspicions so there was no further delay, but as Evans said, he was only there to spot the patterns.

## **Self-Aware and Living in Bradford**

Rick settled back in his chair with a fresh mug of tea and resumed playback. On the rare occasions he met new people — never at parties, more like a lonely old woman on the bus — they were always impressed when he told them he worked on artificial intelligence at the University, said he must have a really interesting job, and he always agreed with a smile. If he'd built the hardware, programmed the software or planned any experiments, then maybe they'd be right, and he wouldn't have had to drag himself to work so reluctantly every morning. Rick's job was to monitor the endlessly repetitive tapes.

Rick often used old-fashioned terminology like tapes, which was part of the reason he never advanced or left much of an impression on his colleagues. They were in fact data downloads from the experimental androids, copies of everything their artificial brains had processed during their time abroad in the city, which could be filtered for anything meaningful to a human and displayed on a monitor. Rick was happier thinking of it more as two video cameras, one pointing through the android's eyes, recording the sights and sounds of Bradford, and the other trained inwards to show

the words, shapes and abstract patterns of the mind. Whatever the physical reality of the data storage, the everyday truth of Rick's job was that there was very little that was meaningful to a human, and what there was was repetitive and dull.

He drummed his fingers on his empty mug and wondered if anyone would notice if he didn't monitor this tape all the way to the end. The decision was made for him in the form of a crash of some sort; whether B332 had suffered a malfunction or the data hadn't transferred properly Rick neither knew nor cared. He activated the error reporter and someone else would look into it, end of problem. B333 was, logically enough, next on Rick's list and he called up the summary report to skim through before he got going.

The early models had been boxes on wheels to transport the artificial brain around campus, but everyone in the research group had grown up knowing the limitations of daleks, and eventually they gave up on the complicated mechanisms for negotiating stairs and kerbs, and concentrated their efforts on perfecting the balance of a two-legged walker. With that they could not only investigate the learning processes of a part-programmed robot, they could also collaborate with the nearby hospital on mobility problems, which meant more funding. So now the AI experiments were five foot

five androids who marched up hills and tottered down steps across the city three days a week. After a brief flurry of concerned or sarcastic letters to the local paper, this arrangement had been accepted as most other changes had been over the years, with a stoic shrug.

B333 was a young woman, which is to say that one of the three gender-neutral androids the group possessed had been given a blonde ponytail wig and the speech mode was set to teenage female 03. Trial and error had revealed a soft Scottish accent to be the most inoffensive, and visual cues such as hairstyles or a simple prop like a walking stick helped people to interact with the androids more successfully. Rick skipped the paragraph about memory banks and experience levels, he rarely found it relevant to the things he saw and he could come back to it if necessary. The android was programmed with false memories and base knowledge, then after a period of learning in the lab which could last from half an hour to a few days, it was set loose to see how it adapted to its situation. Some were back in the lab by the end of the day, some stayed with one of Rick's colleagues and kept the persona for a few weeks, but whenever the experiment was deemed to be at an end the recorded data was transferred to the research database, wiping the android's mind

ready for re-use.

Rick set the tape playing, to use his own terminology, and drifted into his recurrent state of staring through the monitor into his own mind, reflecting on his position as Data Technician, a title which sounded more impressive than the reality, and bemoaning for the thousandth time the third class degree in cybernetics that had led him there.

A sudden change in his field of view snapped him out of his melancholy musings and he frowned at the screen. Pausing the flow he flicked back to the summary of B333 to see she had been given nineteen years worth of detailed memories but a relatively limited information bank, putting her on the intelligence level of a brainy adolescent. A ditzy nineteen-year-old with a blonde ponytail, maybe he should call her Pam after his sister. Rick grinned to himself and continued checking the summary for details of any hardware changes; he couldn't see any but that might mean they'd been overlooked here, he wasn't about to read the full spec.

Rick went back to his tape-watching with more attention. As well as seeing and hearing everything external that the android could see and hear, Rick had neural network diagrams on the screen, building in complexity as the adaptations occurred. They usually followed a similar pattern starting with simple connections, and if Rick chose to open

the extended visual display, he could see for example the comparison being made between the face of a person standing before the android, and faces stored in its memory. B333's neural network patterns weren't building up in quite the way he'd come to expect, but the difference was slight and could just be a natural variation he'd never seen before.

Rick watched the familiar street from the android's point of view, cobbles and flagstones mainly. Then the pace slowed and there was a long view of a clothes shop window, gradually coming closer. Rick smiled as he thought of Pam's short attention-span and ability to be side-tracked by anything that caught her eye: he settled on Pam2, like Audrey II the intelligent plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Pam2 looked through the shop window at a coat, then appeared to catch sight of her reflection; she stood on tip-toe to match herself up with the coat as if trying it on and Rick frowned uncertainly. This behaviour didn't seem usual, but then they didn't usually programme the androids as butterfly-brained teenagers. Pam2 turned away and moved on, and Rick relaxed. Until she started dancing.

Why anyone would be playing *I Feel Pretty* from *West Side Story* on a Saturday afternoon on Ivegate Rick had no idea, but there it was and

Pam2 was gently twirling down the street to it, with only a few raised eyebrows from bemused shoppers. Thankfully it seemed to stop before she lost her balance, and she trotted over to a jeweller's window to peer at diamond rings. She repeated her performance with the reflection, this time holding her hand out to try ring after ring on her wedding finger. Now Rick could hear Pink Floyd's *Shine on you Crazy Diamond*; it was almost as if someone was composing a soundtrack. He froze, going cold at the thought, then separated the internal and external feeds.

Rick sat back in his chair, nervous and shaken by the enormity of his discovery. The neural network patterns for Pam2 had descended into chaos. Separating the feeds had confirmed his sudden suspicion that the music was internal; Pam2 was singing snippets of songs in her head, triggered by her surroundings. If the hallmark of artificial intelligence was its indistinguishability from a real human then this irrational frivolity was surely the best yet. Pam2 twirling, carefree, down the streets of Bradford reminded Rick of Julie Christie's performance as the free-spirited Liz in *Billy Liar* and he was both touched and impressed. Then came the ice-cold prickle down his spine as he realised that Pam2 was now dead, and he was dissecting her brain.

## Meltoriel Vanquished

Meltoriel raced along darkened corridors, muscles straining, heart pounding. She was pleased with herself; she had chosen well. She couldn't hear any pursuit for the moment but she knew Davies would reappear soon and then it would all be over, she would be a married woman.

Meltoriel Nostariel was a warrior, a member of the highest-ranking clan in Eriador. She had been trained from the age of four in combat techniques and military tactics, but the Eriadorians were in reality pacifists, modelling their society on romantic ideals and their founders' love of Tolkien, and she was never expected to use her training. Except to secure herself a husband.

Eriador had originally been the temporary orbiting base of an idealistic group of scientists who had left Earth to build a peaceful, self-sufficient colony on Mars. Romantic ideals didn't stop them from growing offspring in the lab in the struggling early days of Eriador, to avoid the colony losing valuable work from mothers in the weeks before and after birth. Through children and new arrivals from Earth the colony grew in numbers, Eriador was extended and improved to accommodate them, and eventually the building of a permanent

Mars base was abandoned, but the tradition of artificial wombs continued. The practice gradually evolved, with young Eriadorians depositing sperm or eggs at the nurseries when they came of age, ordering a child to be created later when they were ready, or after their death so their genes would continue. Lower ranking women usually ordered the child from their husband's stored sperm, and it had even become fashionable in recent years to have the resulting zygote implanted so as to give birth themselves, but higher ranks united their eggs with the finest genetic material regardless of who provided it, and they would never undergo a pregnancy.

Marriage had survived in Eriador not for purposes of procreation but for companionship and from tradition. The warrior-class women chose their prospective husbands and challenged them; if the woman was bested in combat the alliance was sealed. Of course there were rules, but it was acknowledged that some women didn't try too hard if they had set their heart on a man who couldn't be relied upon to win on his own merits. Meltoriel was trying her utmost, and Davies was still in pursuit, she could hear him crashing down the stairs of a storeroom she had dodged through a minute earlier. Pleased that she had chosen such a suitable mate, she turned and backed against the

wall, preparing to make her final stand and let Davies see as he entered the room that she was cornered and the challenge had been met.

Kieran Davies had been in Eriador a month, and his opinion of the place was not improving. For years this odd colony had been all but forgotten on Earth, but with a recent UN decision to use Mars as a military outpost, Eriador had become a problem due to its proximity. Negotiations had come to nothing; the inhabitants could not be persuaded to go elsewhere. Troops had then been sent, Davies among the small force, to persuade and supervise; violence was to be avoided, which accounted for the lengthy stay, but patience was running out on both sides. Davies would gladly have left the station and blown it up from a safe distance with its inhabitants still in place, just to get away from the intellectual discussions, smug smiles and cloying otherness of this endlessly circling feudal outpost. Luckily for Eriador, Davies was not in command.

Davies and Meltoriel had met during some early discussions within which both were minor participants. He was professional enough not to let his distaste show, and Meltoriel had been isolated enough not to guess at its existence. His bearing, his handling of situations, and the fact that he was not one of them, made him an object of fascination;

her decision was quickly made and the challenge planned. She ambushed him in the traditional manner as he walked through one of the main corridors, launching a flying kick that glanced off his side and caught him unawares; an attack from an Eriadorian was the last thing he'd expected. Unhurt but furious, he considered the best response; he supposed this might be the start of a revolt, though even for this peculiar place it seemed oddly tame. He was reluctant to retaliate openly in such a busy thoroughfare, mindful of the instructions to turn to weapons as a last resort, and he ran after her, down side corridors, through dimly lit rooms, always holding back in case he was running into a trap.

Meltoriel leaned against the wall, catching her breath. She could hear Davies slowing to a halt outside the door. He reached cautiously in and pressed the panel to increase the light in the room; Meltoriel smiled in anticipation. He crept round the door with a gun in his hand, pointing it at the unarmed woman wearing ceremonial battledress which afforded no protection whatsoever. She raised her hands before her, beginning to uncurl her fingers to display the ring in each palm, and he fired. There was no time for her face to even register surprise. The rings fused to her hands as she died.

## Psyche and the Soul

In the legend, Psyche was the breathtaking wife of the god of love. Psyche Sinclair, however, was an Edinburgh teenager with mildly eccentric parents, and hair the colour of drying blood. She didn't have a boyfriend, but that didn't bother her; she knew her namesake was too beautiful for mortal men, and she'd heard that names were reflections of the soul. Psyche most certainly believed in souls.

Wednesday afternoon found her in the garden as usual, her feet curled under her on the bench, watching passers-by. Her dad's ideas of home schooling at this advanced level were vague at best, and he had a Wednesday night residency at a New Town jazz bar. Psyche didn't mind—Wednesday afternoons were a good time to think and dream and be.

“How's it going, Psycho?”

A girl from down the street, shouting and gesturing to impress her boyfriend on the way past Psyche's gate. Maybe it worked; ten yards further on they stopped for the kind of prolonged, uninhibited snog that only teenagers are capable of. Psyche watched idly over the hedge, and then blinked and frowned in concentration. For a

moment, she had seen their souls fuse.

#

The boy had crossed the park and reached the thin band of trees before he realised Psyche was following him. Another of her contemporaries from the neighbourhood, he knew her by sight and reputation.

“Did you want something?” he sneered as she caught up with him at the boundary.

“You have a diseased soul,” she said, her serious eyes fixed on his face.

“What?” he laughed.

“I can cure you,” she murmured, as she leaned in to kiss him.

She was a nutcase, no doubt about that, but not bad-looking and there was no-one around to see, so what the hell.

He gasped for air and clutched his throat as she drew back, and as he sank to his knees choking, Psyche very deliberately stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes in an attempt to look down at the small object upon it. She picked it off and held it in the palm of her hand for inspection. It was a small, pale green caterpillar.

#

The idea was very simple and Psyche was surprised she'd never thought of it before. Her inner beauty, reflected in her carefully chosen name, must exist for a purpose. The world around her, and the people in it, were ugly for the most part, whatever surface appearance suggested. It was her duty to bring light to those who needed it the most, and she only wished she could thank the show-off neighbour and her brutish boyfriend for revealing the means, but she knew they wouldn't understand.

Starting with the boy in the park, she worked her way around the nearby streets, down alleyways, via bus-stops and off-licence car parks, improving lives one by one. She never seemed to notice the crumpled shell she left behind, intent on the tiny treasures cupped in her soft hands.

She was asleep when her dad got home that night, tired out by her busy evening. He quietly opened her bedroom door and shook his head in bemusement before he returned to his wife in the kitchen.

“Where’s she been to collect all those butterflies?”

## The Day the Circus Came to Town

Welcome to the freak-show, honey, check your soul in at the door. For one night only, the amazing world-famous Circus of Murder is in town.

Once upon a time, well, once upon a time makes this sound like a fairytale, but then they're often not as sugary sweet as the Disney version makes us think, so it'll do. Once upon a time I wanted to be a ballerina — no, don't laugh, I had more control over my limbs back then, it could've happened. A ballerina, full of grace and poise, or a circus dancer, bareback rider, daredevil horse-fairy defying gravity night after night. Not quite how it turned out, but not far off.

Teenage rebellion leads us down strange paths; the old idea of running off to join the circus had crossed my mind not long before the big top appeared at the edge of town, and when it's on your doorstep it's hardly running at all. Decked out in my protective black, hoping I looked much cooler than I felt, I strolled along to the edge of the field, working up the courage to ask for a trial. It was quieter than I imagined, no animals braying or trumpeting, no bustle outside the tents and trailers, no activity that I could hear or see at all. Which should have warned me, but instead it made it

easier to cross the empty field and walk right in.

A macabre circus, the teenage goth ballerina's dream, like an Alice Cooper stage show without the man himself. Not an opportunity to miss, I could tell that the moment the door-curtains parted and I saw the rehearsals inside. A sea of silk, lace, velvet, net and brocade; a dozen elegant young women leaping gracefully through hoops and hanging upside down from tightrope or trapeze. Now I understood why there were no animals, every part in this circus was played by one of these women. Except the ringmaster, of course. Like a cross between harmless family fun and a burlesque show.

They noticed me eventually, coaxed me into joining in, persuaded me I could be one of them, with a bit of training. No contract, no promises, just try a small part in the performance before they move on; if nothing else I'd have enjoyed myself, I'd have a tale to tell my friends. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as the ringmaster said, and when he fixed his green eyes on me I had to agree.

So here I stand, painted as the clown I am, lowest of the low, here to greet the paying guests. I never was as graceful as I thought I was, and I'm only getting worse. It took me a while to realise that trying to leave just made me rot; I misunderstood, I thought if I left I'd die. I can't do that though, it's in the contract, I signed one in the

end. Take a tip from me — always read the small print.

That reminds me, can I see your ticket? I'll show you to your seat; make sure you get nice and comfortable, grab a cushion if you like. Because now you're here, you can't leave. Where would we be without our audience?

## The Mist Wolves

Softly fluid the mist wolves ran, coalescing out of the night fog along the embankment, loping towards the inhabited streets above. The boy watched with shock and fear as their elongated snouts formed from the pearly drops of mist along the river, sniffing for prey. Prey like him. He turned and ran, feeling their cold breath at his heels, ever closer, poised to spring. He couldn't look round, couldn't check to see how near their slavering jaws had come to the soft flesh at the nape of his neck.

His mother had warned him not to stray too near the river at night but he, worldly wise at thirteen, had dismissed her words, laughing off the stories of the night takers as children's tales. And now here they were, chasing him through streets he barely recognised in his panic. He had a dim idea they couldn't venture far from water, but on a night like tonight there was water everywhere, dripping from overhanging eaves, pooling before ill-lit doorways and trickling from broken gutters.

He rounded a corner and ran up against a locked gate. Nowhere left to run. Slowly he turned to face the pack, hoping it had all been his imagination, just a young boy's remembrance of

stories designed to frighten him back inside the house before dark, but no — they were real, all right. They gathered before him to enjoy his fear, snarling, wispy and faint but solid enough to bite, he didn't doubt that for a second. He sagged against the gate, sure his life would end here in this alley, his body carried away to the river, his mother believing he ran away. He tried to force his whirling thoughts into a plan, but time was not on his side.

Something caught his eye and he realised he'd missed a bolt-hole in the shadows; a narrow opening between high buildings, barely wide enough for a boy to squeeze through. With no time to wonder where the passage led, he lunged for the entrance and scrambled through, grazing his arms on the rough bricks. The wolves could move faster than the boy in the confined space, mingling and passing through each other as they went; he felt an insubstantial claw, not quite a solid shard of ice, rip at his calf, a taste of things to come.

The boy launched himself from the narrow alley onto the wharf, breathless with terror, the numb cold slowly rising up his left leg from his wound. The snarling wolves were springing from the gap behind him, re-forming in a semi-circle. The only way out was forward.

With no time to consider how slim his chances

were in the cold, dark water, the boy plunged into the river. As he came up for air he saw the last of the pack mingle with the water, and expected to feel jaws close around his legs at any second. Something cold caught his thigh and he was under the surface again; he floundered for half a minute more before he grasped some unseen solidity and lifted his head clear of the water. Frantic, terrified, he whipped his head from side to side, searching for his assailants.

But they were gone, the fine droplets of their insubstantial bodies dispersed by the slow-moving river. Half a snarl rose above the water here, the hackles rising on nothing but a wave over there, the diluting effect lessening the wolves' control of their element until they could no longer gather themselves for an attack. The boy drifted, ragged flotsam on the night current, praying to gods he had also not believed in before tonight for rescue before the river itself claimed him as the wolves had not.

## Windows to the Soul

“Iridescent,” she said without looking. “Aren’t they?”

Henry Deaton shook his head, exasperated that his wife still couldn’t remember the colour of his eyes.

“Never mind,” he replied.

He raced up on deck and peered through the reinforced bubble covering the ship as it sailed the methane seas of the oil-rich planet that had made his fortune. As long as Lydia had her silks and jewels she was happy; she had no time for Henry’s eyes.

“Captain!” came a shout, and Henry turned to watch, longing for excitement.

A young boy ran barefoot along the deck. The captain emerged from the cabin opposite Henry and surveyed the dirty youngster with distaste.

“Well?”

“Captain,” panted the boy. “There’s a hole, they’ve made a hole.”

“What are you talking about, boy?”

“The ship, they’ve broken the ship: the giant barnacles.”

The captain looked astonished for a second then laughed, cuffed the boy around the ear and

dismissed him.

“Giant barnacles!” he repeated to himself, shaking his head as he ducked back through the doorway.

Henry watched the boy with interest as he slunk back along the deck. On a whim, he followed.

Three floors below deck Henry lost the boy in a crowd of jostling men, but he barely noticed as he realised what all the activity was about. The wall bulged alarmingly, and the six-deep crew were straining to push it back into place, trying to strengthen it with a patch. Whether it was giant barnacles or metal fatigue, something had cracked the outer hull, and the immense pressure was threatening to crush their vessel like a toy boat in a storm. Not knowing what else to do, Henry muscled into the pack and added his weight.

It soon became clear, at least to Henry Deaton, that they were not moving the thick wall, and with all the crew here, other important tasks were being neglected. He looked around for signs of authority, but all Henry could see was the imminent onset of panic reflected in the eyes of his companions. He squirmed out of the mass of bodies and ran for the stairs.

“Captain!”

The captain flung open his door and looked disdainfully at the dishevelled passenger who'd had

the audacity to hammer upon it.

“Captain,” Henry continued, “The boy was right, the ship’s been holed.”

“Now don’t you try and tell me it’s giant barnacles,” growled the captain. “If there was anything amiss, don’t you think I’d know? What do you think these are for? Decoration?” He gestured to the gleaming banks of monitors behind him, then slammed the door before Henry could reply.

Rousing the captain again was futile, and there was nothing more he could do below deck, but a sick fascination drew Henry back to the scene of the struggle. He raced back below but froze at the foot of the stairs, eyes wide with terror. Had Lydia been there, she would have seen that they were black, like the bottom of the sea.

## Jump to the Left

Gillian searched frantically through her handbag for her car-keys, already five minutes late for her Tuesday night aerobics class. She lunged towards the coat-rack to check pockets and her boyfriend grabbed her playfully round the waist as she passed.

“Not now, Tom,” she said, disengaging his hands.

“Oh Christ! Can’t you ever say anything else? This isn’t a good time, Tom. There’s a time and place for everything, Tom. Wait until the time is right, Tom,” he mocked. “The time never is right with you though, is it?”

“I don’t have time to argue with you, I’m late as it is.”

She kissed him perfunctorily on the cheek and slammed the door behind her. Tom glowered at the front door, then trudged into the living-room, hands in jeans pockets.

Five minutes of channel-hopping later, he threw the TV remote onto the sofa and wandered into the kitchen. Gillian was forever trying to goad him into taking up a hobby and use his time wisely. To capture, order and control time was Gillian’s driving force. Tom was convinced she’d meet

herself coming back, one of these days.

At thirty-four Tom was still young enough to believe firmly in his own immortality. He had plenty of time for all the vague plans in his head. In the meantime he pawed through the freezer for something easy to eat in front of his games console.

After half an hour of repeatedly getting stuck at the same point in the game, Tom decided to head off to the pub. As long as he stuck to a swift half and arrived home before Gillian did, it shouldn't matter. Maybe she was right: everything came down to timing in the end.

#

Tom woke up abruptly, wiped foul-smelling drool from his cheek and wondered where the brewery smell was coming from. With a sudden panic he realised he couldn't remember coming home from the pub, in fact he couldn't remember arriving at the pub, his last recollection was of picking up his jacket and closing the front door. He looked across at Gillian, sleeping peacefully on the other pillow, and wondered how furious she'd been when he rolled in hours later, paralytic. She opened her eyes and the guilty grimace was already lodging itself on Tom's face before he registered that she was smiling at him.

“Morning, sweetheart. Shall I make the tea?”

Tom nodded dumbly, amazed that she wasn't playing hell with him instead of offering breakfast.

When Gillian had left the bedroom, Tom sat up and frowned, trying to remember the previous evening. Strangely, he didn't seem to have the kind of hangover he'd normally associate with a lost evening, in fact he didn't really have a hangover at all, just a beer-tasting mouth and a feeling of deep tiredness. No doubt a cup of tea would sort him out.

He was still sitting up in bed, his forehead resting on his drawn-up knees, willing himself to swing his legs out from under the covers and make moves towards the shower, when he heard Gillian's footsteps on the stair-carpet. Hardly worth getting up now, he may as well have breakfast first.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Gillian.

Tom looked up to see how much tea she'd slopped onto the rug, and did a double-take at her clothing. Instead of the dressing-gown she'd been wearing a minute ago, she was wearing a trouser-suit, already dressed for work.

"That was quick," commented Tom, wondering if perhaps he'd drifted off briefly and missed her getting changed. "Where's the tea?"

"I can't believe you've been in bed all day."

"What?"

"You haven't moved all day, have you? You

can't have had a hangover unless you were necking spirits, you were back before me last night."

Tom stared at Gillian, confused and not entirely taking in all that she was saying. Something about her watch was nagging at him and he refocused his gaze onto her wrist as she stood with her hands on her hips. The watch was upside down so just to be sure, Tom looked over at Gillian's clock radio.

"How is it six o'clock?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Tom, I keep telling you, you're wasting your life. You're really going to have to get yourself together, you know. I can't put up with this much longer."

"How is it six o'clock?" repeated Tom, realising that the light at the window did seem somewhat dimmer than it had when Gillian left the room, but still refusing to believe that nearly eleven hours had passed.

"I don't know how you're going to swing this past them at work," Gillian went on. "I'm getting sick of thinking up excuses for you every time you go back to sleep after I've left. It's a good job you're on flexitime or they'd have booted you out long ago." She stopped on the threshold and looked back at Tom in disgust. "Get washed and get some clothes on. I'll make a start on dinner."

Alone again, Tom remained frozen in place, worried. He couldn't remember the previous evening, yet hadn't Gillian said he'd already been home when she returned from her exercise class? Now he'd apparently dropped off, been asleep all day and missed work. Maybe there was something wrong, exhaustion, something stress-related. Maybe he was getting older than he cared to admit.

Splashing cold water over his face made Tom feel slightly more alive and he figured the least he could do was go help Gillian cook before he jumped in the shower. He pulled open the bathroom door and his heart leapt into his throat. A swift glance down at his clothes reassured him and he laughed with relief. Obviously he'd just got confused for a moment; why would he be in the pub in his pyjamas?

He sauntered back to the bar, where his old friend John was guarding his half-finished pint.

"Fancy a go on the quiz machine?" asked John.

"No, better not."

"Oh yes, I forgot, you've only got a pass till nine o'clock."

Tom grimaced. "It's not worth the row, believe me. If I head off in ten minutes I should get home with just enough time to spare to make it look like I've been in for ages."

"It's worse than when you were living at

home.”

“Well I never minded peeing off my parents.”

Tom duly drank up and left the pub right on schedule. It only took five minutes to walk home — he glanced at his watch and wondered if he had time for a shower before Gillian’s return. Gillian hated him smelling of smoke, whereas if he scrubbed up, he might be in with a chance when she came home all fired up on adrenalin.

#

Tom turned the water on and stepped into the shower cubicle. He had to hurry or the rugby team would be coming in, and he didn’t want to get mixed up in them. He shook his head. What was he thinking? He was an adult, showering in his own glass-sided cubicle in his own house; he hadn’t been afraid of being caught in the shower by the rugby team for nearly twenty years. But he could hear them, the voices getting louder and nearer, and he turned round to prove to himself that it was just the radio in the bedroom. And got a wet towel right across the face.

Shaken, Tom picked himself up, prepared to slink off to the changing-room without drawing any further attention to himself. He frowned and straightened up; he couldn’t remember what he’d just been worried about but he really should stop

slouching. With wet hair, and a towel wrapped round his waist, Tom padded out of the en-suite and over to the wardrobe. As he slid open the door, he belatedly realised there was sunlight streaming through the curtains, and he glanced across at the clock radio. It was half-past eight, he was going to be late for work.

Hang on, though, it had been evening when he stepped into the shower. Hadn't it? He crossed unsteadily to the bed, sat down and reached for his watch to check the date. Still Wednesday, so it claimed, but Tom was beginning to lose faith in measurements of time. Was it the same Wednesday that was the day after his trip to the pub? He no longer smelled of beer and smoke, but then he'd just had a shower so that didn't prove anything. His heart was thumping madly in his chest, he was beginning to be unsettled by this lapsing of concentration. There was a good chance that it had something to do with low blood sugar; breakfast should see him right.

He dressed quickly and hurried down the stairs. He'd almost reached the bottom step when:

“Granton! Don't run, boy!”

“No sir, sorry sir,” stammered Tom, his face flushing red as he caught sight of the headmaster leaning out of the doorway to his study.

Tom came to a quivering standstill at the foot

of the stairs, and with a final glare of disapproval, the headmaster retreated. Tom took a deep breath to calm himself, and noticed the clock above the study door; he wasn't sure what had compelled him to run downstairs, he had geography next on the second floor. Sighing with despair at his own uselessness, he turned and began to plod back up, his eyes fixed on his feet.

Nearing the second-floor landing, Tom looked up and straightened his tie. He hadn't thought he'd be so nervous on his first day at work, but he was terrified of doing something wrong. Like being late. The thought jarred somehow as he opened the kitchen door, and he paused on the threshold, perplexed. He felt as though there was something on the edge of his grasp if he could only pin it down, but then the feeling passed and he moved on to the more important matter of fry-up or toast.

Dismissing a fried breakfast as a luxury beyond his reach that morning, Tom slathered marmalade over his thick-cut toast, and poured hot water into his mug. Leaving the tea to stand, he wandered out of the kitchen, idly wondering if there were any cartoons on TV. He pushed open the living-room door and his mother looked up sharply from her Hollywood-style bubble bath.

“Tom!”

“What day is it?” asked Tom urgently, pointing

at her with half-eaten toast.

“Get out of here.”

He backed out of the bathroom, breaking into an uncomfortable sweat; this wasn't a memory, he didn't remember ever walking in on his mother like that. And he still had his toast. He looked down at the mug in his hand and shuddered, but he could hear Gillian singing along to the radio in the kitchen and he strode back in.

“Gillian, this may sound...”

“Oh yes? Who's Gillian?” asked Lisa with a smile. “Come on we'll be late for lectures.”

Tom stared at his ex-girlfriend and wondered why she was in his kitchen when he hadn't seen her in over ten years. Then he looked more closely, and realised why the mug in his hand had seemed unfamiliar. This was the mould-covered kitchen he'd used in his third year at university.

He thrust his mug at Lisa and ran from the room, hurrying along the platform trying not to miss his train. Wait a minute... What train? He always drove to work. Shaking his muddled head he realised that what he had thought was the sound of trains was in fact clearly the cheering of a crowd, and with bewilderment Tom realised he was making one of his infrequent appearances for the pub team, sprinting towards the goal with a real chance to score. He looked down and as he

thought, he was wearing his suit trousers and smart office shoes. He looked back up and ran full tilt into the front door.

Tom sat on the hall floor, clutching his smarting nose, blinking back tears and whimpering. He tried to look at his watch but his watering eyes couldn't focus on the hands and he gave up. He couldn't hear Gillian moving around in the house, but then he couldn't hear traffic noise either, it could be the middle of the night. He tried to stand up and reached out to steady himself, but instead of the banister he grabbed a packet of long-grain rice and stepped back into the path of a trolley being pushed by a short-tempered young mother.

Miserable and disorientated, Tom turned to apologise, and teetered on the edge of a precipice. John grabbed his arm.

"Careful, Tom: the path's quite narrow here. It's worth it though, isn't it?"

John smiled and took a deep breath but Tom was in no mood to appreciate mountain scenery. He sank to his knees and the crash-mat cushioned him as he fell forward beneath the weight of his judo partner. He tried to roll onto his back but could only get partway since Gillian was pinning him to the bed, whispering in his ear and giggling softly. Tom smiled and reached out an arm to

embrace her, using it to ward off the cushion that his brother was trying to bring down on his head. Tom edged away, closing his eyes to hold back the threatening tears.

The bewildering sensation of being spun round and round made him feel nauseous, he began to hear drifts of voices:

*...just a...*

*British Airways would like to apologise for the delay to flight 139...*

*Give us back our eleven days!*

*I'm late! I'm late!*

*“Nnng...”*

*And then...*

*Settle down there, chaps...*

*Oh my ears and whiskers!*

*Give us back our eleven days!*

*“Stop...”*

*Now the first thing to do in a situation like this...*

*Give us back our...*

*Oh my ears and whiskers!*

*Give us back...*

*Give us...*

*“SHUT UP!”*

In the sudden silence, Tom tentatively opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, his lashes stuck together with the tears that still streamed down his wet face; fine rope-bridges of snot connected his nostrils, and the floor-tiles were cold and hard

through his thin pyjamas. His breathing slowly began to calm: he was sitting on his own kitchen floor, leaning back against the pan cupboard. He stared at a jagged cut he didn't remember getting on the palm of his hand, and decided to try and steady his nerves with some hot, sweet tea.

Gingerly he pushed himself up on unsteady legs, sliding up against the cupboard for support, catching his back on the overhanging worktop. He tottered a few steps, looked up and saw it looming down: the self-satisfied shiny white face with the classic Roman numerals, the thick tiered band of chrome encircling it. It was more than Tom could take. He reached up and carefully unhooked the clock from the wall, holding it as delicately as if it were made of moth-wings, then he raised it high above his head, swaying a little, and brought it crashing down on the gleaming arch of the mixer-tap, sending glass flying into the sink and across the worktop.

Shaking with anger and confusion, Tom dropped the remains of the clock and reached out to steady himself, leaning heavily on a shard of glass. Crying out in pain, he staggered backwards and slumped heavily back down against the cupboard, doubled over his injured hand.

Opening his eyes, Tom blinked away the remaining tears and tried to calm down. The

kitchen tiles were cold and uncomfortable through his thin pyjamas and he urgently needed a soothing mug of hot, sweet tea. A pain in his hand stopped him as he tried to lever himself up from the floor, and he peered at the jagged cut, the cause dancing tantalisingly on the edge of his memory. He slid unsteadily up the front of the cupboard, catching his back painfully on the worktop, and staggered towards the sink. Glancing up he saw Gillian's bloody precious clock, and a surge of animosity rose in him. He carefully unhooked the clock and raised it over his head.

The bent metal hands scratched the tap as Tom repeatedly battered the clock against it. The thin clockface splintered as the mechanism fell off into the sink, and Tom gave a yelp of pain and surprise as a sliver of wood sliced his palm. Overwhelmed and confused, Tom let the clock fall from his hands and backed away until he bumped against the worktop. He sagged to a sitting position on the floor and rested his forehead on his knees.

Wiping away his streaming tears, Tom opened his eyes.

## The Whitewing Fallen

I helped Lilith over the final stile between the fields and the open grassland on the clifftop. In the distance I could see the lights from a solitary long, low building; it looked like we had almost reached our destination.

If I was tired, six-year-old Lilith must have been exhausted, but being mute she could not say so. I paused a while, leaning on the fence, allowing us both to regain some strength before the final rush across the open ground in the twilight. I hoped we would find the refuge we sought.

A few days earlier, our lives had been idyllic, peaceful, surrounded by beauty. It pained me deeply to think we would never return to our beautiful forest. We had lived in the oldest, deepest heart of the woodland, where our people had lived far beyond the recollection of the oldest living being. There were men in the forest at times, but they rarely ventured so far inside where the wild creatures roamed, and never seemed to notice us when they did stray into our territory. Most of the time we were high above them, perched in the treetops where we lived, or soaring overhead, though that was an activity best reserved for the dim-lit hours, to preserve our privacy from prying

human eyes.

Only the little ones lived on the forest floor; the first decade is spent upon the earth, flightless, protected from view by seemingly impenetrable thickets enclosing comfortable living-quarters. Lilith was an odd child, never uttering a sound she watched the world with silent fascination. Her hearing was fine enough; we did not know if she could speak and chose not to. She often wandered through the trees alone and we thought her lost. How I rejoice at the child's solitary ways! I thank the mother earth herself that Lilith was lost that day, and I was sent to find her.

Lately there had come a small group of men to the heart of the forest. We were concerned at first, but they were so wrapped up in themselves, and so out of harmony with their surroundings that they seemed unaware of all other living creatures. We continued in our usual way, wary of them but sensing no harm would befall us. Their noisy camp was some short way from where the children dwelt, but it had an impermanent air, we thought it some young men's amusement to last but a few days.

The morning of that awful day had been full of light and fun. I often played with the children on the ground, my wings developed barely ten years ago, not long enough that I have forgotten how it feels to be earthbound and clumsy. So many of our

kin who never touch the ground are disdainful, being so delicate and graceful themselves. After some hours of games, my cousin's daughter Lilith was missed again, and I was sent after her. Lilith and I are used to each other, we need no words, and I know the places in the forest she deems special, good places to begin a search.

I found her sitting on a fallen log by a widening in the stream. Her bare feet were pulled up under her, and she was watching the water intently. I made to take her hand and gently pull her to her feet, but she shook her head and pointed, and together we watched the movement of tadpoles and part-formed frogs below the surface. I know not how long we were hypnotised by the creatures, but I am thankful for it.

We made our way homeward until we heard loud voices and much disturbance. Our people would not make so much noise, but there seemed too many voices for the young men's camp. Lilith clutched my tunic as I crept forward to discover what the source was. Through the trees I could see a larger gathering of men, those that the humans hold in authority, with their dark blue clothing, and weapons. They were shouting at the young men, holding them captive and destroying their camp. I knew not if the young men were miscreants who were hiding from authority, but if

they were, they had chosen a good place, seldom visited.

However it was that the dark-clad men were here, they were angry, suspicious, and eager to dole out punishment. More alert than the young men had been, they spied one of our people and shouted, thinking it to be another man from the camp, I think. I could not see who it was at that distance but they began to climb the tree, then suddenly fell to the ground, stricken by a man's weapon. It is hard for us to fly among the trees, they grow too close together, we climb to the top in order to spread our wings. Too many were crowded in the lower branches, watching the young men being captured, whether through curiosity or the desire to aid the camp-dwellers I cannot say. Panic ensued, everyone scrambling for the higher reaches, and I watched them falling, one by one, powerless to help them. The hidden children began to wail; Lilith turned her large green eyes up to me, tears pouring down her cheeks. There was nothing we could do but run.

We ran hand in hand away from our home, blinded by tears, Lilith's small feet being cut and bruised by the undergrowth. My feet were protected by boots, but my wings were more vulnerable. My furled wings are barely the width of my back, but they extend half my arm's length

above my head, and they caught on every overhanging branch, leaving a trail of iridescent white feathers to mark our passage. Even were I strong enough to fly with Lilith in my arms, I could not now manage to do so.

We stopped at last, lost among the trees, but they were more widely-spaced here and I guessed we were nearing the edge of the forest, though which edge I could not say. I helped Lilith into a tree, and we climbed as high as we could before resting, determined to keep out of sight. We could not return home, that much I knew, but I had no clear idea where to go. Lilith needed somewhere safe to sleep, somewhere she could stay until she developed her wings. If she ever did.

Although we preferred to keep our presence a secret, and our hidden dwellings had never previously been discovered, there were occasional interactions with human society. It was not unknown for a man to catch a glimpse of one of our females and fall in love, and in the case of Lilith's mother the attraction had been mutual. Lilith's father, Simon, had lived alone in a village near the southern edge of the forest, and spied my cousin Caracanth flying overhead very early one morning. Instead of dismissing her as a vision, he waited every morning in case she flew past again. In time they joined together, and Simon quickly

learned to climb the tallest trees, and became a part of our large family. Lilith was born a short time later, but it would be ten years before we found out whether she would have wings or not; halflings usually inherited traits from the mother, so she had a fair chance.

Thinking of Lilith's mixed parentage called to my mind another of our kin, who had shed his wings and left to join the human society. There was no love in his story, no woman he coveted, just a fascination with their world and a desire to be a part of it. He lived remotely, afraid to risk city-dwelling and be found out as Other, and I had visited him once before, flying there with a small group. If I could determine where Lilith and I were hiding, and remember where Acantor lived, we may find refuge with him, at least for a short time.

And so here we were, looking across at Acantor's dwelling-house, if I had set us on the right path. We had walked for many miles, a journey that was so brief by wing had stretched unimaginably. I had bound Lilith's feet in coarse leaves and part of her ripped dress, but the unfortunate child was still suffering, blistered, bruised and torn. We had kept away from human habitation where we could, and I had climbed to the tops of trees along the way to try and gain a

winged perspective on our position. I was loathe to push the child further, but we were not safe where we lingered.

We sprinted across the grass and drew nearer to the building where I hoped to find Acantor. As we closed in, I could almost feel the ghost-flutterings of the wings he no longer had; Acantor was inside, and my relieved heart soared. I was not overjoyed for long, however, as I could also sense a large group of humans gathered in the building, and panic began to rise in me. Lilith also sensed them, and she slowed down and began to drag on my hand, holding me back. I stopped, and bent to comfort her, hoping the twilight would cover anything unusual about our appearance, if any were outside to see. A door to the building opened and a figure emerged, it was Acantor sensing the presence of his kin. He walked slowly across the stony ground surrounding his dwelling.

“Hello? Can I help you?” he called, sounding so different I almost smiled. “Carinnan? How lovely to see you, my dear. And who’s this?” he asked, bending to smile into Lilith’s face.

“Her name is Lilith,” I replied on her behalf. “She is my cousin’s child, she speaks not.”

Acantor straightened with a frown, taking in our dirty, ragged appearance. There was barely-restrained panic in my voice as I continued.

“Acantor, we need your help, there is no-one left.”

“Colin, my dear, please. They know me as Colin. No-one left? Surely not. Come with me, you look all in.”

I was frustrated that he seemed not to respond to my urgency, but we were no longer part of his world, and perhaps we had shocked him with our appearance, he seemed perturbed. He led us behind the building, to a doorway between darkened windows, and ushered us inside.

“This is where I live,” he explained. “The other end’s my exhibition space, for my paintings. It’s the opening night of an exhibition tonight, I’m afraid, that’s why it’s so packed.” He sounded apologetic as he rummaged in his food-stores. “Look, here’s some bread, apples, cheese. These are sort of cooked potato-slices, and there’s a bottle of milk in here. Don’t turn any lights on, I don’t want anyone to see you. Oh, and you can get washed upstairs.”

He showed us where his staircase was, and left us alone in the dark room. Lilith bit into an apple, and the sudden noise startled me. Even in our longed-for refuge, I realised we were not safe. Though Acantor — Colin — may help us, he could not shelter us for long without our being discovered. Lilith could perhaps be left in his care,

but would there be questions to answer over where she came from? Would Colin understand her without words? I led her up the stairs to Colin's bathing room and gently washed her battered feet while she devoured her apple. I had become mother to this girl during our journey; I could not leave her now.

Colin returned some hours later, the humans all departed and the building quiet. Lilith, cleaner and less hungry than she had been when we arrived, was curled asleep on the floor of the room we had first entered. I had not dared sleep, but I had eaten my fill, having had little time for foraging on our journey.

"Sorry about that," said Colin, lighting the room as he entered. "First night parties are a pain but they're good publicity."

I said nothing, dismayed by how different our worlds were. He sat down at the table with me, and asked me to explain what had happened. I watched his face grow paler and more serious as I did so.

"My parents," he murmured when I had done. "And my sisters. I know I didn't keep in touch, but...Oh, Carinnan, I wish I could let you stay."

"I know Lilith and I cannot remain here. I had not fully considered the consequences of our coming to you, but I knew not where to go."

"To hear you speak like that, it really brings

back memories...I'll have a think," he said, his eyes glittering with unshed tears. "You go get some sleep."

I stretched out on Colin's bed in my stained tunic and torn leggings, relieved to be sharing the burden of responsibility, however briefly. I must have slept soundly, for it was almost dawn when Colin awoke me, shaking my arm urgently.

"Sorry, it's only been a few hours I know, but I thought it was safer to get you out of here early," he apologised as I sat up and laced my battered boots onto my sore feet.

Lilith was already eating bread and cheese when I followed Colin down the stairs. He handed me some food and explained his plan.

"There's a little wood not far from here, it's not very big but people don't seem to go there; it's right on the clifftop, I think part of it's already fallen into the sea. Anyway I like it, it's quiet and there's always some interesting view between the trees to paint, so I go there quite a bit. Once or twice I thought I saw something. Someone." He paused, searching for words. "One of our kind, I think; I don't think anyone else would've noticed him, but even though I've been away a long time, I still have finer senses than most humans. I didn't see him clearly, it was more a sense that he was there, really. He seemed...darker, somehow. More

solid.”

Colin’s voice trailed off, I had to prompt him to continue. Lilith was sipping milk, watching Colin unwaveringly.

“Well, as I say, I haven’t seen him clearly, but I’m sure he’s there. I thought you’d be best off trying to make contact with him. I’ll take you there when you’ve finished breakfast,” he finished, looking pleased that he’d found such a solution for us.

“You do not know him?” I asked. Colin shook his head. “And you think there is only him?”

“I’ve only ever sensed him,” pointed out Colin. “That’s not necessarily because he’s the only one there.”

“But he could be a madman, an outcast,” I protested. Colin looked hurt.

“If you can think of any better ideas, tell me quickly, because you can’t stay here,” he said, standing up and pulling a jacket on aggressively.

I could think of nothing to say, either to protest further, or to placate my kinsman. I was overwhelmed with indecision and anxiety. For days my only thought had been to reach Acantor, I had never considered what would happen once we had found him. It was true we could not stay, I did not blame him for hurrying us on our way, but I was troubled by the thought of leading Lilith into the

unknown. The sky was growing lighter, there was no time to think about the consequences.

Colin hurried along the path ahead of us, continually looking around him. Lilith and I, footsore and tired, struggled to keep up. We had not gone far when we saw a small patch of scrubby woodland in the distance. It did indeed look as though it was sliding slowly over the edge of the cliff into the sea. I felt sure that if any of our kind lived in such a small wood, only one or two could be supported at the most. Either this creature was not what Colin thought, or was some solitary dweller, best left undisturbed. I began to be fearful of what, or who, we might find beneath the trees, but there was nowhere else for us to go, and at least the woodland would be a familiar setting for Lilith and I to stay in for a short while.

Colin halted in the pathway a short distance from the edge of the trees.

“Right, I’ll leave you here,” he announced.

“Are you not waiting to see what we might find?” I asked, shocked.

“Look at me,” he commanded. “What do you see? Human? If I go in there, whoever it is won’t let themselves be seen openly. I won’t go far, I’ll wait a while.” He smiled and held his arms out to embrace me. “Best of luck, Carinnan. You know where I am if you ever want to visit.”

Lilith and I watched him retreat to a bend in the pathway. I felt exposed and alone, but most of all inadequate as a protector of the child beside me. I squatted down, tidied Lilith's hair and kissed her cheek, then we walked towards the trees, hand in hand.

Stepping slowly under the shade of the outermost trees, I could feel eyes watching me. I could sense a presence, perhaps even two, but they did not seem quite as I expected. I hesitated, Lilith clinging to my hand, wide-eyed. Suddenly I spun around, and behind me two dark figures were blocking the path, enclosing us in their territory.

"Who art thou, whitewing?" rumbled the larger of the two, easily a head taller than myself, with furled black wings towering above his head.

"My name is Carinnan. I am guardian of Lilith," I said, gesturing to the child half-hiding behind my legs. "We seek your aid, if you will give it." My voice sounded weak in my own ears, and I trembled.

"Tis a human child," spat the dark creature, contemptuously, peering down at Lilith from his high vantage point.

"Her father was human, I grant, but her mother was one of our kind," I explained, wondering if I and he were truly of a common kind. "You have not told us your own name."

“The child is more than half-human; where are the wings?” he demanded.

“Are your own children not flightless for a decade?” I asked in surprise.

“Children? There are no children here. Only Fiktan and myself.” He gestured at the dark-winged youth standing with folded arms, a little way behind.

“You still have not told us your name,” I pointed out. Not quite a lone madman, but my assessment had not been far wrong, it seemed.

“And dost thou deserve to wield such power over me?” he asked, drawing himself up. “Darak. An old name but no less treasured for that. Use it wisely.”

I nodded in acknowledgement, wary but still hopeful of some assistance from these two darkwings.

“Thou looked for succour, whitewing,” continued Darak. “Whence came thou? And thy charge?” he added, glancing at Lilith with distaste.

I explained as best I could, unsure how far we had travelled, and uncomfortable enough under Darak’s thunderous gaze that I lost myself in my words and had to return over and again to clarify my tale.

“Yon human knew of us?” he exploded as I told him of Colin’s suggestion that we seek help in

this wood. I knew not whether I had already explained Acantor's transformation to Colin, but I explained again that Colin was in truth a 'whitewing' like myself, wingless by choice, living on the fringes of the human population.

"Hear'st thou, Fiktan? Hear'st thou the treachery?" stormed Darak, seeming to grow taller before me, his dark eyes blazing. Fiktan took a step forward but said nothing. "He lives among humankind! And thy mother, child! Cavorting with men!" He loomed over Lilith, who crumpled into terrified tears; Lilith who was so calm and quiet.

"You are frightening Lilith. She is but six years old, she knows nothing of the suitability or otherwise of her parents' match."

"Six years?" murmured Darak. "I have walked this earth near a hundred times that long. I have watched our race dwindle and die, no space to live in, no pairings. No children. Only Fiktan and myself, doomed to a slow death. And now," he growled, "I hear of whitewings diluting their noble blood, dwelling among the lesser mortals. Thy kindred signed their own death warrants."

I shrank from Darak's furious outburst, closer to tears myself than I would readily admit. Darak seemed to believe himself several hundred years old, yet he appeared barely a decade or two older than myself. Our kind lived longer than humans,

easily spanning a century, but rarely did they live beyond a century and a half, and they aged only slightly slower than a human. Darak was almost certainly delusional; Fiktan, who seemed a year or two younger than myself, had yet to speak but he had not corrected or restrained his companion so I had to assume they were both similarly afflicted.

“Does that mean you can offer us no assistance?” I asked, almost hoping we would be turned away so we could leave these mad creatures to themselves.

“Duty forces me to extend my hand, whitewing. Not the child; her flightlessness imperils us.”

“I too am flightless for the present,” I responded. “And I will not leave Lilith behind.”

“She need not be left to starve in the open. Leave her by a farmer’s gate, that she may be found and taken in.”

“And handed over to the human authorities? Those who harmed all her kin? Besides, she speaks not, they would not understand her as I do. Lilith stays with me.”

Darak looked down at Lilith with interest when he heard of her silence. For the first time, he seemed to see her as a higher being than a slug or snail.

“Fiktan has made no sound these hundred

years. And yet I know his voice to be full and fair. Hidest thou thy pretty voice, little maid?"

To my astonishment, Darak crouched before Lilith, smiling at her more with his eyes than his mouth. She leaned away from him, clutching my tunic. They watched each other silently for a few moments, then Darak suddenly sprang to his feet and the scowl returned to his face.

"The light is near full. Follow," commanded Darak, and led the way through the sparse trees.

Lilith curled against me and slept high in a tree for most of the day. Fiktan stayed nearby, whether to watch over us for safety or guard us as captives I knew not. Darak came and went throughout the day; for all his broad height he moved almost silently, and even I could barely sense his presence. He seemed to take some pleasure from appearing suddenly enough to shock me, which seemed to me to be cruel after the trials Lilith and I had recently endured. Early in the evening, cramped and hungry, I asked him where their dwelling was, hoping it would not be far.

"We sleep here, in the trees," he replied.

"Surely you have a shelter?" I asked. He shook his head and disappeared again.

Later, having eaten freshly-cooked rabbit which Darak had brought up to us, Lilith was asleep once more, exhaustion from the past few

days catching up with her. Darak was perched on a higher branch, staring up into the darkening sky, and I took the opportunity to question him. He seemed less harsh than he had earlier, perhaps his initial hostility to intruders was wearing thin; at times I almost forgot his delusions, he answered so reasonably. Lilith and I had been lucky to catch the two darkwings in the wood, so he said; this was not their permanent residence, though Darak said he had lived in this wood once, long ago. He claimed that at that time the wood had been some distance from the cliff-edge, and long years of erosion had brought the edge closer until it was within the wood.

“And the farmers encroach on the other sides, our woodland has been squeezed almost to naught,” he said sadly. “A permanent dwelling-place here would not be possible without discovery. We visit when we can, the lad and I. Our real home is further north, on a wooded hillside where man is scarce seen.” He smiled at the thought, then frowned again. “Not to thy taste, mayhap.”

“I fear the presence of men, and for good reason since my people have been destroyed by them. Simon, Lilith’s father, was different, he became one of us. He was a good man.”

A wave of fresh realisation knocked my breath from me; never again would I hear Simon whistle

cheerfully as he brewed nettle tea for everyone. I held Lilith tighter and she snuffled and shifted in her sleep. Darak made a dismissive gesture and began to climb higher. I watched him recede, a darker shape against the dark sky, and launch himself from the treetop. A minute later, Fiktan followed him, and Lilith and I were alone.

I shifted restlessly in the crook of the branch, briefly waking Lilith but she soon fell back asleep. I was used to sleeping in the trees, but not without a soft bed resting on a wooden floor beneath me, and a roof overhead. I doubted I would fall from the tree while I slept, but I could not be certain, and I was uneasy about sleeping without knowing where Darak and Fiktan were. Earlier, I had wanted to be rid of them and their insanity, but now they were gone I was afraid they might not return, and I would be alone with sole responsibility for Lilith once again. Darak might be odd, but he had provided hot food, and conversation.

“Why stays the child so silent?” asked Darak around dawn, when he had returned from his night’s flying. “Has she a tongue?”

Lilith was awake and watching him. She opened her mouth wide to show him she had heard, and understood, and that she did have a tongue, unharmed and whole. He smiled at Lilith again.

“Ah, so it’s not for want of a tongue. Canst thou make sound, child? Like a bird?” He chirruped for a few seconds like a blackbird. “No?” he said when Lilith only smiled at his efforts.

“We...I know not why she never speaks. She hears well enough, she is not slow-witted.”

“And has she never made a sound?” persisted Darak.

“Not that I remember,” I replied. “Why does her silence interest you so?”

“Dost thou never listen, nor retain information? Is thine head light in substance as in hue?” he roared.

“Fiktan too is mute,” I said, recalling his mention of the boy’s silence, and also his supposed great age.

“Aye, Fiktan too is mute,” he agreed. “The lad has not always been thus, it was his mother’s death, I think, that did away with his voice.”

“A shock can cause such a thing, I’ve heard. Lilith has experienced no comparable event until this last week. I cannot recall her ever speaking, or laughing loudly or wailing. She is just a quiet child.”

Darak and Lilith looked at each other with silent interest for a short while, before Darak retired to a neighbouring tree to rest.

That morning I wished Lilith would speak; I

wanted to know her opinion of Darak. After her initial fear at his stormy temper, she seemed to have accepted his presence. Fiktan she largely overlooked, as did I, for he was forever in the background, overshadowed by Darak's hulking frame. Though some might suggest it would be misguided to place trust in the opinions of a six-year-old, I knew that Lilith watched, and more than that she noticed things. I had no real choice but to trust Darak and his quiet companion, but I would have felt more comfortable with my position if Lilith had put forward a favourable view of our host.

During the afternoon I drifted to sleep in my tree, worn out at last. I awoke to find Lilith gone, not unusual but worrying in a strange place. I scrambled down from my perch and looked about me; I knew not what delights this woodland held for a small child, nor where to begin my search. I sensed watching eyes and looked up to see Fiktan watching me from a low branch. He jumped down and strode towards me.

"Lilith has gone. Do you know where?" I asked, forgetting his lack of speech.

He nodded once, and held out his hand. I took it, reluctantly, and was pulled along in his wake as he moved through the undergrowth as silently as Darak. We stopped abruptly only a few steps from

the cliff's edge, and there was my small and curious ward, sitting with her bare feet dangling over the crashing sea.

“Lilith!” I called, fearing for her safety.

She turned her head and smiled at me, patting the ground beside her in invitation. A shadow broke away from a nearby tree and moved towards me.

“She was watched; she would have come to no harm,” said Darak. “Venture not near the edge, thy bulk is greater than the child's. Come Lilith,” he commanded, using her name for the first time in my hearing.

Lilith swung her feet onto the solid ground and came to join us, smiling contentedly. The shine in her eyes and the colour in her cheeks cheered me after her constant tiredness on our long journey. I turned to thank Fiktan for leading me to her, but he had retreated into the background and was nowhere to be seen.

“How long for thy wings to be of use?” asked Darak, fingering the ragged tips of my wings.

I winced, but the bruises were healing. Tentatively I began to spread my wings, testing for pain and weakness.

“Not here!” roared Darak. “On a high point in full view of land and sea. Hast thou mind in yon fair head?”

I looked at the curve of land that Darak's sweeping gesture indicated, and also saw movement far out on the water.

"I was not thinking," I said stiffly, starting back through the trees.

"This way," ordered Darak, leading Lilith by the hand in another direction.

I followed them a short way to where the trees thinned out even more, nowhere in this wood were they dense as I was used to, it would be hard to move among them and never touch the ground.

"Now try," suggested Darak, and I slowly spread my wings.

Fiktan watched us from partway up a tree as Darak worked his large hands over every part of my wings, assessing damage, oblivious to my cries of pain. Lilith watched, wide-eyed, from a nook between tree-roots. Eventually Darak swept me up in his arms before quickly returning my feet to the floor.

"Nay, I dare not attempt flight with such a burden. We wait on thy wings. A week, with good fortune," commented Darak, and strode away through the trees.

#

We did not see Darak for the next week; Fiktan watched us in his quiet way, helping when

necessary. The muteness of the boy was frustrating, I had so many questions: when my wings healed, what then? Were we to move away to Darak's permanent home? Would there be others there? How were we to transport Lilith, if flying was part of his plan? Lilith herself seemed contented, exploring every corner of the small woodland. She slept well and ate heartily, whereas I found it hard to sleep among the branches and could not relax on the ground for fear of discovery by men, though we saw none. I was glad when Darak returned, though his form of greeting reminded me of his objectionable nature.

"Thy tale is true, lady," he said upon first seeing me. "I have seen thy wondrous forest."

"And did you see any of my kin?" I asked, overlooking his implied insult in my eagerness for news.

"No life remains in the ancient treelimb save birds and insects," he replied, shaking his head. "Though I saw marks of recent habitation. Thy whitewings are gone."

"Some of the children may have survived — they look almost human at a young age, as you know. In time, they will rebuild."

"A handful, branded freaks and kept apart by men," he spat. "What use are they? Nay, the truth is yon forest will house whitewings no more. 'Tis

the same the length and breadth of this land and others.”

Darak sounded so confident in his assertions, I did not know whether to believe him, or ascribe it to his delusional state, an utterance born of solitude and a melancholy disposition.

“Thy wings are whole?” he asked, and when I nodded, said “We leave at nightfall.”

“I will not leave Lilith,” I began.

“The child will not be discarded,” he said dismissively, and walked away, Fiktan close behind him.

At dusk, Darak herded us almost to the top of the tallest tree. Lilith was agile but still small, and had to be helped part of the way. Once there, with Fiktan watching from a neighbouring tree, Darak peeled his dark shirt carefully over his head and furled wings. He looked frighteningly strong, and my misgivings were reawoken; what choice had I but to trust him, though, and thus far he had harmed neither Lilith nor myself. His shirt-neck was laced from midway up the front, and he began to work the cord free. He noticed me watching his movements.

“A sling. For the child,” he said shortly.

“Will it hold?” I asked, concerned about carrying Lilith slung between us in such a thin piece of fabric.

“’Tis but an extra measure; I shall hold her tightly.”

I realised Darak meant to carry Lilith himself, and was about to ask if he thought it wise when I looked again at his bare torso; a six-year-old girl should not prove to be a problem for such a frame. He tied the sleeves together, placed them round his neck and tied the shirtwaist round his middle with the cord. He tested the sling and seemed satisfied, untying it again and calling for Lilith. She climbed obediently into his lap and placed her short arms round his neck. He re-tied the cord and swung himself onto a higher branch, supporting Lilith with one hand.

“Ready?” he asked, looking down at me since I had not moved.

“Where are we headed?” I asked, frightened now that the moment came to leave; frightened that my wings would not be strong enough to keep up with this giant and his large companion.

“North. Follow me; Fiktan will be behind,” he answered impatiently.

“I should tell Colin we are leaving,” I protested, reluctant to start travelling again.

“There is no time!” snapped Darak. “I depart now, with the child. If thou wouldst follow, raise thy slender arse from yon branch and spread thy wings.”

Shocked, I climbed to the topmost branch, crouched, and spread my wings with trepidation. Half-hidden behind her arm, I could see Lilith's face was creased with silent laughter.

Darak launched himself into the night sky, his arms wrapped around Lilith, and I followed immediately in his wake. I had not had the chance to test my injured wings beforehand, and every moment was filled with relief that I was yet aloft. I had not flown often; my home was a pleasant place which I rarely felt the need to leave, and my time was divided between the forest floor, and clambering between the branches of the ancient trees. Now I was called upon to fly for an unknown length of time to reach safety, and my companions were of larger build with far greater wingspan. I was concerned that if I dropped back, or was forced to land, Darak would fly on, leaving me alone and taking Lilith from me. That thought sustained me long after I thought my wings should collapse under the unaccustomed strain.

To my great surprise and joy, when the night was half-over Darak descended to a hilltop where Fiktan and I joined him. He did not seem to be feeling the cold despite his shirtless state; I shivered from the cold air and the fears I had been feeling. I looked around but could see no woodland nearby.

“Where have you brought us?” I asked.

“A deserted place. ’Tis not the straightest way, but thy wings are new-healed, I’d not expect thee to stay aloft without rest. There is far yet to travel this night.”

My heart grew heavy and I felt as though I should be torn apart with my despair. I had thought we had come near to our destination, but this was just a brief delay for me to regain some strength. Darak had untied the sling and let Lilith down to give them both some respite from their uncomfortable arrangement. She ran to where I sat on the sparse grass, her face lit by the excitement of such an adventure. She had never travelled above the treetops, and though she could see little, pressed against Darak as she was, she could still feel the air rush past and feel the uplifting freedom of the sky. I smiled at Lilith, and held her, gaining strength from my need to ensure her continued safety.

In too short a time we set off once more, if anything my strength felt lessened by our brief cessation from flight. Fixing my eyes upon Darak before me, rather than allowing myself to look upon the distant ground, I struggled through the remainder of that night, my muscles aching. At length, with the sunrise announcing itself faintly to our right, far below and ahead of us could be seen a darker stain against the dark earth. Darak

swooped lower, and overwhelmed with relief and fatigue, my wings began to stutter, the overworked muscles finally reaching breaking point. I lost height quickly, but no panic arose in me, only the calm thought that I had seen where Lilith would live, and knew her to have been brought there safely.

A sudden jolt as Fiktan, rushing to my aid from his position at the rear of our party, grabbed my arm to arrest my fall. He had not the strength to carry me as Darak carried Lilith, and I was so overcome with weariness and a belief that I could never reach the forest that I was inclined to break free from his grasp and continue my rapid descent. He bravely bore my weight, slowly losing height himself, until I managed to force my wings to a final effort, and we flew on together.

I watched Darak sail above the treetops, deep into the forest, oblivious to our struggle to remain aloft. Fiktan guided me to the ground close to where the trees began, for which I was grateful. However, we were still some way from the refuge Darak was leading us to, and as soon as our feet touched the ground, Fiktan took my hand and we ran through the trees. Once again I was forced to trust Fiktan and unable to question him, or rather, unable to obtain answers. We followed paths only Fiktan could see, we were on his home ground and

the best I could do was to try and duck when I saw him duck, leap when I saw him leap. My wings felt like a delicate framework of red hot wire, and every branch that hit them sent a shockwave of agony through me; I fear I had begun to moan softly and my eyes became blurred with tears I did not know I was shedding. The headlong flight reminded me too painfully of leaving my home, and before we reached Darak and Lilith, I had lost all idea of where I was or what was happening.

I awoke as the sun was fading on the following day, confused and disoriented. At first I thought I was in my own bed at home, except that the room seemed larger, and then the looming figure of Darak materialised from the gloom and I recalled my situation. My first thought then was of Lilith, but when I lifted my head I could see her sitting in the doorway, looking out at the trees.

“Thou hast flown well, whitewing. ’Twas a lengthy journey for one so slight,” said Darak, looking as though the praise pained him.

“Is this yours?” I asked, indicating my surroundings.

“Nay, not mine, lady. Think of it as thine own.”

I looked around the room, which was sparsely furnished, and at the blankets covering me.

“I cannot sleep in someone’s bed without their leave,” I protested, wondering what poor creature

Darak had evicted on my behalf.

“Hard to obtain leave of the dead,” Darak replied, to my horror. “It belongs to nobody, sleep here and be thankful.”

He swept out, past Lilith and down stairs I could not see from my pillow. I tormented myself with thoughts of Darak murdering a man to empty a bed for me. I wondered where we were and how many dwellings were nearby; if this room was not Darak’s, and yet we were headed to Darak’s home, then we were in some settlement, which meant others of Darak’s tribe should be here. That comforted me a little; surely they would not overlook a murder, this dwelling must have been empty through chance.

A short while after Darak had left my presence, Fiktan appeared with two wooden bowls of broth. I suspected Darak of sending Fiktan on purpose so that I was denied answers to the many questions I needed to ask. The hot soup was welcome, however, and Lilith and I drank it down eagerly. Fortified by the meal, I began to look over my bruised limbs, covered in scratches, and smears of dried blood. My leggings had already been showing signs of wear when we first met Darak, and now my right knee and half my shin were exposed through a long rip in the fabric. I determined to ask Darak for the means to bathe,

and for fresh clothing if he could obtain it for me. Lilith, too, was in sore need of a new dress, though being a child she seemed not to notice how ragged and dirty she looked. I hoped there were children her own age for her to play with, though hadn't Darak said there were no children? Darak had said some odd things at times, and we were in a different place now, he could well have meant only the woodland we had left.

Fiktan returned to retrieve our empty bowls and I asked him if there was a place to bathe, and fresh clothes. I expected no answer, of course, but perhaps he would send Darak to us. To my surprise, Fiktan swept aside the curtain to an adjoining room. I was still too exhausted to have been able to explore, and had not realised the dwelling was larger than the room I occupied. Through the opening I could see a large basin, such as the wealthy sometimes had, to sit in and bathe out of sight of others. The furnishings had led me to believe I was housed in a poor man's home, but my assumption seemed to have been wrong. Fiktan let the curtain drop back into place, and opened a plain chest near the bed. It was full of fabrics, and I guessed this was an indication that I should clothe myself from its contents. I thanked him, and he left the room.

Lilith and I pulled the clothes from the chest

and spread them across the foot of the bed. We were marvelling at the fine embroidery and richly coloured material when Darak appeared in the outer doorway with a pail of water in each hand.

“Take care of yon fancies, they once clothed my sister,” he said as he strode through to empty the water into the basin.

“Your sister must have been a woman of taste,” I commented. He looked down at me for a moment.

“She was a princess,” he declared as he ducked outside onto the stairway.

I was unsure whether to take this statement literally, or only as an indication of affection for his departed sister, but since it was Fiktan who carried the remaining water to my room, and lit the fire to heat it, I could not obtain any further information.

When Lilith and I were clean, I clothed myself in loose leggings and a belted tunic, and Lilith in an undershirt that was almost a dress on her small body. She had been out investigating the settlement during the day, and knew where Darak lived; she could not describe it to me, but her eyes lit up when I spoke of his dwelling-place. Now that some of my energy was restored, I was determined to visit him, to thank him for his hospitality but also to see for myself what manner of place we had arrived at.

I stopped on the topmost stair outside my door, wondering at the size of the settlement, and its differences from my former home. The stairway reached all the way to the ground, at the edge of a small clearing. There were other stairways leading to a few other dwellings, though the vast majority were disconnected among the surrounding trees, reached by tree-climbing, as was the way where I grew up. Despite the dim light, I could see no sign of fire or candle in any other dwellings but the ones across the clearing, at the head of another stairway. I followed Lilith to the ground, and up toward the lighted openings above.

“Which one of these is Darak’s?” I asked, partway up. She stopped and swept her arm above her. “They can’t all be his,” I said.

I gazed at the cluster of structures above me, including the largest hall I had ever seen above the ground. Did this mean his sister was indeed a princess, and Darak himself was a prince? Or a king?

“Canst thou not find thy way along a stair, whitewing?” Darak’s voice drifted down from high above, with a touch of humour about it. No doubt he had sensed my bewilderment.

“Thou shalt have finer attire than that, little maid,” said Darak, patting Lilith’s head gently as we entered his home.

“It was all that would fit her,” I explained. “Darak, you said your sister was a princess. Are you...?” I hesitated, unable to finish my question.

“Any man can be king of a dead people,” he replied, dismissively. “Ale?”

He handed me a finely-carved wooden goblet, then bent to give Lilith a small cup shaped like a crouching rabbit, its upright ears the handle and its back half-missing to be drunk from.

“What ails thee, whitewing? Hast thou never seen the innards of a dining hall before?”

In truth I had not, but Darak’s contempt forced me to cease my wide-eyed contemplation of the furnishings, and join the others at the table. Darak was seated at the head, with Lilith on one side and Fiktan on the other. I was beside Lilith, with several empty seats on my other side; this table had been designed for a banquet.

Fiktan rose and gathered the remains of their meal. He carried it from the room, and I wondered if Darak had servants. I had heard of societies with kings and queens, Simon’s society of men were one such, but my home had never been organised on those principles. Elders were respected, no harm was done to others, and we worked together as a community.

“May I meet your kin tomorrow?” I asked Darak. I was heartened by the prospect of speaking

to someone other than Darak, at last.

“Thou hast met my kin,” he replied, glaring at me over his goblet.

“Your people then,” I amended, thinking I had offended him by referring to the lower parts of his community as his kin.

“Time and again, thou revealeth thy ignorance.”

That was Darak’s only comment and it was some time before I remembered his reference to a dead people. Surely Fiktan and Darak were not the only members of this community? If he had spent some time with only the silent Fiktan for company, that could explain his delusions. He brooded over his ale for a while longer, then pushed himself from his chair and led Lilith to a pile of cushions near the fire. She sat beside him and he produced a wooden flute from a nearby chest, much to Lilith’s delight. Fiktan was still absent, and I seemed to have been forgotten, so I left my seat and began to walk slowly around the room, marvelling at the woven wall-hangings and the carved furniture.

I stopped at a small table which held only a thick leather-bound book. It did not surprise me that Darak should own such a thing; our elders also wrote down things of importance to be passed down the generations, but I had not learned to read as yet, being still quite young. This book

looked impossibly old, and its cover was finely worked. Carefully I opened it, and slowly turned a few yellow pages of densely-packed writing in black, blue, green and red. I was enjoying the look and feel of the pages until I came to a picture, drawn in black. It was Darak.

For a few heartbeats I held my breath, staring at the fine inked lines which looked too much like him to be passed off as a similar-looking ancestor. What was it he had said when Lilith's age was revealed? 'I have walked this earth near a hundred times that long'? And I had dismissed it as the product of a madman's mind.

"Take thy filthy fingers from what concerns thee not!" roared Darak suddenly, striding across the room towards me.

I jumped back from the book, ashamed to have been prying, and ashamed to have misjudged my ancient host, but I could neither explain nor apologise. Lilith was startled by Darak's outburst, and when I fled down the stairway, she followed behind, still holding the wooden flute.

For the next few days we did not see our hosts; food for the following day was left in our room during the night, and I did not dare approach Darak's hall. On the second night a small dark shirt and leggings were left for Lilith; I wondered if they had belonged to Fiktan many years before. As I

watched Lilith quietly playing the flute I felt wretched for driving her new friend from her. On the morning after our visit to Darak, I had ventured out into the rest of the settlement, and it soon became clear that we were indeed the only four in the place. If Darak's temper kept us apart, then Lilith and I may as well have stayed by ourselves.

Lilith, as was her wont, took to exploring the surrounding forest. With little else to do, I often accompanied her, and received the impression that we were in a vast place, far from the disturbances of men. It would be some time before I would trust to my wings, and investigate our new home from the skies. I realised quickly that this must become our home; I knew not where we were, and could not travel with Lilith except on foot. If Darak and Fiktan had remained here so long, the area must be safe, and even though they withdrew from us, we were still provided with food and lodging.

We had been in our new dwelling-place a week when I decided that if the rooms were to belong to Lilith and I, they must change their nature. I shook the dust from the curtains and blankets, and cleaned the simple furniture as best I could. I was sweeping the main room when Darak suddenly loomed in the entrance. I had not seen him since I had disgraced myself in his hall, and I felt the

colour rise to my face as I stayed my broom.

“Has the little one still my flute?” he asked abruptly. I hesitated, wondering if this was an accusation of theft. “Yea or nay, whitewing?” he demanded, and I nodded mutely, waiting for his anger and perhaps a request to remove ourselves from his settlement.

“Then ’twas her,” he continued. “Come.”

He turned and left the room by the stairway. I followed in confusion, but I could ask no questions since he was already in the clearing, striding quickly out of sight. I hurried after him, struggling to keep pace with his long strides, fearing for Lilith.

At length I heard a single note in the distance, the flute that Lilith carried, but far louder than I was used to, which increased my fears. Impatient to reach her, I began to move faster, but Darak cautioned care and reluctantly I fell behind him once more. We came to a rocky steep-sided gulley, at the bottom of which a stream trickled.

“Lilith!” I cried in alarm, leaning over the edge. Darak pulled me back roughly.

“Would thou send more rocks on the child’s head?”

Always drawn to water, it seemed Lilith had slid down the bank while exploring, dislodging rocks on the way and becoming trapped by the foot. Fiktan had also heard her signals, and was

already picking his way along the gulley to where Lilith lay clutching Darak's flute, tears leaving clean streaks down her smudged face; he smiled to reassure her as he squatted down beside her. Darak and I clambered down the bank a little way downstream and together we three lifted the fallen rocks, not heavy even for me, but too much for Lilith to move by herself.

Darak carried Lilith back to his hall in silence and placed her gently among the cushions that littered the floor. Fiktan brought clean water and bandages from elsewhere and sat beside her, rolling his sleeves partway up his sturdy arms.

"It is unfortunate that we have no healer on hand," I said as I cradled Lilith's head in my lap.

"Healers impress me not with their boasts," growled Darak. "Healers spared not my wife."

I was almost shocked; I had never imagined Darak to have a wife, he seemed too solitary a character for such intimacy, but with his vast lifespan, how many lives of men had passed since his wife was by his side?

He looked up at me, as though guessing my thoughts, or only reading them from my face. "Aye, I was wed, whitewing. Think thee not that I could love?"

I could think of no answer under that stern gaze, and I was glad when he returned to watching

Fiktan carefully washing Lilith's swollen mud-smearred foot.

"'Twas long before thy time on earth. Men pressed upon us then as they had not in earlier times. Our lands grew smaller, our people fewer. No children came among us, we were dying. And then she bore me a son, and I cared not for prophecies of doom, I was sure we would live." He looked up. "I was a fool. Would we had moved across the water to the vast forest I saw in my youth...The weak lasted not; my son and I were not weak, we ran with the blood of our forefathers."

"Your son?" I echoed quietly, my throat tight with unshed tears, for Darak's people and his friendless existence, and for shame once more at branding this noble lord an insane outcast.

"Fiktan, lady. Dost thou follow naught?" he sighed. "The lad is near of manly age, though when his mother died he was scarce more grown than thy little maid."

It was hard to comprehend, that Fiktan who had been mute a hundred years was in some ways not so old as myself. I watched him as he concentrated on neatly winding a bandage and marvelled at the outward appearance of youth from one as old as my parents' parents and more. These darkwing were a truly ancient race, and the knowledge made me feel small and insignificant,

somehow unworthy of their notice.

Fiktan finished binding Lilith's foot and she smiled up at him through her lessening tears. Darak stroked her hair protectively, then looked at me sharply.

"Take better care of yon maid," he cautioned. "We are few enough already."

## About the Author

Trained as a theoretical physicist, JY Saville lives in West Yorkshire and writes speculative fiction that would make her teachers despair. She blogs about writing at [thousandmonkeys.wordpress.com](http://thousandmonkeys.wordpress.com) and details of all her published books and stories, including non-genre works, are available there. She also tweets sporadically (@JYSaville).

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