



FALL IN LOVE
IN LIVE

Studida

SINDIOS
HATE

STOP HIM!
STOP HIM!



DESTINY

BUT IT WAS
ALREADY
TOO LATE...



茶煲
SORRY

FRITZ LANG'S
DESTINY



DYEING
> OLI JOHNS
LIVING
> OLI JOHNS

> OLI JOHNS >

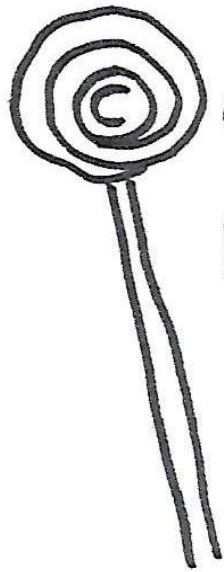
2ND TIME
2ND TIM
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SINDIOS

4-EVER



我的...不是你的
「mine and now yours」



oli johns + to some degree Fritz Lang
printed in Shek Mun

ISBN: - : - 5 - 1 - YYAAAAAA

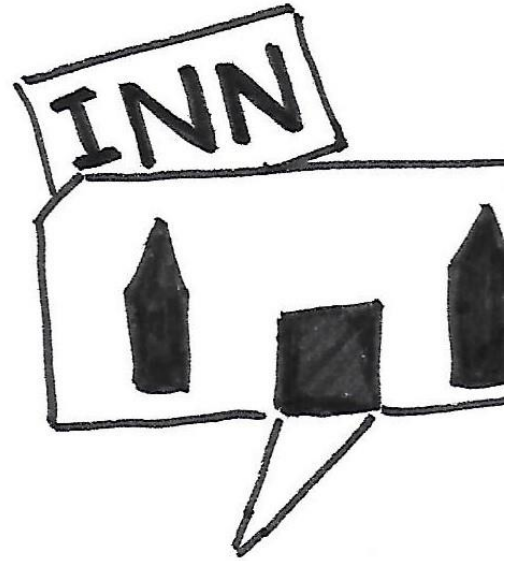
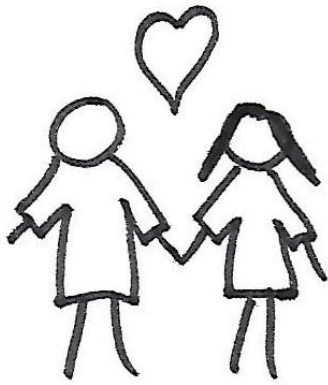
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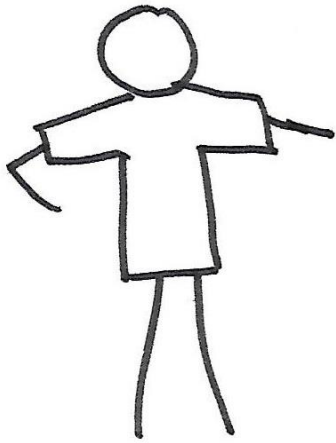
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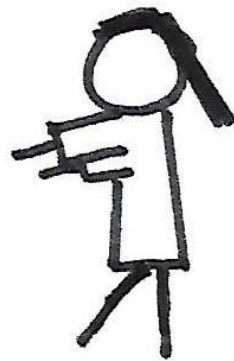
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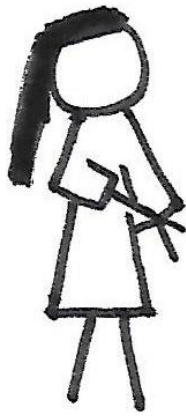
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'The ship accelerates, no visuals...they only had £50 per series...but we know the ship accelerates cos Su Lin says so, and Dayna says, *Dr Plakson, she's dead*, and Avon says, *who*, and then...then the video cuts off, don't know why. Upload limit maybe. But it's so cold, so un *Star Trek*.'

...

'See, Dr Plakson dies and Avon doesn't care. Even makes a joke about it.'

...

'Avon, the show's hero. The sociopath.'

...

'No reaction?'

...

Sila rapped his knuckles on the cabinet door, trying to play the *Blake's 7* theme but getting stuck after the first three bars.

'No music, Professor?'

...

'No sci-fi?'

...

He switched to the paintings on the wall, portraits of long ago Slovene men, stern faces, either poets or dictators, definitely not builders, definitely not *Ugresic* or *Ivana Kobilca*.

Was this it?

The best Slovenia could do?

Turning back to the cabinet, he tried another jibe, calling out the whole room for its blandness, the lack of technicolour and stern female poets.

...

'Professor...really. You should be embarrassed to be here.'

...

'No soul, no women, no weirdness. It's pitiful. Pitiabile. Like a *Darko Dreštivic* movie.'

...

'Still nothing?'

...

'Don't be coy, I know you're in there.'

...

'I can hear your feet shuffling.'

...

'Is it your feet?'

...

'Sounds like your feet.'

...

'No need to answer, I can hear it, it is them.'

...

'Wah, still not coming out?'

...

'Okay, *v redu*. I'll give you a five second head start.'

...

'Serious, not a joke. I'll move to the back of the room and let you have a clear run at the door.'

...

'It's a farmer's chance.'

...

'More than a farmer's. Don't even have the knife out yet.'

...

'No?'

...

'Not interested, Professor?'

...

Sila took the leaflet out of his pocket and checked it for the fifty-second time. Authentic cabinet made by Sigmund Zois, on display at Castle Tivoli for one month only. He looked at the wooden box in front of him. This had to be it. There was no other cabinet in the building, unless, as he half suspected, there was a hidden passage behind that amateur-looking Vincent Price painting downstairs.

'A Zois cabinet, one month only, promoted in a leaflet dropped in a zine store. In Budapest.'

...

'One solitary month.'

...

'Just enough time for me to hear about it and get here.'

...

Sila put the leaflet back in his pocket and pulled out a knife, its short blade a pale shade of green.

'You're really not coming out?'

...

'Okay then, snob.'

...

'*Kmet zarukan cabinet face kurba.*'

...

'Fuck you for dragging me back here.'

...

'Fucking shithole.'

...

Sila jimmied his green knife into the crack between the two doors and thrust forward, not thinking much about what it would be like if there were really flesh at the end of it.

There never had been before
apart from that janitor
but he was already dead
mostly.

The figures so far:

22 cities

57 cabinets

0 Professors of Dark Light.

~~~

There was no noise outside Castle Tivoli when he came back downstairs and no one nearby as he looked out through the broken window, which was quite weird as even at night it was a semi-popular tourist spot and, even if tourists didn't care much for the castle or the mediocre graphic art inside, they liked Tivoli Park.

Where were they all?

He checked his watch and said *fuck* in Slovene. It was one in the morning, an hour later than he thought.

That's where they were then, in their hotel rooms. And it was winter too, minus three degrees, no one serving mulled wine around this area, only near the bridge, so, ja, it was borderline understandable.

Sila climbed back through the gap in the window, pulling down a sharp piece of glass that looked like it could potentially impale on him as he was going through. Ha, shard of glass, just like in that *Dubrovka Ugrešic* adaptation. The woman building the tunnel under the river, the dreamer, and that small guy mad about the lack of bread he was getting, spitting it out, organising the window trap out of revenge and, far as Sila could remember, the woman didn't die from the *falling glass* injury, but she was in the temporary clinic for a few months, immobile. He couldn't afford the same thing to happen to him, not unless the hospital he ended up in had cabinets he could poke inside or

wait

who was that?

Sila stopped next to the cast-iron dog. Counted breaths. Pulled out his phone and pretended to send a message, glancing up and around while fake typing.

On the other side of the lawn, past the closed-for-repairs fountain, was a faint shadow. He squinted. *Ne*, not a shadow, a lurking silhouette. A genuine, human-shaped figure. Not making any specific movements, just there, lurking.

Sila put the phone away and reached inside his *Criolo bandit* jacket, running through the possibilities.

Dust dealer?

Junkie?

Sándor Petőfi?

Keeping one hand on the surface of his pocket, and the other on the head of the dog statue, he waited for some flicker of movement. As he waited, a thick wedge of mist or smoke spilled onto the lawn, seemingly heading straight for the figure.

'*Premakniki*,' he whispered, into a scratch mark on the iron dog's neck.

The figure stayed as it was, letting the mist wrap in and around and behind its form. Somehow, the rest of the scenery remained clear.

'*Kaj...*'

Sila squinted again, managing to pull out a vague outline, but it was hard to see if that outline belonged to a man, woman, Sandor Petofi or something else, something weirder perhaps, an alien or mist creature or

maybe

maybe it was him

the Professor.

Maybe he'd been in the cabinet all along. Maybe he'd been in there, feet shuffling, had seen Sila approaching with his pineal eye and ducked outside. And now the supernatural tease was standing in this haze of a mist duvet watching him, monitoring him, assessing him, laughing at him.

'*Si goljufal...*'

This could be it then.

This could finally be it.

Sila pulled the green knife halfway out of the jacket before reminding himself it could be a tourist or a drunk, and reluctantly put it back. As a

substitute, he crouched down low to the grass and picked up a decent-sized twig, heart beating the same speed Don Cheadle's might if he'd drunk-crashed a Volksfront rally.

Half fear, three quarters anticipation.

But forget the fear, this was a good thing

no cabinet involved, okay, but definitely a good thing,

and besides

if it were him, the Professor, he probably had been in the cabinet at some point so Sila had picked right, initially, which meant

which meant

which meant what?

Killing him near the cabinet was the same as killing him in it?

Hard to say, there were no guidelines, just *look for me in cabinets, Sila, wherever you go*, that was it.

Plus the *green dagger only* caveat.

The mist in the distance swirled and wisped and insinuated, then turned a slightly brighter shade of grey.

Fuck, something was happening.

Something dimensional, ethereal, logistical in some way or language he couldn't comprehend.

Like an amateur leopard, Sila crawled with awkwardly hunched shoulders across the well-kept grass, holding the twig out in front for about twenty seconds before concluding that twigs were awkward to grip and dropping it. With minimal sound, he pulled out its replacement, the green dagger gift from his only foe. It could still be a tourist or a drunk, true, but the Professor leaned tricky and there was a cabinet nearby, so it all balanced out.

He edged forward again until he was about five metres away from the outline, which was defiantly a figure again now, and, it was weird, the thing wasn't shifting, wasn't moving at all, not even its arms.

Sila stood up and swiped through the mist, which made little difference, then said in soft Slovene, 'that you, Professor?'

There were no words back, and no movements, fight or flee. Hiding the knife behind his back, Sila moved forward slowly and, when the figure still refused to budge, put his arm out, touching the strangely thin darkness. It was metal, cold metal. A robot? Why would a machine be watching him? Built by who?

The mist cleared a little, enough to show what was in front of him and-

*'Pizda ti bosanska...'*

It was a memorial.

A bronze, mist-covered statue of *Alojz Knafelc*, inventor of the Slovene trail blaze.

Wait

had this always been in the park?

Was it there earlier, when he'd gone in?

*'Kmet zarukan jeba ti bosanska...'*

Ne, ne, ne, ne, he thought, sliding the green knife back inside his jacket pocket, it wasn't. Or the statue was, but not the figure, it couldn't have been cos

it moved, before the mist came, something had moved,

something with eyes

and it had been watching him

he was sure of it.



## CHAPTER 2 GREEN BACKGROUND ART

Back on *Trnovska ulica*, drained, bored, in his dead mother's house, behind the door and the cage, the latter supposed to keep out not only thieves and drunks and drunk neighbours looking for sex, but also Professors of Dark Light [as long as they didn't have the power to conjure up a key].

But maybe this one did.

Maybe he had an ultimo key, like the one in *Krvic Draclo*.

Maybe he wasn't a *he*.

Maybe not a *she* either.

Maybe two thirds she and one tenth he and the rest of it something else, some gender that even gender enthusiasts would run in terror from.

Sila didn't know, and

as soon as he slumped down on his old couch, stared at the TV he hadn't watched in seven years, tutted at the collection of Petr Grenzic films his mum had adored [minus the three he'd sold] he realised two things, one, he did not care and two, that slumping was for giver uppers, always had been, and there was a whole city out there, a small, parochial one granted, but still a city and who knew what the people were doing out there this late at night.

Painting rats?

Sleeping on water fountains?

Carving doors into trees?

Even better, who knew what else was out there that wasn't people

Like the Professors, he she it they, of Dark Light

hiding in cabinets

fulfilling what the dream demon had outlined all those years ago.

~~~

Green Demon Vision Quest [Insert]

~~~

*In a cocoon of dim-light safety, quite young, Green Lord of Green Castle playing on  
the 18 inch screen, Sila picked at dry skin on his fingers and almost didn't notice  
when the ceiling started to vibrate*

*dematerialise*

*shift green and*

*unproven, undisguised, a face of mist appeared*

*told him his fingers would always be that way, as would his brain, the inner brain,  
spongy bit behind the Id*

*but in order to quell things a little*

*let me lay out my hypnotism background, adjust to triangle hands, get you into bed,  
cut the VR parts, edit the most recurrent of your flaws, swirl around your stem*

*better*

*now forget about the sad count, when you reach him*

*tyrants have control of every aspect*

*ja focus*

*waver a little*

*dilute*

*patch right in*

*oscillate*

*see the way my particles congregate*

*the James Duval bath scene in your head*

*his beautiful lips*

*doom-like haze*

*rangy hair*



*your dick at his front door with sunflowers*

*strident when it has to be*

*ja*

*puzzled and sincere*

*no bully scene*

*more than man enough*

*ja ja ja ja*

*see that tissue box, there's a dagger adjacent, green shade, pick it up, pick it up and  
woad the glamour of process, of our mission*

*the Professor of Dark Light*

*demon*

*bathetic slob creature wreck*

*cunning, playful*

*at some point you're gonna catch them in a cabinet, larping, and at that point  
you're gonna stab and when that's done you're gonna reach something no human ever  
has, not even Tom Hulce, something ablative, downhill, retrograde, definitely not a  
postcard of the Helix Nebula, trust me, troost, trystic treval-*

*Wah, dissipating now*

*clean yourself off*

*take a sedative*

*byye*

*~~~*

Sila got tired of staring at the wall of his ex-living room and turned to the blank TV screen instead, but it was miniscule and square and way too old to sell, so he got up and traipsed upstairs, counting the curbs along the way.

One, two, four, seven...

Thirteen stairs, all covered in newspaper, not by the police, by his mum before she died cos if she didn't do that then he might come back and tread her imaginary fibreglass all through the house.

Mad bitch, muttered Sila, as if she were still downstairs, hovering over the cold tap.

Noise from outside, a singing dog, then a squeal as something booted it in the head.

Wah, brutal.

In Bucharest, they fed them strips of beef.

Here, cranial trauma.

Sila went into his mum's old room and paused next to the bed. He bent a little to sit down, but didn't, looking left instead.

The window was showing his favourite film from when he was a kid - *Ljubljana nightscape, snowy street, castle on a hill in the distance* - so he got up and stared at it, painting on his own plot: a ripped Daniel Wu immigrating to Slovenia, having no prospects, forced to stand by the entrance to Tivoli Park and either mug people or ask for change, or sex if they weren't too fierce-looking, then, with cash on hand, he would go to the triple bridge and

do what?

Buy a camera?

A ticket back to Hong Kong?

There was no one in the real window movie and Daniel Wu's face was too wispy to keep solid in his brain and why was he still standing there? Sentiment? Revenge?

He walked out of the room, down the hall and into his own one.

Jezus, it was almost exactly the same, she'd clearly never tidied anything.

There was his *Kaneda* figure on the bedside table.

*Ubik* and *Red Star* on the shelf.

The line of VHS with non-Slav actors and actresses naked, *Women in Love*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Stranger By The Lake*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Total Recall*, *Basil* *The Great Mouse Detective*, *The Cool Surface* with Teri Hatcher's tits spilling out.

He picked up the last one and dragged back all the sex scenes, all his teenage frustration and thought, that director, what the fuck was he doing? How hard was it to shoot tits and sex at the same time? The French managed it, so did the Koreans, the Tibetans, the Mexicans. The Danish would've put the root-vein of Robert Patrick's dick in there. Or had him walking around post-fuck, the whole thing swinging.

Fucking prudes.

Sila put the case down and sat on the bed, saying the word for *video* in Romanian. It wasn't much use, there were no Romanians nearby, but he knew

he'd go there eventually, he had to. Where else would a professor hide if not the land of Vlad?

Iran maybe

if he could get in

if he was more than upper beginner in Farsi

if he could hack opium fumes.

A scratching noise.

On the window outside, a branch asking to be let in.

He tried to put his face into the pillow, but there was too much dust so he lifted it back up and checked the drawer in the bedside table. She'd probably thrown it out, but then again, if his room was still like this, maybe she hadn't.

Doubt was right. The notebook was there, exactly where he'd left it, open on the page where the Dizzy character called his mum a mad bitch.

He took the notepad back downstairs and read the part with the madness, thinking he'd probably find it too harsh now he was in his early thirties and the target was dead.

~~~

[Extract from short story 'The Fantastic Adventures of Dizzy' based on the old NES game + written by Sila when he was 16]

~~~

*There are many things I do or can do that will contaminate things and even after all these years I still don't understand any of them.*

*How can turning on a tap ruin the washing?*

*It doesn't make sense.*

*Fucking mad bitch.*

*What am I still doing here?*

*No one deserves to live like this.*

*For fuck's sake*

*Can't even watch TV without that witch coming in and screaming at us.*

*Can't visit Dad without being hosed down outside and left in a bathtub for four hours.*

*And she can't cope?*

*Jesus*

*What the fuck am I still doing here? I shout, lashing out hard, and the plant takes it on the jaw, no sound, cos it's limp and dead and I killed it and it can wash its hands as much as it likes cos I'm getting out of this place.*

~~~

He lowered the notepad as far as his lap and thought, ja, I was right, it is too harsh, but that's okay, time capsules are only ever harsh or beautiful, and that's exactly what it was like, apart from the treetop village

and egg people avatars.

'... ..' he said to the wall. 'Still got time.'

The notepad dropped on the floor, the computer returned and the search for cabinets continued.

A lot had changed since he'd been gone, though Metelkova was still running strong. There were a lot of new places that were weird enough to have cabinets, cabinets which maybe possibly potentially could contain the Professor, even though deep down he knew the oblique demon tease was probably in Romania.

He tried to say *the demon is probably in Romania* in Romanian, but fell short with the word *probably*.

'Cabinet, cabinet, cabinet...' His fingernail clicked on different sites and pages and then zoomed out to a view of the city from the castle.

Ah, the castle...hadn't he been there already?

Didn't seem like it.

Would it really have a cabinet? Wasn't it just a commercial set with a themed café?

Ah, but that was during the day, what about night?

He lost himself in the window for a few minutes and when he came back there were images of Drakon Dubrvnic's penis on the screen. It was the scene

from *Vzglavník knjiga* where he takes pills and dies in a very relaxing way, with his dick out, the Czech girl somewhere else, the supermarket perhaps...

Sila clicked on the search bar, typed *Czech outdoor sex*, switched to the *videos* tab and loaded up the first one that had a site name he recognised.

It took a while to fill enough of the bar to be tolerable [bad neighbour wi-fi], so he quickly went to the teaching sites and renewed his ad for Croatia, Austria and the Czech Republic.

The last student he'd got was a month ago, but that was in Hungary, which didn't much like foreigners far as he could tell.

These new countries would be better.

Well, maybe not Croatia, but Austria and Czech, definitely. All he had to do was keep his price quite low, offer one month special deals and, Gods willing, he'd get enough to keep this thing going.

If not, there was always the jewellery.

He logged out of the teaching site and switched tabs back to the porn. The bar was three quarters full, on a thirty four minute video, it would probably do.

He leaned back, pulled his jacket and shirt off, unzipped and pressed play.

The video started drab, two Algerian-looking guys walking around Prague asking women to come to a park, and all the women said *no* until one blonde said *yes* and then the action skipped forward, to a clearing in either a park or a forest, and one of the Algerians was getting sucked off by the blonde, who was already down to her knickers, in Prague, in winter, was it winter, wouldn't there be snow if it was, maybe it was summer or spring, and the other guy, the other Algerian, he was filming the sucking while at the same time shaking and talking fast, maybe editing it later too as there was no hanging around, no long takes, probably about forty seconds of sucking then straight to the guy drilling the blonde against a park bench and apparently it was out in the open, but there weren't any stragglers walking by, and the Algerian kept going and going and going and Sila tried to focus on the woman at first as that's what he'd started with, but her body looked bland, he didn't know why, whereas the Algerian, the Algerian looked tanned, dedicated, strangely rhythmic, kind of like Amir but not as decent-looking.

Sila switched to the wall, keeping his hand on his dick.

Where was Amir now?

Still in Dortmund?

Married?

There were noises from nearby, from the video. The cameraman said something in Czech, probably *people coming, people coming*, which made the Algerian laugh and continue fucking, and the blonde didn't seem to care much either.

Sila clicked off the video and looked at the window, which was dark and branchless, then went back to the search bar, typing in *Amir Aziz* and waiting for the Innsbruck 2002 photos to load.

~~~

It was three in the morning before Sila managed to pull himself away from the computer, and three fifteen before he dredged up the energy to think about getting out of the house and up to the castle.

'It's a half hour walk,' he said to himself. 'Get up there, scan a bit, get back, beam the fuck out.'

He grabbed his Slovene-Romanian dictionary, slid it into the outside pocket of his *Criolo bandit* jacket, padded the inside for the green knife, put on some gloves then glanced out of the living room window. It looked dark outside, very dark, but that was normal

and not scary at all

why would it be?

There weren't enough criminals in Ljubljana to bother him

especially not at the castle

not at this time of night.

You'd have more chance of running into a bear or Mia Sara or an Algerian porn star than something that could do you real damage.

'Off we go then,' he said in Romanian, not checking the dictionary to see if it was accurate.



Outside, it was deserted.

All the streets, all the alleys, all the buildings, as empty as a *Petr Grenzic* movie.

Sila walked the trails he vaguely remembered from years ago, eyes pointing down. It was November so there was lots of snow on the ground and to pass the time he kicked the snow nearby onto other snow, smiled, bent down, took off a glove, picked up some dirty snow from a pile of cleaner snow, shivered, dropped the snow, turned a corner, saw more snow, disliked the snow so kicked the snow and grabbed some other snow, greyish snow, and threw that snow at the actress from *Milla Feeling For Snow* then stopped dead in the street and tried to recall his old job.

It was only three years ago...three and a half...before the Professor, before the green knife, before the green mist demon materialised. Before that, what?

Fuck.

Ne.

He couldn't remember any of it, only his childhood, events before 18.

Was he a teacher?

A prostitute?

Elizabeth Medina?

Something that may have been wind ambushed him from a side alley and ripped off a flyer on a lamppost nearby. He bent down, studying it. *The Cabinert of Dr Caligari*. A new Metelkova production.

Ah, that's right. He was a cultural theorist.

Ne, wait

not a theorist, a cultural theory student with one dissertation, two pamphlets and

Slovene, too,

always in the shadow of the great big moon man Žižek

his fucking beard

permanent cold

all that *Die Hard* bullshit.

*Die Hard*

the *ok to murder semi-xmas* film

did it really mean all he said it meant?

Couldn't you twist anything if you looked at it long enough, skewed enough?

Probably, ja, sure,

if you saw McClane as a man's man and Holly as a housewife who had no business being out of the kitchen

with an office desk

shoulder pads, even though she had decent sized shoulders and

thinking about it

her office probably had a kitchen too.

Did they show that in the film?

Sila blinked and saw the path leading up to the castle, the castle with souvenirs and clean toilets and a souvenir shop with souvenirs, fucking souvenirs, in a castle, and no sign of Hans Gruber or Žižek or any other cultural thingy-ists but hey this was the top of the city after all, that was normal, and what the hell, it wasn't that shit here, not as shit as Belgrade.

Ljubljana, city of Metelkova. City with the only castle not owned by Nicholas Cage.

That was something.

He started up, not able to see a thing, only in his mind, and his mind told him there were either wolves or muggers up this path, but that was okay cos he had a knife, could defend himself, and his mind was probably lying to him anyway.



He kept moving  
then slipping  
and sliding back down.

The castle was invisible, the path pure ice slick, things were tougher than they should've been, but at least he was the only one existing out here.

At least he wasn't at home doing something normal  
or worse  
laying newspaper on stairs  
shrieking about fibreglass and  
contamination theory  
suicide.

~~~

Forty minutes later he made it to the top of the path and without warning there was red light mapped on the side of one of the walls, and *wall* in Romanian was actually *perete* so he should use that if he really wanted to get anywhere with the language,

so he did, and

because it was bathed in horror-red and attached to a castle he remembered it this time, and past the red light was a plank leading to a slope leading to a camera sitting on the ground pointing at a creepy-looking tree in the distance and picking up the camera was a woman,

a Chinese woman,

who didn't seem to know he was there even though she should've done, she should've been hyper alert being up on a hill, next to a castle at half four in the morning when there was no one else around except maybe wolves or muggers or the dead girl from *Vampire Grad*, if they had that film in China which they probably didn't as,

if he remembered right,

it came out in 1972, before China opened up, and it was a Yugoslav film so they wouldn't have taken it anyway, unless Tito had gone to Beijing with the film reel and complimented Mao's hair, telling him it was a film about vampires and China had vampires too so people would go and, hey, did you

know Chinese vampires jump a lot, ja, you probably do, everyone knows that...

'...don't they?' asked Sila, pushing the plate across the table to the Chinese woman, who, in the fierce light of 6:17am, looked kind of like Asaji from *Throne of Blood*.

'The jumping ones?'

'Ja.'

'Those vampires come from the Ming Dynasty.'

'Ah, Ming. 1500's. I vaguely know it. Do they eat people?'

She took a bite of the bun, ignoring the pig's feet and the question.

'I remember they do. Granted, I don't know much about Chinese culture, but I saw it in that film, the monkey king. You know it?'

'I am from Hong Kong.'

'That means you know it?'

'Obviously.'

'Okay. So you remember the vampire part then?'

The woman didn't answer. Instead, she took out her camera and played back the video she'd taken the night before.

Apparently she'd been doing the same thing for the last four weeks, on and off.

Each night she would walk up the path to the castle on the hill and point the camera at the Bergman tree.

Each night she'd look at the camera and see nothing.

'It's pretty weird, being up there so late at night. No the safest thing to do. Why are you doing it again?'

'Doing what?'

'The camera thing, taking videos.'

'I told you before, I will not tell you.'

'Did you?'

'I did.'

'When?'

'Before.'

'Before when?'

'It doesn't matter. I am firm on not telling you.'

'Okay. Fine.' Sila looked out the window, saw nothing but old, struggling men, came right back to the Chinese stone. 'Why not?'

'... ..'

'What's that?'

'I said some things should be secret.'

'Ha.'

'You will not understand.'

'I think I might.'

'You will not.'

'Ne, I really think I might. Fuck it, I do. I mean, you weren't the only one on that hill last night. You ever wonder what I was doing up there?'

'No.'

'No?'

The stone went back to her camera.

'Fine, look at your pics, I wouldn't tell you anyway.'

She looked at her pics. Sila looked at her looking at her pics, got bored, half went for his jacket pocket then vetoed and placed his fingers on the edge of the table as if he were hanging over a cosmic abyss.

'It's too weird for regular people like you to understand, or almost regular people like you. Too much at stake. There's danger and lots of digging into dark places and...other things I can't say. Ja, it's pretty fucking crucial though, the thing I'm doing. More crucial than filming a tree, no offence.'

'Your mission is *mo liu*.'

'Mo what?'

'I don't have time for this. I need to leave, prepare for tonight.'

'What's *mo liu*?'

The Chinese woman opened her mouth then closed it and stared at his face. She stared at it for so long he was forced to look out the window again and ask her reflection if she was angry.

'Are you Slovene?'

'What?'

'Doesn't matter, I think.'

'I'm half British, half Slovene. Why?'

'You can join me, if you have nothing else to do.'

'For your secret mission?'

'Yes, come. You may watch.'

'I thought I wouldn't understand.'

'You will not. But you may still play your part.'

Must be a rich kid, Sila thought, finally eating the Slovene pig feet on his plate and drinking something that tasted like flavoured mud. Only rich kids had time for weirdness like this.

Except him, he wasn't rich

but that was different, he was Slovene, she wasn't. Ah, naturalised, maybe, but pretty unlikely.

Wait

Wasn't there some Chinese near Maribor?

No, they were nurses and there weren't many of them, fifty, sixty max, all holed up in the same complex. Nah, she couldn't be Slovene, she hadn't said any of the language, not to him or the waitress

which meant she was rich

cos what else could she do here to make cash?

It's not like she could get a job in Ljubljana. Not unless it involved hanging around parks or hawking baking powder.

'... ..'

'Sorry, what?'

'And I don't hang around parks, if that's what you're thinking.'

'Ha, you read my mind.'

'Not really.'

'Yeah, obviously, that's impossible, but you read some of it. Or one part of it. The part of my brain that stores thoughts from a minute back.'

'That's what they all say.'

'Who?'

'They.'

'Who are *they*?'

'Slovenes. Mostly. Some other kinds too.'

'You're not very cryptic, are you? [In Slovene] That could get annoying after a day or two. If we make it that far.'

'What is cryptic?'

'[More Slovene] We might though. You wouldn't be sitting here with me if you weren't even a little bit interested. [Pause] Unless you're fucking the guy who gave you that camera.'

The Chinese woman didn't ask him what he was saying, she just put the camera back in her bag and said, 'it's time to go.'

'Now? But it's not even afternoon.'

'We can walk slowly.'

'Maybe we should go back to my place, rest for a while.'

'*Han ah.*'

'Who?'

~~~

Sadly his place was seven streets away and that would take too long, said his new Chinese accomplice, an accomplice in idea only as he'd yet to explain properly about the cabinet thing and the Dark Light Professors, and, she said, it would be much faster if they took this knife and stabbed themselves in the arm and let the *grey vasic* she would dip on the edge run into their bodies.

'Into our blood?'

'Just stab it in, it's blood-seeking, it will get there all on its own.'

'This is a drug?'

'Your questions are mundane.'

'You're talking about stabbing each other in the arm. That's mundane? I don't even know if you've cleaned your knife.'

'I have.'

'It's been sterilised?'

'Cleaned it many times.'

'That means sterilised, right?'

'I'm stabbing, are you?'

'Fuck. Has that thing been sterilised?'

'I don't know what that means.'

'Is the knife clean?'

'Yes.'

He stared at the tip of the blade. It wasn't as long as his, but it could still stab. 'Okay. You go first.'

'... ..'

'Did you just call me a coward?'

'No.'

'What did you say then?'

She pulled out a small vial with misted glass out of her jacket pocket, the same place she'd kept her knife, but when she opened it up and tried to drip some grey-vase-thingy out, nothing happened.

'... ..'

'None left?'

'We have to go back to the commune, get some more.'

'Commune?'

'*Metelkova*.' She looked at him with a cryptic face. 'You are not from here?'

'Yeah, *Metelkova*. I know it, of course. I just didn't know if you did.'

'I stay near there sometimes. It is a good place.'

'Sure, if you like American tourists...'

'We will go there.'

'...or pretend artists who walk around in yukatas.'

'I have not seen that.'

'Ah, that guy may have left. I think he was Swedish. Yeah, he's probably gone. People usually do when they realise it's pretty much the same as that place in Zagreb.'

'I didn't know that,' she said, then turned and started walking towards another street, dodging a local man wide-spinning a yoyo on the way.

'Didn't know what?' Sila asked, catching up.

'That there is a similar place in Zagreb.'

'Yeah, kind of, bit more dangerous though. Bit more of an actual commune too. I think it was an old paint factory claimed by squatters. Then they added the alternative lifestyle part. You really wanna hear all this?'

'If it passes the time.'

'Pretty much.'

'Silence is okay too, I don't really care.'

Almost on cue, a man with poor steering technique rode through the middle of them on his bike, pushing both Chinese and Slovene to opposite edges of the pavement. Sila raised his voice to compensate.

'Actually, *Dibreska*...the Zagreb place...it had a lot of cabinets. Some guy was making them, had a whole shop full. Took me two afternoons to get through them all without drawing any attention to myself.'

'Cabinets?'

'*Ne vem. Pozabi*. Just a hobby of mine, it's not that interesting.'

'It reminds me of a play they're showing now at *Metelkova*. Something about a cabinet and a doctor...I forget the right name.'

'A play about a cabinet?'

'Don't know. I'll show you the poster,' she said, turning the corner onto another deserted, snowy road, and thirty minutes later, she came to an abrupt stop in front of a shack in *Metelkova* and pointed. 'This one.'

The poster had an old German expressionist style room on it, with a heavily eye-shadowed man and the words, 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,' taking up the rest of the space.

'Ah this one,' said Sila, remembering the flyer from the night before.

'You know it?'

'An amateur production. Probably not good. Lazy marketing skills too. See, they spelt cabinet wrong.'

'I thought that was Slovene,' said the woman, pointing at the door to the shack which was also a theatre and telling him they were probably inside rehearsing if he wanted to go in and investigate.

'I might do that.'

'I'm going to that building.' She pointed at another shack with a gremlin head above the entrance then turned and looked at him as if his resume was printed on his throat. 'Maybe it's best if you don't come tonight.'

'Where? The castle?'

'It is very boring for others.'

'Ne, I'll come.'

'And very late at night.'

'If it's really that boring then we can just entertain each other. Tell stories or something. Or do other things. Maybe there's a way into the castle itself.'

She looked at the poster behind Sila and said, 'okay, I'll be back in ten minutes.'

'I'll be here.'

'... ..'

'Is that Chinese?'

'It is.'

'Care to translate?'

'No.'

'So it was something bad?'

The woman didn't bother to answer, she just turned and walked over to the other shack, nodding at a Slovene woman with green hair walking the other way.

Sila waited until she'd entered the gremlin building then examined the poster again. There was definitely a cabinet in the title, but no picture, which meant it could be a figurative cabinet. That would be a waste of time, but as he was waiting anyway and had nothing better to do he might as well get in there and check.

If it's real, great.

If it's figurative, no problem, just come back out and see what this grey drug thing is all about.





Inside the theatre it was almost pitch black.

There was either no budget for electricity or there was no one around, and it quickly turned out it was neither as the lights came on and three scarved women on stage asked him at the same time, in not bad English, what he was doing there.

'How did you know I was here?' Sila asked back, sticking to English.

'All men breathe loud,' the one with the cane said, looking at him with her head slightly tilted, a pose that reminded him of that zine store lady he'd met in Brighton. God, that woman was intense.

'Dami...'

'*Kaj? Šalil sem se.* I was joking.'

'I just wanted to have a look at your set design,' Sila cut in, scanning the stage for a cabinet. 'Your poster outside is pretty good. Interesting aesthetic.'

'It's temporary.'

'We're printing one with our faces on it,' added the tallest one, a woman in a *VOTE VALENTINE* t-shirt. 'For the first show next week.'

'I think the one you've got is pretty creepy.'

'It's no good.'

'Why not?'

'*Ni reprezentativen.*'

'*Angleščina,*' said the *VOTE VALENTINE* woman before turning to Sila. 'She said it is not representative.'

'Zakaj? Smo v sloveniji...'

'No women,' Sila said, pretending not to understand the Slovene part, 'is that what you mean?'

'Not just physically, but thematically. See, what is *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* about? Control, of course, but control inside the general society. In our production, it is the schism inside feminism, the battle of the old guard and the new, the battle for definition and ownership. *To ni nekaj, kar bi razumel.*'

'Soften a bit,' whispered VOTE VALENTINE.

'Nisem jezen,' replied Dami sharply, swinging a full circle with her prop cane.

'Angleščina. He might want to come and see the play...'

'I know, that is why I describe the plot. *Poleg tega ni razumel, kaj sem rekel.*'

'No, it's okay,' said Sila, walking closer to his real target, the cabinet. 'I think misogyny is facing a similar battle.'

'What?'

'The old guard wants to stay militant, the new guard wants to play the victim.' Sila laughed, a lonely one. 'It's a bit similar, in a pathetic way.'

'I'm confused,' said VOTE VALENTINE, moving to the edge of the stage. 'Are you comparing feminism to misogyny?'

'It was a joke.'

'On je men's rights fuckers,' added Dami, swinging the cane again.

'Šalil sem se. Da je sala, se sprostite,' replied Sila, hands up in a surrender pose. 'I love Ursula Le Guin. I've read *Tales from Earthsea* five times. Major Kira is my favourite ever Star Trek character. Her and Sisko. Maybe Garak too, but he's a side role. Really, I like what you're doing here, your play, Metelokova, this whole place. It's the rest of the city I'm not a fan of.'

'Wait, you're Slovene?' asked VOTE VALENTINE, squinting at his *Criolo* jacket.

'Da je bila največja partizanska sprememba kar sem jih kdaj videl,' added Dami, the *adding* queen. 'What was your name again?'

'Thought he was French.'

'Sila.'

'Ne, he's a traditional Slovene. It's obvious.'

'I was born here, but I wouldn't say I was one hundred per cent Slovene.' Sila pointed across the stage. 'Hey, is that your cabinet?'

'Kaj?'

'The cabinet you're using, is that it?'

'Ja. Zakaj?'

'Nothing.' Sila climbed up onto the stage, ignoring the attempt of Dami to block him with her outstretched cane. 'I just wanna have a look inside.'

'For what?' asked VOTE VALENTINE. 'It's empty.'

'Maybe before it was...'

'I don't understand.'

'O čem govoriš?'

Sila stepped forward, took out his green knife and opened the door on the left side of the cabinet. Normally he wouldn't be so bold, but this time there were three other people nearby so if there were someone inside, at least he wouldn't die unseen. Though if he stabbed first and won, that might be a little harder to explain.

'Jezus...'

'Is that a real dagger?'

'Iti in najti Petr.'

Sila glanced at each corner of the cabinet then put the knife back inside his jacket pocket. 'No need to get Petr. I'm going.'

'*Ne poslušaj ga, najti Petr,*' repeated Dami, jabbing the woman who hadn't said a word in the shoulder.

'Relax, Krofta, I said I'm going.'

Sila jumped off the stage and headed past the thirty or so seats to the exit, but before he left some part of his brain told him to depart on a positive note, so he turned and said, 'really, your play sounds decent, especially the cabinet aspect. Sorry about the knife.'

'*Najti Petr,*' bit Dami, waving her cane like an exiled academic, but it was way too late as Sila was back outside in the snow-coated commune, telling the Chinese woman that all indie actors were out of their Vulcan minds, and had she got the grey stuff yet?

'No.'

'Why not?'

'The supplier is still asleep.'

'Ha.'

'They said it will be ready in an hour, so, two choices. We can go for a walk or stick around here and get a drink.'

'Or we could go back to your place.'

'Drink is better.'

'Sure, drink. Just testing the waters.' He scanned the commune buildings, comparing and contrasting with his memories from three years earlier. 'There should be a bar round that corner.'

'I know.'

'The coffee is shit, but cheap. Or it was the last time I was here.'

'I don't care.'

'Me neither.'

They walked round the corner, the Chinese woman looking at the theatre poster but not asking Sila what had happened inside, so he waited until they were settled in the warmth of the bar with shit coffee, then forced the conversation that way himself.

Not that it registered much. She was too busy staring at her cup then a while later, after they'd talked about folktales and anarchism and Chinese attitudes towards sex and whether or not she was seeing anyone, she tilted her head and started listening in on the two guys sitting at a nearby table. One was American and Gary Busey-like, the other an Indian guy with a South London accent, and when Sila asked in a whispered voice if she could understand what they were talking about, she turned to him and said in her usual deadpan tone, 'fucking.'

She was right, they were, but not for long as somehow the American steered himself towards Muslims and how they were the racist ones, not him and then the real South and black people in New Orleans, Mexicans too, how they were all lazy and loud and like infants, expecting other people to just give them everything for free, and the Indian guy was looking around the bar as his friend talked, seeing if anyone else was picking up channel Klux, and when he saw Sila and a Chinese woman glaring back at him, he said, out loud, 'he's joking, it's not really him.'

The whole bar remained hushed, cigarette hanging loose from its lips.

'Just stuff he's heard, in the US. Relaying what some other guys said to him.'

'What the fuck, dude?' screeched the American, elbowing the Indian guy in the tit.

'Some guy on the street, in Texas...right?'

'Fuck Texas, I'm from New Orleans. This is what it's like down there.'

'Chad...'

'Seriously, dude.' The American, Chad, swivelled on the little stool and faced his audience, specifically the Chinese woman. 'Maybe the blacks and Mexicans where you're from are saints, I don't know, but the ones in my city...'

'Fucking hell, mate.'

Sila turned to the Chinese woman and said they should go for a walk somewhere, but she waved him away.

'No lie, they're like pests. Just swinging on their porches all day, mugging people, trying to be tough. And they don't contribute anything to the state, not one dollar. Just take, take, take, race card, reparations, bullshit like that.'

Chad picked up his bottle, Croatian brand beer, but didn't drink any.

His Indian friend, or person he'd just met in this bar, Sila wasn't sure which, told him they should go to the Triple Bridge or somewhere with students, an attempted distraction tactic, obviously, but Chad wasn't having it.

'What, I'm not saying they're all bad. Denzel, Wesley Snipes, Danny Glover, they're okay. I'm just saying most of the street ones are thugs... thugs with guns. Not that there's anything wrong with guns, but they're not responsible enough to use them right, they just-...fucking just hang out on the street and shoot each other. I mean, dude, you're calling that culture? It's fucking jungle shit.'

Chad looked at Sila when he said the last two lines, which made something click in Sila's head. In his experience, people only talked like this on white supremacist forums, not in the open. The American, Chad, was in this place, an art commune, at the exact same time as Sila, using language that would draw attention to himself. Why here, why now? Sila looked around the bar. There were no cabinets visible, but that wasn't definitive. The Professor could function outside of them, or so he guessed. He looked at Chad again. This cartoon, was he really what he seemed to be? Was he even human?

Landing on *ne*, Sila reached inside his jacket and pulled out the green knife, not even bothering to disguise it. No one stopped him. He put it on the table and waited for Chad to notice, but the guy was busy arguing with his friend now.

'I'm not making this shit up, this is fact. I come from New Orleans, dude, this is exactly what it is. They don't do anything, seriously, how can they, they've got no history of achievement in their culture, they're just riding on the coattails of our stuff, getting handouts and whining about it.'

'Mate,' said the Indian guy, raising his voice, glancing at the Chinese woman. 'Riding on the coattails?'

'It's true, they don't have anything, no inventions, nothing. We had to give it to them.'

'We?'

'White culture, dude. You can bitch about it, but it's fact, white culture invented everything we use right now, all around us.'

'Okay, mate. You invented everything. Great. Can we go now?'

'Go where?'

'Somewhere remote. With no people.'

'Dude, relax, I wasn't messing with you, I'm just saying, all the inventors of modern stuff were white, from white culture.'

'Yeah, I heard.'

'It's not racist, it's just fact. Alexander Graham Bell, white. Wright bros, white. Computer guy, white.'

'Okay, save it for New Orleans.'

'Mark Zuckerberg, white.'

'Drink up, we're off.'

'Steve Jobs, white.'

'Mate...'

'Bill Gates...'

'...Steve Jobs was half-Syrian. And Zuckerberg's a cunt. Now put your jacket on, door's that way.'

'Martin Scorsese, white.'

'Jesus...'

Sila picked up the knife and sliced the edge of the table, making a tiny mark. The woman leaned into his ear and whispered something either in very faint English or Chinese.

'What?'

She pulled back and drank her coffee.

'You're worried about the knife?'

She didn't answer.

Sila shrugged, made another dent in the table then glanced back at the other two, who were still at it.

'Democracy, white. Roman Empire, white. Beer, white. Dictionary, white. Bicycle, white. Internet, white.'

'The Big Bang, white,' the Indian muttered, still loud enough to make it across the bar.

'What's that? Yeah, Big Bang, dude. White discovery. Telescope, white. Space-ship, white. The Moon, white.'

'Look. Can we just go?'

'The only real bad thing on our record is Hitler, and he was a socialist so he doesn't count. Ah, and we rescued blacks from slavery.'

'Fuck, this is endless...'

'What?'

'Only bad thing on our record was Hitler?'

'It's true.'

The Indian guy held up his hands and looked over at Sila and the Chinese woman. 'I don't even know how I got dragged into this. It's like talking to a four-year old.'

'Fuck off...'

'Might as well chat to the table.'

'I'm right here, dude, who are you talking to?'

Across the room, Sila continued making dents in the table. He didn't intervene, he just stared at the American thing called Chad, looking for the tell-tale sign. But it was tough as, apart from the shit coming out of the guy's mouth, he looked completely ordinary.

Maybe this one is different, he thought. Maybe the only way forward is a leap of faith? Stab first, confirm later? And if he's not actually the Professor of Dark Light then, doesn't matter, the world will at least have one less cartoon to worry about.

Sila grabbed the knife and stood up, but was quickly pulled back down by the Chinese woman.

'What are you doing?' he asked, trying to shrug her off and failing.

'Putting on the leash.'

'I'm not a dog.'

She tightened her grip, almost preternaturally. 'Sit down. Put your sword away.'

'It's a knife.'

'Put your knife away.'

'Ne.'

'Now.'

'You don't understand, he's not-...' Sila paused, remembering this woman was a stranger, not a confidant. 'I'm not gonna do anything, just scare him.'

'Sit down and stay here.'

'What?'

She patted him on the head like a loyal Alsatian and stood up, walking straight for the racist's table.

'Where are you going?'

She ignored him and kept moving.

The other guy, the friend, saw her coming. 'Sorry about this, he's just drunk. I'll get him out of here.'

'Dude, I'm not drunk, it's my second fucking beer.'

'Mate, shut up...'

'I'm telling the truth, the real truth.'

'Yeah, then why don't you say it to a black guy?'

'I do. I told my black friend back home, he agrees with me. You're just annoyed cos you lost the argument.'

'Mate, you're humiliating yourself.' The Indian guy turned back to the Chinese woman. 'Really, it's okay, we're going.'

'I'm not the staff.'

'Yeah, I know, I'm just-...'

'I don't care what he says.'

'Ah, you see...' said Chad, jabbing his finger at no one.

The Chinese woman took out a pen from her pocket, wrote some numbers on a tissue then handed it to the American.

'What's this?'

'My phone number.'



'The fuck...!' The Indian guy peered over the American's shoulder. 'That's real?'

'I'm going to the castle tomorrow night. You can join me, if you're free.'

'A castle?' asked Chad, checking the nearby window.

'And bring some rope.'

'Sure. Rope.' He stared at the tissue, confused. 'What?'

The Chinese woman didn't say anymore, she just turned and walked out the bar, quickly followed by Sila, who asked her three times, 'what the fuck you wanna meet him for?' before she finally gave a reply.

'What do you mean *your experiment*?'

'You will see tonight.'

Sila glared back at the bar entrance. 'What, that guy's getting the same treatment as me?'

'Tonight.'

'Tonight, what does that mean? I don't understand.'

The Chinese woman looked at her phone, and then the sky, face bordering on Jodorowsky. 'The grey might be there now.'

'You're really gonna meet that guy?'

'Stay here, I'll be back in five minutes.'

'Huh? Stay where?'

'Here. The theatre. Back in the bar. Wherever you like.'

'The train station?'

She ignored him and kept walking, back into the shack with the skewed, scrambled gremlin creature above it.

'I guess here then.'



Sila killed time by rolling snow and kicking it at the *Dr Caligari* poster. It was harsh, he didn't mind the play they were doing, it was more the other guy, the Grand White Wizard. What was she doing? Did she not understand what he was saying? Was his accent too strong?

He tried to work it out before she got back but there was no solution without extra data from the enigma herself, so he kicked more snow and waited for her to return, which turned out not to be five minutes later, but fifteen.

'The wizard reappears...'

She nodded, wiping something off her hand and onto her pink *Mizuno* ski jacket.

'Did you get your grey thing?'

'This time, yes.'

'Great. What's next?'

'We take it.'

Sila looked around, checking for cops hiding in snow-flaked trees. 'You mean now? Out here?'

'I told you, it passes the time faster.'

'So does flirting with racist cartoons.'

'Roll up your shirt.'

'I said so does flirting with racists.'

'What?'

'Back there.' Sila gestured with his head at the café/bar in case she was confused. 'You gave that caveman your number.'

'We did this conversation already.'

'Caveman white supremacist cartoon. And all that shit he was saying...I don't get it. You didn't even flinch.'

'What is flinch?'

'And then you go and put him on the same level as me.'

'What levels?'

'Level, standard, the same kind of respect. You're giving him the same treatment you're giving me. Actually, if anything, you were nicer to him.'

'You're tonight, he's for tomorrow.'

'Jesus...'

'What's the problem?'

Sila stared at her face as she double checked the label on the vial. 'I really don't get it.'

'Roll up your shirt.'

'Is it lack of contact? Do black people not live in China?'

'Some.'

'Are they accepted?'

She looked up from the vial, perplexed.

'The Chinese population. Do they give a friendly welcome to black people?'

'I am not a representative of all Chinese citizens.'

'Okay, generally...do they welcome them?'

'Generally or historically?'

'Either.'

'Historically, apart from Han, Qing, Ming, the CCP, maybe Tang, Chinese culture has been friendly to others. Generally, it is still friendly to others, on a social level. Except for the occasional washing machine advert.'

'Washing machine? Is that a joke?'

'Maybe.'

'I don't get it.'

The woman jiggled the vial of grey in the air. 'Are you taking with me or not?'

'What?'

'This. Are you taking it or not?'

'The grey thing? Maybe, I don't know...if you promise not to meet that guy, I'll take it.'

'Okay.'

'Is that a promise?'

'I'll think about it.'

'Good.' Sila paused, wondering if he should say out loud what really happened in the bar, decided against it then changed his mind straight away. 'Actually, I half suspect he's not even human. That racist guy. It felt a bit like he was baiting me. That's why I pulled out my knife. Or my sword as you call it.'

The woman took out her blade and dipped four drops of *grey vasic* onto the tip.

'You don't really care, do you?'

'Are you ready?'

'Thought not.'

'You're not ready?'

'Don't know. Does it hurt?'

'... ..'

'What?'

'Not really.'

'Just a little sting, like an injection?'

She nodded and then, without waiting for confirmation, moved the knife down, slicing his forearm, unlike the Serb guy in Zagreb who'd just waved the knife in his face and said more money, I need to buy a plug.

God, that Serb guy was annoying.

but probably desperate too

which is why Sila had just stood there, in the alley near the church on the hill that was a tourist spot during the day and a place to get mugged at night

and, fuck, the Serb guy called him fag man too, just because he was alone and wearing glasses and enervated.

'When's this drug gonna kick in?' Sila asked, drifting back in, but the woman had gone.

Huh?

Where did she...

No, wait, she was over there, very far over there, one street ahead and then, hey, so was he and, what, how the fuck did that happen, did they teleport or run, or something else, but there was no time to answer as now they were at the door to some place he didn't know, talking about satire and anti-war novels, but only single lines cos before he could go further they were both on a bed he'd never seen before, in a room with four other beds, and he turned and tried to ask her for an answer, why was this happening, was it really teleportation, but she was gone and he was staring at a letter that said, I've changed my mind, I don't want to meet you tonight, don't come.

He put the letter down but not really as it was already gone and instead he was staring at a pretty Pakistani guy on another bed with earphones in and he thought about saying, hey, who are you, what are you doing here, what am I doing here, but he didn't because he was wiping himself off with a tissue and wondering where the other tissues were, where the Pakistani guy was, why he didn't feel anything but that wondering was brief as you can't wonder too long when you're already standing at the bottom of the icy path leading up to the castle on top of the hill.

Sila put a hand out and grabbed the wall, his legs shaking.

There was cold sweat on his forehead, too, growing, wiped off three times, but every time budding right back.

Ne ne ne ne fuck ne...

He lowered himself inch by inch down onto the ground, not feeling the cold, looking around cautiously for Serbians and men on beds.

'Did that happen?'

'Yes,' said the Chinese woman, holding the camera at the top of the hill.

'The walk, the hostel...the hill...'

'Everything.'

Sila patted at the sleeves of his *Criolo* jacket, then the sleeves of the woman's, wiped off more cold sweat. 'How?'

'*Grey vasic* speeds things up, takes away consequences.'

'I don't understand.'

'Or there are still consequences, you just don't know the event they've grown from.'

'Where did you get it, this grey thing?'

'But there are no psychological consequences. You take it enough times, you get used to it, same as everything.'

Sila blew out ice particles and looked around. The top of the hill for the second night in a row. The castle wall with the Argento red light. How long would this bit last? If he blinked, would they be back at the bottom of the hill, eating breakfast?

He blinked.

The creepy red wall was still there. Hypnotically red. Which was strange in itself as from the Triple Bridge, the walls looked a regular stone colour or blue sometimes, but never red. Was this just the other side of the castle? The part you couldn't see unless...

'Your dose should be done by now,' the woman said, walking across the wooden plank towards the corner of the castle.

'You sure about that?'

There was no answer, so he hurried after her, asking her again when they turned the corner, but she still didn't say a word, just pulled out her camera and started fiddling with the lens.

It could've been the sweat or the comedown or both, but Sila desperately wanted to push her against the castle wall and say, 'answers, now, for fuck's sake,' but some part of him, either the pragmatist or the coward, reminded him that they were alone on top of a hill after midnight, and pushing a woman against a wall could only lead to darker things and he didn't want to be sitting on a bench the next day, staring at the river and wondering, are there reeds, how long are they, could they really drag a despicable wretch like him down to his death?

Instead of violence, he wiped off another layer of sweat then walked up and peered over her shoulder at the camera. 'What are you doing?'

'Setting up.'

'For what?'

'Stop talking, you're disturbing me.'

Sila bit his tongue and backed off a little. He waited for her to speak again, but the silence seemed to fit her like a shell suit, so he walked slowly to the

next corner of the castle, picked up a twig and threw it at a motorbike parked next to the main gate.

Hang on

it was past midnight

why was there a motorbike?

Was someone else here?

Another guy?

The gate was closed and there were no lights on in the windows, though he couldn't see them all. But it was unlikely that anyone official would still be around. Why would they be? For what possible reason?

'... ..'

He turned and saw her standing in the same place, pointing at a tree near the beginning of the slope that led back down to Slovene civilisation.

'What did you say?'

'I need your help.'

Sila walked back over to her, not to the tree, and glanced at the camera.

'Don't look.'

'Why not?'

'It's blank.'

He almost laughed. 'That doesn't make any sense.'

'I don't like people looking at my camera.'

'Okay.' Sila looked at her instead. 'I have a question.'

'There's no time.'

'That whole grey valic thing we did...it was pretty weird, but...I remember one part...a few parts, actually, but this one part...we were on a bed and...it's a bit patchy but...did we have do anything earlier? Together?'

'*Fong sam*. Krsnik are harmless, far as I've heard.'

'Sorry?'

'Nothing will happen.'

'*Will* happen? Did we change topic or something?'

She pointed at the tree again. 'Stand over there.'

'Why?'

'And don't move.'

'You know, I just saw a motorbike over there, round the corner.'

'I don't care.'

'Someone else might be here.'

'Walk.'

'Walk, why? You're not telling me anything.'

'It's just a photo, don't worry.'

'Feels more like ritualism, actually.' Sila sucked in cold air and edged backwards. 'And not an erotic hippy one.'

'Keep walking.'

'Okay, but I'm only doing this if I get a reward.'

'Further.'

'After this is done, we go back to your room and have a drink. With our jackets off.'

'Of course.'

'You agree?'

'A bit further.'

'Do you agree?'

She lowered the camera and walked up to him, saying, 'yes, I agree,' then grabbed him by the arms and shifted him left towards the side of the tree.

'That didn't seem very enthusiastic.'

'Quiet.'

'Neither did that.'

'Stop resisting.'

'I'm not.'

'Your feet...more to the left.'

'Okay, relax, they're moving. I give myself over to your masterful puppet hands.'

Sila let himself be pushed until his back was against the weird-looking tree, switching topic and asking more questions about the drug he couldn't



pronounce but there were no answers, still no answers as the Chinese woman who definitely wasn't his accomplice, she wasn't acting like one anyway, was now thirty feet away, back in her original position, pushing buttons on that fucking camera.

This is beginning to feel like a murder rehearsal, he thought, looking up at the bird-less, nest-less, ninja-less canopy above

thank God there's no Croatian church behind me

and no Serb guys

cos then I'd really be in trouble.

'Are we nearly done?' he asked, trying to remember details of the sex they may or may not have had earlier and only pulling back images of the Pakistani guy on the bed and someone's jizz on a tissue and, why that one, why him and not her?

He couldn't even remember if the guy was good-looking or not. The only image he could pull back was a pair of eyes and the back of a laptop. Were they pretty eyes at least?

'... ..'

'What's that?'

'... ..'

'You did this before.'

'... ..?'

'Wah, you're not even speaking English, are you?'

'... ..'

'You're not.'

'... ..'

'*Ste strašen ženska*. See, I can do it too.'

'... ..'

'Come on, what are you saying?'

'... ..'

Sila looked up at the branches again, checking to see if any wildlife was about to drop on his head. Then at the trunk. Then at the mass of shadow looming as a backdrop, that may have passed for a forest during the day, but right now, in this void, could've been anything, pit retribution, green death, Cthulu on a pimped-out prayer mat, vlog ambush.

'.....'

'You're not gonna tell me?'

'.....'

'Sounds kind of like chanting.'

'.....'

'Are you chanting?'

'.....'

'Look, if you're chanting, just tell me. I can handle it.'

'.....'

'You're not gonna tell me, are you?'

'.....'

'Introvert.'

'.....'

'That was a joke.'

'.....'

'Look, I didn't tell you this before...or I might've done, I don't know, that drug was pretty destructive on my memory core, but if I didn't, I'll tell you now. Are you listening?'

'.....'

'Fuck it. My big secret, here it is. I open cabinets and stab whatever's inside. Most of the time it's nothing. Sometimes it's a jacket or person. But I haven't got who I'm supposed to get yet.'

'.....'

'I will though. Even if it takes me my whole life, I'll get him. Or her. I don't know which. I think it's a guy, he was billed as such, but I'm thinking he may have shape changing abilities.'

'.....'

'That was a short sentence.'

'.....'

'Can you go back to English, please?'

'.....'

'Govorijo angleško strašno žensko.'

'... ..'

'Look, this is starting to get weird.'

'... ..'

I can't die here. If that's what you've got in mind.'

'... ..'

'I'm not joking. I have a mission, the cabinet thing. If I died then it wouldn't make sense.'

'... ..'

'Yeah, you're not gonna kill me, I know.'

'... ..'

'I was joking.'

'... ..'

'Can I move now?'

'... ..'

'Why am I even asking you? I can move anytime I like. You're not my master.'

'... ..'

'If you don't switch back to English, I'll move.'

'... ..'

'I swear.'

'... ..'

Sila took a step forward in his head, but not with his feet, as he knew that if he did she might not go back to her room with him and take that pink jacket off.

Ahhh, whatever this camera routine was, it had to end soon.

'Stop moving,' she said, eyes lost in the trees beyond.

'Finally, the common tongue.'

'It's almost over.'

'Still using creepy words though.'

'Quiet.'

The Chinese woman walked behind the nearest castle wall and peeked back round, one eyeball showing.

A cute eyeball, objectively.

No,

subjectively

objectively was a cow eye in a science lab.

'What are you doing?' Sila shouted, following up with exaggerated shivering sounds.

The woman put a finger to her mouth, only the right half of her face visible now.

'Okay, this is getting really weird.'

He thought of the motorbike parked round the corner. A double team, the woman and...who?

'Is there someone else here?'

'Quiet.'

'Serbians?'

The woman pointed at her camera on the ground, the lens of which was rigidly fixed on him [or the tree], then vanished completely behind the castle wall.

'Where you going?'

No answer.

'Hey...'

Nothing.

Not even a loud hush.

'Ah, fuck this, it's freezing.'

Sila took a step forward, but as soon as he did a gust of wind blew in and almost took him off his feet. What the fuck? He put a hand back against the tree trunk to steady himself, felt the wind get stronger and colder and thought, well, okay, whatever happens, at least the prospective murderer's gonna be caught on tape.

He reached for the inside pocket of his *Criolo* jacket, gripping the handle of his knife.

'*Moja ne bo edina kri,*' he muttered, looking behind to see if the motorbike guy was creeping up from the slope then, seeing it was clear, spinning back to check if the guy was coming from the front.

But there was no one and  
nothing happened  
for one and half minutes then

something did happen, something coming up the slope with a fresh gust of Alpine wind, a creature that was an outline at first, a hundred yards out then, another fifty yards on, something crooked and tall, something that looked kind of like Nosferatu but with a pointier face, and the creature wasn't walking, it was jumping, flickering like a faulty hologram, moving ten yards closer each time, jumping and buffering and shifting until it was next to Sila and sniffing his neck like a bloodhound.

Hold still, Sila wanted to say, but it wouldn't come out. He tried to pull the knife out from his pocket, but that wouldn't budge either. Was it raw fear? The wind?

The creature raised its hand, its claw, and ran a nail along Sila's throat, not firm enough to draw blood. Sila waited for it to look up into his eyes, but the creature didn't seem interested.

It was staring at him like his Mum used to stare at the washing machine.  
Shit, was the only thing left for Sila to think.

~~~

Having your neck slashed at wasn't a nice thing

but it was something that happened sometimes to people unlucky enough to find themselves standing on a hill at night in Ljubljana with no one else around except a Chinese girl who clearly didn't give a shit.

Even if you had a green knife in your jacket pocket,
didn't matter
cos it was done quick
quicker than any human could do it
though to be fair

Sila did manage to hit the ground without smacking his head on anything.

'Professor?' he rasped, holding out a bloodied hand to touch the claw coming down from above.

That hand was slashed too.

And the arm that owned it.

Then the void arrived and slid him in.

The pointy Nosferatu creature poked at Sila's body, auditing its catch, then gripped the jacket with one claw and dragged the corpse back down the hill it had come from, flickering in and out of reality until it reached a small forest outside the city and vanished between the trunks of the trees, its escape solidified by a cloud of mist drifting in from all five sides.

~~~

Back on the hill, which was mist-free, the Chinese woman, Joanna, came out from behind the wall and ran to the camera, picking it up, clicking back and calling the castle a cunt in Cantonese when she realised the machine had captured nothing.

It's some variant on the drug, she thought. The thing can speed up and slow down and the only way I'll ever get it is if I turn into a man.

The idea churned in her brain, if churning was the right word, until the next day when she sat in the bar in the art commune and wrote down the details of her twenty-second failure to catch the thing old Slovene people called Krsnik.

'The creature only takes men. I am not a man. If I cut my hair, would that help?'

She looked around the bar, at the three men talking quietly in the corner.

'Twenty-three won't make any difference. Maybe I should. Cut my hair, buy some male clothes, a muscle suit.'

But that wouldn't bring him back, would it?

She took the book out of her bag and flicked to the page on Krsnik and, with the Slovene-English dictionary at her side, read the whole chapter for the eighty-seventh time. There was nothing on Krsnik sparing anyone. Each time was a kill. A palpable kill.

Closing the book, she took out the knife and stabbed her arm and went back to the hostel room she'd rented for nine months straight and looked at the old photos they'd taken in Lisbon, in Faro, in Seville, the one where he was

biting her cheek and the one he always thought was funny, where they were looking sad with cigarettes hanging out of their mouths even though the sky was azure and the sun was clear and no matter how many times the drug dragged her forward in time she was still there on the bed looking at the same photos and not even crying anymore, just sitting there blank, wondering in spurts where her soul had gone, was it ever there, would it come back now she'd led twenty-two men to their deaths?

And would one more make a difference either way?



The next day Joanna ignored the vial of *grey vasic* and walked out of the room that looked like a prison cell, that had been designed conceptually as a prison cell, and onto the streets of Ljubljana.

It was eleven in the morning and, even though the Triple Bridge was only a few streets away, it felt like it would take a decade for the object self to drag her there, a decade with one person every ten minutes and the night before and a slight pang of disgust and failure and distinct moments that weren't distinct enough to override the other moments almost a year and a half old now.

She thought it out and came to the conclusion that

a] the day was just a regular day

b] disgust was pointless

and

c] the things Slovenes did at eleven in the morning on what might've been a weekday were *ho mo liu*.

She turned on an actual heel and walked back to the hostel, picturing the vial of *grey vasic* in her head, but half a street in she got jumped by a bookshop, a bookshop she hadn't noticed before despite being in Ljubljana for over a year, and inside the bookshop was a book on Slovene folktales and on page 57 was a chapter headed *Krsnik*.

As with the other books she'd read, it was all in Slovene so she edged over to a woman nearby and was about to ask her to translate when she noticed a young man with a green bubble jacket and asked him instead and cos she was



alone and it was a weekday the young man said, 'okay, I'll do it because you're pretty, but why...

...are we standing up here at two in the morning on a weeknight? It's freezing, why don't we go back to my place? There could be wildlife here, muggers, predators, Slovenia has bears too, not usually in this district, but there are trees, they could be couched in and-...'

Joanna told him to stay where he was and be quiet until she'd gone completely round the corner of the castle wall. She didn't tell him that he was actually there because the racist American guy she'd given her number to the day before, or two days before, hadn't called and now she needed a replacement, even if this one wasn't quite as vile.

'I don't understand.'

She realised she'd spoken in Cantonese so repeated the same line in English.

'Was that Chinese you were speaking?'

'Don't move, don't speak.'

'Okay, this is getting a bit weird now. Hey, where are you going? You didn't tell me your name.'

She waited around the corner for ten minutes, listening for the tell-tale screams.

None came.

Just a few *where are yous* from the bait.

At several points, the wind went through the stage dance of a generic whistling noise, but that was probably out of pity.

Pity for her.

Pity party.

Pity and the Pendul-

She managed another ten minutes before giving up.

'Can I move now?' the Slovene asked, as her pink Mizuno sleeve reached down and picked up the camera.

'Did you hear anything? See anything?'

'Ja, the castle wall.'

'Nothing?'

'No. Why? What are you expecting?'

She turned and walked towards the path, regretting the lack of *grey vasic* in her pocket. It would be a slow journey back, and this Slovene would probably follow her most of the way.

'Hey, we're going to my place now?' he asked as they hit the half-ploughed street at the bottom of the hill.

She walked a bit further and saw zero people ahead.

'Yes,' she answered, turning back to give a flash smile then pulling her jacket zip up another inch and continuing on towards the river.

'Cool.'

He followed her trail, asking if that was some kind of weird Chinese sex ritual they'd been doing up there, and how long she was staying in the city for and...

'I need the toilet,' she said, pointing at something around the corner, possibly a bar.

'No problem, my place is ten minutes away.'

'It's urgent.'

'Well, I don't think they're open,' he said, pointing an elbow at the bar.

'I know the owner.'

'Know him?'

'Yes, his name is Sila. He stays open till three, special service. Wait here.'

'Okay, if you really have to...'

The young man in the green bubble jacket went over to the railing by the river and threw pieces of snow into the water, thinking ahead to the future sex he was about to have and if there would really be any difference between Chinese and Slovene. He'd heard they were quite passive, but that could've been Japanese.

Yeah, it probably was, he thought, flinging more snow. Passive girls didn't make guys stand outside castles at two in the morning. Or ignore basic queries.

Actually, what time was it?

Three?

He checked his watch and saw he was forty-eight minutes off. But if it's nearly four, and a weeknight...

No.

Impossible.

No one could lie that serenely.

About knowing the owner of a Slovene bar.

After all that castle shit.

Could she?

Realising she probably could, the young Slovene dashed around the corner and saw a dark, snowy alley without bodies, live or desperate, and a bar that was implacably closed.

'Čudno prasica...'

Future sex changed quickly to past sex

to the last girl he'd been with

who'd dumped him for a Serb

a six foot three Serb

majoring in metallurgy.

Fuck. Fuck. How could a Chinese girl see the same thing after such a short time?

What did I do wrong?

What did I say?

~~~

'It doesn't make sense,' Joanna told the photo back at the hostel, 'it happened the other twenty-two times, why not tonight?'

The photo didn't answer, so she put it down and replaced it with the vial of *grey vasic* and the knife which hadn't scared her for how long? Four months, six, eight?

Blade cut arm and she waited until the room changed to the panel of the sky outside and the facades of the buildings and it was weird, there were no people intruding this time, maybe they'd heard about what she'd done, maybe she was becoming Krsnik herself, a stupid thought, but a hopeful one.

If she were Krsnik she could go back to their cave without needing *man ID* and then she would know, she could find him or at least the body and then

switch to the next part of the mission, resurrection spells, resurrection demons, voodoo, ley lines, whatever did the trick, and when he was back they could *loihan* again, go to Iceland, go home, get married at 35, have kids and raise those kids and make sure they didn't become spoilt little shits or bullies like she'd feared and then, then she wouldn't need to keep standing near this creepy-looking tree every night and

there she was again, standing next to the creepy tree

and that's where the images stalled, buffered

stayed the same until the sky

slide-cut into blue

which was the one great thing about Slovenia

it was seldom grey.

Folding herself and the Mizuno jacket down, she watched the tourists coming up the hill to the castle entrance and waited for the dark to return but after checking her watch she realised the dosage was done and the only way back down was the path, then the half-ploughed streets, then the prison doors.

~~~

With the aid of her Slovene to English and English to Chinese dictionaries, she worked out that the man who'd translated the Krsnik chapter wasn't as bright as he claimed to be. In fact, the more she read, the more she doubted that he was Slovene at all. Luckily she hadn't given her number, or even her e-mail, to that one.

She turned the page to 61 and tried the next sentence. Twenty minutes later she had:

'Although Krsnik are typically portrayed as aggressive, some stories have depicted them as melancholic, poetic creatures, who spare victims if they are of a similar vein.'

Spare for how long? Permanently?

And under what criteria?

Would Yute Long qualify as melancholic? Or poetic? He'd made a few zines before. He'd been depressed. He played the clarinet to an intermediate level.

Would that be enough?

She tried the next sentence for elaboration, but it was no good, the topic had moved on. She checked her other books, the ones she could read, but they made no mention of poetic creatures or spares.

Why would that one mention it but not the others? Where were these other stories?

Blanketing herself in the pink Mizuno ski jacket, she went outside, around the commune snow patch, took a cigarette from a random Indian tourist, stopped next to an antique wardrobe that someone had probably abandoned and continued her thoughts.

How long would he be spared? Would they keep him prisoner? Maybe he was out already and looking for her. A whole year? Maybe he was in a coma? Maybe he was...

The wind blew hard and the antique wardrobe shook a little.

She looked over, calculating if the stubby little legs would hold. Seemed stable enough. Though if it had been thrown out, it didn't really matter if it fell, stood or exploded.

More shaking, no collapse.

The cigarette died out and so did the breeze.

She looked for the Indian tourist and saw him vanishing inside the bar opposite.

Pursue or not?

The wardrobe shook again, more dramatically, the doors bulging outward as if someone were stuck inside.

What?

With no wind?

She held her ground for a few seconds then, pulling the blade used for *grey vasic* out of her jacket pocket, edged slowly towards the wooden beast.

As she got close, it stopped shaking. There were sounds from inside, some kind of language maybe, it was hard to tell. She held the blade ready and reached for the handle.

More sounds from the other side, definitely words.

Slovene?

Cantonese?

She pulled her hand back and whispered, her heart full of *hei mong*, 'Yute Long, is that you?'

The wardrobe doors burst open, one of them coming off its top hinge and hanging down, limp.

A dust cloud spilled out  
surprisingly large  
and then a man  
holding a bloodied green knife.

'... ..' she said, stumbling back, tripping, falling into piled-up snow.

'Air...finally.'

'... ..'

'Don't know what that fucker was,' continued Sila, brushing the dust off the dried blood stains on his partially shredded *Criolo* jacket. 'But I killed it.'

'... ..?'' she asked, still on her ass, knife point down in the snow next to her.

'Or I think I did.'

'... ..?'

'Wounded it definitely.'

'... ..? ... ..?'

'Thank god for green knives.'

She crawled off the ground, still high, and trailed Sila into the bar opposite where he let her touch the scar on his neck and said, 'don't know why it's healed so quick, but it still stings.'

'Did you see anyone else? Any other men? Skeletons even? Did you really kill it? Did you see where you were? Did you die and come back or did you just get cut a little? Where did that scar come from? Was it the monster? Did you talk to it?'

Sila batted away the questions, saying she'd said the same things the whole last hour, and asked the woman behind the bar [in Slovene] for another pint of Slovene brand beer. She asked back if he wanted one for his girlfriend too, but he said, 'no, not girlfriend, she's a witch who tried to have me killed.'

'Excuse me?'

'Just now. A few hours ago.'

'She tried to kill you?'

'No, but she assisted. Anyway, I don't really wanna talk about it, I just wanted to tell someone. Have a witness in case she tries it again.'

The barwoman stared at Sila's scar, the dried bloodstains on his jacket. 'I'm confused. Are you talking about the Cabinet play?'

'Ah, forget the beer, I'm leaving.' He put on his jacket [which only had two main tears, actually; one on the collar, one on the left arm] and zipped it up tight cos it was still winter outside and the adrenaline of the monster attack had finally worn off. 'I'm leaving,' he repeated to the Chinese woman.

'We haven't finished our conversation yet.'

'Farewell, witch bitch. Hope that fucker gets you next time, if it can still walk.'

'My name is Joanna.'

'Don't care. You're lucky I don't call the cops.'

'Let me buy you another drink.'

'And anyway, Joanna's not even a Chinese name.'

Joanna nodded at the bar woman, who pulled down a new glass and started pouring. 'We can go back to my place.'

'Did you not hear me?'

'Yes, I heard you. My Chinese name is difficult for foreigners to pronounce. It takes a lot of repetition. But we can go back to my room and I can teach you.'

'No thanks, murderer.'

'You wanted to go back before, didn't you?'

'Sure, before I knew you were a murderer.'

'I'm not a murderer.'

'Near enough.'

'I didn't kill anyone. In fact, I told you not to come, if you remember?'

'The fuck you did.'

'I left you in the hostel room, but you insisted, you followed me to the hill. I never force anyone to come up there. You build your own platform, not me.'

'Followed you...!' Sila muttered, shaking his head at the pint put down in front of him by the barwoman then drinking some of it with pure disgust. 'Hang on...never force anyone? You mean you've done this to others?'

'I did not say that.'

'Fuck, I'm an idiot, of course you have. You said you've been up on that hill for three weeks.'

'Nine months.'

'What?'

'Actually, nine or eight. I don't know the exact dates.'

'Hez fucking bollah. Nine months?'

'It's unimportant. What matters is you and your unexpected escape.'

'Escape, right.' Sila blanked his own beer and reached for the woman's, Joanna's, drinking a good third of it. 'God, I hate this city. Really fucking hate it. It's like Chernobyl, only no-one left. No one turned out the lights. Don't even know why I came back.'

'We can buy some wine and take it to my room, talk about what happened with the Krsnik.'

'Even Bulgaria's better than this shit.'

'Where it took you, how injured it was, anything else you saw.'

'Much better.'

'Are you listening?'

'Nope.'

'I need to know, it's important.' She put her hand on his arm, rubbing slightly. 'Please...'

Sila watched her make an 'S' sound a few times then laughed. 'Fuck. You don't even remember my name, do you?'

'It begins with S.'

'And?'

'Stephen.'

'Ha, I knew it.'

'Okay. Tell me. What is your name?'

'It's difficult for foreigners to pronounce.'

'Slavoj?'

'Žižek? No way.'



'Selma? Slivic?'

'It's Sila.'

'Ah, Slivic was someone else. Yes, I remember now, you told me in the café. Sila.'

'Jesus...you're unbelievable.'

'Sila...I know you're angry, even though it wasn't really my fault, but please...can you tell me what happened with the Krsnik, after it took you?'

'Ha.'

'Just the location would be enough.'

'Would it?'

'Please, Sila.'

He muttered something in Slovene and drank some of his own beer, covertly staring at her reflection in the mirror behind the Russian spirits shelf. Her face was the size of a small moon, and moon faces had always been attractive to him, ever since Enid Blyton put one at the top of a tree, but this was also the woman who'd forced him next to a nightmare forest and watched him die, or watched him being taken away to die, to probably die, that was the monster's plan, he was sure she'd known that much, and besides, Bulgaria really was much better, unless you were *from* Bulgaria and had the same brain wiring he did, in which case Ljubljana was way better, or Japan, or China

no, not China, that's where she was from

and the only thing he knew about her was the nightmare forest murder thing so fuck that Kristeva sketch.

'Sorry, but I'm not telling you a fucking thing. And I'm not actually sorry. At all.'

'Sila. Please.'

'Leaving time.' He looked for his *Criolo* jacket on the back of the chair then realised he was already wearing it. 'Goodbye, murderer.'

'You can't go, you're the only one who-...'

Sila swatted the question away, walked out of the bar, stood outside in the snow for a few seconds then went back inside and put a 10 euro note on the counter.

'You're paying the rest,' he said, not looking directly at her moon-like face cos if he did, he'd probably find himself back on that hill again with that fucking monster

or that fucking monster's brother or  
sister or cousin cos  
he'd stabbed that last one pretty good  
and pretty deep and  
in the chest too so  
yeah  
that original fucker, slasher myth thing  
that one had to be dead.



## CHAPTER 7

# INNSBRUCK CASTLE

GLUM

Thirteen hours later, Sila was in Austria, the head of the tadpole part, bussing into Innsbruck on a hunch.

A book he'd read said there was a cabinet in the castle there and nearby was a room with a bath dug into the floor and the painting of a wolfman at the entrance, and that was exactly the kind of detail that Professors of Dark Light crafted poems about, or he thought it was, mainly cos of the note he'd been left in Kagoshima, the story of the woman at Uji Bridge, with the bold underlines on:

*'She bathed in the Uji river for 21 days, divided her hair into five horns, painted her body red with vermilion, and went on a legendary killing spree.'*

He still didn't know what vermilion was but he understood the weirdness of it and why Professors of Dark Light would be drawn towards the 'five horn, paint your body red, 21 days' part

cos he would be too

all in

right up to abject possession.

~~~

The castle was covered in snow when he got there because it was November 28th, and the wolfman painting was exactly where the book had promised it would be, so the only thing left to do was find the cabinet and ditch the Chinese murderer, Joanna, who'd been walking fifteen yards behind him ever since he'd boarded the train from Ljubljana station.

It was weird, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't shake her, not even when the train got into Salzburg and he'd sprinted out of the station and kept going for twenty minutes down side roads and alleys, then looped back and into the same station and onto the platform to wait for the next train to Innsbruck, it was no good cos somehow she'd known his plan and was sitting on a bench on the same platform waiting for the same train, her line being: if he were really staying in Salzburg, he wouldn't have sprinted out of the station.

It was dubious logic, but it worked then and it worked in Innsbruck station too as, somehow, she knew it was the castle he was aiming for, which meant they'd ended up on the same bus, bought the same ticket and were now looking at the same row of shabby-baroque paintings.

'He looks like you,' she whispered, pointing at the wolfman, then at Sila's cheek.

'Fuck off.'

'A bit less hirsute maybe.'

'I'm not a wolfman.'

'But the eyes are similar.'

'And why is your English so advanced all the time? How do you know how to say things like *a bit less hirsute*?'

'Is that wrong?'

'Other people say not too many hairs, or not too hairy, not hirsute. How the hell do you know hirsute?'

'You ask strange questions.'

'You're lucky I'm asking any. Or even talking to you.' Sila stopped, fake smiling at the tourist couple nearby, possibly German, then lowered the volume and continued. 'This is my castle, my idea to come here. You didn't even know it existed before this morning.'

'I don't mind,' replied Joanna, tucking into the wall as the German couple squeezed past.

Sila waited for them to exit the corridor, then moved a hand towards his *Criolo* jacket. 'I'm not forcing you to stand here. You can leave anytime.'

'No.'

'Not until you know what that fucker's favourite colour was, right?'

'Krsnik don't recognise colour.'

'Jesus...'

'To them, the world is monochrome. Like *Hong Seen Do Hup*.'

'Monochrome...' muttered Sila, pulling out his green knife, spotting a fat security guy and quickly slipping it back inside the jacket. 'Hong See what?'

'Actually, I don't know if they can talk.'

'Who?'

'Krsnik. I'm not sure if they have a tongue or something else. Maybe you could tell me.'

'Right, that's it. I'm going this way. You can go wherever. In the river, hopefully.'

'Wait...'

'Don't follow me.'

~~~

It didn't take long to find the cabinet.

There was a courtyard and seven rows of dead flowers and a rustic door close by that led to a huge, cold chamber full of medieval-era weapons, most of them behind museum glass, a Vlad the Impaler portrait too, an ugly-looking man with soldier-fish eyes, brutal, methodical, though the blurb said that was probably just Saxon propaganda.

At the end of the weapons room was a staircase that led up to the room with the bath dug into the floor and next to that room, in the corridor outside was a plaque and a cabinet.

On the plaque, a biography, one paragraph only:

*Kurszán was born a Hungarian peasant but, due to innate military brilliance, soon rose up the ranks and, at the age of thirty two, became the youngest duke in Austria. He stayed in this castle as a guest, and grew so attached to it that he refused to leave. Despairing like all weak old nobles tended to do back in the day when confronted with younger, stronger, nastier men, Count Roethke tried to have Kurszán murdered in the bath, but the attempt failed and Kurszán took his revenge, not by killing the Count, but by marrying his wife, taking his daughter as a mistress, raping and mutilating his sons, and locking the old man in the cabinet you see standing before you in this very corridor. It is said that on some nights you can hear the old Count moaning from inside, begging for death.*

'What are you going to do?' asked Joanna, popping up behind him.

'I told you.'

'Every cabinet?'

'Out of the way.'

'Each one in the whole world?'

Sila pushed Joanna to one side, checked for fat security guards then grabbed the handle and pulled open the cabinet door.

The same as fifty-six other times, it was empty, except for a small tape recorder sitting on the wood partition at the bottom.

Sila bent down and pressed play.

There was a moaning sound, universal.

'That's a pretty cheap trick,' said Joanna.

'I don't understand.'

'It's easy, the noise is supposed to be the old Count moaning. They probably press play when journalists or vloggers come here, scare them enough so they'll write about it, or film a reaction.'

'I really thought this would be the one.'

'It isn't.'

'When I saw the tape recorder, I thought, maybe this is a message. Maybe a clue. But it's nothing. It doesn't make any sense.'

'Why don't we go and get a drink?'

'Jezus, to je izguba časa...'

'Some German wine...'

'Three years. Three fucking years.'

'I don't have any, but we could go to a supermarket, I'm sure they have a good selection.'

Sila turned and looked at her about the same time she said *supermarket*. He said *where* in a whisper then faced the cabinet again and added, 'what the fuck am I doing here?'

'I asked myself the same thing many times, back in Ljubljana. Each time I walked up that hill. I thought, if only I were a man, it would take me and I could move on. But even then I would've died. You're the only one to survive it. You're the only one who got taken back to its lair. Somewhere. I don't know. You never did tell me where it took you.'

Sila closed the cabinet door, took out his green knife, lined it up with the crack between the two doors and then thrust forward as fast and hard as he

could, which wasn't that fast or hard as he hadn't slept well the previous night, mostly cos of the murderer and her constant massage and questions and

'Was it in the forest? A cave, maybe?'

'Why do you still care?' he asked, pulling the green knife back out and re-sealing it inside his jacket pocket. 'What's the point of all this?'

'It's important to me.'

'Just go back to China, leave me alone.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'I just can't.'

'*Jaz odhajam.*'

'What?'

'I'm leaving.'

'Me too.'

Sila shook his head. 'By myself.'

'It's okay, I will be quiet.'

'Don't follow me.'

'Like a fieldmouse.'

'... ..'

~~~

Outside the less tourist-ridden part of the castle, on a slope of snow covered only in dog prints, with the same dog pissing on a tree four metres ahead, Sila sat and told himself a cold ass was what he deserved for feeling this way

for letting her trail him like she had.

If he had to guess a percentage as to how hard he'd tried to get rid of her, he'd say 40%

nowhere near enough

though he still didn't understand how she'd managed to get a room at the same hostel as him. Had he shown her his booking reference at some point?

Or did she just follow him in, ask at the desk and get lucky?

Maybe she was lying.

He picked up snow with an un-gloved hand and threw it at the dog, raising the other hand in apology when it connected.

Fuck, I don't mind if you piss there

it's not my tree, or snow, and thinking about it, that kind of luck she had, that had to have an opposite, a curse on the guy next to her, which possibly just fucked up the cabinet search he'd done, got him abducted and slashed by that lurching thing, but then there was the other opposite side, that he'd survived the attack, healed his wounds

come out the greener side.

How?

Cos she wasn't close by at that point?

He took out the paper map of Innsbruck he'd taken from the train station and looked for the next target.

There's a cable car going up the mountain, and a path snaking up another way, could be something in that? Inspiration at least, or peace away from that-
...

A blur of colour pulled him back up, but it wasn't the dog he was expecting to see, it was a man in a ridiculously old fashioned jacket, a cosplayer, leaning with his back against the same tree the dog had pissed on, observing him.

Sila observed back

tilting his head when the other man did

scratching his neck the same way

until finally the stranger pulled his Styrian-era jacket tight and moved along a curved arc up to the castle.

Sila watched him all the way to a side door that couldn't possibly be a way in, but then it was, acceding to the man's push and sucking him inside.

Waiting ten seconds, Sila got up and stamped over, each step eating up half his calf, which was odd as the other guy had walked over like he was on normal ground, but

Sila reached the side door eventually,

pawed at it with a cautious hand

and then pushed harder when it didn't open.

The fuck?

He'd locked it behind him?

Or it just needed a firmer push?

Probably the former, which meant there was no illicit fuck against a suit of armour waiting for him behind this barrier, just a creepy member of staff, and the map was the key anyway, the map and the path he'd seen, up to the mountain but not the regular way

that's where the action would be.



As with most other hostels, it was better to avoid the 16-bed dorms, or even the 8-bed dorms, as that's where the collective drunks would be.

2-bed dorms were the [Nietzschean] ideal, but the smallest the Innsbruck hostel had was a 4-bedder so that's where Sila ended up, on the top bunk with a Korean man below, who at one point, got up and wandered off to have a shower wearing only his underpants.

Somehow, the Chinese stalker had failed to switch to the same room as him, probably cos she booked online, or he'd booked the last bunk in this one, though he knew she was still in the hostel somewhere; he'd seen her earlier, lurking in the reception area.

Unless she'd given up and left?

Either way, she wasn't in this room, which gave him the chance to stretch out on the bed in peace and plan his next move.

Go back to the castle.

Go back to the castle.

Go back to the castle.

Go back to the castle.

It was incessant, the image of the random, wild-looking man slipping through the locked door of the castle, waiting for him on the other side, whispering, 'come back tonight, come back tonight.'

Was there another cabinet, one without a tape recorder?

Perhaps. It was a large place, with the possibility of secret tunnels, hidden alcoves, torture chambers where he could pin the wild man down on a rack, rub against him a bit, loob up and then drill into his ass with Kristevan dick, all the way in, while at the same time scanning for the iron maiden with Barbara Steele's eyes peeking out.

There was a noise by the door, someone messing with the lock.

Sila rolled onto his side, holding up his phone again, pretending to read the site on Slovene mythology he'd loaded up.

Another few seconds and the door opened.

The Korean man entered, smiling like a genuine Mormon, towel around his waist, upper body toned and built from the army training he'd told Sila about earlier

hair still wet

skin smooth and

Sila watched him change into new underwear, glimpsing the side of his dick, wondering if there was any normal, polite way to jump down and ask if he wanted to fuck for a while, before anyone else came in.

Deciding there probably wasn't, he went back to his phone, to the page on Krsnik, which turned out to be a smart move as five minutes later the door opened again and two Indonesian girls walked in with backpacks the size of fridges.

Krsnik have the ability to change shape, which helps them in their hunting of Kudlak, he read, as the Indonesians sparked up conversation with his Korean distraction.

In most tales, they are seen as a force of good.

'Not in this one,' he muttered.

~~~

After the other three had gone to sleep, Sila got up and put on the same clothes he'd worn earlier, apart from the jacket, which was bloodied and ripped and now replaced by a *Good Viy* hoodie.

The castle was quite far from the hostel, but at night it didn't matter as the streets would be deserted and no mugger with a brain would be operating this late in winter season.

Besides, he knew how to fight, to some extent, and there was his concealed green knife if things really got desperate.

Which they wouldn't.

It was Innsbruck, for fuck's sake, not Mega-City One.

~~~

Setting up directions on his phone, he headed away from the city centre, towards the river, and after five minutes gave up on the phone map completely as he could see the silhouette of the castle with his own eyes.

Helen of Troy on a dirt mound, Achilles on a hill of dead TVs, the Korean guy surrounding by dick-less mannequins.

It was exquisite

demanding

reeling him in like a harpoon shaft, his body having little choice but to follow.

The light from the moon and the dark particles buttressing that light made the city streets bearable, though whenever another human passed by, his thoughts inevitably turned inwards, the mind telling him without decoration that the sun would come again soon, as would the drudgery, and then he'd be back where he started; alone, defeated, professorless.

A taxi rushed by as he made it to the river, beeping its horn at him for no reason whatsoever.

He took out his phone and checked the time.

Quarter to one.

Not too bad.

Another twenty minutes and he'd be at the castle gate, an hour and a half to look around, then another hour to get back to the hostel. Or not. Maybe he'd just walk the streets instead, set his radar to random search mode. Could be a cabinet hidden in an old composer's house, or some historical shack he hadn't got round to discovering yet.

He got to the other side of the river and looked up at the mountains beyond.

Or maybe he'd just go feral. Wander up into the peaks and the Narnia canopy and see what happened. He'd read countless books about castle ruins not on the map. Maybe there was one up there too.

All he had to do was go in the opposite direction to the one suggested on the signs.

Not difficult.

And if there were bears, or wolves, he had his green knife. Which would make it a fair fight. And a fucking ecstatic one. Both him and the beast in control again, each with an equal chance of coming out on top. Instead of slumped next to human bones, watching a jagged-looking myth douse itself in purple liquid, hush-praying for his limbs to work again.

Sila stopped by a lamppost, closing his eyes.

You got out, you survived.

You got out, you survived.

You got out, you survived.

You got out.

You survived.

Bored of repetition, he opened his eyes and cursed. The castle was only half in frame.

Shifting left a bit, he corrected it.

Ah, Innsbruck Keep, drowned in shadow, enigmatic, a portal to something much, much brighter.

Had to be.

~~~

For a supposed tourist hotspot, the castle was incredibly easy to break into.

At the back, next to the sunken garden, there was a gate that led into the old dungeon, or a replica of it, and the padlock to that gate looked genuinely Tyrolean.

Sila picked his way in and headed up to the ground floor, where all the suits of armour and *Count of the Castle* paintings were.

It took a few minutes for him to adapt to the dark, but once he did, everything was fine. No need to turn on his phone and point it at things unrecognisable.

There was little in the way of noise.

Just the occasional bird sound from the grounds outside.

And his own footsteps as he pressed down on the tiled floor.

He didn't bother trying to disguise it, there was clearly nothing in the way of security, no cameras visible, which come to think of it was a bit odd.

Maybe none of these things are real, he thought, walking up a spiral set of steps to the next floor. Or the real valuables are somewhere hidden.

Either way, he refused to care. The cabinet was the thing he was interested in. During the day, perhaps it did only possess a tape recorder, but at night, it could be completely-

He stopped mid-step and pushed to the left, tucking in behind the wall.

There was someone in the corridor, up ahead.

A large figure.

Or a shadow perhaps?

Slowing down his lungs to monk standard, Sila pushed himself back to the corner of the wall and poked one eye round the side.

No, he was right, there was a figure.

A man.

Staring right at him.

Fuck.

Keeping his right arm tight against his side, he slid his hand into his *Good Viy* hoodie pocket, feeling the handle of the green blade.

'... ..' said the figure, his voice soft yet somehow engulfing the entire corridor.

German, thought Sila, catching a few familiar words.

'... ..?'

No, hang on. French.

There was a hacking cough then more speech, this time in clear English.

'I was hoping you would return.'

Sila pulled out the knife from his hoodie pocket. Don't walk out, he told himself. And don't speak either.

'It has been so long since I have had visitors.'

Don't walk out. Don't speak.

'Please, show yourself. Do not be afraid.'

Don't walk out, don't spe-

He feigned a deep breath and walked out, tucking the green knife back inside his pocket.

'Ah, it is you,' said the figure, who was now several steps closer and, thanks to the moonlight streaming in through the corridor window, revealed as a tall, rough-bearded man in a dark purple cloak.

Oddly beautiful, thought Sila, as the man glided forward, feet moving without sound, giant hand reaching out and wrapping itself round his own not exactly tiny one.

Like Lee Van Cleef and Gian Maria Volonté merged.

Poetic psychopath

glowing blue eyes

the silk before the stabbing.

'You're...' Sila stammered, not able to think of a name.

'...the protector of this castle,' the man replied, gripping Sila's hand with strength that came from swinging ridiculously heavy swords around all day. Or occult voodoo. One or the other.

'Kurtain...'

The man grunted, which may have been a laugh, and released Sila's hand. 'It is a lonely business. Though, at times, serene also.' He repeated the line to himself, grimacing. 'Forgive me, my English is unpractised, there may be some errors.'

Sila looked past the alleged protector, checking for other shapes lurking in the dark.

'But then, you did spoil my name, so perhaps apologies are redundant.'

'Are you real?' asked Sila, straightening his back out and realising they were almost the same height.

'Come, let us go somewhere with a bit of warmth. There is a fire burning nicely in the quarrel room.'

The man, Count Kurtain, turned his back on Sila and returned down the corridor to the spot where he had first appeared. Stuck to the same tile, Sila studied the man's form, the movement of his boots on the tiled floor, the cloak covering most of his body, the faint sound of breath flowing in and out of his lungs.

'Unless you are content to stay in this tedious corridor all night?' the man said back, not quite shouting but certainly wearing the costume of it.

Sila waited out a few more seconds,

hoping to give the impression of a sceptical scientist instead of the lunatic reality that was playing out in the rest of his mind, a man who had found his deity and was now busy drawing up plans for a rack to fuck him on,

then coughed and followed after him.



## CHAPTER 9

# A HISTORICAL MONSTER



The room that Count Kurtain [or Kurszán, as Sila realised when they passed a block of text on the wall referencing the name] led him to did, as advertised, have a lit fire, though it seemed unlikely that the warmth of its flames would reach any of the walls.

The sheer size of the place; if Sila had counted out the time it took from the door to the fireplace, he was sure it would've been at least half a minute.

But he'd been distracted, mainly by the deep purple cloak of his host, the bottom part of it caught on the top of his left boot.

Kurszán neither noticed nor cared as he sat down on the rug by the poker and stared into the fire.

Due to the lack of chairs, Sila did the same.

To some people, this may have been something meaningful, but to Sila it was vacant, the flames being far too alive, flickering erratically, mimicking the madcap ley lines of his own mind instead of giving something steady to anchor onto.

A black square.

Uranus from a distance.

Green hospital walls.

The Garden of Earthly Delights.

That's what he liked to peer into.

Perhaps sensing this on some level, Kurszán left the flames and stared at the stone wall past Sila. His beard was ragged, but the rest of his face, especially the long nose, reflected the heat nicely. He did not appear at all to

be seven hundred years old. And the fact that his hand was now on Sila's forearm meant he couldn't be a ghost either.

Pushing fingertips down to Sila's bone, the Count confirmed it, his voice even softer than in the corridor.

'Ghosts, as far as I am aware, do not converse. If that is what you believe I am.'

'No...'

'Yet there are some concessions I could make to the theory. Certain limits to my existence here. That, however, is for another day.' He released Sila's arm and picked up the poker, stoking the fire without strategy. 'It has been so long since I have had visitors. So very long.'

'I didn't think you were a ghost,' replied Sila, watching sparks leap off the coal and vanish into the fumes.

'Tell me, young man, how is the movie industry progressing? Did they make a sequel to *Fletch*? Is Fassbinder still active? How about the Edward Murphy vehicle, *Beverly Hills Cop*?'

'Err...'

'And literature. Is Lem still around? Did Tanith Lee manage to finish her alien leopard series? Is there a new genre conjured up that includes both desktop computers and flying skateboard machines?'

Sila stared at Kurszán's beard, then switched quickly to the paintings above the fireplace when the Count caught him.

'By the puzzled expression on your face, I deduce that I am at least a hundred years out of date.'

'More like forty,' answered Sila, following the hem of the dress on the glum medieval woman above. Possibly Kurszán's mother. Or wife. Or one of those kidnapped lovers the plaques had talked about.

'Ah, not so poor then. It merely indicates that I have more research to do. Stitching a new costume from the materials you can supply to me. Other metaphors that I struggle to think of at this current moment.' He yawned, looking up at the same painting as Sila. 'Ah, I see you have honed in on Veronika. A difficult courtship that one.'

'She was your wife?'

He laughed, jabbing the wall with the poker. 'No, no. She was far too low on the scale for that kind of arrangement. Lover was the appropriate position, after much pursuit. You see, at first, she would not even see me. Then her father objected after I hosted her here in this castle. Had to deal with him. Beyond that, there was not much. Myself with my duties, her locked up in her

room, complaining about the leery nature of my façade or some such drivel. Poor girl had no idea about the secret tunnel I'd built. Of course, fucking her soon became tedious, even in the dungeons and, in other such cases, I would have dunked her in the river nearby and moved on yet...there was a brother of hers...a young man with the smoothest hair you'd ever touched...' He stopped the poker, analysing the fragments of chipped stone he'd dislodged from the wall. 'It was a different time back then.'

During the monologue, Sila's hand had shifted back into his *Good Viy* hoodie pocket, getting a tighter and tighter grip around the handle of his knife as the Count detailed his previous exploits.

At first, there had been some level of fear, trepidation, but that had passed when he realised how depressed the Count looked. Now he just felt disgust. And, on a deeper level, desire. An atavistic urge to find that secret tunnel, burst into his room and see how the anomalous fucker liked it when the sock was on the other dick.

He blinked, realising that Kurszán was looking at his hoodie pocket.

'I am not certain you can physically harm me, young man,' he said, his voice a little harsher. 'If that is your intention.'

'My name is Sila.'

'I assume it is a small blade you are concealing.'

'Not that small.'

Kurszán nodded and looked back at Veronika, then the other paintings of long dead men, women, wolfmen surrounding it.

'Did you terrorise all of them?' Sila asked, keeping his grip on the handle steady.

'To the degree that my position afforded. Yes.'

'With no punishment?'

'That depends.'

'On?'

'Your consideration of ennui. The hold it has. Its powers.'

'Therapy is a big industry now.'

'A peculiar answer.' The Count lifted up a finger and floated it through the air until settling on a painting on the far right; a man with a bowl cut that only people facing the void of the black death could think was appropriate. 'He was the one. Petr. *Sehr mutig*. Came to me as a fifteen year old, fresh as a coddled lamb. Walked through my castle gate as if it were his own front door.'

Stayed with me. Hunted at my side. Visited my bed. Created wounds for me to experiment on. Sucked droplets of blood from my lacerated shaft. Disappointed me. Irritated me. Died in the castle dungeon, alone, at twenty three. Ja, I confess, I truly did the blackest things to that boy. And yet...'

Kurszán lowered his finger, making no effort to wipe away the tear meandering down his stone-like face.

Despite internal self-warnings, Sila removed his hand from the hoodie pocket and did something he had the vague hope would confuse the Count; he patted him on the shoulder.

Instantly, he felt Kurszán's muscles tense up, and then an arm swing backwards to knock him off. Digging a trench around his position, Sila swatted it away with surprising agility, even to himself, and ossified his grip.

It seemed to work.

There was no more resistance from the Count, yet no acknowledgment either.

'I do not suppose you give much weight to the argument of historical relativism?' Kurszán asked, finally brushing away the tear from his face.

'Not really.'

'Then you believe I am evil, singularly?'

'Maybe. Perhaps.'

'Ahhh.'

Kurszán put his hand on top of Sila's and gently guided it off his shoulder and down onto his thigh

repeated *ahhh*

then returned to the flames.

~~~

Due to a lack of clocks in the palace-sized room, Sila had no idea how much time had passed, and it was only when he remembered the existence of his phone that he was able to find out it was almost three in the morning and he'd been there for almost two hours.

Weird that I forgot about my phone, he thought, putting it back in his non-knife pocket. Must be all this historicism surrounding me. And the serial killer projecting god knows what onto that fire.

Maybe he's got the same thing in mind for me that he had for medieval Petr?

But how?

There's no law to back him up here, no sword in hand and, based on his current state and mood, no certainty that he could take me in a one-on-one fight.

Unless...

Sila looked up at bleak Petr, settling on two lines: one, Kurszán dominated cos he really was a great fighter and, two, Petr didn't fight back cos of class distinction.

No, there was a third, too: Petr wilted cos he was in love with the beast.

And a fourth: Kurszán would kill without batting an eyelid, others wouldn't.

How many do I qualify for? Sila wondered.

Three?

A coughing noise ruptured the flickering sound of the flames, bringing Sila back down to ground level. Somehow, at some point, using some unseen portal, Kurszán had left the room and come back with a pile of books with no cover pics.

'Reading time,' he said, a whole new expression on his face. Basement Glee, if Sila had to label it.

'What language are they in?'

'German, mostly. Though there are several translated into English, the lingua franca of this age. Unless that has changed too?'

'Actually, yes. It's Slovene now.'

The Count mouthed the word back to himself, looked at his paintings in confusion for almost a full minute, then finally leaned in close and slapped Sila on the thigh, adding a laugh like a faltering chainsaw. 'Ah, your first play. Well done.'

'I'm glad you can take a joke.'

'Yes, in older times, I would have had you flayed. But now...it is a different matter.'

'No one to do the flaying?'

Kurszán didn't laugh this time, but he did loosen a smile. Clamping his giant hand on a book with a crimson cover, he laid it down on Sila's lap and said, 'read.'

'Okay...' Sila opened up, skipped through the preamble, the introduction, the company line praise by other authors, the first paragraph of chapter one that was tedious description, and started reading.

After a few seconds, Kurszán put a hand over the page and asked what he was doing.

'Reading.'

'To me, you dolt. Read out loud so I may relax.'

'What, like a servant?'

'*Sehr mutig*. No, there is no need to call yourself such. Besides, none of my servants could read, and even if they could, I never would have asked them to do such an intimate thing as recite prose to me. No, this activity is strictly for confidantes.'

Sila breathed out with theatrical weight and went back to the start of Chapter One. 'Beyond the citrine reeds of the lush, blanketed fields, the slanted house stood as a solemn refinery to all that was malevolent and modern.'

'No, no...start with the praise.'

'Sorry?'

'The first pages, the praise. Other authors detailing what they like about this story.'

'You wanna hear all that?'

'Certainly. It is often the most lyrical part.'

'Okay...' Sila flicked back a few pages, took in the first quote and stifled a laugh, then read out loud. 'Not since the feverish quill of Rabelais has a text enraptured so vociferously. At points, an affectionate tirade, by the end, a searing treatise on all that is insidious about this enervating age in which we currently toil.'

'And the next,' said Kurszán, fixing his eyes again on the painting of Veronika.

Sila coughed, trying not to picture the lump of shit that had come up with the thing he was about to recite. 'Bravo, Sir! A hit, a palpable hit. Daring prose, yet unerringly prescriptive in its diagnosis of our current ills. It will be a fair few seasons before I read a novel of this ilk again.'

Elk?

Checking the line, Sila laughed. Either a typo or this clown had truly fucked up.

Or maybe it was a pun connected to the novel?

Did the story involve elks?

He checked the back of the book, but it was one of those very old ones that had no blurb, just more praise for the author.

Looking left, he opened his mouth to ask Kurszán what he thought, but the Count was faraway now, his eyes completely unresponsive to the fact that Sila was staring right at him.

A trance of some kind?

Sila followed the Count's line of sight and came to Petr, the poor fifteen-year old who'd wandered through the worst of all possible worlds' castle gate.

Was this regret, or erotic recall?

Based on Kurszán's vacant gaze, it was hard to tell. No drool either, or tears, or lump within his loose under-gown. He had been in this castle a long time, at least seven hundred years in linear time, perhaps longer in the *felt* variety. Or perhaps shorter. Without visitors, did he just blink out of existence temporarily? Vanish until called on again?

Which one was more likely to prod regret? Guilt?

Running his eyes across the parade of misery hanging above the fireplace, Sila could make a case for both. Loneliness grows longing grows tension grows psycho-sexual scream. Or loneliness grows thought grows sadness grows a new found desire to connect with someone on an equal footing.

Was that what was happening here?

Desire?

He blinked, catching a particularly loud crackle from the fireplace.

'Sorry, I blanked out there for a while...' he started, but cut off the rest of his excuse when he saw that Kurszán was no longer sitting next to him. Instead, the large not-a-ghost was on his feet, moving towards a different door, purple cloak free and flowing out behind him.

Throwing the book perilously close to the fire, Sila pulled himself up and followed the trail of the Count, shouting forward for him to slow down a bit.

Kurszán didn't hear, didn't respond and

after two smaller passageways that had to have been used by the servants in older times, and a claustrophobic spiral staircase,

Sila found himself in a compact room, kind of like a film set,

with a four poster bed,

a bathtub

no tap

turquoise curtains poorly covering the window/balcony

a second painting of glum Veronika

and

zero sign of Count Kurszán.

'Where the fuck did he go?' Sila asked himself, walking out onto the balcony and shivering a little as he looked over the side of the stone railings.

There was nothing below, no rope or ladder, and apparently no other rooms on either side.

In the distance: mountains, snow, wild dogs, wild bears, the cousin of that fucker who'd slashed at his neck.

Ah, not again, he thought, forcing his hand back down from the obvious thematic symmetry.

Concentrate.

Pushing the curtain aside, Sila moved over to the bed and sat down. It was impressively soft, almost sucking him into a makeshift hole, and lying down seemed to be not the worst thing he could do.

So he did it.

Give it five minutes and I'll go and look for him, Sila told himself as he shuffled up the bed to the giant pillows with loose feathers sneaking out.

Probably went into one of those secret tunnels. Like he did with Veronika. When they were courting.

Sila breathed in through one nostril, the other blocked, and stretched his neck back so he could see the painting on the wall.

No, that wasn't right.

Not courting.

Kurszán had used the secret tunnel to come in here, as a surprise.

To rape her.

Sila closed his eyes then pressganged them open again, letting out a mammoth, incongruous yawn.

He'd raped her here, on this same bed.

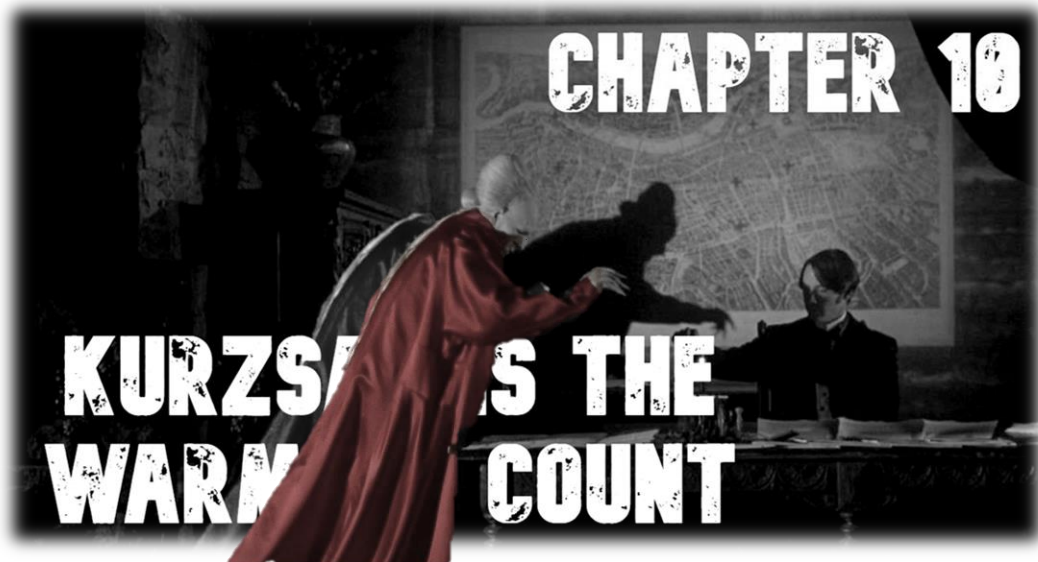
Cos he was a rapist.

A terrible man.

A psychopath.

Not even hum-...

His eyelids gave up and the image of the rigid Veronika looming above narrowed until everything was dark and deep and formless again.



Lodged Ozuan in the fireplace

book in claw

not saying a word, just reading, and all I could do was sit there in a slumped state, blood leaking out the neck from the creature's slash wound, waiting to see if it could be bothered to drink me at some point

and the flames

didn't affect it in any way

not even a slight flinch of discomfort

which was fine, really, as fire wasn't the key to this, the thing in my jacket pocket was, if I could muster up the energy to lift my hand up and

blue laser shot into the room

wretched cave

missing the creature, the Krsnik, by a metre and a half, then expanding, thickening into a cold bar of light that wasn't blue anymore

[not red either]

A pale, glowing line to illuminate the décor, show more of

~~~

Sila woke up looking at the floor.

Most of his body was still on the bed, but everything above his chest was hanging off the side, as if he'd already tried and failed to get up and this was the compromise.

Still in the castle, he thought, before lifting himself off the mattress and looking around the bedroom.

Yup, same bed. Same balcony.

It was hard to say what time it was based on the window light alone as outside looked grey and wintery, so he fished his phone out of the *Good Viy* hoodie pocket and felt instantly bleak when he saw quarter to two in the afternoon staring back at him.

Mountain time, he instructed himself, putting the hoodie on and heading for the door.

Assuming I can make it past security.

~~~

The spiral staircase and the corridor on the floor below were both empty, which was odd but not conclusive as maybe guards didn't come this far up.

However, when Sila reached the fireplace room from the night before and heard no sounds at all, from the corridor or the gardens outside, he started to panic.

No, not panic exactly, it was closer to anticipate, the idea that he'd finally stumbled through a Damijana Chu portal and landed brain-first in a deserted castle.

Wasn't this one of the old dreams?

Prospero and Juliana?

He walked to the window and examined the layer of snow on the garden below, a layer on another layer, no footprints in sight, no tourists either.

'You are alive again,' a familiar voice said from somewhere behind.

Sila turned and almost laughed when he saw the Count decked out in a deep crimson cloak, accompanied by a ridiculously high collar and foliage hair.

'As you can see, it is a day to stay indoors, I think.'

'For the whole town?'

'We will visit the library, peruse some of my vast collection of literature and YA. Though the latter is quite bland, quite sexless, unfortunately.'

Sila pulled the strings of his hoodie together and headed to the double-door.

'You cannot go outside,' warned the Count, making no move to stop him.

'I have to.'

'Did you not hear me mention the library?'

'There are things I need to do.'

'Such as?'

Sila paused with his hand on the door frame, not the handle, scanning the Count's lunatic attire. Tell him. Don't tell him. He might know something about it. He might think I'm insane and put leeches on me. Or attempt an amateur lobotomy.

'It's personal,' Sila said, finally.

'Ah, your feelings. Fine, then you will at least let me feed you before you leave.'

'You have food here?'

'Unlimited supplies.'

'I mean...do you eat?'

'Come, there is some produce laid out already in the kitchen. I think you will find it quite modern. The last visitor I had brought a microwave with them. And a device that warms bread in less than two minutes.'

Sila pushed his left palm into the frame of the door, understanding on some level that he had to pull, then deciding that food wasn't a terrible idea, he hadn't eaten for almost a whole day, and, as he walked closer to the Count and saw the details of his *Dracula* cloak, the little patterns on the thread, he realised that wasn't terrible either

in fact

he half wanted one himself,

only in a dark green colour.

~~~

As promised by Count Kurszán, the toaster did indeed warm bread in less than two minutes, though it was a bit disconcerting to see that the brand was the same one his grandma used to have.

The kitchen itself was impressive, a combination of medieval and contemporary, with a fridge, washing machine, electric stove and microwave all given enough space to breathe and function and ask themselves internally, what the hell are we doing here, isn't this a castle?

Sila had the same question in mind, but each time he tried to ask the Count, he would get fobbed off with a tangent, or a long stare at the wicker doll pinned to the far wall. Which would in turn force him into studying the bizarre selection of film posters surrounding the microwave – *Excalibur*, *Santa Sangre*, *Nowhere*, *Countess Dracula*, *Masque Of The Red Death*, *Basil The Great Mouse Detective* – wondering who had pinned the things up and, on a more incongruous level, whether Kurszán had actually seen any of them.

He had mentioned *Beverly Hills Cop*...and Fassbinder...but these films?

*Masque Of The Red Death*?

About a tyrannical medieval prince, stuck in a castle?

On whose prompting?

After finishing off four slices of bread with Wallachian jam, plus two blood oranges, Sila left the film sheets, sat down on the chair opposite his host, blocking the view of the wicker doll, and asked him four times in a row, why is there no one in this castle? And a rejoinder: why is there no one outside?

Kurszán took the longest sip of his coffee then put eyes on the dalek salt shaker in the middle of the table.

'I do not know about outside matters.'

'What about inside matters?'

'Inside the castle, yes. Indeed it is a dispirited place. I will not deny that.'

'That wasn't my question.'

'But with another soul present, like yourself...do you not feel the air is already slightly warmer?'

'Why are there no people in here?'

'The walls also. Not so distant it seems.'

'Where are all the tourists?'

'Ja, it is an odd effect. Perhaps it is only I that can detect it. Tourists? You mean from fringe countries?'

'Finally, you respond. Yes, people from fringe countries. Where are they?'

'I do not know. It has been a long time since I have seen anyone. Only you, the Chinese girl you travel with and the occasional tramp.'

'She's not with me.'

'No? You seemed to be very close yesterday.'

'Yeah, we were arguing. I was telling her to go away. And when exactly did you see us anyway? That was in the castle, with other people around.'

'She is not your paramour then?'

'Were you secretly hiding in the-...'  
Sila stopped, noticing the Count's fingers wrapping together. The occult code for manipulation. He turned and looked at the microwave, the shitty brand name stamped on its side. 'Why can't we see any tourists in here, this castle?'

Kurszán looked down at his own fingers and unknotted them. 'It is probably for the best. The last I heard China was in a precarious state. Den Ping betraying his friend Mo and empowering the merchants. Of course, I may be out of date on this. If there is any news you have on the matter...'

'Sorry, I don't know much about China matters,' Sila replied, pouring out what he hoped was Darjeeling tea into his cup.

'Then other countries. I myself have a soft spot for Pakistan, Iran, the Swahili States...I forget their modern name. Tell me about those places.'

'You mean Kenya? Or Tanzania?'

'Possibly.'

'They speak Swahili so it's probably right. I think they're doing okay. Still under the thumb of what you call the merchants, western energy companies. Chinese now, as well.'

'A great pity. In my era, they were Muslim strongholds, a great trading zone. Many different cultures mingling together without butchering each other. Until we came along to ruin them.'

Sila opened his mouth to say 'huh?' but decided it was probably too provocative and just sipped his not-Darjeeling tea instead.

'At least that is what I've been told. Perhaps by revisionists. To be honest, it is difficult for me to have confidence in my own opinions. Everything comes from another source, one which I cannot verify.'

'Things haven't changed that much.'

'Perhaps.' Kurszán took a sip of coffee then returned to playing with his fingers again; not making a lattice, just flicking at them. 'Even in my own era,

I was forced to rely on others. Outside of this castle...Bohemia, the Ottomans, what was truly taking place...I could not know.'

'You didn't travel?'

'To my doom? Ha, of course not. My reputation was built on my castle, my land. Leave for even one day and someone would take it. Visit another province and I would have my throat slit during the night. Survival required stagnancy, an entrenched base. With a well-oiled torture apparatus.'

Sila flinched, looking away to the *Nowhere* poster. James Duvall topless, legs wrapped up in the American flag.

'It was, of course, a different time. And the torture machines...are not in the best condition nowadays. Ah, you are just like Petr...shying away from the realities of life. It is a positive attribute in some ways, I suppose.'

'Didn't you torture Petr?' asked Sila, switching to *Countess Dracula*, blood streams pouring out of Ingrid Pitt's mouth.

'There it is, the suicide spark. Ja, I did. I tortured him. Had no choice but to do it. Though I doubt I would do such a thing now.'

'You can't, he's dead.'

Kurszán turned sharp as an owl, the height of his collar blocking his reaction. It seemed as if he were focusing on the microwave, but Sila knew there was nothing to see there.

Okay, maybe back off a bit, he told himself. Torture machines are still around this place somewhere. Don't wanna end up strapped to one of them.

'A change of topic perhaps. Or a regression. Tell me, young Sila...have you travelled far in your life?'

'A bit.'

'To which places?'

'Many.'

'For fun?'

'Not exactly.'

The Count noticed Sila's hand creeping over to his hoodie pocket. 'You have a purpose?'

Sila pulled the hand away, picking up his cup which was full again with not-Darjeeling. He studied the spots of milk bobbing on the surface, wondering if it were congealed, out of date, if the Count actually received the milk in person, whether or not he'd understand something mystical like the Professor of Dark Light.

'By your recalcitrance, I assume it is something abstruse.'

'I don't know that word.'

'Perhaps more abstruse than myself and this castle. Or the talking green mist I encountered when I was a child, telling me to murder those above me. Or the winter witch in the spacious cavern who warned me about the machinations of the merchant class.'

Drinking some of his mystery tea and forcing it down, Sila weighed up the pros and cons again. He may understand. He'll laugh in my face. Those were the two main ones and, looking at Kurszán's outfit again, he decided to regret later and just go for it.

'Okay, here it is. No dodges. A few years ago, I was a cultural theorist, not doing much with my life and...'

After telling and editing and retelling and apologising for the fragmented nature of the whole thing, Sila leaned back in his chair, looked at the Count's hands and waited for his reaction.

It didn't take long.

'I have heard this name before, somewhere. Professor of Dark Light...'

'You have?'

'But I cannot recall where, or when.' He knitted his pale fingers together, slowly, carefully. 'In my library, there is most likely a book on this topic. Come, I will show you. We can search together.'

'Will it take long?'

'No, no. I have an excellent cross-referencing system. Designed by Veronika, in fact. Many centuries ago.' He drifted off towards the wicker doll tilted on the wall, detaching his fingers. 'She was talented at that kind of thing. Very skilled.'

Sila used the break to check his phone. 'I have about four hours, then I'll have to head back to the hostel.'

The Count switched back on, rising to his feet and pushing his crimson cloak out at the bottom. 'Then we should start immediately. Come, follow my trail.'

~~~


In Sila's head, he imagined a library from 19th Century-set horror films, the aristocrats cultivating books on the occult and symbolic gardening and Plato and more normal subjects they could show if the police turned up

but

in actuality

Count Kurszán's lair of words was a segmented affair, carved up into six cosily-lit alcoves, each with two bookshelves.

Apparently, two of these alcoves were reserved solely for occult matters, which the Professor of Dark Light fell under, and the key words they came up with for the referencing were: occult weaponry, dark light, occult furniture, possessed furniture, ritual sacrifice and insane artists who killed people.

'Green blade or green knife might be a good search topic too,' said Sila, pulling out the signature weapon from his pocket.

'That was the artifact given to you?'

'Yes.'

'Hmm. It looks almost Sumerian. The patterns on the handle.'

'You've seen it before?'

'I cannot recall. Possibly. But it is too much to bring back. We are best served attaching ourselves to more general words first, see what can be exposed.'

Sila slipped the blade back inside his *Good Viy* hoodie pocket and waited by the tiny ladder as Kurszán scanned the books on the top shelf. To his left were two more film posters, *Lucifer Rising* and *Querelle*, both distracting enough to stop him looking up and tracing the tone lines of the Count's calves.

Or worse, reaching for them.

Stroking them.

Going higher and...

'A favourite of mine...'

Sila blinked, swinging too far right and saying, 'what?' to the other side of the bookshelf.

'The poster you are examining,' continued the Count, stepping down off the ladder. 'Querelle the sailor. One of Fassbinder's best creations...if you can accept the opinion of a dilettante like myself.'

'Ja. It's a good film.'

'You have seen it?'

'Bits. Some scenes.' Sila nodded at the poster, Brad Davis's awkwardly tied jacket. 'Ja, pretty good.'

'The bits?'

'All of it. His other films too. Pretty good. Distinctive. Nice lighting, cinematography.'

'I see,' replied Kurszán, mimicking a nod of his own then heading back up the ladder.

After stacking up a pile of forty or so books, they both sat down on long chaise longues, and started reading. It was a silent endeavour at first, with Sila struggling with the archaic German in a text called the *Hocken Manual*, and the Count engrossed in an old Persian classic that Sila couldn't even read the title of, but after an hour or so, they both caught each other's eye at the same time and decided to discuss what they'd got so far.

'This has a chapter on a teacher who trapped malevolent sprites in wardrobes,' started Sila, tracking his finger along the relevant sentence, 'then ate them out when town planners were nearby.'

'Intriguing...'

'I think I may have translated it wrong.'

'Old High German is difficult for modern readers.'

Sila coughed, peered over at Kurszán's open tome. 'What have you got?'

'Very little.'

'Nothing?'

'A tale about a Djinn who wanted to have sex with the man who controlled him.'

'Are Djinnns related to Professors of Dark Light?'

'In minutiae, no. Though they did play with humans. In this case, I believe the djinn got his way and shared the bed of the man for seven years. Then castrated him when he converted to Islam. Hmm, a religious polemic, I suspect.'

'That doesn't seem related at all. We need something closer to Slovenia, from Slav mythology maybe.'

'Then I suggest these texts,' replied Kurszán, picking up five blank-covered books from the floor and handing them to Sila. Then leaning back into the chaise longue, almost touching the *Querelle* credits with the top of his head.

'I should probably go.'

'It is not yet late.'

Sila checked his phone. It was just past six. The hostel technically didn't close, he had a key to get in...if he wanted to go back.

Putting the phone on his lap, he looked over at the Count. The *Vlad* cloak was off, and the black shirt underneath was reminiscent of what Gian Maria Volonté used to wear, back in his prime, not too tight, the top button undone to show the lower slope of his neck, almost the top of his chest and...the Fassbinder eroticism, framed as backdrop...sunset glow promising the removal of everything, the merging of flesh and-...

'It is your choice, of course,' said Kurszán, running his left hand along his belt then shifting with a small flourish to the new book in the other hand.

~~~

A few hours later, with the light from the windows replaced by the steady flames of the candles, Sila put down the third book he'd attempted and closed his eyes.

Things had started to blur about half an hour earlier, and he hadn't said anything, but now it was becoming unsustainable.

Just a few minutes, he told himself.

Maybe piece together some of what I've already read. See if I can connect the *Hocken Manual* to the diary of herb healer Maud Mudfell, the occasional references to the emerald spear, emerald being green and green being what he had

and Maud talked about carpentry too

said it was a pagan art

that if you opened a certain trunk, made by a certain carpenter, the right number of times

then a demon would appear

and it would taunt and mock until you did what it requested, which was usually sexual in nature

pretty basic sex to be honest, not the kind that a real medieval tyrant would perform, if he had his eye on you

which was more likely the more innocent you were

not so grubby

like Petr on that bed, half hanging off the side while Kurszán pushed himself inside his ass, blade in hand, holding it ready in case he tired of fucking like a normal-

A gust of cold air blew in from somewhere, forcing Sila to spasm almost out of his chaise longue.

He opened his eyes, seeing a blurred figure, half shadow, half sailor, clutching a giant white cloud.

'A pillow for you... ' said Kurszán, pushing the white thing that wasn't a cloud onto Sila's lap.

Blinking several times, Sila checked the rest of the room, saw the silhouettes on the posters, the almost melted candles, and tried not think what time it was.

'...if you cannot make it to your bed.'

Sila examined the pillow resting on his thighs. Next to the shaft of his dick pushing hard against his jeans.

He stretched his eyes moon-like, reading the open page of the book on the floor. It didn't work. He was still hard.

Looking back up, he saw the Count staring down at him, flanked by *Querelle*, stroking his belt again.

'Are you going to bed?' Sila asked, not sure where the question had come from.

'... .. ' replied Kurszán, bending down and, without even the slightest hesitation, gripping onto Sila's bottom lip.

In historical terms, with all that he knew about the man, the Petr and Veronika stories, the torture apparatus, there should've been resistance, but wasn't he repentant now?

Didn't he deserve some kind of forgiveness?

Just a tiny bit of non-violent sex play?

Kurszán moved down to Sila's neck, pulling at the skin with teeth as he kissed, scraping his nails across Sila's chest, past his *coming soon* abs, onto the stem of his dick which had doubled down on its hardness and was now just about ready to fuck anything that happened to be in fuckable range, most likely Kurszán if he ever got that belt off and

'... .. ' said the Count, pulling his hand out of Sila's jeans, backing off to the bookshelf nearby.

'What's wrong?' asked Sila, pulling himself up and, after a few shallow breaths, stretching out a hand. 'Come back.'

'Consequence,' the Count replied in a strangely distant voice, staring at the *Hocken Manual* on the floor for almost a full minute, then turning and walking off without another word towards the door.

Sila stayed on the chaise longue, waiting to see if the Count would return, watching the candles slowly burn out. In his head, the familiar litany cranked up, and a nervous hand edged into his *Good Viy* hoodie pocket.

*Bastard raped Veronika.*

*Tortured Petr.*

*Murdered people in the dungeon.*

*Avoids direct questions.*

*Excessively hairy.*

*Kisses violently, like a Klingon.*

*Just fucking walks off on you.*

A few minutes passed and Kurszán failed to re-appear. No noises from out in the corridor either.

Lucky, thought Sila, picking up the *Hocken Manual* from the floor and reading a line. The man was a monster. Tortured people. Probably manipulated me into waking up aroused so he could take advantage of my delusional state.

That's what had just happened.

Medieval sorcery.

Nothing real.



Waiting in that suspiciously white room

*con* gun

the Chinese trickster shies away from the shattering glass

me bursting in

axe ready

but as I chop at her arm

nothing happens

the axe is blunt

no, it's outright plastic.

Little choice but to sit down

brood a bit

reflect on axe origins, chopping technique, pagan forestry, pagan porn,  
*Blood On The Devil's Claw, Dahlgren* etc.

'Do you want a coffee?' she asks, settling on my lap.

'Go away.'

'What's on the other side of the window?'

'Leave.'

The witch seizes the axe and places the edge against my neck, saying even plastic has its moments, and when I look down at the floor, the shards of broken glass are not where they promised to

~~~

The next day ran in a similar vein to the last.

Afternoon rising.

No humans in or outside the castle.

Eerie mist hovering over the nearby mountains.

Food on the table, food from the microwave.

Squinting at the *Hocken Manual*.

Squinting at other manuals.

Kurszán on the brink of a hand-job then turning blank, giving no explanation or apology, and wandering off somewhere just fast enough that when Sila followed he was already gone.

This time Sila did manage to make it back to his bed though.

Or Veronika's bed.

Eyes down to their last light, but brain pulling back all the gay porn he'd watched over the last five years. Anything older than that would flit in and out, with the lead guy ultimately morphing into Daniel Day Lewis.

Sila pulled the covers over his head and improvised a collage; *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Mysterious Skin*, *Women In Love*, *Querelle*, *Quigley Down Under*, *Angel Heart* and *Slav Guy Gives Confused Cop A Buffering With 9 Inch Cock*.

It was tough at first, Kurszán's face kept appearing and Sila didn't want to give him the satisfaction...weird medieval fuck was probably watching from the fireplace, or a secret panel in the wall, but the more he tried to edit the Count out, the more prevalent he became.

At one point the big murdering wretch burst out of the washing machine, shouting, 'Djinn like Flynn,' and something about the way he said it made Sila laugh, even though it was his own mind that had created the scenario, and

soon enough,

he was out of bed, tapping the walls for any sound that might imply a secret tunnel.

Either by luck, or sub-standard architectural design, Sila found it within seven minutes. Part of the wall to the left of the *Bear in Exquisite Pain* painting retreated inwards when pushed and, putting his *Good Viy* hoodie back on, he

followed its surprisingly curved trail through pitch black darkness until arriving at a place where he could easily make out unnatural whining noises.

Putting an ear to the wall, Sila listened in as [what must've been] Kurszán toyed with himself, the occasional outbursts in old German 98% incomprehensible.

From the tone, he could guess it was neither flowery nor sweet, and when he heard the name 'Petr', he suspected it was much, much worse than that, possibly torture-related.

Better not to eavesdrop, he thought, pushing lightly against the wall just enough so it opened up a crack, through which he got a slightly angled view of the Count's bed. And the triptych of nude, full frontal Raul Julia posters, framed in glass, on the wall above.

As predicted, Kurszán was tugging himself off with his left hand while, in the other, he gripped a dagger.

There was no sign of blood, not vast quantities of it at least, but Sila was too far away to know for sure.

Logically, why hold a dagger if you didn't plan on using it?

Keeping his breath stealth-like, he slipped his hand downwards and started the most gentle of pulling motions.

Projecting Kurszán onto the tip of it wasn't easy as the Count was lying on his back, apparently oblivious to the slice of Sila observing from the far corner, and he didn't want to put himself on top, not when Kurszán was spitting out old German shit about a peasant boy he'd tortured to death, so he collated a different picture; the two of them on a bed together, rubbing themselves against each other's skin, while an alien overseer watched on a hidden monitor.

Alien captor, equal prisoners.

Kurszán on the receiving end, lost in powerlessness, turning to Sila to act as the decent one.

Maybe I'd help, thought Sila, stroking faster, maybe I wouldn't.

If he promised to stop wandering off every time we started biting each-

A geyser of vermillion caught Sila off guard, erupting out of the bed, splashing onto Raul Julia's abs.

No, erupting from Kurszán's dick.

No, wait, from-...

Sila opened up the gap another inch, poking his face forward.

Jezus, he was slashing at his own legs. Gushing out blood and...

Eyes closed and legs activated, Sila leaving the panel ajar as he retreated on pure cave instinct back into the darkness between the castle walls

stumbling

careening into stone

nauseous

aroused

desperate for the bloodlessness of Veronika's room

her

~~~

The next day, Sila woke up with the morning light.

*Get your stuff, leave.*

*Get your stuff, leave.*

It was a crossover from his dream, Raul Julia chasing him around a drab laundrette, telling him to cut his legs off, while Hanif Kureishi whispered a counterpoint from the open door, 'get your stuff and leave.'

Throwing on clothes and the *Good Viy* hoodie, Sila walked out onto the balcony and was in no way surprised to see that there were, once again, no humans around.

It wasn't that cold either, despite the heavy snow.

'Is this an apparition I see before me?'

Sila turned, smirking when he saw Kurszán modelling yet another in his series of long cloaks, this one something between indigo and violet. His legs were covered in tights, perhaps covering up the wounds from the previous night, but he was still standing straight enough so they couldn't have been that serious.

If they were there at all.

The man was over eight hundred years old, after all, possibly a spirit in temporary human form. Or something darker.

'Did you mistake the time?' Kurszán prodded.

'Light woke me up,' replied Sila, monotone, eyes still on the tights.

'Perhaps you did not sleep well?'

'Not too bad.'

Intercepting Sila's thoughts, the Count looked down at his thighs. 'There is no ruin. If that is your concern?'

Sila didn't answer, as that would admit his voyeurism from the night before. Instead, he looked back down at the flashes of naked statue and grey bush poking out from under the snow.

'You wish to go outside?'

'I was thinking of going back to the hostel, actually.'

'That is understandable.'

'It's been a few days already.'

'And you need to deliver payment. Ja, you should go. The Chinese girl will be worrying about you too.'

'Ja, like a cop and her informant.'

Cutting the distance between them by half, the Count peered over Sila's shoulder at the mountain backdrop. 'I have learnt, with some struggle admittedly, that it is selfish to keep others at a distance. I apologise if that has been your experience too, here at the castle.'

'You've been okay. Relatively.'

'For a devil.'

'Ja.'

Kurszán glanced around the room, at the Veronika painting above the bed, at the secret panel on the wall, then at the bed itself.

Sila watched him, matching the wistful look in the Count's eyes with the lunatic from the previous night who'd slashed his own legs. Was it such a strange picture?

For a medieval Count?

Weren't they pretty much raised to do that kind of thing?

Coming back into the room, Sila put his hand firmly on the Count's wrist, riding out the inevitable flinch. 'Before I go, how about a walk outside?'

~~~

Touring the garden was a short affair, as the Count knew as much about the various plants and flowers as Sila did.

And they were barely visible anyway, suffocating under layers of continually topped-up Alpine snow.

'I do not come out much,' Kurszán offered in defence, his hand now on Sila's wrist as they walked towards the front garden.

'Didn't I see you the first day I came here?'

'An aberration.'

'What about the city? Do you ever go there?' Sila looked ahead, at the gate with zero traffic moving beyond it, and zero sound of potential traffic beyond that. 'Can you go there?'

'It is unlikely.'

'You mean, you've never tried?'

'Solitude is preferred.'

Sila put his free hand on top of Kurszán's, which was still clamped to his wrist, and pulled the same face he did whenever a cabinet was nearby. *Manic adventurism.*

'You look strange,' Kurszán said, digging his feet into the snow slightly, but not enough to stop Sila dragging him forward.

'One foot outside the main gate, see how it feels.'

'For what purpose?'

'You could just say *why*, you know. I assume you had that word in old German.'

'I am not in the mood.'

'Actually, I never really noticed before, but your language is quite weird.'

'The gate is closed, it cannot be opened.'

'Like a mix of old Robin Hood films and modern slang. I guess it's cos you've had visitors before. That's how you knew *Beverly Hills Cop* and the other ones you said.'

Kurszán put his own free hand on Sila's and pressed down. But it was too late. Sila was already pushing open the gate and, some part of the Count was clearly okay with that, as five seconds later, they were on the slush-coated road, pointing out a sign up ahead that they could walk to.

'... ..' muttered Kurszán in his old tongue.

'Did you just say thank you?'

'This is not possible.'

'And yet...'

Kurszán examined the sign now only a few metres in front of them, and read out the words: 'Innsbruck City Centre - 2km.'

'Don't know if I can be bothered walking all the way in. Unless you want to?'

'It cannot be deserved.'

'Huh?'

'Can it?'

'I'm not sure what you're asking me. Can it be deserved to walk outside in the snow?'

Kurszán stopped, reaching out and grabbing hold of the sign post. He re-read the words stamped on the metal plate then turned and looked at the castle a hundred metres or so behind them.

He looked at it so long Sila started to think he was in psychic communion with it.

'You wanna go back?' he asked, attempting to break the spell.

'... ..' the Count replied flatly.

'What?'

'It is almost lunch time.'

'That means yes?'

Kurszán scratched at the paint on the signpost that would've been splinters in medieval times. 'Ja, back.'

'No need to be glum, we can come out here again later. Walk along the road for a bit, if you like.'

'If permitted.'

~~~

After a lunch made up of different shapes of bread and cheese, overseen by the wicker figure [that had apparently been traced back to the secret chambers of Arnulf of Carinthia] on the wall - as well as the judgment eyes of Prince

Prospero, the nipples of James Duvall - the Count patted his stomach and told Sila they should bunker down in the library and do more research

and they did, for over an hour,

but then Sila pointed at the light still streaming in through the library window and managed to drag Kurszán back out to the main road, where this time they mustered the courage to walk all the way to the river, close enough to see a whole row of houses with no people inside.

'Must be an alternative dimension,' Sila said quietly in Slovene.

'Truly a wondrous sight,' replied Kurszán, bending down and dipping his fingers into the water.

'Is that not cold?'

'Freezing.'

'I mean, your hand.'

'Ja, very cold. But it can be warmed back to health again. Or cut clean off if that is the cost.'

'It's turning blue.'

'Come, let us swim a while. See if we can find some fish to catch. No, to assist. I am tired of destruction. I wish to add something to the world for once.'

'I really think you should pull your fingers back first.'

Kurszán smiled and did as Sila asked...then unclipped his cloak and leapt into the river.

'Fuck...'

~~~

Luckily, pneumonia was alien to medieval apparitions, or Counts in purgatory, or whatever Kurszán happened to be, and he was still in high spirits as they sat down at the kitchen table to eat dinner.

Finishing off his third glass of Chilean wine, Sila said he really probably definitely should get back to the hostel at some point, and Kurszán responded by pouring him a fourth glass.

'There is more research to be done,' he said, moving the bottle over to his own glass. 'This Professor of Dark Light, I feel that he lurks in my collection somewhere. Ja, I am certain I have heard that name, or something related to the cabinet aspect. It is too familiar to be coincidence.'

‘There can’t be many books left to check.’

‘Of course, if there is no reference to this creature, nothing at all, then we shall have to switch to more practical exploits. A trip to Salzburg, that is the first thing. Then we can branch out into the rest of Austria, Bavaria, Slavic territory at some point. Assuming you have not already covered those parts?’

‘Some of it.’

‘Never mind. There is still plenty for us to explore. Assuming the spell holds. If that is what it truly is. I admit, even after all these years...to walk beyond those gates...’

Sila sipped his wine, trying to block out the palpable elation flowing in on the wings of the Count’s words.

‘What do you say? Set off within the week? Or perhaps walk further into the city first, measure the extent to which people can materialise.’

‘Maybe slow down a bit. To be honest, I don’t even know where my next destination is yet.’

Kurszán nodded at the words, taking his wine glass and studying the surface of the liquid.

Sila took the bottle and added another few millilitres to his own glass. ‘It’s a bit weird, actually, talking like this. I usually do the mission stuff alone.’

‘You wish to continue that way?’

‘No. I don’t know. Not really, but...’

‘You worry about my lack of passport?’

Sila burst out a gravelled laugh, unable to stop a drop of wine from dribbling down his chin.

‘Myself as well, to be frank. Though I have heard it can be avoided when travelling between European nations.’

‘Most of the time.’

Kurszán picked up a biscuit and dipped it into the wine. ‘Good. Then it is merely a matter of your own independence.’

‘It is quite comfortable, being with you,’ said Sila, wiping his chin, trying not to look at Kurszán’s wine biscuit activity. ‘Apart from the odd moment or two.’

‘That is expected.’

‘I suppose.’

‘As long as we avoid the dungeons, we should be on firm ground.’

'Is that a joke?'

'There is one thing I am confused about though. You say you are alone, yet the Chinese girl was unmistakably at your side. And you yourself said she had knowledge of the Professor.'

Sila groaned, reaching for the almost empty bottle. 'Not her again.'

'She is not working with you then?'

'With me? She sacrificed me to a fucking Krsnik.'

'Sorry?'

'A Krsnik. Slav monster myth thing.'

'Ah, that is what you said...Krsnik. Without doubt, one of my favourite beasts. We have them here in Austria too.'

'Great. This one slashed my neck open. I nearly died.'

Kurszán squinted at Sila's finger prodding at his own neck, just about able to make out the scar. 'A serious hit, but not a fatal one. After all, you are still here, with me, drinking Chilean wine. And the Chinese girl remains at your side, too. You have to admire such persistence.'

'Only cos she wants to know about the Krsnik. She doesn't give a single shit what happened to me. What she did.'

'Ja, a callous mistake. But I am certain she had her reasons.'

'Maybe we should change topic.'

'Moreover, it is a blessing to be nearly killed by something deadlier than yourself. It steels your nerves. Prepares you for future battles.' Kurszán sipped more wine, coughing as he put the glass back on the table. 'You know, I was twelve when I first killed a man. Fifteen when I received a wound in the stomach. It all accumulates.'

'I don't think her intention was to steel me for future battles.'

'Agreed, but that does not make the effect any less real. The only danger is whether or not you have developed a fixation on this Krsnik that emasculated you.'

'I killed it.'

'Ah...'

'With my green dagger.'

'Perfect. Then there is nothing to regret.'

Sila took more of the wine, ordering in his head the whole story of how she led him up to Ljubljana Castle and made him stand by a tree to be taken, but something about the Count's expression...the wistful way he was staring at the *Excalibur* poster...made him think that he would still take her side.

Peas in a sociopathic pod.

Clearly.

~~~

Later in the library, as the two men sat in the same chaise longues as the night before, the fire in an intermediate state, Kurszán's mood slowly altered itself into something that could only be described as *hippy mellow*.

If he'd whipped out a piano and started jabbing the first bars of *Almost Blue*, lighting up a drainpipe-sized blunt, Sila wouldn't have been shocked at all.

In fact, he was a bit disappointed that he didn't.

That feeling didn't last long, however, as they were soon on a shared chaise longue, kissing and struggling, biting and sucking, telling each other they should've done this the previous night, or on the kitchen table, or up against the wolfman painting downstairs, and when they got their pants off and Kurszán was still there, still hard, still biting, Sila knew that this time it would be real.

Apparition or not, he could feel the Count's skin, the movement of his stem in Sila's hand, the cold touch of...

Sila shuddered, shifting away from Kurszán's hands and looking down.

'What's that?'

'A herbal mix to heighten things,' the Count replied, dabbing his fingers in a jar of green cream and then smearing it on Sila's asshole.

'Feels cold.'

'Do not worry, there is no pain.'

'Can't we just use normal lube instead?'

'I do not know what that is, and I doubt that I have any. This is sufficient, I assure you.'

Sila looked at the jar, seeking out a label or some kind of brand name, and was unsurprised to see neither.



'You wish to stop?' asked Kurszán, moving his hand back round onto Sila's crotch.

'No...'

'Good.'

Bending down and running his top teeth over the tip of Sila's dick, Kurszán told him the cream was medically proven, by the finest occultists of his own time, and that it would take them both beyond the library, into the realm where otherness and void-ecstasy reside.

'Void-ecstasy?'

'Ja, exactly that. You will see.'

'Is it-...'

'Trust, comrade. Trust.'

Pushing Sila onto his side, the Count coated his own erection in the green cream, rubbed along the crack of Sila's ass, then slid himself slowly inside.

Cold turned instantly to weightlessness

to a tingling sensation

the sometime part of sex at the very beginning

constantly on the verge of erupting

and it continued, with Kurszán clamping calloused hands on Sila's shoulders and pushing him into the cushions

his whole body submitted

ecstatic

off this dimensional plane and in a castle of infinite Kurszán fucking that he never wanted to stop.

Cabinets?

Fuck them.

Professor of Dark Light?

Never existed in the first place.

Kurszán Kurszán Kurszán Kurszán

Kurszán Kurszán

Kurszán

~~~

The flames within the fireplace rose back slowly to former heights as Sila lay on the floor, re-examining the jar.

Kurszán sat on a fallen cushion, his entire crotch area covered in green residue.

'If you started selling this stuff,' said Sila, ending with a whistling noise.

'I am not a merchant.'

'Ja, I know that. I'm just saying, it's really strong. Powerful. Where did you get it from again?'

'An old recipe.'

'Does it have the same effect on you too?' Sila asked, gesturing towards the green smears on Kurszán's flaccid dick.

'It is late,' he said, quietly.

'Really? I can't tell.'

He stood up, grabbing his cloak and tights and tucking them under his arm. 'There are things I need to do.'

'Right now?'

'Important things.'

'Okay, but...right, right now?'

'Good night.'

Sila opened his mouth to add another *right*, then stopped and just held it static, watching mute as his lover walked robotically out of the library, waiting for the moment where he would snap out of the midnight possession and say, ha, joke trance, let's fuck again, you leading, but, just like the previous two nights, the shift did not happen.

Post-fuck Kurszán was the same as pre-fuck Kurszán.

The same as all the Kurszáns.

Crawling closer to the fireplace, Sila wrapped his *Good Viy* hoodie around him and stared at the burning wood.

The big lump will come back tomorrow, he thought.

Beg me as I'm walking out the front gate.

Stay Sila, stay. I need your body. The magical green cream.

Or something more capricious.

Let's try the dungeon, show you my other side.

He held his finger forward, almost touching the flame.

Fuck the dungeon.

That's where his real heart is.

Probably where he is right now, fingering Petr's skeleton, licking Veronika's bony cunt, apologising, terrorising, laughing, buffering into that void-ecstasy chaos all by himself, alone.

His finger pushed closer, waiting out four long seconds in the middle of the flame before he pulled it out again.

'Next time I'm leading,' he told the fire, and the *Querelle* poster to the left.

Then blanking the big wretch afterwards.

See how he likes it.



Grabbed the remote

flicked off *Blake's 7*, said

'no more space shit'

and when I moved to grab it back

Amir morphed into purple mist – legs, arms, dick - held the remote out on one of his tendrils of bizarro smoke and

taunted me with what I was missing

Seroalan dies in this one

Seroalan dies in this one

which he couldn't possibly know cos he'd never watched it properly

but somehow he did know

and each time I thought I'd outflanked him

he swirled to a different part of the bedroom, brushing an inch away from my dick as he swirled, but never close enough to affect anything

cos he'd got what he wanted and now

it was taunting time

without shame

and all I could do was stand there and

~~~

A giant remote in a bathrobe watched as Sila opened his eyes and looked around Veronika's private chamber.

Then a blink-cut and it morphed into one of the bed posts.

'I'll give you that,' he mumbled, half unconscious, surprised that there was actually floor when he pushed off the bed and planted his feet down.

Moving over to the balcony, he mentally prepped myself for Siberian style wilderness, but then he counter thought, even Siberia has towns and villages, Rasputin was born in one, and the counter thought filtered through to reality and suddenly he was hearing voices outside.

From the garden.

'Wah...'

Ducking behind the curtain, Sila waited out a few seconds to see if anyone would shout, 'hey, sleepy guy up there,' then poked his head back out and peered down.

Fuck.

There were at least twelve people, some of them wiping the snow off the plants, others sweeping the courtyard.

None of them Count Kurszán.

Fuck.

Possibly.

Or maybe not.

No Count meant no distractions. No more redemption fantasies followed by childish mood swings.

'Fifteen minutes,' shouted one of the workers below, his voice so loud it felt like it was coming down from a god in the sky.

Fifteen minutes...to what?

Opening time?

Fuck.

Opening time. Had to be.

Sila reeled backwards to the bed and pulled up different parts of the covers, searching for his clothes.

Then he realised he was still wearing them.

Okay, think, he ordered himself.

You're in a publicly-owned castle.

You look like you're living here.

The clothes on you are not staff-issue uniform.

There's probably another dozen people downstairs too.

Pulling hoodie strings in tight at the top, Sila stretched the door open an inch and peeked out.

As predicted, there were others.

Two large men in dark green jackets standing by the wall, halfway down the spiral steps, one of them with a knee on the floor, seemingly fixing something.

It didn't make much sense, but he had no choice but to adapt so he closed the door, walked over to the hidden panel and entered the passageway that would hopefully still lead him to Kurszán's room.

~~~

Unsurprisingly, the Count was absent from his bed.

Had been absent all night by the look of things, thought Sila, moving briefly over to the bed and stroking the pillow.

But that made sense.

It was harder for him to show himself when the staff were around, or to drift through from his own dimension.

That's what he'd said anyway.

Sila rubbed his eyes, more out of performance than need, and crept up to the door. Opening it an inch and half, he breathed out a held-in *fuck* when he saw the corridor was clear.

No idea where exactly he was

for about two minutes

but then he turned a corner and saw the room with the bath dug into the floor.

Ah, that thing, thank gods.

Quickly locating the stairs down to the ground floor, he jogged through the armour display room then the mixed-art room, and managed a slurred *guten morgen* to a confused looking security guard standing next to the wolfman painting.

'Tourist?' the man asked, checking the ceiling for some reason.

'Guest,' Sila replied, pointing at the wolfman.

~~~

The journey back to the hostel was over in a second.

Or that's what it felt like to Sila, who looked at the first twenty or so human faces as if they were Reptilian aliens pining for a lifeboat back to Zeta Reticuli.

Had they all been somewhere else the last...how many days? Five? Or was he the one who'd been excised?

Whatever the truth, Innsbruck appeared and functioned the same as it had five days earlier, and the hostel woman at reception was completely nonplussed when he came in and asked if his room was still booked.

'You are reserved for six more days,' she told him, trying a different colour nail on her finger.

'Six? I thought today was the last one.'

'Your name is Sila Kudesnic?'

'Ja.'

'Then it is six days.'

Sila leaned over the desk and tried to get a glimpse of the computer screen, but she saw him coming and shifted the screen an inch to the right.

Then she changed her mind and swung it left, giving him a full view. Wah, she was right. Six more days. That couldn't be right.

The screen moved back, cutting him off.

*What's the date* was the obvious next question, but he didn't have the courage to ask it. If his phone wasn't dead, he could've checked that, but it was very dead, out of power for the last three days.

Moving away from the reception desk, he sat down on the nearest beanbag and immediately laughed.

Next to him, on a slightly bigger beanbag, was the Chinese murderer, reading a book called *Austrian Demonology*. Or pretending to read it as the cover was practically in his face.

'Didn't see you last night,' Joanna said, her eyes looking out over the top of the book.

'What's the date today?'

She checked her phone, without bafflement. 'Twentieth.'

'Not twenty-fourth?'

'No.'

'Four days then,' Sila muttered, just low enough not to be detected.

'Where did you go last night?' Joanna repeated, turning a page in her book.

'Out.'

'To the castle?'

'No.'

'Wandering the streets?'

He stared at the cover of her book, a demon with its arms raised in surrender, one leg fat and red, the other hairy.

'I was just reading about Austrian demons,' she said, following his line of sight. 'Apparently, they have Krsnik here too. A different name, but...same monster.'

'What are you still doing here?' Sila asked, sinking into his beanbag.

'Strange question.'

'Following me?'

'I told you, I'm reading about Austrian demons.'

'Sure.'

'What are you doing here?'

The hostel door opened and three Americans walked in, proclaiming instantly that the carpet was so cool, and then repeating it with genuine awe to the front desk woman.

'It is the owner's design.'

'They did it themselves?'

'No.'



'It's so cool, so decorative...'

'So Austrian,' added another.

The front desk woman clearly didn't know how to respond, so she just opened up the guest register.

From his beanbag, unnoticed, Sila watched them go through the signing-in procedure, expression sceptical, brain even more so; were they real people? Americans didn't act like that, *cool* was an old word, no one cared about carpet design. Was this a drama he'd fallen into?

He shifted view-scope to the other beanbag, his dogged yet utterly nonchalant stalker.

Would a real Chinese woman really still be hanging around, reading a book that appeared so esoteric in its design that he strongly suspected no other human eyes had ever set eyes upon it?

Wasn't this all a little bit counterfeit? Especially when he compared it to the drawn out dinner sessions with Kurszán.

The sheer duration of time involved...

Startling himself with his own blinking, Sila refocused on the red leg demon and stood up, steering himself away from the hostel lobby scene and upstairs to his room.

The Korean was still there, clearly tugging himself off under the covers, but Sila ignored that and climbed up to the top bunk.

Plugging his phone into the charger [which was still laid out untouched on his pillow], he looked up Count Kurszán and started reading through a litany of medieval hell:

*Murdered his wife Veronika in the bath, after she refused to sleep permanently in the dungeon.*

*Invited peasant boys into his castle, and into his bed, then flayed them when he grew tired of their quirks.*

*Defiantly libertarian, rose to power through soldiering and castle theft. Akin to a Japanese ashigaru.*

*Cut off the private parts of anyone who told him to get out more.*

*Built secret passageways that led nowhere.*

*Locked loyal advisors in wardrobes for months on end to improve their advice-giving skills.*

*Fucked his mum.*

*Fingered his grandparents.*

*Died with no heirs.*

Sila clicked onto the Count's picture, his dick almost shrivelling in on itself as he saw a fairly accurate painting of the man he'd had inside him the night before.

This isn't new knowledge, he told himself.

You knew he was like this.

Historically.

He dipped a hand inside his pants and started to stroke, reviving things a little.

Didn't he deserve a chance to be sorry?

~~~

The idea of wandering around the daylight hour streets of Innsbruck wasn't a pleasant one, but Sila did it anyway cos it was better than staying at the hostel with the Chinese stalker and her weird demonology book glued to his back.

Every time he came out of his room, she was there.

Outside the toilets.

In the kitchen.

On the chill out balcony.

The only time she hadn't popped up was when he went out for good, which was weird as previous behaviour would suggest that she'd be following him all day.

Yet, as far as he could tell, she wasn't.

Maybe she'd finally got the hint? Realised what she'd done and pissed off back to Ljubljana?

Kurszán's words flashed into his head, telling him without tone or inflection that she probably had her reasons and, ja, she'd done him a favour actually.

Almost being killed by something deadlier...

Sila dug his hand into the snow, scooped up a ball and lobbed it into the river.

...steels you.

~~~

By the time it got dark, he was standing outside the gates of Castle Ambras, waiting for the staff to leave.

In his head, the calculation was simple.

Medieval Kurszán was a devil.

Modern Kurszán was trying.

So he'd just go in and talk to him, no fucking, ask him how he felt about his past and how he thought about coming with Sila to Romania.

~~~

Inside the castle, it was dark, as dark as the first night he'd come.

Fumbling around the armour display room, almost knocking over something pointy, he ended up by the wolfman painting again and was about to give up, when he saw a lit candle farther along the corridor.

Walking over to it, he saw another one light up a few metres away, and then another, and another, and soon he was standing by an open door leading down into total darkness.

He put a foot forward and discovered a step.

'Kurszán?' he shouted.

An echo sounded back, telling him whatever room was down there, it was most likely cavernous.

The dungeon, he thought, gripping the side of the door.

An invitation or a threat.

Or a confession.

Psychologising was one of his strong points, or so he thought, but this had too much finality attached, the chance that even a confession from the Count

could lead to himself strapped to a rack, saying, 'ah, I thought so,' while having his dick stretched off.

He stepped back from the doorway, looking right.

There was another lit candle, leading down the same corridor he'd walked along that morning.

'Kurszán?' he shouted again, following the flickering light.

~~~

After seven more candles, Sila arrived at the bathing room.

The door lay open and the sound of running water was coming from inside.

Taking a breath, and trying to wipe everything he'd read earlier from his mind, Sila entered.

*Fingered his grandparents* was the sole surviving thought, and that quickly evaporated as the Count stood naked in the dug-out hole, water up to his thighs, silver goblet tilted in his hand, eyes hooked with fascination onto the wall opposite.

Sila turned and looked at what was so alluring, but there was nothing. Just stone and an inverted cross sticker.

Probably left by a tourist, Sila thought, moving over to the edge of the bath, or the edge of the hole dug into the floor, and waving his hand in front of Kurszán's eyes.

It had no effect, he was clearly in some kind of trance.

Somehow keeping hold of his goblet too.

Sila noticed a twin at the side of the bath, next to the tap still shooting out water, and a bottle of what looked like wine.

Picking it up and finding no label, he poured himself some anyway, then took off his jeans and dipped his calves in the bath.

This seemed to break the spell, the Count dropping his goblet and yelling something in old German. Sila wasn't sure, but one of the words sounded like *creepy*.

'Guten something.'

'You came back,' said Kurszán, a little guttural as he pushed through the water and fixed his hands onto Sila's calves.

'After a real day in my universe, ja.'

'It is not deserved.'

'Hmm. Maybe not.' Sila drank some of the wine, squinting a bit, trying to swat back *murdered his wife Veronika in the bath*. 'What were you doing just now?'

'Thinking.'

'Not sailing through time?'

'Adjusting my range.'

Kurszán ran a hand up from Sila's calf and on to his thigh, forcing him to compensate with more wine. 'You know, I went back to the hostel and it turns out only one day has passed. The whole time I was here, what I thought were five days...it was just one single day.'

'Mundane.'

'You don't find it weird?'

'Time does not pass the way you think it does.'

'No?'

'*Nein.*'

'How does it pass then?'

Kurszán stared beyond Sila, at the little satanist sticker on the far wall, while his nails worked their way up to his chest. Pulled off the *Good Viy* hoodie. Then the shirt.

Then went down again.

After running two fingers along the outline of an apparently forgiving dick, Kurszán gripped the sides of his waist and pulled Sila into the water.

*Killed his wife Veronika in a bath*

*Killed his wife in the bath*

*Bathed with wife in bath*

*Massaged and fucked wife Veronika in bath*

*Massaged and fucked intriguing young Slovenian man in bath*

Things proceeded as they had the night before, only this time with even more biting and, despite the magical green cream's absence, an unnaturally intense sensation every time Kurszán touched his skin.

'The wine and the water,' said the Count, pushing Sila's head down towards his waist, stopping just short of forcing him under the surface. 'Mixed together.'

'Drug?'

'Very powerful.'

Sila dipped under the surface scuba-style and put his mouth on the tip of Kurszán's dick, running halfway down the shaft before water seeped in and strongarmed him back up.

He coughed out most of it, laughing as he pushed the Count back to the side, then kissed him aggressively as he lifted him up on the ledge.

'Easier now...' he said upwards, as his mouth went back to work, going fierce for a full minute then pulling back and retreating to the middle of the bath.

'Tired?' Kurszán asked, slipping back into the water.

'Your turn.'

'Ja.'

'On me.'

'Dynamic.'

It was a strange response, and then a forgotten one as Kurszán grabbed Sila by the arms, shifted him round and pushed his head down against the wall.

'This is not feeling like my turn,' said Sila, struggling for a second as the Count lined his dick up, then breaking free completely when he felt the tip starting to creep in.

'... ..'

'That was last night.'

'... ..'

'I'm the Count this time, okay?'

Sila didn't wait for an answer, he grabbed Kurszán by the shoulders, then the arms, then pushed him through the running water and back towards the edge of the bath.

Hitting stone, they wrestled with each other, Kurszán briefly getting the upper hand until Sila shifted his feet and managed to steer him round.

'This fucking water...' Sila said, the words coming out almost in a gasp.

'You fuck me?'

'Ja, getting there.'

Rubbing his dick against the underside of Kurszán's ass, he pushed upwards, feeling the initial surge of entry, the nirvana of the next few thrusts, then pulled back, pure reflex, as a dagger flashed through the air like an anime dart and nicked his shoulder.

'The fuck...!' he shouted, falling back towards the middle of the bath, right arm raised in frenzied defence.

Kurszán kept his back to Sila, the dagger gripped in his right hand, then slowly rotated to face him.

'You tried to stab me.'

'No right.'

'Fucking lunatic...'

'... ..'

Sila checked the cut on his shoulder, which was somehow bloodless, then circled round to the left hand side of the bath, plotting his way out.

It wasn't easy. His dick was still hard as a fucking harpoon, the chemicals in the water making it tingle even when he wasn't moving. And sapping his energy too. Or that's what it felt like. Both his eyes and limbs, slowly being drained.

He edged forward, making sure not to put his eyes on the exit.

Kurszán watched him, but didn't move right to block him. Instead, he stayed by the side of the bath and raised the dagger to his own throat.

'What are you doing?'

'Trial.'

'Put the knife down.'

'Judgment.'

'Put it down, and we can just fuck. Like normal people.'

'Punishment.'

'Okay?'

Repeating *trial, judgment, punishment* in a softer tone, the Count tapped the handle of the dagger against his cheek then ran the blade slowly, methodically across the front of his neck, deep enough for the blood to ooze out.

*Cutting his own throat.*

*Blood stream.*

*Real-*

Sila closed his eyes, putting his palm flat on the wall to stop himself fainting.

It worked. Just about.

When he opened up again, the Count was still upright, the blood slowing to a dribble and already beginning to stain on his collarbone.

He didn't seem to mind.

Didn't seem to be anything.

Face vacant, entire skin like a suit, and

behind him was something else

an outline of hair and shoulders

ragged yellow eyes

a complete shadow figure that let the Kurszán suit sink into the water and flawlessly took its place.

'You're human?' was all Sila could manage, his eyelids barely holding themselves up.

'... .. Petr,' the shadow whispered back.

'Petr?'

The yellow eyes advanced, in a staggered, slalom-like motion, the rest of the shadow drifting sluggishly to match up.

Sila looked for the dagger, but it wasn't there.

Probably on the bath floor

retrievable

if his legs weren't buckling.

The wine, he thought, unable to keep his head steady enough to glare at the bottle. The fucker drugged me. In a bath. And then subbed in a fucking shadow creep that was

swirling above his head

fourteen of it

plus a hundred yellow eyes

magnetising against-



Sila's hand slipped from the wall, his eyelids dropped.

Yellow eyes pursued him in

imprinted *something something Petr*

as the Kurszán shadow swirled feverishly, slapping up waves, encircling a non-existent perimeter as Sila's legs finally gave way, both the water and the black hole guiding him and his tingling dick down

without passion

into yet another fucking void

losing all



Hoped to god it was cheap plastic  
yet instantly forlorn  
as I caught sight of the glint on the blades edge  
then a second glint  
and a third  
as the pendulum cut through the air above me, dropping an inch with each  
pass.

‘The rope?’ I asked, tilting my neck as far left as it would go without  
snapping

but Kurszán dug in

continued with his recital.

‘...the wound seventeen degrees to the arch of Saturn, count to nine in the  
old tongue, insert the blade and call out, *I know of Oizys, their follies.*’

I tried to catch Kurszán’s eye

but the only thing looking back was that fucking book

*The Hocken Manual*

as the pendulum kept slicing down an inch

and down an inch

and down an inch

and then suspense was desiccated completely when  
the cable snapped and  
the blade fell  
onto my chest, and through it, without even the slightest hint of

~~~

Stone was definitely beneath him and no mattress he'd ever known was made of that.

Klingon?

Breen? Romulan?

Eyes opened, legs kicked out, hands flew out to defend against imaginary daggers.

Not Veronika's bed, not Klingon.

Not the hostel dorm.

Not Michael Dorn.

Where?

It took a moment to get his bearings – for some reason, he expected to be floating in a pool of his own blood – but when he did, he saw it was the same room as the night before.

Only he wasn't in the bath anymore, he was laid out next to it, with a giant animal fur draped over three quarters of his body.

Sila padded himself down, checking for wounds, wincing a little at the twinge in his lower back.

Wah, someone had tried to dress him. His trousers were on, unzipped at the waist, and his shirt was rolled up around his chest and

demonic eyes, Kurszán double, sliding out the skin of

Eyes jerked left, then right, then up at the ceiling he'd never bothered looking at before, searching for signs of yellow-eyed doppelgangers.

There was nothing.

Whole room vacant, bath-hole waterless.

Void.

~~~

I hallucinated it? Sila asked himself as he snuck out of the bathing chamber and descended the stairs into the painting hall, rubbing his back as he went.

It must've been early as there were no staff, though he could hear engine noises outside so they probably weren't far off.

The curtain drops.

Second day in a row.

He stopped by the wolfman painting and asked himself again, did I imagine the whole thing?

Not the sex, not the past five nights, but the doppelganger, the demon twin of Kurszán peeling itself out of his skin, was that part real?

Moving onto the next painting, he checked off the conflicting variants.

A yellow-eyed demon would've killed me.

Kurszán may have done that, with the dagger.

It felt malevolent.

It looked malevolent.

I was scared.

Owls aren't malevolent, they have yellow eyes.

It was drifting over to me, absorbing my consciousness.

I could've just passed out.

Tenebrae.

Kurszán won back control and intervened, stopped me from drowning, put my clothes back on, draped a giant fur over my naked body.

Kurszán won back control and fucked me. The ghost of Petr or Veronika came and played nurse afterwards.

A door creaked opened in a nearby corridor, pushing him back to the painting hung on the wall to the side.

Ah, poor Veronika.

With the exact same expression she had in the bedroom pic. Not a smile, definitely not contentment.

Forced portrait?

Kurszán standing behind the painter with a raised mace?

Or maybe she had been contented, inside. Genuinely contented. At least for a little while.

Until the rack sessions started up.

~~~

Grinding knuckles into the lower part of his back and rotating the stiffness out of his shoulders, Sila found a quiet exit from the castle and

continuing with the rehab exercises

made his way through the morning streets and back to the hostel, where a different receptionist welcomed him in by staring at the computer screen and sipping loudly from a cup of coal-black coffee.

The clock and his phone told him it was seven twenty, which explained why the Chinese murderer wasn't sitting on the common room beanbags with her *Austrian Demonology* book, so he could sit in peace for a while and think about things.

Kurszán does not liked to be fucked

bareback

or lose control in any way

was about as far as he got before more guests came down and started chatting about how trashed they'd got the previous night.

Room is better, he thought, lifting himself up and feeling another twinge in his lower back. Wah, he may not have been raped, or beaten, but that yellow-eyed thing had definitely put him in some awkward positions for a decent amount of time cos his spine was killing him

or irritating him

given how close he'd come to Kurszán's dagger.

Perspective, he warned himself.

~~~

Lying with a slightly arched back on his bunk, Sila once again went through what had happened the previous night, trying to fill in the missing gap, wondering if Kurszán had nearly raped him or he'd nearly raped the Count or if it was all just normal sex play when one of you was innate medieval and you both had knives.

There was and could not be an answer.

He closed his eyes and attempted sleep

but the other people in the room woke up and got dressed as loudly as possible – one of the girls used a hairdryer, for over fifteen minutes – and somehow

that hairdryer noise attached itself to Kurszán's face, his pre-yellow eyes as he'd gripped the dagger the night before.

A man who would've taken you to the rack eventually, Sila thought, digging his knuckles into his lower back.

Not a lover.

An abuser.

Reliant on his castle spell to reel you in, semi sorry for his crimes, but only temporarily, when it suited him.

Sila felt for his phone and lifted it up towards the ceiling.

The Slovene to Romanian dictionary tab was still open, as it always was, so he typed out some sentences and hit translate.

Ne, waste of time, too easy.

Adjusting brain and body position, he thought out some sentences and tried to translate them himself. Things related to his mission, the Professor, places he could go to next that might have cabinets.

The Professor is waiting for you at the train station.

*Profesorul vă așteaptă la gară.*

He is disappointed that you are late.

*Este dezamăgit că late.*

He killed his wife in the bath and doesn't feel guilty about it at all, in fact, he still keeps her paintings up as a form of Proustian control.

*El...*

An hour of Romanian, map study, Slovene news and two episodes of *Catdog* got him to a point where he *could* sleep, if the curtains weren't wide open and a hundred thousand rays of sunlight weren't pouring in.

Forcing himself off the bunk, he worked on stretching his lower back for a few minutes, then put on the still torn *Criolo* jacket, grabbed his bag and headed out.

There were faces and bodies in the common area, most of them reading Innsbruck guides and ignoring each other.

No sign of Joann-...the Chinese devil.

Sila walked over to the desk with all the literature laid out and picked up one with an old church on the cover. Flipping straight to the index, he found two references to *cabinet*, nodded at the text and switched to the front desk.

The receptionist was different again, and actually smiled at him as he approached.

'Are these two places far from here?' he asked, pointing at the cabinet locations in his leaflet.

'About two minutes down the road.'

'Oh.'

'We're in a very convenient location. Right in the middle of everything.'

'In the middle. Okay.'

'If you want to go somewhere more remote, you could try Castle Ambras...it's maybe two kilometre on foot. Quite a peaceful walk.'

'Been there already.'

His reply was a bit sharper than intended, and pushed the receptionist into pretending she had work to do, which suited Sila anyway as he didn't have any more questions.

And didn't want to talk to anyone either.

~~~

'Built by an 18th century master of cabinet making, the *Wrangel Schrank Junior* is notable for its...'

Sila stopped reading the plaque and yawned.

Then checked his phone.

Almost lunchtime.

Kurszán popped into his head, holding a tray of poorly made sandwiches, telling him there was nothing to be sorry for.

The fuck there wasn't.

Sila took another look at the cabinet, decided it was far too tiny, far too passive for the Professor to lurk in and walked out.

Forget cabinets, he told himself in the winter sunshine outside, just fucking walk.

~~~

He's gone.

He's gone.

He's gone.

He's gone.

Different tones, added rage, indifference, it didn't matter, he was still fixated on the lunatic Count.

Walking didn't help either

cos he was still in his city, circling his castle, and

only cos it was the last five days

fresh, embedded

that's why it had a grip on him.

If he just got on a train and left, walked around a different city, watched some gentle porn, looked at pics of old boyfriends, old girlfriends

ja, girlfriends would be better

then things would go back to normal.

You can't love a man after only five days, he told himself, walking the same line along the river that he'd walked with Kurszán the day before.

He can only love you

and then hide from it by vanishing all the fucking time.



Slashing at your neck with a dagger.

Shedding his flesh and-

He picked up a twig and threw it at the river, his back twinging a bit.

Fuck.

~~~

Seventeen different ways of phrasing *staying in a castle with medieval ghost Kurszán Innsbruck Castle Ambras* and the only result he unearthed that was even the smallest bit relevant was a WordPress blog from a Swedish guy, who claimed he too had spent the night in the castle with a ghost man, and after chatting by the fire for a while, the ghost had asked him to wear a medieval peasant costume and respond to the name Petr.

The Swedish guy did as he was told and was prepared to suck off the Count when he pulled off his robes, but then the ghost got up and vanished, and the rest of the night, after searching every room, including a surprisingly well-kept dungeon, he gave up and moved on to Salzburg.

Sila re-read the account three times, even though the text was white on black, and when he was done, muttered to himself, 'not even one night.'

The sky behind the bench he was slouched on responded by fading to purple.

~~~

All the cars were gone, and the lights in the windows were off.

No groundskeeper to worry about.

Sila avoided the crunchier parts of the snow, moving his way around the garden and towards the door at the back of the castle.

Unlike the last few times, it was locked.

He tried pushing it, and then knocking with gradually increasing volume, but nothing happened.

Not really a shock.

Kurszán had never opened it for him before, and he wouldn't start now.

He was probably sulking by the fire.

Fiddling with the handle one more time, and failing to achieve anything, Sila walked the perimeter of the castle, looking for an open window or unlatched door, or an uneven-looking chunk of wall that could be the beginning of a secret passage inside.

Twice around and he found nothing.

You're really making it this hard, he thought, noticing a particularly large rock half buried in the snow and picking it up.

The window in front was a highly breakable target and, if his internal map was correct, would take him into a room next to the armoury hall.

He tossed the rock up in the air, testing its weight, then pushed it gently against the ersatz, antique glass,

but he didn't throw.

Instead, he studied the pattern, a knight fighting another knight with the head of a bear.

Which one was the enemy?

Neither of them?

He let the rock drop out of his hand and walked another lap around the castle, but it was a lethargic effort - he didn't even look up at the first floor windows - as his mind was shifting

showing him the Professor of Dark Light

a demon who could lurk anywhere

no recorded baggage

at least not in the historical logs.

Sila wandered into the deeper snow, heading on an erratic curve back towards the main gate.

The monster killed his wife in a bath.

In a fucking bath.

Cos she asked him to wash her back.

Probably.

~~~

It was too early to go back to the hostel, so he walked around the streets of Innsbruck, shunning the busier ones in the centre.

There were a few oddballs,
old men talking to lamp posts
middle-aged men talking to lamp posts
a young woman painting a giant dick on an abandoned washing machine
but none of them paid Sila any attention.

He was a ghost.

No, worse, a tourist.

And his thoughts were turning again, encouraging him to go back to the castle, explaining the differences between myth and actuality, killing a woman trying to kill you in the bath vs killing a woman regularly in the bath vs killing a-

He bent down to the ground, barely registering the ache in his back, and buried his hands in the snow

keeping them there even when two Canadians walked past

then got back up

started walking again, thinking resolutely, who killed who in the bath?
Ghosts. Gone people. History. Myth makers.

Not the Professor.

~~~

Around eleven, he decided it was probably late enough to go back.

The sullen receptionist was on duty again, this time staring up from his computer when Sila entered.

'Guest?' he asked, monotone.

'Yes.'

That seemed to be the extent of the security check as the staff returned to the computer screen and left Sila free to roam around the common area.

It was a short roam as

sitting alone on a beanbag, reading her *Austrian Demonology* book, was Joanna, who looked up when he walked past and asked how his day was.

'Busy.'

She turned a page, reading another few lines.

'No Ljubljana plea?' Sila asked, studying her eyes, matching them to the demon on the cover of her book.

'Not right now,' she replied, glancing up. 'But I was going to ask how much longer we would be staying here.'

'We...' said Sila, digging nails into his palm and laughing.

'One more day?'

'The close-knit pair.'

'Two?'

He dropped the laugh, and the nails, and walked off towards the stairs, pulling the slightly torn hood of his *Criolo* jacket up as he went.



For people with occult missions, the peak of mourning was well known to last only four days, so, despite the vague *what the hell am I doing, what void is this* aura floating about, Sila still managed to pick up the map and plot the next cabinet ambush, which turned out to be back in Salzburg, only two hours away by train, two and a half by bus.

'Ljubljana is four and a half,' said Joanna, leaning forward from the seat behind, the *Austrian Demonology* book in her right hand.

'How the-...'

'Maybe five.'

'I thought I lost you in the station.'

'It's not too late. We could change tickets and be there by mid-afternoon.'

'We?'

'Early evening at the latest. Yes, we.'

'I'm not going back to Ljubljana.'

'We could be at the castle by six.'

'No.'

'It's not that far.' She took out the vial of grey thingy then the blade and mimed a slicing action on her arm. 'Not that far at all.'

'No.'

'Just a drop.'

'I'm going back to Salzburg then on to Czech land. After that...ne vem. I don't know.'

'Those places are okay, but Ljubljana is better.'

'Why am I even telling you? You go where you want, I'll go where I want. Okay?'

'.....'

'Čas spanja.'

~~~

According to the guide book he'd picked up in Innsbruck, not only was Salzburg the hometown of Mozart, which was pretty well known, but it was also the home town of Ron Silver

the guy who played the evil senator in *Timecop*.

'Who's Ron Silver?' asked the stalker, her head popping up behind his shoulder.

'You know, I remember when I looked over your shoulder and asked about the camera...'

'When?'

'...and you ignored me. No, wait, you told me to shut up. Remember that?'

'On the hill?'

'Ja. The hill.'

'I remember.' She walked round the front of him, looked at the apartment where Ron Silver had been raised despite not having a clue who he was, pretended to consider the concepts of *home* and *belonging* then turned back and said, 'the parts after that are a bit foggy though.'

'Ha, of course you know the word *foggy*.'

'Maybe they're not so foggy for you.'

'Psychopath.'

Sila walked on, turning left towards the market and then, forty minutes later, the castle.

He stopped at the bottom of the slope leading up to the main gate. There was an elderly man with a cane, standing with one degloved hand against the

cold stone wall. Looked like he'd been there for centuries. Complete ossification of his boots on that ground, his brain in some past event seven hundred times better than the bottom of this slope.

Sila stared at a crop of weeds half a metre to the man's left, trying not to hop on the same train.

Dozens of tourists passed him, heading up the slope, chatting in Chinese, German, English, Spanish, Cambodian, Swahili.

The castle above was vibrating.

With forensic activity.

Mundane staring at chainmail and saying, 'wah, they really wore that? Looks heavy.'

No allusions to Veronika, or Petr.

No longing for the rack.

A cold wind swiped in from the side, forcing him to squint and look at his own hand clamped to the wall. He pulled it away fast, muttering at the old man who was attempting a slow wink.

'What are we waiting for?' Joanna asked, already two steps ahead.

'I've changed my mind.'

'We're not going up?'

'No.'

'Too steep?'

'And don't say *we*. I'm not stopping you from going.'

'I thought we could go together. Take some photos. Then have dinner and walk back to the hostel. You must be tired.'

'I'm going alone.'

'Good. Then I will meet you at the hostel.'

Sila let out a burst of barely held-in breath, plus a few specks of spit. 'I still don't know how you did that.'

'Did what?'

'Booked the same hostel as me. Here and Innsbruck.'

'Coincidence.'

'Unlikely.'

'It's a small city. Could even be a town. I'm not sure about the classification.'

'Not that small.'

'Then call it fate.'

'Right,' said Sila, walking away and looking back after fifty yards to check she wasn't following him.

She wasn't.

But the old man was, his stick the wrong way round, those narrowed eyes lit up with historicity.

~~~

Back at the hostel, Sila lay diagonal on the bottom bunk and tried to stop his thoughts sliding back to Innsbruck.

It was the residue stage, where he'd dwell on the library chats, the green cream, fucking for the first time in a semi-romantic way, or semi-Byronic way if he were honest.

But that way lay inertia

an old man glued to a tourist castle gate

and that wasn't him.

Would not be him

Become him.

Patching into his phone, he tried a new search.

Demon sightings in Salzburg.

Two-thousand, three-hundred and twenty results, none on the first page related to Salzburg.

The door opened and the Pakistani girl he'd met earlier walked in, alone, quite pretty, smiling at him.

Not a medieval psychopath, he thought, clicking onto a supposedly haunted house in Cesky Krumlov.

And Urdu was an elegant language, from what he'd heard

And she really was quite pretty.

Should I?



~~~

On her own bunk, Joanna lay side-on, ostensibly reading the Spectral farmer chapter of *Austrian Demonology*, but actually just painting her thoughts onto the white bits between the words.

Salzburg the *sute gwai*

That's what she'd called it the first time she'd come.

When Yute Long had put his even colder hands on her cheeks and said, 'you underdressed, idiot.'

Didn't even offer me his jacket.

Although if he had, I would've refused.

But he should've offered it.

That was basic psychological etiquette. You make the offer, they reject. You make the offer, they accept, that's the end of the line. You don't make the offer, even worse.

He didn't make the offer.

But now that he wasn't there to make excuses for it, to whine in her ear...

The door opened and a Japanese guy walked in. She rotated out of habit, and he smiled at her, saying, 'hi,' in Mandarin.

You can do many things with a mushroom.

The other Japanese guy, in Kyoto, talking to her for four hours straight about his plans for a herbal cuisine restaurant stroke bar.

Language practice.

The Yukio Mishima biography by his bed.

She rotated back to the wall, picked up *Austrian Demonology* and continued with the account of the whole town's supply of asparagus possessing an ethereal green glow.

Ha, green...

The colour of the lunatic.

Who she was chained to indefinitely now.

Had chained herself to

for a memory

a guy who didn't even offer his jacket.

~~~

Sitting on the back seat of the car taking him across the border into Czech land, with fifty-seven thousand Vietnamese clothing outlets cropped along the side of the road almost all the way to Cesky Krumlov,

Sila wondered,

how is it possible for this woman to be sitting next to me

in the same car

that I booked alone

without her seeing the website I used

or even being in the same room as me?

Some kind of magic?

Feng Shui?

Another local pagan thing not shown in films?

Was she even human?

He didn't know, but he wasn't surprised anymore, and when they got to Cesky Krumlov and he checked into the hotel he'd booked two days earlier, he couldn't help but laugh when she appeared next to him at the reception desk.

'Just tell me we're not in the same room.'

'That's very unlikely.'

'Hope you're right.'

'Me too.'

~~~

It was weird

Cesky Krumlov was officially a Czech town, but if an alien came down and landed in the main square and looked around at the crowds of mainland Chinese faces [and Joanna] then they would probably think they were in Sichuan not Europe.

Okay, they wouldn't think that

unless they'd done extensive reconnaissance beforehand like season 4 episode 15 or season 3 episode 2 of *TNG*,

but if they hadn't

they'd probably think it was just a bunch of humans

slightly different looking humans

some with cameras

some with scowls

but basically the same,

all meandering around the town like mixed-race cattle.

Standing by a market stall, taking photos for a Chinese couple who'd spoken to him in what he guessed was basic Czech, Sila couldn't help but isolate and develop the thought he'd just had, adding in the image of Chinese faces bobbing around a typically mid-European town and his friend back in Liverpool, Ethan Wong, the guy who told everyone he was British, not Chinese, even though he'd had a pretty shit time growing up, and

was that the fate of every world,

of every planet?

Would aliens understand the concept of race?

The concept of petty nationalism?

It was hard to know

but they probably wouldn't

not from a human perspective at least.

In fact, Sila had written about it once, five years earlier, when he was merged with the machine of regular Slovene society, a 24 page theory on the cartoonish portrayal of nationalism in science fiction.

Theory = if aliens are like humans then they must have schisms and divisions, but such splits would be unrecognisable to humans as facially all aliens would look the same and, unless the aliens had printed an English to Alien dictionary, or any human language to Alien dictionary, no one would be able to understand a word they were saying. If they had words. They may

not. And if they did, would they really have a common tongue that all of their species spoke? Wouldn't there be a bunch of alien villagers in all alien countries who only spoke the village dialect? The answer had to be yes as, if it wasn't then they wouldn't be aliens, they'd be archetypes, utopians, a whole planet of Eugene Debs and Elvira Dolinars. No culture could eradicate its core rottenness, even if they did have faster than light ships.

Sadly

his theory wasn't published cos he'd written it on a lilac *Gummi Bears* notepad with character icons at the head of each page, but, according to a drunk voluntarist outside one of the bars in Metelkova, it was a good one.

~~~

Sila walked around the centre of Cesky Krumlov, alone, which didn't take long as it was a small place. The church was where he really wanted to go, but he knew Joanna was following him and he didn't want her to be there again when he opened a cabinet.

She was a bad luck charm,

the last one they'd opened had possessed a tape recorder and led to temporary heartbreak, she couldn't be allowed to infect him again.

He stopped at the bottom of a slope leading to yet another castle and looked at the street behind.

There were lots of Chinese people, but they were all in groups, chatting to each other.

Only one of them was alone, pretending to look at a map.

Jezus, how long was this gonna last?

Sila looked at the main gate, and started walking, deciding to erase her from his mind and enjoy the castle, but when he stopped at another slope, this one inside the castle with huge windows on the wall breaking in sunlight, she caught up with him and smiled.

'What?'

'You're too serious,' she replied, putting away the map.

'Serious? You've only just seen my face.'

'You need to relax more, do silly things.'

'I'm not a child.'

She patted him awkwardly on both shoulders and looked up at the gothic window.

'Did you pay to come in here?' he asked, harsher than intended. 'Do you know anything about this place?'

She raised her arms as if blocking the sunlight and pulled a pretty impressive *burning vampire* face.

'You do one too,' she said, returning to normal.

'No.'

'Why not? It was your idea.'

'What?'

'You did it before.'

'I didn't do anything. What are you talking about?'

She blinked and looked at him like he'd just appeared from another dimension. 'Mistake,' she said quietly.

~~~

After getting through series 3 episode 2 of *Blake's 7*, Sila ignored the urge to search for 'Paul Darrow sex scenes' and went instead to his hotel room window.

Outside was the river and above the river was the castle. There was a blue light shining against the wall facing the town, making it seem like there was some kind of event taking place, a ball, or satanic comic con, but there was nothing, just a deceptive blue light. That's probably where she was now, back up there with the camera and some poor Czech guy, looking for her precious Krsnik.

He lit one of the cigarettes he'd bought in Salzburg and looked out the other window onto the side street.

There was nothing to see

no wanderers

no bars to stumble home from

except for the one just off the main square, but that closed at 10pm.

If she's not up at the castle, she must be asleep, he thought, taking in smoke and not letting it back out again. Or reading that fucking Demonology book.

Sila finished the cigarette, cursed himself for smoking it, put on his *Yuki Onna* hoodie, slipped the green knife in the inside pocket and left.

Twenty minutes later he was outside the church, trying to find the lock on the front door.

There didn't seem to be one, but there was a balcony about three storeys up, so he climbed onto the wall then across to a pipe and edged his way higher using the strength in his arms more than his legs.

The balcony led to a roof which led to a skylight that was half open, the priest clearly not afraid of the one or two thieves probably operating in Cesky Krumlov. It was understandable. They were more likely to target the groups of Chinese tourists in the main square, not places of worship at one in the morning.

Would they even be awake at this time?

Maybe not.

Sila pulled the skylight up and looked down into the room below. There was a desk, a jug and a cabinet against the far wall.

There she blows, he thought, climbing through and hanging by his fingertips until he was sure the five foot drop wouldn't break his ankles.

'... ..'

He took out his green knife and walked over to the cabinet, checking the skylight once to make sure she hadn't followed him.

It was clear, mostly, just a three quarter moon and two clouds, no voices or chatter from the street below and

as he put his non-stabbing hand on the cabinet handle

and heard silence from inside

he thought

this is it

a nothing town in Czech land

a deserted church

it has to be.

Taking a diver's breath, he pulled the door open fast and did one third of a stabbing motion, stopping when he saw there was something in there, which was weird as that's what he was hoping for, but this something was not a person or a professor, it was

fuck

it was a dummy
a poorly made, life-sized dummy of a
no
couldn't be
a Romulan?

'... ..'

He pricked the skin of the dummy with his knife, to confirm its fraudulence.

No whelps of pain or backhand slaps.

He put the knife back into the tiny wound and expanded it, pulling out cotton wool.

'Kaj?'

He picked up some of the cotton wool and rubbed it between his fingers.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he asked, Picard-like.

It was a good question but there was no one in the room to answer it and if he stayed until the morning then the Czech priest would come in, have a panic attack, call the police, and not answer the question either.

'... ..'

Sila moved the desk beneath the skylight, pulled himself back up onto the roof, slid back down the pipe against the wall, crossed over to the other wall then jumped down onto the street where a voice said softly,

'find anything?'

He spun round with the knife, praying for the Professor, or Paul Darrow, anyone except her, but who else could it be, at this time of the night, in this tiny Czech town, asking something as specific as *find anything?*

'You seem jumpy.'

'I thought you were asleep,' he said, keeping the knife raised, trying to dilute the warm colour of her shape and form against the bleak street backdrop.

'Not tired yet.'

'It's 2am.'

'I went to the castle, got bored then came here.'

'Here? Why?'

She looked at the knife hanging in the air. 'I assume it was empty.'

'What was?'

'Don't be dense.'

'It's none of your business.' Sila put the knife back in his hoodie pocket and started walking.

'Are we going back to the hotel?'

'I am.'

'You don't seem tired. How about a quick drink in my room?'

He stopped but didn't turn. If he turned, he knew he'd go back with her, whereas if he didn't, he could keep pretending she looked like Gowron from *DS9*.

'I have wine.'

'No.'

'You can tell me about the next cabinet on your list. Or previous cabinets. I don't mind.'

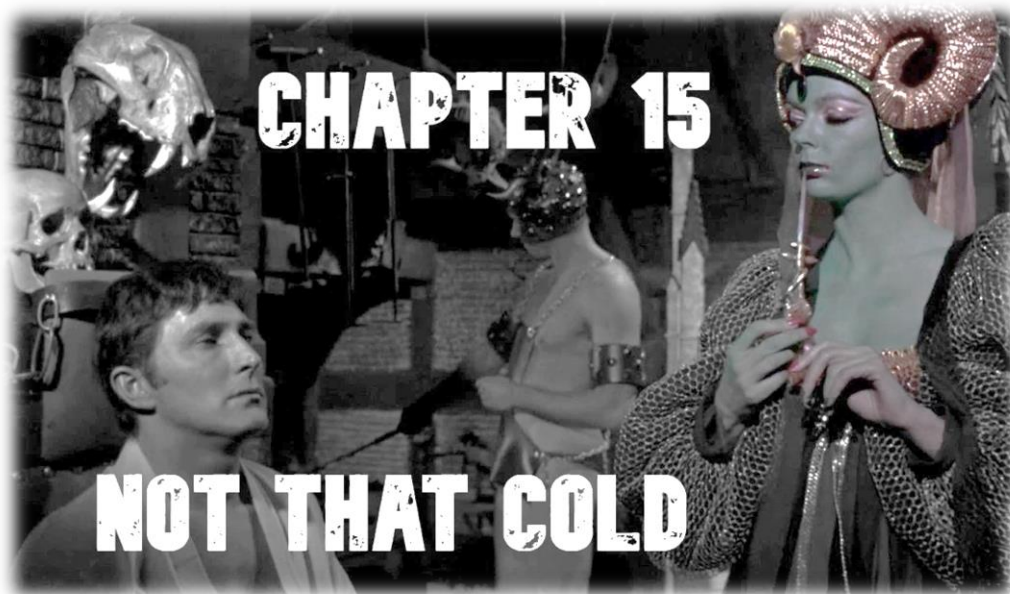
He carried on walking.

'.....' she said, turning to face the church.
'.....'

'Don't care.'

'.....'

'At fucking all.'



There was nothing left for him in Cesky Krumlov beyond arctic snow and Romulan trickery, so Sila checked out early the next morning, early being 10am as he hadn't got to sleep until five.

The bus station wasn't far, just up the hill and along a hidden path. Getting there in twenty minutes, he checked the schedule pinned up on one side of the car park, or the bus park as there were no cars. The next bus wasn't due until half eleven. Later than that, if Czech traffic standards were poor. He went inside the building opposite and sat in the waiting area, sat there for one minute only as every single person was smoking and he didn't wanna inhale any more of that shit.

On the way back out, he dumped his own pack of cigarettes, still half full, in the bin and walked over to the bench next to the bus schedule. He still had forty five minutes to sit and wait and hope she wouldn't turn up on the bench next to him. But she would. Probably. If not physically, then as a wispy threat.

'I'm in the walls...' he muttered, remembering a Corrao work from old times.

To kill the inevitable anxiety, he pulled out his Slovene-Romanian dictionary and did the section on literature.

The study lasted about ten minutes as it was no good when there were no Romanians around to practice with. Or there were but he couldn't recognise them.

He put the book away and stared at the other buses and the end of the hidden path, continuing the hope that the Chinese ninja wouldn't appear at the top of it.

It was a blossoming hope right up until two minutes before the bus was due to depart, when that pink Mizuno jacket drifted out from the end of the hidden path and, despite Sila asking the driver to put his foot on the pedal and go, made it onto the bus

mostly cos Sila was shouting in English and the driver only spoke Czech.

The blank witch put her luggage on the rack, sat down on the seat behind him, ignored the guy next to her asking if she was Korean, waited out ten minutes then leaned in and said,

'Where to next?'

~~~

The next cabinet was under a bridge in Prague, surrounded by chewed cardboard, one lazy-looking dog and newspapers that weren't in Czech.

Sila had found it by accident, walking out of a park with dead trees, turning down the wrong street, crossing the industrial bridge, feeling low about the lack of cabinets advertised on local arts websites, throwing stones over the side of the railings then leaning over and spotting it.

From above, it'd looked like a coffin as the doors were incredibly narrow, but close up, it was definitely a cabinet.

Very strange, thought Sila, approaching slowly, hand inside his *Yuki Onna* hoodie pocket, the thing is wide open, anyone could take it. Sell it second hand, no questions asked. If they could carry it. Which they could, if they had a trolley. There was a concrete ramp leading back to the riverbank. Not many police on the streets. Not many people on the streets at all, actually. No one to stop you and say, *hey, is that cabinet yours? Where'd you get it?*

Logically, there was no reason this cabinet should be there, except one.

He hesitated at the cherry wood door, thinking and counter-thinking each possible theory.

The Professor can't be here, it's too vulnerable.

The Professor's has to be here, it's the last place I'd look.

He settled on *look and see*, confident it couldn't be any worse than the church in Cesky Krumlov.

The door opened, the knife advanced.

'... ..'

He was wrong, it was worse

much worse.

'... ..'

The sky didn't turn grey, it was already that colour, and the mess on the ground would've nailed him to the wall if he'd been anywhere else

but

luckily he was alone and

dogs couldn't talk

so it wasn't anything that couldn't be run away from.

~~~

Back on the industrial bridge, Sila watched as the paramedics almost slipped off the concrete ramp carrying the homeless guy back over, wondering if he should go down and introduce himself, say

hey, I'm the one who called you guys

I found him like that

lots of blood

but just a flesh wound, right?

From the looks of things, that's what it was, and he knew the dagger went into the side of him, not the middle,

but

was it a flesh wound?

The guy's eyes were still closed, and his chest wasn't going up and down.

Merging with a crowd of curious Czechs, he heard one of them shout a question, and guessed it was either *what happened* or *is he gonna be okay*, but the answer from the paramedics was beyond him.

'Is he okay?' Sila shouted, as the doors were closing, a machine inside beeping in response.

~~~

The day after the Prague cabinet incident, Sila woke up early, ditched the psycho while she was in the bathroom [probably slicing that drug into her arm again] and walked around the scruffy parts of the city in a bubble of anarchist theory. When he got tired, he found a bench or a wall and watched videos on his phone about prisoners turning their lives around and animals saving smaller animals. When his phone got low on battery, he walked around again, giving coins to beggars, old people, anyone lying on or near cardboard.

He didn't understand what they said back to him, but he apologised to all of them for not speaking Czech

before adding

it was the Professor's fault, not mine.

When he got back to the hotel in the evening, the murderer/shaman asked him where he'd been all day, if he'd found any demons in cabinets, but he blanked each question and headed straight for the shower.

Back in the room, drying himself on the second night, he asked her if the hostel had any empty rooms yet, and she said no, they were fully booked indefinitely.

'Still have no idea how you pulled this off,' he mumbled, climbing into his side of the bed, pulling the blanket over his head. 'First the same train, then the same hotel, then the same dorm, now the same fucking bed in a two man room.'

'... ..' she said.

'Did you just say it was fate?'

'I did not.'

'Good.'

~~~

The third day couldn't be the same as the second day as Sila didn't have enough spare cash to hand out – or any cash, really - so he woke up early, looked at the clock, closed his eyes and woke up again two hours later, with his stalker sitting on the bed next to him, trying to shove a cup of black hole in his face. After a few faint rejections, he sat up and took it.

'I'll drink this one thing, and that's it.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, feigning confusion.

'We're not hanging out.'

'Hmm. What if I told you I'd found a cabinet?'

'I'm not interested.'

'A beautiful, mysterious cabinet made by a Russian.'

'Still not interested.' He turned the cup round so he could grip the handle, then blew on the coffee. 'I'm taking a break.'

'What if I told you I'd found a bookshop?'

'What if I told you I was a Romulan?'

'A Romulunt?'

'Romulan.' Sila drank some of the coffee, stopped, looked at the surface. 'What's this stuff on top?'

'What is a Romulan?'

'It's not poison, is it?'

'Why would I do that?'

'To finish me off.'

Joanna put an ice-cold hand on his forearm. 'Don't be silly, I could've done that when you were asleep.'

'Comforting.'

'Don't you want to know about the bookshop?'

'No.'

She pulled out her phone and showed him a random Prague street map. 'We can go there directly, an hour on foot. You don't have to talk to me.'

'I can find my own bookshops.'

'You don't need to, I've already found one.'

'I'll find another one.'

'It has a bicycle hanging from the ceiling. A paper bicycle with paper wheels. I've only seen pictures on a WordPress site, but it looks very beautiful.'

'Don't care.'

Sila put down the coffee, grabbed his towel and went out of the room to the shared bathroom. The door wasn't locked, which was normal in a hostel, so Sila walked in, took off his *Gentle Berberoka* shirt and hummed the *Robocop* theme. When he got to the fourth loop, one of the shower cubicle doors opened and a dark-skinned guy came out, a towel wrapped loosely around his waist.

'Sorry, I thought it was empty...'

'The shower is okay,' said the man, his accent either Spanish or Portuguese or possibly any country in South America, it was hard to trace and Sila didn't have a clue either way. 'I finish just now.'

'Thanks.'

'You here with friend?' the guy asked, finger tucking into the towel.

'No.'

'You are alone?'

'Mostly.'

The guy nodded soap-opera style, spooled out a few more lines then asked, quite abruptly, if Sila was busy later and, if not, would he like to go to the bar area around ten, have a few drinks, maybe hit a club.

Sila opened his mouth to say *ja, and bed* then looked at the man's chest and his arms and said instead, 'what are you up to now? Going out somewhere?'

'Now?' the man looked around as if there were a spy someplace in the bathroom. 'Where to go?'

'Don't know.'

'We go outside, this is what you mean?'

The door opened and a pale-skinned woman walked in, asking the guy something in Spanish then glaring at Sila.

'You know each other?' she asked, brusque as Baba Yaga at a burned-down adoption agency.

'No, not really.'

'Just meet? Here?'

'Err...briefly.'

Muttering in Spanish, the woman turned back to her possible boyfriend and dragged him by the arm out of the bathroom, shouting non-stop while he laughed and said in broken English, 'there's nothing wrong, we just talk, relax.'

The argument faded, into the walls.

Sila took off his pants and stood in the shower, staring at the tiles with little sea creatures drawn on, waiting to see if the dark-skinned guy would come back.

He didn't.

Probably cos he was in a headlock

or being sucked off

or taking off the mask and flashing yellow eyes, talking about the good old times with Petr and the rack and

Sila turned on the water and let it run over him.

His brain wandered.

Scrambled.

For some reason, he thought of Bruce Dern and his garden in space, the robot and the watering can, Dennis Quaid alone on a planet with his dead alien friend, Tony Leung sliding down the back of a taxi seat, Maggie Cheung long since sublimated. The creature's cave and all those bones...his mother's empty room...the newspaper laid out on the stairs...

Ne, ne, ne, ne , ne, ne, ne...

~~~

After washing himself and shaving for the first time in a week, Sila went back into the room and told Joanna that they could walk around together as long as she didn't mention Ljubljana or that fucking Krsnik thing.

'I won't,' she said, holding up three fingers.

'What does that mean?'

'I promise.'

'In Chinese?'

She stared at her fingers, a faraway look in her eye. Not just faraway, light years away, round the second sun of Sirius.

'Hello? *I promise* in Chinese, is that what you're doing?'

'No,' she said, dropping her hand.

~~~

December in Prague was okay for Sila but
for Joanna it was tough as

Guangdong women had body temperatures at least 10 degrees lower than Slovene men which was why their hands were always cold, could be poor blood circulation, hard to know for sure, but when you're walking by the river in Prague in the middle of winter and you're a female from Guangdong then you're gonna struggle with bitter ice-licked wind blowing in feral from the jagged coast of Norway.

If it had happened in Innsbruck, he would've told her to fuck off, but now it was Prague, and he didn't want her to feel cold, or he didn't want her to keep complaining about feeling cold, both seemed the same to him, so he said, fine, let's go hide in this café for a bit, but no more talk about Ljubljana, you promised, with three fingers, okay?

~~~

The main square of the city was gothic and crowded and pernicious, pernicious financially as the guide book warned about pickpockets lurking in plain sight, but you'd never recognise them as they did this kind of thing every day,

which is true, thought Sila, but also bullshit as they only tended to target people looking at open maps, gullible types, not people who looked like him  
in fact

if you'd never lived in middle Europe, you'd probably think he was Czech too, though you'd still know Joanna was Chinese.

'I've seen this before,' said Joanna, following the Styrian-esque church from its black doors all the way up to its spires.

'It's an iconic place.'

'On TVB.'

'Where?'

'I think they had a deal with the Czech tourist board, to promote this square.'

'Who did?'



'They do that a lot. There was a vampire drama they produced in Holland. One scene was ten minutes of the main character shopping in a market.'

'Vampire drama?'

'Cheng Ka Wing threw a Dutch man off a bridge with only his eyes. And broke a museum in half. It was quite funny. I don't think they ever broke this church. Not in any of the episodes I saw. Maybe the Czech tourist board is more sensitive than the Dutch.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Which part?'

'You speak in shorthand, every time.' He paused, staring off at something in the near distance. 'What's that?'

'Shorthand? You mean fragments?'

Sila walked closer to the church and stopped next to the statue of a woman. He didn't recognise her, but her face was frozen in a scream with one hand on her neck, possibly a response to the elimination of all women from Czech history [on Wikipedia].

'Who's she?' asked Joanna, joining him, gloved hands clamped to her cheeks in mimicry.

'A Czech woman.'

'You don't know her?'

'No.'

'You should read the plaque then.'

'Ha, what an idea.' Sila pulled out his phone and winced at the screen, then went back to the plaque and read the only words visible. 'Anny Ondra.'

'Do you know her now?'

'No.'

'We can look her up.'

'Forget it. Not that interested.'

They walked away from the gothic church and followed a road that Sila swore led to a zine store, but it would take about an hour and a half to get there.

'I don't mind.'

'You're not cold today?' he asked, watching her hands swipe at the mist near her cheeks.

'No.'

'Your body's adapted already?'

'Yes.'

'Okay, augment.'

'It's been winter for months, it's normal. I just need to rub my cheeks occasionally. What's org mint?'

He looked at her giant pink jacket, plus the three levels underneath that he'd seen her put on earlier. 'You said you were very cold yesterday.'

'It was windy.'

'There's wind here too.'

'Yesterday was by the river, it's colder there.'

'Wah, you've got an answer for everything. You don't even pause.'

'Rivers are colder places everywhere, that's not an answer, it's a fact.'

'No, it isn't.'

'The Shing Mun river is freezing in December, but Shatin Central, no problem.'

'I've never heard of either of those places.'

'They're real.' Joanna put out a hand and gently tugged him back by the hoodie sleeve, forcing an instinctive, 'hey, what the fuck?'

Then he looked around and realised he was standing one third of the way into a road that had no curb and the exact same stone paving as the pavements they'd been walking on.

'Fuck...'

'You get too caught up in your ideas.'

'It looks exactly the same as the pavement. There's literally no indicators at all, no curb, nothing. How the fuck are you meant to know it's changed?'

She put gloved hands back on her cheeks. 'I won't say I saved your life as there were no cars.'

'What?'

'There were no cars coming down the road. You wouldn't have been hit.'

'You're trying to connect this to-...'

'I'm not.'

'You're unbelievable.'

'I said a simple fact. If you don't want to accept it, there's a country called North Korea...'

'Fuck off.'

'...we can go there via Ljubljana.'

'You're taking the piss.'

'Am not.'

'Okay, I'm walking ahead, you stay here. And don't try and catch up either, I'm not in the mood.'

Sila didn't wait for a response, he merely increased speed and walked across roads with a red man and past slower pedestrians until he saw a poster for a Czech boyband plastered on the wall ahead and the sign said the name of the road he was looking for, the road with the zine store, and he didn't even want to go in there now, even though it was supposed to have a cabinet with a poster for an old movie called *Mysterious Doctor Satan* written on it, which could be a sign of the Professor, or the sign of a hipster to be honest, but he didn't care now

he was annoyed

annoyed that she was still around, polluting everything with her words and opinions and

for some reason he was staying in the same room as her, in the same hostel, and he'd actually booked it that way

him, not her

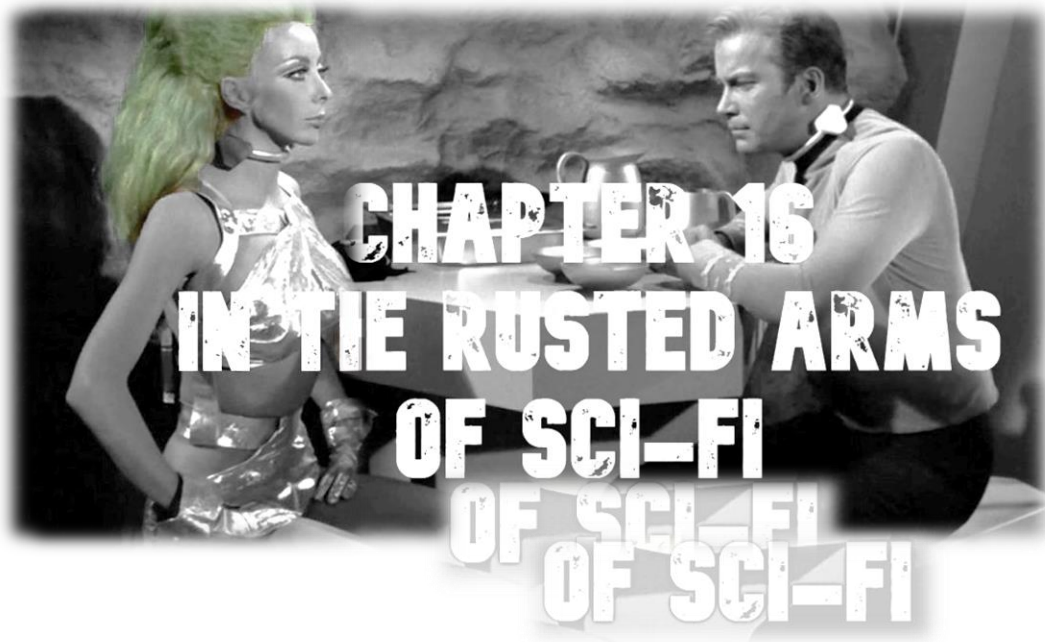
it was like gluing yourself to the Spanish Inquisition

what was he thinking

no

worse than that

what had he been thinking for the last eight days?



Near the zine store was a park with a bench.

They bought some Czech cereal bars and sat down and watched the pigeons for a while. After eating half of her bar, Joanna started breaking off little pieces to give to the birds. Sila told her not to, they might not be able to digest it, but she ignored him. Irritated, he changed tack and talked about how to prevent arguments for the next two days.

First idea, don't talk at all, but that was unrealistic as they were sharing a room.

Second idea, only talk about the city. That was more plausible, though also depressing.

Third and final idea, talk about anything except Ljubljana and don't get so wound up, both of them. After that, after two days were up

he could go his separate way

she could go hers

and they'd never have to see each other ever again.

'Disagree,' replied Joanna, watching two pigeons circle a chunk of cereal bar near her feet.

'Of course you do.'

'The spirit of what you say is wrong. Despite everything, we make a good team. And your cabinet mission is starting to grow on me. It's something I think I can adapt to.'

'Liar. You just wanna get me back on that fucking hill.'

Joanna broke off another piece of her bar, threw it at the bird that had lost.  
'Not true.'

'Sure...'

'Not true at all.'

~~~

Sila sat angled, erratic on the bed in the room on the fourth floor of the hostel - their snug little private space - and watched series 2 episode 5 of his early 20's comfort blanket, *Blake's 7*.

Around him, quietude.

Furniture blurred into a modern Korovin interior.

The door opened and Joanna came in with two towels wrapped around both body and head, glanced at the Slovene lump on the bed, asked what he was watching.

He stared like a demon owl at the computer screen...

'Something about cabinets?'

...at Blake's jacket sleeves...

'Not cabinets?'

...the sheer airiness of them.

'Is it Slovenian? English?'

This time Sila noticed her making a study of him and took out an earphone.
'Huh?'

'What are you watching?'

'Nothing.'

'Something about cabinets?'

'No.'

She came over and examined the screen, keeping one hand on the side of her head towel. 'Is that supposed to be a spaceship?'

'Maybe.'

'Is that supposed to be space?'

'Yes.'

'Are they the good guys or the bad guys?'

'Ambiguous.'

'Who's the one with the perm?'

'Blake.'

'Is he ambiguous too?'

'More partisan than ambiguous.'

'I see.'

'You know what partisan means?'

'Of course.'

Sila shook his head and muttered *Jesus* in Slovene, which was pretty much the same as the English version.

'Where are they now?'

'Earth.'

'Are you going to tell me what they're doing there?'

'Nope.'

'How about the plot of the show?'

'Ha.'

She sat down on the bed, the body towel riding up almost to the top of her thighs. 'Quite a lonely life if all you've got is science fiction forums.'

'Huh? This isn't a forum.'

'Even lonelier then.'

Sila paused the show and took out the other earphone, trying not to look at her thighs. 'Look, I'm not gonna tell you cos I know you don't actually care.'

'Untrue.'

'You'll nod and then find some obscure way to link it to Ljubljana and then, hey, remember Ljubljana, the castle on the hill, that was cool, why don't we go there?'

'Why don't we?'

Sila put the earphones back in. 'Finished.'

'I was joking.'

'No more chat.'

'Ljubljana is off the board.'

'I'm watching, bye.'

He pressed play and stared at the screen.

Joanna watched him for a little while then returned to the bathroom and dried her body. Ignoring the hairdryer, which was low-quality anyway, she opened up her bag and pulled out the *grey vasic*.

She stared at it for a while...then closed her eyes. She thought of *chopped time* train rides back to Ljubljana, Sila jumping out the window and rolling into a dark, Krsnik-less forest, her warm persuasions lost in the fog

Eyes open, she tapped the vial and placed it carefully back in her bag.

~~~

Series 2 episode 5 ended and Sila looked at Joanna, looked at her so long that she glanced up from her *Austrian Demonology* book and mumbled, 'what?'

He said nothing and went online

onto Wikipedia

and searched for context on the episode he'd just watched, answers for why they'd killed off Gan and why the other characters got over it so fast.

One look at his empty chair on the ship

then onto episode 6

it was cold and bleak

but then so was space and the 70's

or so he'd heard.

The info came up, the creator and the cast both saying one of the characters had to die, and the most pointless one was Gan, so Gan it was.

'... ..'

Sila clicked on a video link and the actor who played Gan appeared, looking old and worn down but still jovial, and said, it's true, Gan was a spare part, the big lump had to go.

'... .. Gan.'

'What?' asked Joanna again, still looking at him.

~~~

The next day was a warmer one, at least five degrees, and to make the most of it they went back to the river.

For some reason, Prague still had tourists with physical maps, and all the depressing things that came with them, which meant it was a blessing from Prospero himself when they came across a second hand book shop, in a deserted alley, near the pickpocket bridge.

Sila didn't bother asking for opinions, he just went in and settled down in the Mythology, Occult and Folk Tales section.

Joanna lurked nearby for a while then drifted towards the Asian fiction area.

Half the books were in Czech, the other half in English, and, possibly market-related, there were even some books Joanna knew from her youth, in the original Chinese.

The Book and the Sword // Jin Yong

The Deer and the Cauldron // Jin Yong

Ah, they had the Condor series too, but only in English. She thought about not buying it, but then remembered the plot and the TVB series when she was thirteen years old and went to the counter and paid the cash, rationalising it as both an impulse buy and an experiment in translation.

After all, that's what she'd studied at University - linguistics, different types of translation - so it would be interesting to see if a...

wait, who wrote it?

She checked the cover and saw a western name.

It would be interesting to see how a foreigner would translate a book from a culture he had no immersive experience in. Sure, they might know the language, but only from a textbook or a classroom. It wasn't the same as living it

not even close.

~~~



As they left the shop two hours later, Sila noticed the book and asked if it had anything to do with her precious Ljubljana monster.

'No.'

'Incredible, a second interest...'

'It's martial arts fiction.'

'Like in 2046? Faye Wong and Tony Leung?'

'No.'

'Ha, blunt as a Russian. Aren't you surprised I know about Faye Wong?'

'No.'

A random Czech slalomed by on a bicycle, turning into Sila as he got closer and forcing a cat-like dodge. After shouting, 'watch it' in Slovene, he caught up to Joanna, who was sitting down on a circular bench winding all the way round the trunk of a giant tree.

'Okay then,' he said, parking himself next to her. 'What's your martial arts fiction about?'

'China.'

'And?'

'Old China. Chinese things. I have to read it first. Then think of a way to translate it back to you.'

'Read it when you're high?' he asked, peering at the man with swirly robes on the cover of the book.

'Don't be silly. I'm not high.'

'That drug...your daily dose of vasic...'

'Vasic.'

'You're gonna read a book and skip time and somehow still know what's going on at the end of it. Good luck.'

'I'm not taking it today.'

'That'll be a first.'

'I can't, it's too late now.'

'Really? I didn't know skipping time had a deadline.'

A guy sat down on the bench next to Joanna, looking too far in the other direction. 'If I take it after 2pm then it will bleed into my sleep. Make the whole dosage meaningless.'

'Is that true?'

'I will take it tomorrow morning, when we leave.'

'Fuck, you are weird.'

'Or I won't.'

'Probably the weirdest person I've ever met...who isn't American.'

'It's not weird,' she replied, glancing at the Czech guy's hand edging towards her thigh then standing up and moving to the other side of Sila.

'Ja, the weirdest non-American I've ever met.'

'Your compass is malfunctioning.'

'Wah, compass...'

'The man who hunts cabinets and has no job.'

'Hunts them? I don't hunt them. I open them. I find them and I open them, for a good reason.'

'You think manga is weird too, don't you?'

'What?'

'Manga.'

'I'm lost. Why are we...' He paused, looking left and seeing the Czech guy's hand almost at his jeans pocket. 'The fuck are you doing?'

Rumbled, the guy said something in Czech then got up and headed with hands in pockets to the next bench along.

'Fucking bold...' muttered Sila, finishing the line with *cunt* in Slovene.

'He tried to do the same thing to me,' said Joanna, tapping her jacket pocket. 'A minute ago.'

'Probably cos you're Chinese. Thinks you're rich. What were you saying about manga?'

'Weird. From your perspective. Nintendo, too.'

'Nintendo? The games company?'

'Yes.'

'How's that related to manga?'

'I'm as weird as the creator of Mario, and so are you. That's the relationship.'

'We're as weird as Nintendo?'

'The creator of Nintendo.'

'The Mario guy...!' Sila pictured a walking, talking, leaping mushroom in his head. 'Yeah, maybe you're right. About that specific one.'

'I am right.'

'Though I don't know how we got from your time-drug to Nintendo.'

'By talking.'

'Uh-huh.'

'The drug is weird, so is Nintendo. So are we all.' Joanna gripped the spine of her martial arts fiction and stood up. 'Let's go.'

Sila didn't have the energy to resist so he just nodded and said, 'fine.'

They walked back across the bridge, looking down at the river on both sides, forgetting about the pickpockets who were supposedly everywhere. If they were as talentless as the bench guy then it didn't really matter anyway.

When they got to the other side, Joanna asked if there were any cabinets on the schedule for later.

Sila paused a while, looked at the *Hungarian Book of Folk Tales* he'd just bought and said, 'no, not tonight.'

~~~

With Czech traffic

and Czech arguments on the street outside

Sila sat on the bed, watching an old episode of the original *Star Trek*, waiting for the shower to be turned on in the bathroom.

He'd been watching *Blake's 7* again

fifteen minutes earlier

but he wasn't really in the mood for series 4 episode 13, not yet, so he'd switched to *Trek* instead, one of the *DS9* episodes.

Series 6, just after they'd retaken the station

one of the happy ones

especially the first two minutes when the three flags come down, and Bajorans, Humans and Klingons walk around the promenade drunk and pointing and looking to get more drunk, happy to be back in the war.

The shower came on and Sila paused the video.

There wasn't much time so he stayed on the same topic and typed *Trek actors actresses naked*.

Not much to choose from.

None of the male actors had done anything sleazy, not that he could find after a quick search, so he was left with Marina Sirtis, Denise Crosby and, beyond that, the guest stars. The highlight of course was the infamous green-haired woman from *The Gamesters of Triskelion*, who apparently left the silver bikini behind and went on to do erotic thrillers.

He loaded up the video and pulled down his pants and pressed play, expecting soft lighting and nipple shots

but it was harder than that

much harder

Jezus

you could actually see the guy going inside her muff

what was this?

He stopped tugging, stared at the video the same way he'd look at a rusted bicycle chain, pinned down the phrase *ascetic wank* then opened a new tab and searched the actress's bio.

Angelique Pettyjohn

Star Trek actress and

in later life

hard porn star

died aged 43 of cervical cancer.

'... ..'

He pulled up the video screen, still paused and studied her frozen body

the guy's cock halfway in

and wondered how old she was at the time this guy was fucking her

or how old she was when she was fucking him.

Late 30's?

40's?

God, was it when she had cancer?

He clicked off the video and loaded up images of her from the *Trek* episode.

Green hair, silver costume, huge tits.

It wasn't enough, so he looked for the episode online. It took a while to load but he got it to the halfway mark, with a topless Kirk showing her what kissing was and, as a loose supplement, love

and she seemed so innocent, so trusting, so unable to die of cancer in her early 40's

or tell a bad actor to fuck her like he meant it in a cheap motel room

it was insane

how could she do that

was it even the same person?

Sila switched back to the screen and tried his usual trick of placing himself in the aggressor's position - gay and straight porn both - but each time he tried the scene changed

to a table

two cigarettes

and an aggressive attempt to get her to go have a check-up before it was too late.

~~~

In the shower, Joanna rinsed her hair and closed her eyes and tried not to think of anything.

As usual, it was no good.

She pulled the shower head down to her thighs and put it in-between, pointing upwards. Her fingers followed as auxiliary force.

There were lots of times with her and Yute Long in the shower and on the bed and even awkwardly in the sea

but the only picture she could pull back was

him and her on the hill

in Ljubljana.

'... ..!'

Her, Yute Long, the castle wall, before the krsnik came.

Her, Yute Long, on the hill, before the krsnik came.

Her, Yute Long, by the tree, before the

Krsnik came and took him, and this time, somehow, she was fast enough to follow them both all the way back to its Styrofoam cave and inside the Styrofoam cave Yute Long pushed her against the wall and kissed her and fingered her and

the Krsnik watched

in the corner, at first

but then it was next to her

swatting Yute Long across the Styrofoam cave

its claws or paws running over her thighs, up and down, then grabbing her breasts and

its face

its face was like Fire Hand Zhang

after the wolves had got him

and it kept grabbing and biting and sucking and scratching and

no

this isn't

it's not

She turned off the shower, grabbed two towels and stayed in the cubicle, thinking slowly and deliberately, thought is not truth, caves are grim, Krsnik are asexual, they wouldn't

I'd kill myself before I ever let that happen.

~~~

In the room, Sila was coffin-vertical on the bed, still watching the science fiction show.

When she asked him what was happening, he said,
weirdly,
'ne, nothing good.'

~~~

The next morning, they checked out of the hostel and Sila said, I need more cash, gotta sell some stuff. To achieve this, they spent the rest of the day looking for a pawn shop that would take the jewellery he'd probably stolen from someone else, or maybe even taken from the Krsnik's cave.

'Where'd you find that stuff?' she asked as he searched on his phone for decent places, but he didn't reply.

With nothing much else to look at or do, she asked again, just as he was handing it over to an old Czech lady and he said, in a sharp tone,

'it's mine, okay, give it a fucking rest.'

~~~

The train station was so non-descript that Joanna wondered whether or not communism was as buried as the museum had told her it was.

Not that it was real communism.

Nothing was, and never had been, as her dad had told her, coming back from the factory one night with *tong soi* for all of them.

Buildings looked shit everywhere

especially in the capitalist Ernst-scape of Hong Kong

much shitter than this train station, which looked clean at least.

And had quite a cute clock above the entrance.

Sila didn't seem to notice any of it as he was too busy buying his own ticket. He tried Czech first, which got as far as the counter staff's initial reply then switched to Slovene, or what she guessed was Slovene.

That got a one word response, followed by a retry in English, which made them both comfortable.

'Where are we going next?' Joanna asked, when he turned round.

'East.'

'Poland?'

'Maybe.'

'Which city?'

Sila put the ticket in his *Yuki Onna* hoodie pocket and leaned in close to her hair. 'I'll tell you what. You buy your ticket first then we'll see if we're going to the same place.'

Joanna nodded and went to the counter.

'Well?' said Sila, when she was done.

'Same as you.'

'I doubt it.'

'Berlin.'

'What?'

'Leaving in 17 minutes.'

'How the fuck did you know? I said East, not-...'

'I saw your ticket.'

'.....'

'I think you wanted me to see it.'

'Did I fuck.'

'Liar.'

'.....'

~~~

The train pulled into a station somewhere in North Germany, a station with no buildings surrounding it, no people waiting on the platform and no passengers looking to get off.

'I'm gonna drop here,' said Sila, wiping condensation off the window.

'Don't.'

'Why not?'



'It looks like a horror movie.'

'Doesn't look that bad.'

'Like *Rosemary's Baby*.'

'Just a bit of mist.'

'Or *House of Usher*.'

'Huh? You know that one?'

'If we get off here, we'll regret it. There's nothing to see. We'll be back on the platform within an hour.'

Sila looked out the window, seeing himself on the platform, away from her, liberated, in mist imported direct from Jupiter. If he did go, he'd have to go now. But then he'd get off and be stuck with the only other person on the platform, a fat old man who'd appeared from nowhere and was now staring at a poster for dynamic toothpaste. In a town called Salzwedel.

He turned back to the itinerant stalker. 'Where would you like us to drop then?'

'Ljubljana.'

'Ha, back with the old tune.'

'Or we could try Bled?'

'Nope.'

'Maribor?'

'You know we're heading in the wrong direction...'

'At the moment.'

'...and you said you were okay with that. Remember?'

'This train station has changed my mind. Too bleak. How about Munich?'

'No.'

'Salzburg?'

'Can you say somewhere that's actually in the same direction that we're currently going?'

'Hallstatt.'

'Where's that?'

'Austria.'

'Okay, fine. I'm out.' Sila folded his arms, felt melodramatic, unfolded them.  
'Now we're heading even further north. All the way out of Germany.'

The train started moving again, and Joanna looked at the train station disappearing into the past.

'You can get off at any point.'

Pulling out the Jin Yong book, she opened up to a page she hadn't reached yet and started reading.

It was fresh for a few seconds then

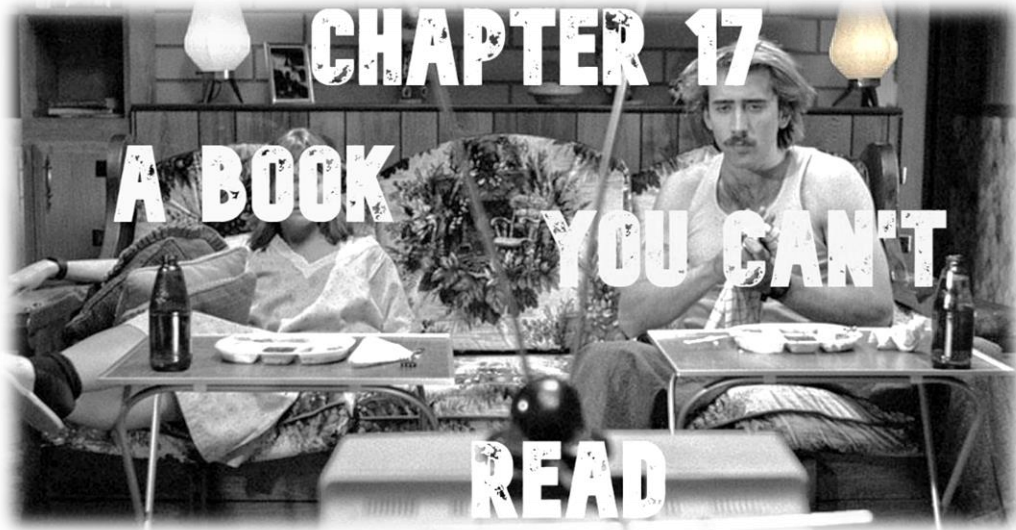
as she recognised a line, a character, a scenario

it became worn again

enervating.

'Not getting off then?'

'No.'



On the surface that generics perceived, Copenhagen had surprisingly few cabinets, but sometimes cabinets had the habit of blindsiding you with cosmological paws, and that's what happened in a bookshop off *Prinsessegade* where Sila was reading a 60's French comic that seemed ostensibly to be about a sex demon sailing on a cruise of the damned, but was really about mid-century French petit-bourgeoise acting like pieces of criminal shit.

'Have you read this before?' he asked Joanna, who was hovering nearby, a German book hanging loose in her hand.

'No.'

Sila showed the cover to make sure, but she shook her head and said, 'the name's weird, and I don't speak French. But that naked woman next to the boat funnel does look a little like a comic I saw in Ljubljana once.'

'A French comic?'

'I think it was the day before I met you, a few days before you came out of the cabinet in my room.'

'Wah...again?'

'Don't know where you were before that. You haven't told me yet.'

'I thought we'd moved past this.'

'Maybe you don't remember. Maybe your brain isn't very strong. What do you mean? I am moving past it, I'm moving forward, here, in Denmark.'

'I'm buying this comic.'

'You're the one who won't move past anything.'

'.....'

Sila took the *doomed cruise* comic to the counter, but there was no one serving so he poked his head into the back room and that's when he saw the cabinet, phthalo green, standing completely alone in the corner.

'Hello?'

He didn't bother trying a second time as the cabinet was green, the occult code-sign of potentialism, and besides that there was a suspicion in his head that told him, the guy's not serving you cos he's inside that green cabinet, and he's in there cos this is it, this is the Professor you've been looking for, Petr Pangloss. Now, get over there and stab before he beams away to Kyushu or Neptune, move, stab that thing, wooden fuck, stab it, go, go, go.

Obeying what meta-physicists may have called GOD, Sila jogged over, pulling his knife out as he went, put one hand on the door to steady himself then stabbed through the crack in the middle of the two panels just as the owner of the shop pulled open the door of the toilet.

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

'That's my cabinet.'

'Yes, I know.'

'You cannot open it. Please, move away.'

After pulling the knife out, Sila said sorry, paid for the comic, ignored Joanna, walked outside to the nearest bench, sat down, pulled out his notepad, crossed off Copenhagen and added a small note: 'phthalo green cabinets a trick, don't stab.'

Two minutes later, Joanna came out and sat down next to him, a bag the shape of the German book she'd been reading tucked under her arm.

'Didn't know you spoke German,' Sila said, looking at the bag.

'I don't.'

'Martial arts fiction?'

'No, it's German.'

A laugh, quickly turned into a cough. 'The one you were looking at?'

'Ja.'

'I don't get it. You bought a book you can't read?'

'.....'

'Huh?'

'It's for a friend.'

'Does she speak German?'

'He.'

Sila followed a duck floating by in the harbour, giving her a ten second window to add more.

'Does *he* speak German?' he asked again, when she refused to take it.

'Some.'

'And where is he now?'

'Not here.'

'In China?'

'No.'

'The Moon?'

'No.'

He breathed out long, half a second away from calling her a fucking pedant. 'Where then?'

'Somewhere. Nowhere.'

'Okay, this is getting a bit tedious.'

'... ..'

'If you're not gonna answer properly, I'll just look at that duck.'

'I don't know.'

'Don't know what?'

'Where he is.'

'Huh? Why not?'

'He didn't tell me.' She looked down at the water, left and right, then stood up and walked to the railings, peering over the side. 'Which duck?'

~~~

The hostel was a party place, which was never good for a thirty-one-year old with a tired voice, but that's what he'd booked cos it was near all the

cabinets he'd found online and it wouldn't be that bad as long as he got a 2 bed dorm and woke up early for breakfast, but

it was hard to get up early when your mission involved staying up late, to four in the morning most nights, just so no one would be around when you broke into the places with the cabinets and

secondly

there were no 2 bed dorms

only 8 bed dorms or

16 bed dorms cos

this was a party hostel, not a couple's retreat.

'What do you think they're doing here?' Joanna asked, lying on her bunk with one earphone in.

'Who?'

'Those guys.'

Sila looked up from his computer, the screen full of stills from *The Pillow Book*, not cabinets, and nodded at the Italian guy lying on the bunk opposite. There was another one above, but he was asleep.

'The hostel staff said there's a lot of them here looking for work...' she continued, twisting the cable of her earphones around her thumb, 'but what work can you get if you don't speak Danish?'

Luckily the Italian guy had missed enough of her lines to not understand he was being talked about, if he even understood English at all, and two minutes later the other guy had woken up, and four minutes after that the two of them were out of the dorm and doing whatever it was they did outside to excavate work.

'I'm bored,' Joanna said, after a long period of silence.

'Read a book.'

'Bored of this room.'

'The German one you bought, maybe.'

'There's a history museum not too far from here. We can go there. Learn about the Vikings.'

'Can't. I'm still doing research.'

'For how long?'

'As long as it takes.'

'How long will that be?'

'Sorry, I don't do deadlines.'

'... ..'

'It's fine, I'm not stopping you. Go if you want.'

Joanna rolled back onto the central part of her bunk and put the second earphone back in. She tried listening to some old Tat Ming Pair songs but stopped after one and a half and took both earphones out. Rolled back to the side of the bunk and looked down at Sila's angry face, or what looked like an angry face. He'd said it was his normal expression, pensive, but to her, it looked angry, as if he were being forced to watch a TVB variety show on loop

or an ATV drama

or worse, a Bosco Wong movie

though technically he wouldn't hate any of those cos he didn't know Cantonese and it was tough to hate anything with subtitles, it just wasn't the same. Look at Wong Kar Wai, most HK people didn't like it, *mo liu* shit about holes in trees and never-ending train rides, but then she'd watched *Dor Lok Tin See* on Irish TV one time, with the sound off, and

it was still shit

really, there was no story, no plot,

but the dialogue didn't grate as much when it was written down in foreign words.

'Maybe I asked this before, can't remember...but how do you search for all these cabinets?'

'You did ask. Twice.'

'Did I?'

'You were on the time skip stuff...*grey vasic*...'

'When?'

Sila typed something, rotating his phone with his other hand. 'You want me to count the times?'

'I don't take it that much.'

'Sure.'

'And you took some, too. Three times. That's almost the same as me.'

'Different situation. I wasn't feeling well.'

'You wanna take some now?'

'And it's nowhere near the same as you. Three times in how long? Four weeks? You take it three times in one day.'

'... ..' she muttered, looking over at the Italian's empty bunk.

'Okay, maybe not three, more like once a day...once every two days if I'm being kind. That's still a lot more than I've ever done it. And...you were taking it before I even met you, so...ja, your total could be huge...you could've done it ten times a day for all I know.'

'Didn't.'

'If you say so.'

'I give you my word that I didn't.'

'The word of the nut who tried to kill me.'

She pushed her face further past the edge of the bunk railing, offering complete nonchalance to a guy who wasn't even looking up from his computer anyway. 'I'm not a nut.'

'Close enough.'

'I didn't kill anyone.'

'Close enough.'

'... ..'

'Nope. Didn't get any of that.'

A bit more Cantonese, then a tapestry sigh. 'You twist words to pity yourself. All the time.'

'That's what you said?'

'But I'm not interested in character flaws. The most important thing is you killed the Krsnik. Or wounded it.'

'What a defence...' he said, typing again.

'The only way to be sure would be to go back, see if it's still there.'

'Jesus, give it a rest for one fucking minute, please.'

'There's only so far north you can go.'

'I'm not going back there.'

'Only so many countries...'

'Ever.'

She held out a palm over the railings and ran her finger along what she thought was her life line. 'Could be fate. Where else would your cabinet demon be but the place you were born? I mean, wasn't that where you saw him?'

'It wasn't a *him*.'

'Where you saw *it*.'

'It's not fate. Or not fate that it's there. It doesn't have to be there. Besides, I've checked it all...the whole city. No professors in Ljubljana...'

'Have you?'

'...apart from the wanky academic types. No, sorry. I'm done talking about this.'

'You checked the whole city?'

Sila went back to the screen and resumed his TVB variety show face. Not being able to see that he had done this, Joanna waited for a reply to her question. When nothing came, she tried something else.

'You didn't answer me about the vasic?'

'No.'

'You don't wanna try some?'

More typing noise.

'It'll help the time to pass...'

'I said no.'

'...a little bit faster.'

'Completely not interested.'

'Okay, Bela of Tarr. Slow it is then.'

She turned and stared at the ceiling for a while, listening to the sound of him typing, following the various cracks in the paint, one of which reminded her of the Shing Mun river and the bench near the Banyan bridge where she'd met Yute Long at 2am in the middle of January and...

they'd argued about something...

why do humans swing towards a figurehead leader, why not groups instead and

it was so small, so stupid, but she'd been angry for days and depressed cos they were different, at their core, they were different and she couldn't love

that side of him cos it was fucking stupid, his thoughts were so fucking naïve and stupid, and it made her angry, so angry that she'd...

More typing noise from down below.

She left the ceiling and glanced at the German book next to her. The gift that would never be given.

Unless...

Pushing her head further off her bunk, she twisted downwards and tried to get a glimpse of what he was looking at. For a half second, it seemed to be two blurred men, naked, in some satanic antechamber, but then it was gone and there was a photograph of a scruffy looking council estate, with a slide and swings erected on hard concrete.

'Do kids play on that?'

Sila looked up, pretending to be a little surprised that she was leaning over so far.

'Seems dangerous.'

'Don't know.'

'Where is it?'

'You're really interested?'

She nodded, which from her position on the bunk looked like a sideways nod.

'Okay.' Sila sat up and scrolled down the screen. 'According to this blog, there's a kind of youth centre nearby, for minorities mostly.'

'Chinese?'

'Muslims, Africans, Eastern Europeans, some Danish. No Chinese mentioned.'

'So you think there's a cabinet inside?'

'I do.'

'They talk about a cabinet on there, on that site?'

'Not exactly, but it ticks all the boxes. Dodgy area, hard to find, and there's a workshop inside so...' He stopped and noticed she was looking at his bare feet. 'I can stop anytime.'

'I'm listening.'

'You're looking at my feet.'

'Listening to the sound of your voice bouncing back off your feet.'

'You don't care about any of this, do you?'

'I told you, I'm listening.' She switched from his feet to the *Yuki Onna* face on his chest. 'Actually, I wanted to hear about your method for cabinet selection, but you never answered.'

'I am answering.'

'Seems roundabout.'

'Roundabout?' Sila looked at the screen and laughed. 'Are you sure you're not British Chinese?'

'Am not.'

'Australian Chinese? Canadian?'

'I'm regular Chinese.'

'How the hell do you know a word like *roundabout* then?'

'Self-study. How the hell do you know it?'

'I'm Half-British.'

She hesitated, moving from *Yuki Onna* to his neck. 'You never told me that.'

'Sure, apart from about thirteen separate times.'

'You didn't...not when I was lucid.'

Sila laughed again, definitely not a performance cos his mouth was weirdly lopsided.

'What?'

'You still wanna know what my method is?'

'I want to know why you laughed.'

'I'll assume you do. Forget about the laughing, it's a segway, doesn't matter.'

'Segway?'

'Basically, my method is...in the shortest possible way...don't look for cabinets. Don't look for them directly. Look for old places, weird places. Castles, museums, famous houses that belonged to weird poets or Satanists or...just anything or anyone weird, anything connected to anything or anyone esoteric.'

'That's not very efficient.'

'It isn't about efficiency.'

'It should be.'

'More about about intuition...psychology...what I know and what I can deduce.'

'Deduce about what?'

Sila pulled himself up so his back was straight against the head board of his bunk. 'It's too complicated to explain.'

'You haven't tried.'

'And I don't have time for it. I need to focus, search more...'

'.....'

'Ah, there it is, back to the Chinese channel. Doesn't matter. I know you don't really care. You're just feigning interest so I'll mellow and let you whisk me away on the next train to Ljubljana.'

'Whisk?'

'There's no need to deny it.'

'I'm not. I'm telling you I don't know what *whisk* means.'

'Wah...you know *roundabout* but not whisk?'

'I know the cooking term, but that doesn't make any sense in your sentence.'

'You don't know any other usage?'

She paused, shifting the pillow closer to the edge of the bunk. 'I'm not a dictionary.'

'You could look it up?'

'Too tired.'

'Forget it then, I'm not explaining.'

'Try.'

'I've already told you before, but you were too spaced out to take it in. I'm not doing it again.'

'.....' she said, most of it muffled by the pillow.

'Talking shit about me in Chinese isn't gonna help you much.'

'I said you're too stubborn to find anything.'

'Great.'

'One brain leads to one path, one path leads to a narrower path, a narrower path leads to a dead end...'

'Who's that, Confucius?'

'...or a hundred metre drop.'

'Chairman Mao?'

'Who?'

Sila ignored her and went back to the computer. He made a note on his phone about how to get to the youth centre, the opening times, the location of the woodcraft workshop, and then got up, packed his rucksack, switched the *Yuki Onna* hoodie for the *Old King Matjaž* one, and headed for the door.

Joanna asked him where he was going and got nothing but the sound of the door creaking open.

'To the playground?'

'Enjoy Copenhagen.'

'Are you going to the playground?'

'Bye.'

When the door had closed and the locking beep had sounded, the spiritual Asaji jumped off the bunk, took the vial of *grey vasic* out of her bag, the blade out of her pocket, sliced a vein-less part of her arm, waited a minute then muttered something in Chinese and trailed after him.



Everyone knew that Copenhagen was dangerous if the only film you'd ever seen was *Pusher*, and even more dangerous if you swerved away from the tourist areas cos there were no drug deals next to the little mermaid statue and no killings outside those colourful houses by the harbour, ever.

Sila and Joanna [trailing fifty metres behind him] were not couched in the tourist area anymore, they were traipsing into a live version of the picture Sila had pulled from the internet, the playground on hard concrete with the youth centre a blander version of Bates Motel in the background.

It didn't look that much different from the online version, except for a few needles and burger wrappers, and neither Sila nor Joanna flinched at the needles cos both had read the recent story about Hackney, how activists had placed fake used needles in the streets to get more attention for the area, how artists and pseudo artists had put more fake used needles down next to the first batch to make it seem like they were living in a slum, how locals had added even more fake used needles to get rid of the artists, and how the drug addicts had placed real used needles down cos they didn't know where they were or what they were doing, so

needles could have any story, it didn't have to mean drugs or danger, in fact, because there was a youth centre nearby, it probably meant the owners were trying to get more funding though

'...that guy does look pretty dodgy,' said Sila, who had noticed Joanna stalking behind, waited for her to catch up and was now pointing at a pale white guy in a Juventus jacket standing next to the slide, staring a yard to the right of them.

'I have my *grey vasic* blade,' said Joanna, patting her *Mizuno* jacket pocket, 'if we need it.'

'He might just be tired.'

'Like Giovanni Ribisi.'

'Yeah.' Sila scanned the building and saw what he thought might be the entrance, then cough-laughed when the Ribisi reference got through. 'I'm going inside.'

'How are you gonna get to the cabinet?'

'Don't know yet.'

'I'm coming too.'

'If you want.'

Joanna pulled him back and hit his hoodie sleeve. 'You'd let me wait out here with him?'

'What are you doing?' Sila rubbed his arm even though it couldn't possibly hurt.

'Don't exaggerate.'

'Why did you hit me?'

'Because you don't care if I stay out here with that guy.'

'What are you talking about? I said *come if you want...*'

'That means you don't care.'

'No...actually, it doesn't mean anything. You can come in or you can wait here. Up to you.'

'You're leaving me to his mercy.'

'Whose mercy? That guy?' Sila looked over, scanning for positives and coming back with only one: his Juventus jacket looked quite clean. 'He won't do anything. It's Copenhagen, not Helmand province.'

'... ..'

'What?'

'... ..'

'You're calling me a twat, aren't you?'

'... ..'

'This is pointless.'

Joanna put both hands in her *Mizuno* jacket pockets, the one on the left shuffling around, possibly getting a grip on the handle of the knife. 'I said you've got no heart.'

'That's it? That's what you said three times?'

'No heart, no compassion.'

'Fuck off, I've got compassion. I've got loads of compassion. You don't know anything about me.'

'All you care about is cabinets.'

'I give £5 a month to Shelter. That's not cabinets. That's homeless people, people like him.' Sila pointed at the guy by the slide. 'Potentially.'

'Your words do not match my view.'

'Ja, view from where? Back round the dark side of Ljubljana castle?'

'... ..'

'Chinese again. Fantastic.'

Another short burst came out of her mouth, then a full-stop grunt. She edged round the side of him, onto the pale green concrete of the playground. Possibly blanket-stained. 'You're really going to leave me out here alone.'

'I'm not your master.'

'Aren't you?'

'What, your master?'

'Going to leave me out here alone?'

He looked down at the green concrete, seeing future child death. 'This is endless. Fuck. Don't even care anymore. I'm going in, you can do what you like.'

'And if I stay here?'

'Your choice.'

She stuck a hand out, blocking the ground. 'You won't ask me to come in?'

'What?'

'I want you to ask.'

'Jesus...I just said, come in or don't, it's your choice.'

'You won't ask?'

Sila looked at the tired-looking Juventus guy, who now had one hand in his pocket and the other one out in front, gesturing for them to come over. 'What's he up to?'

'You see my point.'

'Is he serious? Why would we go over?'

'He wants to sell us drugs. And then mug us. Think what he'll do when I'm all alone out here.'

'Shut up...'

'You're still not going to ask?'

'He's not gonna mug us or sell drugs...maybe the drugs part, I don't know, but okay, fine. I'll ask. But only on the 1% chance out of 100 that he is dodgy.'

'I don't hear a question.'

'Relax, I'm asking. Would you, proven murderer with a knife, like to come in with me so you can escape that probably okay guy who hasn't done anything except stand there?'

Joanna gave a performance nod and said, 'yes.'

'Great. Hope you can see the difference between us now,' Sila muttered not very quietly as they worked their way to the youth centre door, avoiding needles, fake or otherwise.

'There is no difference between us.'

'*Jebote, picka. Ste v zmoti.*'

'Slovene again?'

'Fuck off.'

'Better.'

~~~

Sila didn't know if the website he'd looked at was outdated or just straight up lying, but the youth centre wasn't a youth centre, it was...actually, it wasn't clear what it was as there were three floors; the first a deserted, possibly closed canteen, the second some kind of office, and the top one a reading area with most of the books in Danish [and one corner shelf in German]. Centre or not, one thing was for sure; there wasn't much youth around.

Joanna said she didn't understand how a library full of books that new immigrants couldn't read would help the local minorities and for the first time in three days Sila agreed with something she'd said.

'Unless they have baby books...that might work.'

'Doesn't look like they do.'

'But even then, Danish uses the same alphabet as English so if the only language you know is Arabic then what use is it?'

She looked at a book with a cover that seemed familiar, a picture of a spray can with the letters *UBIK* written on the side. For some reason, she knew this book but had no idea why. She turned it over and read the synopsis on the back but it was all in Danish; the only thing she could understand was the word *UBIK* and the name *Philip K Dick*.

'Ha, *UBIK*,' said Sila, leaning over her shoulder, 'I read that five times when I was in the...' He stopped then flipped the book back over to look at the cover. 'Ja, *UBIK*. Not a bad book. Bit of a mindfuck.'

Joanna offered the book to him, but he shook his head and looked at the counter with no staff.

'It's weird... anyone could just come in and take stuff.'

'Maybe they don't like books.'

'Actually, in Slovenia, the working class are the biggest readers of books. This place would be packed.'

'I remember.'

'Remember what?'

'The bookshops in Ljubljana. They always had a lot of people. Don't know their financial status, but they didn't look very poor.'

'You were in the tourist area.'

'Which other areas are there?'

Sila looked at her and knew where she was leading him so he walked forward, all the way to the end of the room and through a door that led to another door that led to a room that looked like a storage area.

There were no cabinets but that didn't matter

he just wanted a moment to compose himself, a moment away from the Stasi interrogator, and if he'd had a cigarette he would've lit up, but he didn't so he picked up a roll of masking tape and threw it up and down a few times, saying to himself in Slovene that he wasn't going back, he wasn't ever going back, not again, and when he realised she was at the door he stopped throwing the tape and walked back out and through another door and into a stairwell that led back down to the other floors, but also up to a fourth floor that hadn't been accessible from the opposite side.

Humming the *Blake's 7* theme, he went up, not down, and at the top of the stairwell was a door with a note in Danish that he tried to read even though he didn't know a single word and

giving up on *farligt*

he pulled out his phone to translate, but then remembered, there was no connection for him in Copenhagen, he hadn't signed up, fuck, so he put his phone back in his pocket and called to the interrogator, 'come here, I think I've found something.'

Joanna appeared fast, along with her usual aura of black hole outreach, telling him the place was completely deserted, useless, and what was that note on the door?

'Do you have internet here?'

'No, I don't need it outside the hostel.'

'Serious?'

'Unless I'm staying somewhere for a long time. What does the note say?'

'Danish.'

'Can you translate it?'

He laughed and then swore in Slovene cos it was so weird, so strange to have a door at the top of an unmarked stairwell in a dodgy-looking part of Copenhagen with a note left on it, why would anyone leave a note?

He stood still a while then said fuck it [in Slovene], doesn't matter what the note says, I'll just open the door, have a look.

He turned the handle, once, twice, four times, but the door was locked.

'Fuck...'

'You can try kicking it,' suggested Joanna, legs planted rigid on the floor.

'I know that.'

'Good. Then kick it.'

'Someone might be downstairs.'

'There's no one here.'

'They might've come back from lunch.'

'It's not lunch time.'

'Late lunch.'

'Are you kicking, ja or no?'

'I'm thinking.'

'If you don't kick it, I will.'

'You?'

'To see what's inside.' She tried to nudge him out of the way, but he nudged back, harder. 'You're going to kick?'

'Uh-huh. But gently.'

He took a step back, let out a boxer's breath, and kicked the bottom middle of the door, but the weight behind it was minimal, so all it did was shake a little.

'Harder.'

'I'll try running into it instead.'

'With your head.'

'Ha.'

He stepped back again, listened for faint conversation sounds downstairs then jogged into the door shoulder-first.

The frame didn't budge.

'... ..' muttered Joanna, tilting her head at the lack of any damage.

'What?'

'Like a tired ghost.'

'Oh fuck off...'

Adding another metre to his run up, he tried again, this time making it tremble a little more, but still not enough to break it down.

By the fifth attempt, his shoulder started to hurt.

'I think we need a fat person,' said Joanna, looking back down the stairwell.

'Ja...Macho Man Randy Savage.'

'Who?'

Sila rubbed his shoulder and muttered, 'guy from the 80's, you won't know him.'

'Maybe the room is nothing special. Maybe it's used for storage. Are you sure there's a cabinet inside?'

'90% sure.'

'And the other 10%?'

He stopped rubbing his shoulder and launched into the door again, this time breaking the lock and stumbling through.

'Shit...'

Joanna quickly followed him in and said the same thing in Cantonese.

The room definitely wasn't being used for storage - most of the floor was visible - but it also wasn't a hundred per cent empty. The windows had been blackened by someone, yet there were enough scratches on the paint to let slats of outside light in...some of which settled on the wooden box laid out on a large dining table in the middle of the room.

'Is this normal?'

'Normal?'

'In Denmark...do they usually have this kind of thing?'

'I don't know.'

Sila reached inside his *Old King Matjaž* hoodie pocket and edged forward. It wasn't a cabinet, technically, though he wasn't actually sure what the technical specs for a cabinet were, but it was weird, and it was in a hidden room, or a not easy to notice room if you didn't own the building, and...

'What are you doing?'

Sila didn't answer and Joanna didn't wait for one as she walked forward, ahead of him, and peered down into the box.

'Careful...'

'... ..'

'Huh? What?'

'This is weird. I don't understand.'

'What's in there?'

Sila took another few steps and saw what it was she was looking so puzzled about.

In the box was a small, semi-emaciated figure...a girl...face down, completely naked and shivering.

'Jesus...'

'Is this real?'

Sila had looked up a few Danish phrases when they were on the train the day before but now he couldn't even remember the word for *hello*.

He tried English instead.

The child stopped shivering for a moment, turned its body, stared up at the visitors...then started shivering again.

'She's cold,' muttered Sila.

'Take off your hoodie.'

'Shivering...'

'Quickly.'

Blinking like a salaryman on a handle-less train, Sila removed his *Old King Matjaž* hoodie and put it over the girl who couldn't have been more than six years old. It covered most of her body, apart from her ankles and feet.

'And your shoes.'

'My shoes?'

'Yes.'

'I just gave her my hoodie.'

'And now she needs shoes. Come on, faster.'

'Fuck off, why all my stuff? You've got shoes too. And smaller feet.'

'You won't do it?'

'I will, I'm just saying, you've got smaller feet. My shoes won't even fit her.'

'Okay, fine.' Joanna took off her socks and shoes and put them on the girl's feet. The socks went on, a bit loose, but the shoes were a lost cause. 'Maybe just the socks.'

'Are they on tight enough?'

'Open the door more.'

'Look a bit loose.'

'The door...push it, make it wider.'

Joanna lifted the oddball figure in the dress-like hoodie out of the box and guided her to the doorway. Reaching the frame, the girl hesitated then dug her feet in and outright refused to move any farther.

'What's Danish for go?'

'Just use English.'

Grunting, Joanna turned and looked down at the girl. 'Go.'

'Not like that.'

'Go...' she repeated, a tiny bit softer.

The girl pulled the hoodie sleeves in tight at her sides, body still trembling as if a thousand, microscopic scientists with jump plugs were scattered all over.

'Let me try.'

Sila bent down to the girl's eye level and did a combo of bobbing head and librarian smile, then said, in therapist English, that it was okay, they were going to get her somewhere warm.

The girl stared at him, pale blue pupils growing out over most of the irises, and finally replied in what he assumed was Danish.

Sila flinched at the size of the dots and tried to ignore what he'd read about *sexual attraction starting in the eyes*. She was tiny, she couldn't think like that...unless it also applied to parental love. Or love for a stranger who'd just given up their giant hoodie.

'It doesn't make sense,' said Joanna, as they reached the bottom of the stairwell and moved back into the ghost library section.

'That someone was keeping her naked in a wooden box, in a locked room, in the middle of winter?'

'Not that.'

'What, that makes sense to you?'

'She's looking at us, all the time.'

'Huh?'

'Her eyes have not moved to anything else. She hasn't looked out the window, around the room, at all these books. Only us.'

'She looked at the doorway.'

'Even now, she's staring at you, not the books. Did she look at the doorway? I didn't see it.' The girl turned and stared at Joanna. 'Look, now she's back on me.'

'That's not weird. We're her saviours...'

'Maybe.'

'...she's literally wearing our clothes to ward off hypothermia. And we're talking in a language she doesn't understand. I think. And if you don't

understand, but want to understand then you look at the speaker's lips...even if it doesn't really help much.'

'Is she looking at our lips?'

'Probably, ja.'

Joanna looked at the girl and tried to draw the line from her own lips to the girl's eyeballs, but the target seemed to know what was happening and turned to mesmerise the books instead.

'See, she's changed view,' said Sila, keeping the collar of the hoodie wrapped tight around the girl's neck. 'Not looking at us now.'

'Maybe she understands what we're saying.'

'Or maybe she's just scared. Jesus, why are we even talking about this? Let's just get her to the hospital. Okay?'

Joanna stared at the little blonde head in front of her, almost completely absorbed by Sila's sleeping king hoodie...and still shivering. 'Both maybes are possible.'

~~~

The hospital the taxi dropped them at didn't look much like a health complex.

In fact, as Sila carried the little girl from the back seat of the taxi through the revolving door entrance, he picked up a mental photo of the library in Liverpool, the old red brick one with the science fiction professor in the basement, but he didn't dwell on it as he was still pissed off about the guy in the playground.

Didn't he have any morals at all?

Even drug dealers had souls, or the ones he'd met anyway, but that guy...

'Still think we should've called the police,' he said, checking the little girl's waist for the fortieth time in case the wound was slow-moving.

'No need.'

'He tried to stab her...'

'They'll come regardless. For the child in the box part.'

'Ja, but...he'll be gone by the time we tell them about it. Fucking psycho. He's probably the one who put her in the box in the first place.'

Joanna stopped, looking around the reception area. 'Where is everyone?'

'Yeah, must've been. There was no one else there, just him. But why would he do that? I don't get it. Why would you put a little girl naked into a wooden box?'

'Can we just find a doctor and get out of here?'

'What?'

'I don't like hospitals.'

'Fuck that, it's warm. And we're gonna have to stay and talk to the police anyway.'

'Doctors can do that.'

'Okay, then don't you wanna at least see that she's okay?'

'No.'

'No?'

'She's not my child.'

'Yeah, but...' Sila looked at the girl and realised she was dropping quite low. He gestured to the plastic seats nearby with his foot. 'Over here.'

They sat down, the girl staying attached to the sleeve of Sila's *Phantasm II* shirt. Joanna looked around for someone medical-looking, but the reception area was empty except for an old woman sleeping across three of the other seats.

'Did we come in the right entrance?'

'It said emergency on the sign.'

'Can't see any doctors.'

'Maybe they're on lunch break.'

'It's not lunchtime.'

'I know, I was joking. Remember? You said before, where are all the...' Sila realised she wasn't looking at him. 'Ah, never mind. You're not even listening.'

'I'm looking for a doctor.'

'Yeah, I can see that.'

'And when I do, you can explain what happened to them.'

'Ha, great. Can't wait for that story. Probably have to tell them where we found her, and that she wasn't wearing anything. Still not wearing anything, if she takes off the hoodie. Fuck. Not sure what else they'll ask. Superficial

stuff, wounds maybe. Could even request us to stick around, if they can't find her parents.'

'No.'

'No to what?'

'Questions are okay, but I'm not adopting anyone.'

'Adopt?'

'Don't have the time or the desire to carry a child around with me, especially one that didn't even come from my own womb.'

'What the fuck are you-...?' Sila checked the little girl's reaction. Her eyes were open, staring at him like a cult member, exactly the same as before. 'You're lucky she doesn't understand what we're saying.'

'Don't care if she does. I'm not Madonna.'

'Okay, okay, keep it down a bit. No one's accusing you of being Madonna.'

'I don't like children that are already six years old and not mine. You can't control them or shape them, it's impossible. They're not blood. The only good thing that can happen is you tolerate each other and when it's eighteen, it leaves.'

'That's the only good thing?'

'Worst case scenario, it kills me in my sleep and empties my bank account.'

Sila tried to lower the girl onto the seat next to him, but she tightened her grip on his shirt sleeve, forcing him to keep her at his side. 'You're insane. She's a kid, not Pol Pot.'

'Pulput?'

'And kids are pure as fuck. I mean, look at the way she's staring at us. Even you, after all that shit you just said.'

'She's Danish, she can't understand.'

'Not the words, but she can tell by your face. Probably. Anyway, kids don't understand morality. If you're her mum, you're God. You could probably tell her what you-...about your adventures on Ljubljana hill and she'd still adore you.'

'I don't want her to adore me.'

'She might even be halfway there now...'

A tall man in a white jacket walked out from a nearby corridor, yawning. Joanna jabbed him in the arm as he went past. 'Are you a doctor?'

The man yawned again, finally replying with, 'yes, why, what's the problem, is this your child?' and before Sila had a chance to clear his throat to tell the tale, Joanna was already two thirds of the way through it, making sure to leave in all the details that might paint them as crazy people.

'That's a real story?' asked the doctor, when she was done.

'No,' said Sila, coughing over Joanna's *yes*, 'we're just tourists, not cabinet hunters.'

'I mean, the box part.'

Joanna nudged Sila to the side, right on the hip bone. 'Yes, like a coffin. Can you take her?'

'Wow, very disturbing. Yes, of course we can take her, this way.'

He reached over to take the girl's hand, but she growled and buried her face in Sila's *Phantasm II* shirt.

'A bit shy,' said Sila, pushing her away from the deadly flying sphere.

'Maybe you should come too then.' The doctor started walking back towards the corridor he'd come from, slowing down a little and turning to check that Sila and the girl were following.

They were, and now the girl was strong enough to walk, though she still kept her hand tucked inside Sila's.

'Do you know if she has parents?'

'No,' said Joanna, walking on the side of Sila that didn't have a little Danish girl.

'Anyone we can call?'

'I told you, we found her in a box.'

'Yeah, I remember that part.' A nurse appeared next to the doctor, almost on cue, and he told her something in Danish. She nodded, looked at the girl with a *sympathetic eunuch* face, and hurried off.

'Do we have to stay and talk to the police?' asked Joanna, looking back down the corridor at the weird shuffling run the nurse was doing.

'You understand Danish?'

'Lucky guess.'

'Well...ideally, yes, you should stay. Unless you need to go somewhere?'

Sila nudged Joanna in the side, close to the hip bone.

'We'll stay,' she replied, elbowing back.

~~~

An hour later, the police had asked all their questions and, following an injection of anaesthetic, chloroform, sleep juice, whatever the medical term was for it, the girl was asleep in the children's ward.

Apparently, she was physically fine, apart from some reflex shivers that would [hopefully] dissipate after a few more hours of uninterrupted rest. There were no bruises, no scars, no obvious motive for someone keeping a little girl naked, face down, in a wooden box.

The police asked for Sila's and Joanna's contact details and told them they were okay to leave the country, but reminded them that if they did catch the people who did this, they were legally obliged to return and give evidence.

'Both of us?' asked Sila, pulling on one of the hoodie strings.

'Yes.'

'Could we just send an e-mail or something?'

'That would not be admissible in court. It has to be in person.'

'But we don't know anything.'

'Yes, we know that. We just need you to confirm that you found her in a box and what condition she was in.'

'That's all?'

'If it is true that you didn't see anyone at the scene of the crime, then, yes, there would be nothing else to add.'

Sila nodded but the Chinese not-Madonna stayed blank. The police didn't seem to care either way as they were already on their way out.

Joanna got up and followed after them, before having her jacket sleeve grabbed by Sila and pulled back.

'What?'

'Hang here a sec.'

'Why?'

'Habit.'

'We're not taking her with us.'

'I wasn't saying that.' Sila waited until the police car had left and then released his grip.

'Are you scared of them?'

'Who?'

'The police.'

'No. Just being cautious.'

'About what? You wanted to call them before, to catch that drug guy.'

'That was before you told them our whole story.'

'So? They didn't care.'

'Maybe.'

'They didn't, they've gone.'

'Ja, ... ..'

'It's fine. We are cabinet hunters, we found a box, there was a girl in it.'

'Let's just...say tourists next time.'

'Why? It's not illegal.'

'Tourists. Okay?'

Joanna didn't really understand, but also didn't care, so she shrugged and said, 'okay.' What she really wanted to do was get out of there and out of Copenhagen before the girl woke up and asked where the blank-looking Chinese woman had got to.

There was no malice or hate, she was glad they'd rescued her, but she didn't have the room in her life to be anyone's mum. It was bad enough following the Slovene Quixote around, and she had a nasty feeling in her stomach that he was going to get back to the hostel, look at the map, and say, next stop, Stockholm.

If he did, she'd have to try the Innsbruck trick again. Get him drunk or drugged and then dig for details.

In fact, why didn't she just do that again anyway?

Drunk was better as it opened things up, and if he really didn't say where exactly the cave was this time then she could just leave the next day and go back by herself.

How hard could it be to find a cave?

She'd only tried it previously for a few days, before she got the idea of baiting the hook, and she hadn't explored very far. It had to be somewhere between the castle and the abandoned wardrobe in Metelkova, unless that was some kind of magical wormhole. If you could call that magical, probably not. Wormholes were scientific, theoretical as far as she knew, but still based in science,

not speculative supernatural fantasy.

'Can we go now?' she asked, zipping up her pink *Mizuno* jacket.

Sila put his hood up and tightened both strings, noticing the collar had a faint smell of child on it now. 'You sure you don't want to say goodbye to our baby?'

'Funny.'

'We could leave her a note.'

'She doesn't speak English.'

'We could get the doctor to write in Danish for us...'

'No.'

'Wah...'. He stopped, acting out a chest clutch. 'And you said I have no heart.'

'We brought her here, that's enough.'

'Sure, not-Madonna.'

Joanna muttered something in Cantonese then pulled out a wallet and checked her money situation.

'You're leaving her some cash?'

'No.' She finished counting and put the wallet back in her pocket. 'I need a drink.'

'You really are a sociopath, aren't you?'

'How about you?'

'What?'

'Drink?'



Back at the hostel, Joanna put her plan into action, cajoling, deceiving and finally outright shoving Sila off his bunk and into the bar on the second floor.

It was instantly pastiche,  
borderline hauntological

alt-posters of *Scarface* and *Run Lola Run* and *Carlito's Way* and *Miami Vice* and *Manhunter* on the walls

music via *Kraftwerk* covers in the air  
no visible cabinets.

Around a hundred hostel guests provided vague dance manoeuvres, none of them over 25, none occult-looking, so Sila pitched himself down in the corner, let Joanna manage the supply line of alcohol, then drank and drank and drank, and the drunker he got, the more unguarded he got, but also the angrier he got, the more embittered and

by two in the morning he was at last calm and balanced enough to begin shedding dead skin.

Yet, despite Joanna being the only person in the bar he knew, the Slovene nut managed to shed it the wrong way

to the wrong person,

a Danish guy, not his Chinese travel partner and

for some reason he talked about Danish people he liked and 60's hammer movies and representation of Danes in Hollywood and how tall and strong Danish men were and then

finally

some sad words about the girl they'd rescued from the wooden box  
how she was shivering  
and naked  
and face down and

how he was willing to adopt her but this one, Joanna, was too heartless to do that so they'd left her in the hospital, alone, possibly face down again, and the Danish guy laughed, saying, 'now she will never leave you in peace, my friend.'

Sila was too busy glaring at his glass to notice the line, but Joanna did. She leaned in from the bar stool on the other side, with *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as her background, and asked the Danish guy what he meant by that.

'I'm sorry, who are you?'

'Why won't the girl leave us alone?'

'Were you always on that stool? Are you his girlfriend?'

'I've been sitting here all night. No, not girlfriend. We're...travel partners.'

The Danish guy looked back at Sila and asked if the Japanese girl was his girlfriend.

'Her? Not really. She tried to have me killed.'

'Excuse me?'

'Up on the hill, by the castle. Some creepy-looking tree.' Sila pointed at the scar on his neck. 'See this? All her doing.'

'She cut your neck?'

'No, not her. The Kurslik.'

'Krsnik...' Joanna corrected, keeping an eye on the other guy's hands.

'This is strange. I thought you were joking.'

'About what?'

'I don't know. About everything. Actually, I'm still quite confused. Is she your girlfriend or no?'

'Neither girl nor friend.'

'Sorry, I don't know what that means.'

'I'm not his girlfriend,' said Joanna, drinking some of her green tea. 'He was attacked by a monster in Ljubljana. He blames me because I set him up and



didn't intervene. He complains about it a lot. Why won't this little box girl leave us alone?'

'What does travel partner mean?'

'God, I'm bored,' said Sila, stretching his arms out and squinting at what he thought was a girl fingering herself in one of the darker booths then saying 'fuck' when he poked further and realised it was just someone's jacket. 'Is there any other place round here we can go? This one's too blue. The lighting bits. Too many blue tubes running along the wall. Radium blue tubey things.'

'Well, there is a library...'

'That a bar?'

'It is a kind of bar. Most of it is closed now, but there is a secret door, it is near the back street. There is an interesting method to get into this place. What you need to do is knock five times on the door then quote a line from *Blue Velvet*, and they will let you in.'

'Sounds like hipster wank. You got any Circle K or 7-11's?'

'I don't know about Circle K, but there is a late night supermarket nearby.'

'Anywhere to drink?'

'You mean outside?'

'River, park, youth centre, something like that.'

'There is the river, you can walk there in about 20 minutes. Or there is the...'

'What about the girl,' said Joanna, butting in and almost spilling some of her green tea on the guy's military flak jacket. 'Why won't she leave us alone?'

'Which girl?'

'Ignore her' said Sila, nudging the Danish guy in the arm, 'she gets one track sometimes. What about this river, is it cold?'

'If we swim, sure, just like ice.'

'Wah...I don't wanna swim.'

'I know, I was joking. You'd probably drown if you-...'

'What I wanna do is get out of here.' Sila slipped off his bar stool and lost one arm trying to put on his *Criolo* jacket. 'Come on, travel partner, you too. This place is edge-lady shit.'

Thirty five minutes later, they were camped on a bench by the river, hands up the sleeves of their jackets, wondering if the unbearable blue lighting in the bar they'd been warm in half an hour earlier was really that blue after all.

'Ja, I'm not saying I told you so, but we never should've left that place,' said Sila. 'Like the fucking capital of Greenland out here.'

'Nuuk,' muttered the Danish guy.

'Not that one.'

'It's the capital.'

'Ne, wrong N. Nuuk's in Iceland.'

'Is it?'

'Uhura. I've been there. The cabinets are shit.'

'What is the capital of Greenland then?'

'No idea.'

'I know it is the town with the very colourful houses, but if it is not called Nuuk then...I don't know the name.'

'Nuuk?' asked Sila, confused.

'Yes.'

'Fuck, I thought you said Reykjavik.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Didn't you?'

'I said Nuuk, two times now.'

'Did you?'

'I read that Greenland was part of Denmark,' said Joanna, the only one of the three not drinking anything.

'That's not true,' replied the Dane quickly.

'Are you sure?'

'I am very sure. Before, it is true, we were joined, but not now. We don't have enough money. We are a tiny place, like Ecuador.'

'Like Sierra Leone,' added Sila, scratching at the tear on the collar of his *Criolo* jacket. 'Wah, I wonder if they have any cabinets there...colonial wooden stuff...'

Joanna coughed, then put both hands on the side of her neck. 'I'm sure I read that Greenland wanted to be independent from Denmark.'

The Dane in the military flak jacket coughed back, rougher. 'I'm sorry, that is wrong.'

'It's what I read.'

'Was it in Danish or Chinese?' cut in Sila, giving up on the tear, drinking more beer.

'Chinese,' answered the Dane before Joanna could open her mouth.

'Cos if it was Danish then there's a good chance you're wrong. Because you can't read Danish. Right?'

'It was English, actually...'

'English...'

'And I don't care either way. I'm only talking to take my mind off the cold.'

'Can you read this plaque?' Sila pointed to the silver plate on the bench they were sitting on. 'No cheat, no looking at your phone.'

'I said I don't care. Can we go back now?' asked Joanna, pulling her pink *Mizuno* jacket another inch higher towards her face.

'Try the first word...'

'My feet are turning green.'

'She is right, it is quite cold,' said the Danish guy, rubbing his death-white hands together. 'Maybe we should go back to your room to warm up a little.'

'Our room?'

'Yes, the hostel room. Are you in a dorm or private?'

'8 bed dorm,' said Sila, swatting in the wrong place as Joanna nudged him in the side.

'Damn, that is not so good. Who are you bunking with?'

'Bunking with? Wah, your vocab's pretty good.' Sila put a hand on the Danish guy's shoulder and patted him like a dog. 'What is it, the Danish education system? Language exchange?'

'Can we talk about this on the way back?' asked Joanna, standing up.

'What do you mean? We're walking already...'

'We're glued to a bench.'

'Wah, I thought the bench was walking already. Floating...'

'No.'

'No what?'

'The bench is not walking. You're drunk.'

'It could be. We just can't see it cos we're on it. That makes sense. Fuck off, I'm not drunk. It's like lightspeed, you can't see the planets fly by cos you're on the ship and the time dilation factor doesn't...time doesn't move for you cos the ship time is different...so the bench people don't know we've moved until we're back at the hostel and...'

'Let's go back,' said the Danish guy, guiding his hand onto Sila's waist. 'Before your little demon girl turns up and skewers me.'

'Wah, you even know skewer...'

'Demon girl,' said Joanna, bending down and pulling Sila up to his feet [and manoeuvring the guy's hand away]. 'You mean the girl you said wouldn't leave us alone?'

'Are you okay there? Can you carry him?'

'No,' replied Sila, sharply.

'Let me help you.' The Danish guy put Sila's left arm around his shoulder and adjusting his position until he was propped up straight. 'Okay now?'

'Ja, ja, ja...wait, rule of three...one ja.'

The guy let go and somehow Sila was stable, stable enough to walk in a wavy line, which would get him back to the hostel as long as they didn't bump into any police. Even then, he was drunk, not violent, so nothing would happen.

As they walked back, Joanna prompted the Danish guy four times to explain the demon girl comment and, after three tangents, one of which went into the dangers of 8 bed dorms, especially since all the Italians had started invading Copenhagen, looking for work, the guy finally told the story behind his demon remark and

apparently

there were two versions of the story, the modern one and the historical one, and

in the modern one,

'there is a human-looking demon in a wooden box, naked, face down, resembling either a young girl or young boy, and

basically

the demon is found by a woman who cannot have children and she takes pity on what she thinks is a poor child and takes her home and feeds her and showers her with love and care, and the demon follows her everywhere, around her house and outside to the market and, when the woman's husband returns from sea

he is a fisherman, by the way,

he is sceptical at first, of course, but the demon child soon wins him over and both the husband and the wife decide that they will keep the girl as their own. Even if someone comes to claim her, they will deny the truth of her discovery and say she is from the wife's own womb.

Fortunately, their resolve is never tested as no one comes to claim the child, but the wife is still anxious that someone will come and take their child away so, to make sure of it, the couple moves to another village, where no one knows their background, and the wife soon relaxes when their new neighbours say how pretty their daughter is.

But, as the years pass, and despite their happiness, the girl never ages beyond 6 years old, the same age she was when the wife found her, and the demon girl never stops following them everywhere, and soon enough, the wife and the husband start to argue and the arguments become so bad that the husband leaves and the wife is heartbroken.

And to make it all worse, the child still does not say a word, it just stares at the wife, wait, did I say she never speaks? No, okay, well, the demon girl never speaks, not in the modern version, and the wife gets so depressed and resentful that she leaves the house in the middle of the night and goes to another village, but the girl follows her, so she moves again and again and again, until she ends up in a different country, where she doesn't speak the language, and life is tough, and finally, she ends up cleaning dishes in a local tavern and every night, as she cleans dishes, the little girl appears outside the window and stares at her and

it is kind of creepy, but the other version, that is even worse, even creepier, and it runs pretty much the same way as the modern version

they find the girl, they adopt her, move village etc.

but instead of leaving the house,

the husband is murdered by the demon girl

with her bare hands, superhuman strength, something like this,

and instead of not speaking a word, the demon girl speaks in some kind of old Danish language, which the wife does not understand, and the demon girl keeps following her for the rest of her life

murdering anyone she gets close to

anyone who tries to help her  
and instead of cleaning dishes, the woman becomes a prostitute, and the  
child is always at the end of the bed as she fucks the customers, but

for some reason,

I don't know why,

the demon never kills those guys

maybe to prolong the wife's misery or some kind of sex curiosity

who knows

but, sure, it does sound kind of similar to the story you told me, not that I  
believe in demons or things like that, but

you know

when you think about it, they have to be based on something, some kind of  
real event in the past, otherwise

where the hell did they come from, right?'

~~~

After the Danish guy had finished his story, he went back into a monologue
on 8 bed dorms and how some people did very risky things there, sordid
things like, how it was possible to have sex without waking anyone up if both
guys held the teeth of the other guy and, it was actually kind of exciting, the
idea that 7 other strangers were in there too, possibly holding their breath so
the two sex guys wouldn't know they were listening in

that is something you do not get in a normal hotel room, unless you believe
those stories about the secret cameras they install in some places, just so they
can sell the videos to porn sites, or not even sell the videos, just upload them
and take a cut from the clicks and advertising.

'But in dorms, it would not work, there are too many beds and the cameras
could never get a clear view, so in that way it is private, I think.'

Joanna nodded and said, 'okay, we're going up to our room now,
goodnight,' but the Danish guy in the military flak jacket insisted on taking
the elevator with them and making sure Sila got back to his bed safely. Joanna
said *okay* again and pressed the button that would take them to the reception
area, so security could get rid of the guy, but when the doors opened, the
reception desk was empty.

'This is reception,' the Danish guy said, pressing the *close doors* button. 'Which floor are you guys staying on?'

'Four,' Joanna said, picturing the roof, a falling irritant.

He pressed the 4 button and asked Sila if he was still conscious.

'Are we walking yet?'

'The walking part has finished now. We are at the hostel, going to your room.'

'I miss the bench.'

'Sure, me too. It was a good bench.'

Joanna remained silent, running through all the options in her head. One, she could just open the door to their room and tell him to go away.

Two, she could let him come in then lie down with Sila on her bed.

Three, she could tell the Italians there was a strange guy following them.

Was he a strange guy? Maybe he was just being polite, or maybe, at worst, hopeful that Sila would invite him in and stay conscious long enough to suck him off or whatever it was the guy was expecting.

No, that was still strange.

Normal people weren't this aggressive, nor were any of the gay guys she'd met. Her ex-flatmate never brought back anyone this uncomfortable, except maybe that one guy who didn't speak, even when they sat around the table and had *dah bin lo* together. That guy didn't say a word and it turned out, after four months, he'd been going to saunas and hooking up with other guys behind her flatmate's back, but he still wasn't the same as this guy.

And another thing, why was a Danish man in a military flak jacket drinking at a hostel bar in his own country, a hostel he wasn't even staying at?

Was that normal here?

The elevator stopped and the doors opened.

Before Joanna could grab hold of him herself, the Danish guy had already manoeuvred his arm around Sila's waist and asked if he needed the toilet before going back to the room.

'Toilet's in our room,' said Sila, opening his eyes large and seeming to realise where he was. 'I know how to get there.'

'Sure, but there is a communal one down here too,' said the Danish guy, pointing at a sign on the wall. 'I think it might be easier.'

'He's fine,' said Joanna, tugging lightly on Sila's sleeve.

'Sure, okay, *travel partner*.'

'We're gonna head back to our room.'

'No problem. You go there first, me and Sila will join you soon.'

'He doesn't need a guide.' Joanna twisted her grip on Sila's sleeve into a scrunched ball and tried to pull him her way, but he resisted. 'What are you doing? The room's this way.'

'Stop pulling at me.'

'Yes, stop pulling him.'

'... ..'

'What did you say?'

'It's Chinese. She uses it when she's mad.'

'... ..' said the Danish guy, glaring at Joanna.

'Wah, was that Danish?' asked Sila, finally getting his jacket free.

'Yes.'

'What did you say?'

The Danish guy smiled, putting a hand on Sila's shoulder. 'I said we were going to the toilet, so she can go back to the room.'

'That's quite polite.'

'It is true, I am a polite person.'

'... ..'

'Hiding in Chinese again?'

'... ..'

'I can do the same in Danish, if you like?'

Sila laughed and detached himself from the guy, saying the two of them could stay there and trade polite insults they didn't understand while he went to the toilet.

The Danish guy nodded and let Sila walk off down the corridor alone, waiting until he was in the toilets before telling Joanna she might as well go wait in the room as Sila was clearly not interested in her.

'He's drunk.'

'Now, sure, but not before.'

'That doesn't mean anything. He's friendly to everyone.'

'Except you.'

Joanna breathed out, dug nails into her jacket sleeve Krsnik-style. 'I think you should leave.'

'Do you? Well, I think I need the toilet.'

'He's not interested.'

'I'm going to the toilet, what has interested got to do with it?'

'It's the beer, he doesn't even know where he is.'

'Then I will tell him.'

'... ..'

'Ja, goodnight, China.'

The guy saluted for some reason and started walking down the corridor, almost skipping a little.

Joanna turned sharp as soon as the guy started walking, pulled the room key out of her pocket, mis-swiped three times then opened the door and hurried inside the 8 bed dorm.

The two Italian guys on the bunk opposite were still awake, and both of them nodded politely when she came in.

She ignored them and went straight to the bathroom, stared at a shampoo bottle, picked it up, dropped it on the floor, wrapped some toilet paper round her right hand and then punched the door.

'... ..'

When she came back out, the Italian guy on the top bunk asked her in fairly decent English if she was okay.

'You speak English?'

The one on the top bunk said, 'sure, I lived in Newcastle for five years. Where's your friend?'

'You mean Sila?'

'I don't know his name. The man you talk to before.'

Joanna nodded and told them that her boyfriend was drunk and hanging out in the toilets with a random Danish guy.

'He is your boyfriend?'

'Yes.'

'And he is in the toilets with a Danish guy now?'

'Not intentionally.'

'I don't understand.'

'He's drunk, not gay. It's the other guy who's gay, the Danish guy in the toilets. I think he's gonna try something.'

'You sure it is like this?'

'What do you mean?'

'Sorry, I'm just saying this cos I think before, maybe your boyfriend is gay.'

'What?'

'I don't say it is a bad thing, I just get this feeling. Okay, sometimes, I am not right, maybe he is bisexual, maybe not gay one hundred per cent but...'

'He is not gay.'

'Okay, I am wrong, I'm sorry.'

'He's my boyfriend, we've been together for...!' She stopped and mentally counted the time since the hill incident. '...three months.'

'I'm sorry, I just think...like I say, I am wrong sometimes, it happens.'

'You don't need to be sorry.'

The Italian said he did, he was sorry, two of his good friends were gay, and Sila seemed similar to one of them, that's why he thought what he did, but it was still a bad thing to say to someone's girlfriend and if she wanted him to go and check the toilets then he would.

'I'll go myself,' she said, back turned, already at the door, and when she was out in the corridor she walked all the way down to the far end and stood outside the male toilets. There were voices inside, but nothing sexual, not that she could pick up, so she walked back down the corridor and stood outside the dorm door for five, ten, fifteen minutes until the elevator pinged and she was forced back inside.

The Italians were seemingly both asleep now, their bed lights off, their phones unlit.

Joanna removed most of her clothes and changed into shorts and a t-shirt that said *fun-glasses* on it then lay down on her bed, wondering if she should take her knife and go into the male toilets, but it wasn't a strong thought as she continued to lie there, staring at the end of the bed. When she got bored of the end of her bed, she turned on the pillow light and picked up the German book.

Better times, better people...

She opened it up to a random page and tried a line somewhere in the middle.

'*Meine augen tout mir vey...*'

She knew *Meine* was my, *augen* was eyes, and that was it. Nothing else. Not that it mattered much. It was a gift, not a hobby. German was not a shared experience they had, it was his, something he'd done in high school, seven and a half years before they met.

She closed the book and hid it under the pillow.

About five minutes later, the door opened and the swaying figure of Sila walked in.

He slalomed over to the bed and muttered something to her, something in Slovene that she couldn't understand, so she asked him if he was okay.

'He was working for him.'

'The Danish guy?'

'Didn't say it, but...the guy was, he was working for him, spy work.'

'Where is he now?'

Sila said, 'yeah, if he comes back,' stared at her face then disappeared into the bathroom.

When he came out again, he didn't speak and she didn't ask him anything because, despite having had time to clean up, he still had the green knife in his left hand, with a decent amount of fresh blood dripping off the tip.

She waited until he was on the bed then got up and walked to the door.

'Where you going?'

'Vending machine.'

'How?'

It was a strange question, so she just said *coffee* and walked out, heading down the empty corridor to the male toilet and walking straight in without knocking.

Why bother?

There were either men in there or there weren't, no other way to find out except *enter and see*.

Luckily, there was no one

no drunk tourists and no dead Danish rapist
attempted rapist
sleazy Crowley stan
whatever he was.

She checked the cubicles, not that there was much need as she could see all the doors were open. There was blood on the floor near the sink, about a finger's worth, and none in the corridor, which meant the guy probably hadn't been stabbed anywhere vital.

What had happened here then?

The Danish guy tried it on, Sila stabbed him?

Something else?

There were noises from the corridor so she hurried back out before they could see which toilet she was exiting from and walked, fake yawning, past the two drunks and back into the dorm.

It was dark, but as she got close to the bed she could see that Sila was staring up at her.

'Anything?' he asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Deserves got nothing to do with it.'

'What?'

'... ..'

'Did something happen to that guy?'

'Guy?'

'The one in the toilets, the one who followed you.'

'Flew away.'

'What happened before he flew away?'

Sila turned and buried his face in the pillow, saying something too muffled to hear.

Doesn't really matter, she thought, climbing up to her own bunk, whatever happened in there, serious or not, it's probably for the best if we leave early tomorrow, get out of town before anything else weird or predatory crops up.

Head Southwards perhaps.

Fate willing.

~~~

Five kilometres away, outside the hospital that looked like a red brick library in Liverpool, a little blonde girl in a hospital gown and ash grey bubble jacket walked out of a side door and into an alley where a tired-looking medic was smoking a cigarette.

'You okay?' he asked, blowing out smoke into the icy air.

The girl didn't answer.

'Hey, little one...where you going?'

The medic stubbed out his cigarette and ran after the girl, reaching out a hand to grab at the bubble jacket and spin her around then stopping with a *fuck* in Danish when she turned around all by herself.

'... ..' she said, breath coming out white with the words.

'Sorry, I don't-...was that Danish?'

'... ..'

'You need to find who?'

'... ..'

'Sorry, little one, can you slow down? I can't understand everything you're saying.'

'... ..'

'Are your parents nearby?'

'... ..'

'Sorry?'

'... ..'

'Okay, I don't know what textbook you've been using, but it's about a hundred years out of date. Can you speak English? German?'

The girl shifted left and tried to continue walking, but the medic got a little braver and seized hold of her jacket sleeve.

'I can't let you just walk off, it's freezing.' He looked down at her feet, two inches away from a puddle. 'Jesus, you're not even wearing shoes.'

The girl didn't push him off, in fact, she advanced towards him, putting a pale hand forward, prodding at his crotch, attempting to pull down the zip.

The medic pushed her off, shouting, 'what the fuck?' in Danish, but she came right back and touched it again, this time rubbing up and down.

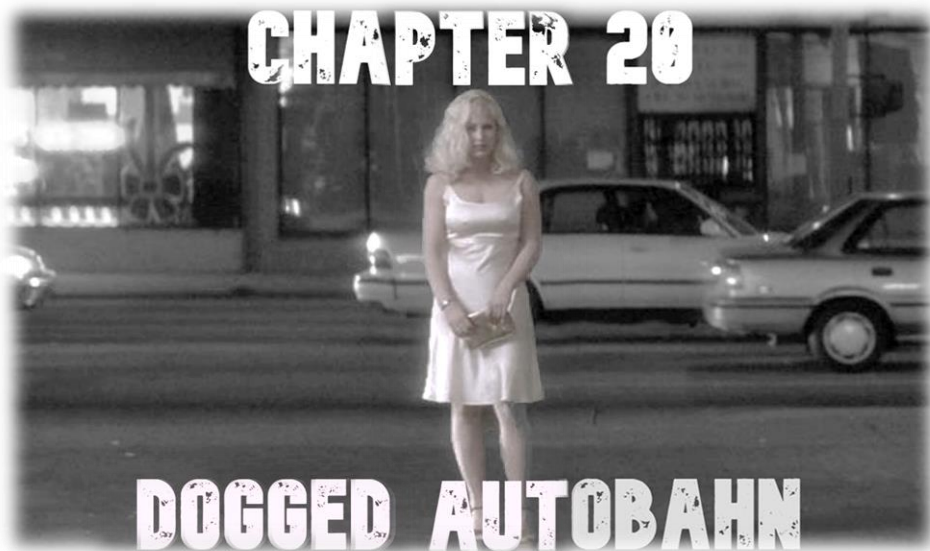
He grabbed her hand and said, 'no.'

The little girl bobbed up and down on invisible waves for a few seconds then moved her head forward. The medic tried to gently push her back, but her head wouldn't budge, it was like a truck, so he pushed harder, but it was too late, her teeth were already on the skin of his waist, pressing down and

it was a good job he was next to a hospital

cos the little girl had already taken a chunk out of him and was bobbing again, teeth dripping blood, past the back of his hand, his arm, his neck and up onto the stubble of his face.

'... ..'



The gap between the east side of Denmark and the south west coast of Sweden was tiny, smaller than the English Channel, and even though the bridge led only to Malmo, it was enough for Sila.

He stared at the map and told Joanna in intermittent bursts that that's where they were headed next then Norway then maybe Scotland, if they could get a boat, what did she think?

Not that he really cared, she could either come or fuck off back to Ljubljana, but he asked anyway and

when she didn't respond,

he flipped over to ask the top of his bunk, but there was no need, she was already there, with the knife and the vial and a resigned look on her face, like Joan Severance plucking white hairs from her muff, mumbling about the Dirty Dorothea role in Corman's *Blue of Noon* adap.

'Okay, Sweden. If we have to. But I looked at the map and the ferry ride looks dull. The wind will be freezing too. Why don't we make things go a little faster?'

'You mean take that stuff?'

'I do.'

Sila looked at the vial then switched to the blade. He'd refused the grey almost every time she'd offered

which had been about seven so far

the most aggressive one coming in Salzburg, when she'd grabbed his Matjaž and screamed right in his ear, 'we have to go back, we have to, right now, back, back, back, back.'

Of course, he'd pushed her off and stepped on her wrist to stop her stabbing him and, okay, he'd relented in Innsbruck, when he was low, but then told her afterwards, on the train, never, ever, ever, ever, and now here she was asking yet again, just for a fucking ferry ride, why?

What was her ground game here?

'I'm doing it, even if you're not,' she said, rolling up her sleeve.

'Go ahead.'

'You don't want some?'

He looked at the mini scars criss-crossed all the way up to her elbow. 'No.'

'It'll be a boring ferry ride. The Swedish coastline is not as nice as Norway's. Actually, it's quite bleak.'

'I'll survive.'

'If you're worried about ending up in Slovenia, don't. I told you, it doesn't work that way. You only do things that some part of you wants to do, nothing against your will.'

'Have you packed your bag yet?'

'No.'

'I'm leaving soon.'

'My plan too.'

'Good, pack your bag then. Ten minutes.'

Joanna said *fine*, dipped the blade into the vial and disappeared into the bathroom.

Sila stayed on the bed, staring up at the yellow stains on the underside of the bunk, thinking of the ferry ride over to Malmo and how it wouldn't take that long, not long enough for someone to get so bored they had to put that grey shit in their blood. What kind of a person had that level of indiscipline, was that why those 1800's Chinese got hooked on opium, was it something in their culture that wired their brains that way or

was it just her?

It was hard to know as the only thing he knew about the Opium War was that the British were the demons pushing it, probably not the Chinese's fault, and the only things he knew about her were the things she'd told him herself,



as well as the things she'd done in his company, most of which were pretty cold and amoral and

Ne, immoral?

Ja, definitely immoral, she knew what she was doing, how could she not? Twenty two men don't just stand by a tree waiting for Krsnik to come and gut them of their own free will, they had to be coaxed there or goaded or

~~~

'How exactly did you get them up there?'

'Who?'

'Same way as me?'

'Ah that. I didn't get anyone to go anywhere.'

'Sex?'

'I invited them to come and they came. No need to hold a knife to their throats.'

'Bullshit. Lies.'

A Danish voice came over the tannoy and said the ferry would be delayed for an hour. To pass the time, passengers would be able to visit the café, which served coffee and tea, or look out of the window at the scenic view of the surrounding area.

Sila cursed in Slovene and looked out of the window. There were a few trees, a choppy-looking Baltic Sea, and the decaying remnants of the Danish motorbike industry.

'God, I hope Sweden's not this bad.'

'It is.'

'What, you've been there?'

'I went to Malmo last year. It was cold and industrial. The Swedish version of Kiel.'

'Seriously?'

'This is why I said we should go south.'

'Wah, there it is. South to Ljubljana, right? Night walk up to the castle on sacrifice hill.' Sila stood up and stretched his arms. 'I'm gonna get a coffee.'

He didn't offer to get Joanna anything, but it didn't matter much as when he got to the café, the sign outside said *no coffee, tea making machine broken, sorry.*

'Jezus fucking...'

Sila looked around the terminal to see if the tannoy guy had missed anything. There were white walls and green walls and windows and a ticket office and nothing else. No cabinets...secret tunnels...brooding Counts in dark red cloaks...*Querelle* posters, magic green ointment...

His eyes closed, the Toyen brain-scape dragging some parts back.

If permitted...

Takes you to void-ecstasy.

Ja, I tortured him. Had no choice but to do that.

You fuck me?

Trial. Judgment. Punishment.

One of his greatest creations.

The tannoy sounded again, carrying him back.

Wah...still here...

He checked the time on his phone and cursed in Slovene. Then walked back blank as he could manage to the plastic seats, sitting down next to a half-conscious Joanna and asking her to explain, in incredible, precise detail, what exactly this *grey vasic* stuff did and how much of it she had left that vial.

~~~

'... ..?'

But he didn't speak Hindi so the Indian guy kept walking, looking back and smiling and

Sila smiled too, briefly imagining the two of them opening a laundrette and reading *The Black Album* together, then looked out of the train window and thought ahead to Berlin and all the cabinets they would have and all the new faces and

fuck Sweden

it didn't have anything

just Stockholm and Malmo and

she was right

it was too far north, too isolated whereas Berlin was a cultural mecca with low rent and lots of cafes and workshops and men with beards in lumberjack shirts that had enough money to sit around all day and do mock carpentry

and even if he couldn't stand those fuckers, carpentry was a good thing, carpentry meant cabinets

and

~~~

Jezus, would this road ever end?

The map had promised bars, but so far there was nothing beyond industrial wasteland, possibly box-making factories or pharmaceutical labs, something that got made somewhere but was generally unthought about.

No people either.

Was this an alternate Berlin?

Joanna was about ten metres behind him, constantly looking back for some reason, so he slowed down to let her catch up and, when she was within sonar range, asked, 'this place, is it really Berlin?'

She looked back again, for about four seconds, then slotted in next to his left arm. 'It was you who wanted to come here.'

'I wasn't having a go...'

'The ping pong bar was fine. You may not have noticed, but I was having a good time.'

'Ping pong bar?'

'I almost won one of the games.'

'That's where we were?' He tried to go back past the road they were on, but it was too hard to remember. There was a train, and the hostel and...what else? 'We were in a ping pong bar, before here, this road?'

She said *ja* and turned to look down the road that seemed to stretch all the way back to Copenhagen. Sila looked too, assuming she was trying to grab a taxi, but there were no cars anywhere.

'About tomorrow...' she started, not looking at him.

'Huh?'

'I think we should take the train down to Munich.'

'South again?'

'Unless you want to go back to Kiel?'

'Kiel? God, no. Half those boats looked sunk.'

'South then.'

'South West. Maybe. If the weather's good.' Sila stopped, putting his hand on a nearby lamppost. 'Hang on, the ping pong bar. I remember now. The girl who's lived here four years and doesn't speak any German.'

'Don't know about that, I was playing ping pong.'

'Or she could say the basics, *hello, good morning, I like people*, things like that. But she couldn't-...wait a sec, didn't you say she was a demon?'

'No.'

'Didn't you?'

'That was the girl last night.'

'Which girl?'

'The one who looked like a witch.'

'Don't remember that...what colour hair did she have?'

'You should take your hand off that lamp post. It might be dirty.' Joanna turned again and looked back down the highway. 'Seems to be clear.'

Sila took his hand off the lamp post and wiped it on his *Criolo* jacket. 'Clear of what?'

'She probably couldn't get through the ticket gate at the station.'

'Who couldn't?'

'But she'll keep coming. It's in her nature, constant movement. I doubt she even needs to sleep.'

'Who? Who will keep coming?'

'I told you.'

'Told me what? When?'

Joanna moved closer, put two fingers on each of his eyelids and pulled them up.

'Wah, get off...'

'Are you still blacking out?'

Sila pushed her hand away and blinked a few times, focusing on a vaguely industrial building with no lights to make sure it was a] clearly defined and b] there was no permanent damage to his eyes.

'You shouldn't be. The last cut I gave you was this morning, well over eight hours ago.'

'I'm not blacking out, I remember stuff. I just don't remember everything. Like, who you're looking for down that road.'

'The demon we picked up in Copenhagen.'

He turned, sharp. 'Demon?'

'Nothing to do with your Dark Professor, don't worry. This demon is a child and very well-documented in Danish mythology.'

'Child demon...'

'The little girl we took to the hospital. She followed us here, to Berlin. How she managed to get a train ticket from Copenhagen to Germany, I'm not sure, but it was definitely her.'

'That little girl in the box? Wah, feels like ten years ago. You're saying she was a demon?'

'I suppose she could've robbed someone. She was wearing a different jacket and shoes, not the ones the nurse gave her. At least not the ones she had when we left the hospital. I think it was a bubble jacket. About two sizes too big for her. You still don't remember?'

'No, none of it. Except the Copenhagen part. The blonde naked girl. But she's not dangerous, right?'

'If we keep moving, no.'

'Nah, she can't be, she's a kid. And she liked us too.'

'I don't think demons like anything.'

Sila literally wagged his finger in the air, stopping as soon as he saw himself doing it. 'Then why could I carry her from that shithole to the hospital? She could've attacked us anytime, at the youth centre, in the taxi, in the hospital, but she didn't.'

'You haven't read many folktales, have you?'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Forget it.'

'She didn't attack us though, did she?'

'Read the folktale.'

'Why? What's that gonna prove?'

'Read it, you'll see.' Joanna looked back down the road again then left at the industrial blocks, slowly curving forward. 'There are some buildings coming up. They could be bars.'

'On a highway?'

'The highway's ending.'

Sila hadn't really been paying attention, so he looked forward and saw the road narrowing into two lanes, and a line of smaller buildings about twenty metres ahead on the left. 'That one looks quite busy. Wanna go in?'

'One drink should be okay.'

'Will the little demon girl catch up?'

'Maybe.'

'So...shouldn't we leave?'

'It was you who wanted to try this area, not me.'

'You keep saying that, but I don't remember wanting to try anything. Head's still fuzzy, blurred. I don't know. Do you think it's a good idea to go in or not?'

'Don't care.' She took out the blade and the vial from her pink *Mizuno* jacket pocket and dipped the end with four drops. 'You decide.'

'You're taking that now?'

'Ja.'

'But the little girl...'

'The little demon girl.' She sliced her arm in one stroke, another tiny line next to the fifty or so others. 'I trust my mind to be rational at all times. She won't catch us.'

Sila heard the words, but didn't process them as he was too busy staring at her arm. 'Do those cuts ever actually heal?'

'Most of them.'

'They don't turn into scars?'

'Not yet.'

Sila looked at his own arm, noticing four lines that hadn't been there in Copenhagen. This *grey vasic*, it was either a waste of time or the complete opposite, an efficient trimming of it.

His current state leaned towards the former, as he couldn't remember much of anything since Kiel. Or worse, Copenhagen. What use was trimming time if you didn't retain the absence of the parts you trimmed? Did that even make sense?

He tried to go back over the sentence, rephrasing it, but the presence of the word *absence* confused him, confused him so much that he told himself in military fashion to stop taking the grey shit, no more cuts, cos if he didn't stop, he'd keep jump-cutting through the cabinet searches and the lucid moments when decisions were made and directions were altered and if he were really incautious, he might even jump-cut past his own death. Would that be a good thing? Would it have any kind of feeling attached, or would it literally be light to no light to void?

'Are you taking or not?' Joanna asked, the blade already stretched out, hovering like a strangely obedient mosquito in front of him.

He looked at the cuts on his arm again, telling himself to stop moving so far ahead. Death wasn't near. Each hit was eight hours max and he'd already decided to stop. His life wasn't disappearing in huge chunks. He could take another hit now, it wouldn't be apocalyptic, but there was no need, no craving for it.

Though it was fun in a *yes black hole, where will we end up next* kind of way.

And she was right, it wasn't healthy to stab cabinets three years straight without some kind of counterpoint. Some kind of break. Maybe this was a good thing, for the present time. As long as he didn't overlap hits, run seven hours and do the next cut, no lucid moments in-between to recap events and review, as long as he retained control of the thing.

'Well?'

Ah, fuck it, if it had got him this far.

He rolled up his jacket sleeve, then the hoodie sleeve beneath it, and pointed at a clear-ish patch of skin. 'Two drops only, okay?'



CHAPTER 21

GOD, A HYPNOTIST

There was no answer

so he tried it again and this time it was a woman's voice, first in German then in English. 'Hello, *Meine Augen* book shop, can I help?'

He hung up, annoyed the guy had given him the wrong number then relieved cos it would've been a distraction and he wasn't going back there even though it was pretty decent and the darts bar was cool and

'No answer?'

'What?'

'You're not talking into the phone, so...'

'Doesn't matter.'

Joanna went back to her Gum Yong book, for about four seconds, then peeked up again. 'Was it the man or the woman?'

'Where?'

'On the phone. Were you trying to call the man or the woman?'

'Which man?'

'Don't know his name. You disappeared with him for a long time. At the darts bar.'

'Ah, that guy. We went outside to smoke. I told you that last night.'

'Can't remember.'

'You say that a lot.'

She muttered something in Cantonese straight down at her book, pretended to read another page, gave up the act, visually interrogated Sila's neck. 'Did you not like that guy?'

'Like him?'

'Yes.'

'To smoke with?'

'.....'

'More gutter Urdu?'

'I said you don't have to worry. My ex-flatmate is gay, I don't care.'

Sila spun his phone and dropped it on the second loop. 'I'm not worried.'

'You don't have to hide it.'

'I'm not.'

'Okay.'

'Okay what? I'm not hiding anything.' He dusted the carpet fluff off his screen and swiped back onto the article he'd been reading two days ago – *12 Most Terrifying Danish Mythological Creatures And How To Appease Them*. 'I like some women and I like some men. What part of that is hiding?'

'You are bi?'

'If that's what you wanna name it.'

'I don't, but it is called bi.'

'Anyway, the point is, I didn't do anything with that guy. Or the woman. We went to smoke, we came back, that's it. And now we're moving on.'

Joanna closed her book, putting a palm flat on the cover. 'I'm sorry.'

'For what?'

'I know you like it here, it's a nice place. The darts bar was nice too.'

'Ja, don't really care, to be honest.'

'But it's okay, Innsbruck has better mountains. I climbed one of them last time, when you were spending time with that dark shadow guy in the castle.'

'Dark what?'

'Kurtain something. Dressed up like a Count. Solipsistic. Your description, not mine.'

Sila gave up on the article and looked at the hostel walls, settling on a retro poster of *The Holy Mountain* above the leaflet desk. The film that everyone knew but no one could make it through fifteen minutes of. Cos it was vague, elliptical shit. Pretending to be something behind other doors but really just wearing the skin of the thing, with generic yellow eyes and

cream that must've died in the enlightenment, last batch hawked by Maud Mudfell in her forest shack

cos he couldn't find it anywhere now

not even online

fuck

if he could just get a smear of it

dip it on

find a more reliable, less erratic medieval tyrant who didn't vanish at the first sign of

whatever it was

some other dick's turn at the wheel

comfort

residue lust?

Sila blinked his way out of the Kurszán loop, focusing on the ugly yellow of the next poster along. *Blow Out*. Then the blank face of Joanna opposite, telepathically following his journey. Or that's what it seemed like.

'You've crashed,' he said, waving a hand in front of her face.

'Rebooting.'

~~~

Out of the hostel and Munich and onto a train that, despite faux intentions, was taking them down to Innsbruck.

Not going back

not going back

not gonna

run to the castle door and jump on his demon-adjunct eleven inch dick the second I step out the station and-

He closed his eyes.

Then opened them straight away and tried reading the Slovene-Romanian dictionary. When that didn't work, he attempted Joanna's Gum Yong book. A little better, the story ran smooth and fast, had the heroes stabbing drugged guards, but it wasn't Kurszán.

Finally, he put the book down and picked up the dictionary again.

'Are you reflecting on Munich?' Joanna asked, looking up from the German thing she occasionally pretended to read.

'No.'

'The ping pong guy?'

'No.'

'Thinking ahead to Innsbruck?'

'Please stop guessing.'

Joanna nodded and watched Sila fake-read the dictionary. After tolerating two minutes of him flicking through pages and muttering random Romanian, she asked him if he would be staying at the castle in Innsbruck or the hostel with her?

'Obviously, the hostel.'

'What about the mountain?'

'Huh?'

'The one you said you wanted to climb. It's next to the castle.'

'I don't care.'

'You don't want to climb it now?'

'No.'

'Or you don't want to go to the castle?'

'Both.'

'If it's the Kurtain guy you're worried about, it's okay. There are other mountains in other cities. Other castles too. We can just follow the Alps down, cross the border into-...'

'We're not going to Ljubljana.'

'You always say that, but every train we take is heading south.'

'Doesn't mean a thing. Italy's south, Greece is south.'

'Slovenia is south.'

'Jesus on a fucking-...'  
Sila slumped back defeated into the train seat, reaching a solitary finger out to dab condensation from the window. 'I don't have the energy to go through this conversation again. I'm taking a nap.'

'Okay.'

'Don't try and make me miss the station.'

'Innsbruck is the final stop.'

'Then don't pick me up and put us on a different train. To any place beginning with *Lj*.'

'Are you still taking a nap?'

'Yes.'

She watched his finger return from the window, then leaned across, patting him on the knee. 'Have a nice dream of Munich.'

'I don't dream.'

'Okay, then have a nice *black square*.'

'Huh?'

'Or blank square...I don't know which is better. Black is a horror movie colour, blank is existentially bleak.'

'I'm out.'

'Have a nice half-black, half-blank square.'

Sila closed his eyes and straight away saw the interior of a Roger Corman castle imprinted on the back of his eyelids, the walls and fireplace in glorious technicolour.

It didn't matter that they weren't in Munich anymore, the ping pong guy was a sleaze, so was the girl, ne, he was just happy to be on the way to Austria, a country with castles and cabinets and

ja, he may have been there only a few weeks earlier, with her, but that was a brief trip, cut short by medieval trickery and then self-trickery

his brain telling him this whole cabinet thing was fucking nonsense, a self-constructed ruse to distract him from something vague or normal or the object-world around him, perhaps, maybe, he didn't know, never found out, but four days of that, of immersion haze that had taken him into Czech land, land of Vietnamese markets and plastic shit from China and almost no cabinets, unlike Austria which had about fifty thousand castles, each one possibly, potentially, almost definitely having at least one cabinet or two

protected by a fucking beautiful Count K  
with magical cream and  
yardstick dick and  
if he could just

~~~

There was a castle on top of the hill, just five seconds earlier, it looked like a ruin, but somehow Joanna had conspired to miss it.

'The bus can't turn back.'

'We'll wait till it stops then return.'

'How?'

'Or we can walk. Can't be that far.'

'We'll be over the border when the bus stops.' She checked the map on her phone, pointing at a word in size 2 text. 'See, this town here. I can't pronounce the name.'

'Gelden something...doesn't matter. We can get a taxi, it'll be fun.'

'In what way?'

'It's not a tourist castle. No crowd or hassle, just me, you and...occult historicity.'

'You don't even know if there's a cabinet.'

'Ne, there will be.'

'Or a castle even.'

'Guaranteed.'

~~~

Innsbruck was a city with a piece carved out  
a castle-shaped void brought back in slashes  
there for him alone.

He walked with head down, hands in hoodie pockets  
on a road two short roads away  
saw the sign signified  
signifier pyre  
caught fragments of wind whistling his name  
Petr's name  
Veronika's name  
something Swedish he couldn't pronounce  
but on closer listening, by the castle gate  
the greenest of green warnings  
Kurszán's been sleeping rough on the rack the last two months  
digging nails into his own dick  
blood neon mesmeric  
stay away.

A floating jar of sapient green slime, garnished with dick blood  
tried to pull him in  
tempt him  
but then she was there too  
in her pink *Mizuno* jacket  
watching him  
interrogative  
tunnelling skin under and

~~~

He pulled the thick crop of black hair, or *tao fah* as she'd called it, back past
the side of her head and flicked at her sidey

her wispy, ghost-like sidey

the same sidey she'd had when she told him to stand still and wait while
she vanished round the side of the castle

the same sidey she'd had for the 22 others

the same sidey she'd

'Stop it...'

'What?'

'I need to sleep.'

'Now?'

'I'm tired.'

He pulled her hair back to its original position and ran his hands down her side, all the way to the inside of her thigh.

'Don't get cyber.'

'Cyber?'

'I'm tired, need to sleep.'

'What the hell is cyber?'

She rotated and faced the wall and shrugged him off when he tried to put his arm over her chest, so he turned to face the rest of the room and told himself

I'm never touching her again

no matter how drunk she gets me

won't fucking do it

fucking junkie

sociopath

witch doesn't fucking like me anyway

she's just using me the same way the Freddie nurse used Joey in *Nightmare on Elm Street 3*, a complete sociopath, doesn't care at all, even when we were fucking she looked faintly bored, no clutching, no *get it in deeper*

didn't try to look down and see it sliding in and

ne

witch cold sociopath

won't do anything with her again, even if there's drink or vasic or that weird kind of bleak-erotic atmosphere there was before

I will not touch her

not a hair.

~~~

'It's no good.'

'No, it's true, if you really wanna go there then it's the fastest way. All the other routes take an extra six hours minimum.'

'I never said I wanted to go there.'

'Ljubljana. Zagreb. Budapest. Bucharest. Overnight, we'd get there around five in the afternoon tomorrow.'

'You're not listening. I do not want to go to Romania and I definitely don't wanna go there through trauma central.'

'Then why are you reading that all the time?'

Sila looked at the Slovene-Romanian dictionary in his hands, open on the S section, and closed it abruptly.

'Doing that won't hide anything.'

'I've told you a thousand million times, I'm not going back to Ljubljana. You wanna find the cave, that fucker's corpse, go yourself. I'm going this way.'

'Which way?'

Sila looked at the signs in the station, all of them displaying Austrian names. 'That way.'

'To Italy?'

'Ja. Italy and Spain...and maybe Portugal.'

Joanna muttered *Portugal* then pulled out the vial and the blade, dangling both in front of him like a *Yuki Onna* sex video. 'Are you sure?'

~~~

'What am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing?'

Sila stared at the face in the mirror, water streaming down from forehead to chin, and told himself, whatever happens, don't get on that train, don't get on,

don't let her slice you up again, don't let her jump on you, she's a murderer, a liar, do not give into her, don't...

Outside, Joanna waited with the luggage, trying to come up with new ways to get him back to the same place she'd been trying to magnetise him towards the entire last month or so.

For some reason, the grey wasn't working, even if it had gotten him this far, to the cusp of the Austrian border, but they'd been there for two days and he couldn't seem to take that final step, there was always an excuse, two days ago it was the weather, yesterday it was a headache, today it's a worse headache, always a way to block her off which meant

which meant he was

showed that he was trying to

trying to

do what?

All this fucking stalling, why?

Part of him wanted to go back but part of him didn't but then

which part was which

what was the psychology behind it

what was the rationalism?

She picked up his rucksack and did a few arm curls as if that would somehow give her a clue.

If he travelled light it meant he always intended to go back home, or it meant he wanted to keep moving, never go back, and if it's heavy it means

what?

Why did he not want to go to Ljubljana?

And more importantly

how could she force him to do exactly that?

Beginner's hypnotism?

A stronger dose of vasic?

There was no guarantee that would work, it hadn't the past two days, even though she'd genuinely believed it could make you do things you didn't want to do, or on the surface, you didn't want to do them but deep down you did, the same way men would act like they didn't want to fuck you on the first date but if encouraged or drunk enough then they would because they were

short term creatures, just like right wing politicians and Fire Hand Zhang, but Sila had resisted which meant...which could mean there was a deeper level of desire not to go back to Ljubljana, trauma perhaps, the encounter with the Krsnik, that could've fucked him up, must've fucked him up, at least a little but

even that didn't make sense as he survived it, and he'd already been away a long time before that all happened, and the whole cabinet thing too, that was not the action of a man who was happy where he'd been born but

that was okay, she understood that part

she hadn't been back home in years, but, if she had to, she would, if someone really wanted her to go back, she would get on a plane and go direct cos it wasn't a nightmare for her, it was fine, a bit tedious but

mostly fine and

it wasn't disgust or terror keeping her away, it wasn't anything, it was the thing keeping her here, like a spaceship circling the court line of a black hole, a spaceship captained by a man with his foot permanently stuck on reverse, a man she'd probably have to drag by the fingernails to the top of that hill, if she had the strength to do it, which she didn't, unless she paid someone else to do it, or found a stronger drug, or a hypnotist

god, a hypnotist

what was this coming to

couldn't he just say, okay, I'll go back up

show you to the cave, the Krsnik's bones

then we're done

how hard would it be to do that?

The thoughts streamed a little further, receding to core memories of other stubborn people she'd known, how she'd tried to fix them, how she'd been pissed off when they called her stubborn too, and annoyingly defensive, even on little things, and

anger started to build, as if her own brain was turning against her, telling her it was wrong to drug a guy and drag him up to the top of a giallo hill, well, yeah, if you put it like that, but that's not the truth of it, that's like pointing at Robocop and calling him a murderer without any context at all, and all those men, they didn't necessarily die, and she didn't actively kill them and

they were all perverts anyway, she was doing Slovenia a favour, and Poland, that guy was the worst, he probably would have gone back to Warsaw and date-raped hundreds of other women, he'd probably done it

already, so really, she was doing them a favour, a *wai dai* favour that only she would ever know about, her and the-

The door swung open and Sila came out, still rubbing his face dry, and said, 'don't give a shit what you say, I'm going to Italy. If you don't wanna come, fine. If you do, it's this way.'

Joanna broke out of her defences and weighed up the options. It was a quick weighing. She could go to Ljubljana now, *solus*, and get nowhere, or she could go with him and get nowhere over a longer duration of time.

'And no more grey valic.'

'Vasic.'

'I'm done with that shit. Permanently. Okay?'

'Understood. I'll keep it on standby, just in case.'

'No, I'm done with it. Finished. No more arm cuts.'

He picked up his rucksack and went off to the ticket counter without looking back to check if she was following.

She grabbed the handle of her luggage and looked at the platform with *Ljubljana* written above it.

It may as well have said Neptune

or Alpha Centauri

or the seventh circle of hell

any of which would probably be closer and more appealing than Ljubljana to that idiot fucking Slovene *pokkai*.



Sila sat on the top bunk of a youth hostel with a flooded basement, the only hostel in Vicenza apparently, and read from the book he'd traded his Slovene to Romanian dictionary for

Monogatari of Northern Italy

which used the word *monogatari* cos it was written by a Japanese occultist who travelled the world looking for the demons she'd read about on the internet and, when she didn't find any, the alternative was to write a book about them instead, and make enough yen to do the whole thing *v simulakru*.

Her name was Ritsuko Takano

though online she wrote as Fox Volant.

The folktale that Sila had focused on was the one that sounded familiar to the missing men he'd been reading about online - the reason he'd come to Vicenza in the first place - fifteen young men over the last seven years, which didn't sound strange on its own, but when you heard that they'd all gone missing near a town in Northern Italy, a town famous for carpentry, during winter, during heavy snowstorms then it began to sound like something *cabinet* related.

Joanna was on the bottom bunk, the cover of the German book showcasing itself to the rest of the room, which basically meant *to no one* as they were the only two people there.

'You ready for this?' Sila asked for the third time, getting back faint breath and muttered German. 'Okay, I'll take that as a neutral vote.'

He tried the first line, 'many years ago,' but his throat was a bit dry, forcing a cough, and then a series of saliva swallows before a second attempt.

'Many years ago, in a small town near the border of Italy and Austria, there lived a beautiful young girl called Damijana. She was the daughter of the local woodcutter, his only child, and he was well known to spoil her. All the young men in the village wanted to fuck her...' A cough, unconvincing. '...marry her, but found it difficult to a] please her father, and b] please Damijana herself.

Every young man would take it in turns to visit Damijana, always in the summer when it was pleasant to do so, and try in various ways to impress her. I'm using the phrasing from the book by the way, *pleasant to do so* is not from me. Okay. So they visited her and, the strongest of all the men from the village, he would lift fallen tree trunks to show how strong he was.

'See how strong I am,' he said. 'I will protect you always and keep you safe from others.'

And Damijana would reply, 'but who would keep me safe from you if we disagreed?'

'We will never disagree.'

'Silly man, marriage is attrition warfare.'

'Ha, what do you know of it?'

'Men are barbarians, women are not.'

'That's ridiculous, I'm not a barbarian, what are you talking about?'

'You see. We already disagree.'

Another man, this one smart and self-satisfied, learned of her disregard for physical prowess and, sensing muff opportunity, came up with a new plan. He borrowed philosophy books from the local library, had some lens-free glasses made by the local optician and then took himself and his new disguise to Damijana's home. He opened one of the philosophy books to a random page, sat on a tree stump outside her home and posed in a similar way to the local intellectual Eduardo del Nortoni, even though the rest of the village remembered the lies he'd told about speaking Japanese.

Sila stopped, looking over the bunk towards Joanna, who had put down her German book at some point in the story and replaced it with her computer screen.

'Yeah, that was an insert...they didn't really know about Japanese back then.'

Joanna muttered something in Cantonese.

'Okay, back to the fable. Clever guy sitting on the tree trunk, philosophy book.'

Sila flicked a page over, grimaced, and flicked right back.

'See how smart I am, how deep I am,' the clever young man said. 'I will always stimulate your mind, and outwit any trouble-makers who attempt to erode our perfect home, and, to a certain degree, tolerate any disagreements we may have from time to time.'

And Damijana replied, 'but how would I be able to stimulate your mind, if you already know everything from your books?'

'Nonsense. I do not claim to know everything.'

'Oh, what is it that you are short on?'

'I'm...not sure. I suppose I wouldn't know the lack until it danced in front of me.'

'Perhaps I could help you to fill some of your deficiencies?'

'You?'

'Yes. I am sure there are skills I have, that you do not.'

'Like what?'

'Well, first of all, I could teach you how to cut wood.'

'Nonsense. I can cut wood. I can cut any wood, with only one strike.'

'Oh, I see. Then, I could teach you how to row a boat.'

'A boat? I know how to do that. In fact, not only can I row one, I can build it too.'

'Yes, but do you know how to swim? If not, I can teach you that. I have a duck ring in my room, and some floats in the attic.'

'Little girl, I knew how to swim when I was two years old.'

'I see.'

'I could swim to Albania and back before you've even completed your first stroke.'

'Of course.'

Damijana bowed dramatically and walked back towards the front door of her cottage.

'Where are you going?'

'Home.'

'But you have yet to tell me your decision?'

'What decision?'

'About your hand in marriage, of course.'

'Oh, that is easy. You do not need me, you already have yourself.'

Another man, not particularly handsome but extraordinarily sly to compensate, heard both these stories and, being the only man left in the village who hadn't tried to impress Damijana, went to her cottage, sat down on a tree stump and started to cry.

'Oh, how modern I am, how comfortable with showing my true feelings,' the boy said when Damijana came outside to investigate the sobbing noise. 'I will let you chop wood, and read books and do whatever it is you want to do, and I will not say a word.'

And Damijana replied, 'then I might as well marry my bookshelf.'

'But...'

'Wipe up your tears,' she said throwing him a tissue. 'Fucking pussy.'

Sila looked over the top of the book to see if Joanna had noticed the ad lib.

If she had, it was pretty well hidden, unless she was channelling the car thief from that black and white Serbian film he'd watched 40 minutes of once.

Sila mumbled something in Slovene and continued with the story, repeating the *wipe your tears* line then scrolling down to:

'It was true that Damijana was a little harsh with these young men, and there were nights where she would feel a little guilty at humiliating them so much, but then her father, who had witnessed every attempt on his daughter's body...heart...told her not to be silly, they deserved every bit of it as not one of them was the equal of her, just as he was always 12% less *good* than her mother.'

'But father, though you are right, I must also accept the reality of my situation. I am a woman, my life expectancy is short, I must marry before twenty-one so I can pump out five kids then die of smallpox.'

'No, young Damijana, you are wrong. You do not need to marry, nor pump out five kids. As long as you remain kind-hearted, it will be a good life you have led.'

'Thank you, father, that is gracious of you to say. Though I admit, it would be nice to try at least one other man before I expire.'

'Nonsense, my sweet daughter. No other man can take care of you as I can. Certainly not those idiot tadpoles in the village.'

'Sorry, father, I did not mean to offend.'

'They do not know what it takes to make you happy, they are amateurs, children. They've probably never even had a whore.'

'Yes, father.'

'Puerile boys with puerile minds. Now, up to bed with you. I'll be along shortly.'

Damijana waltzed up to bed, undressed and tried to warm up both sides of the bed so her father would not be angry when he came up.

As she moved her legs like a bicycle, she tried to remember the day her mother had left, but it was difficult, she was too young back then.

The only image she could bring back was her mother resting on the tree stump with red paint smeared on her dress. Yet, it was so long ago now that she couldn't even remember if her mother had spoken or wept.

Nor could she remember if her mother ever smiled, though she was sure she must've as father was a smart and caring man who could crack a gargoyle if he put his mind to it.

Feeling oddly dolorous, Damijana looked out of the window in an attempt to distract herself and saw a leaf fall from the branches of a nearby tree.

It was Autumn already.

Beginning of the Alpine devil's breath.

'Warmth,' she muttered.'

Sila stopped, listening for sounds or mutterings on the bunk below. 'You still there?'

'No.'

'Then I'll continue.'

He re-read the previous paragraph, a bit confused about the dolorous bit, then moved on past the squiggly line.

'Throughout the season, Damijana continued her daily routine of cutting wood and reading books selected specially for her by her father. In terms of mood, she was both contented and forlorn as the boys from the village had stopped visiting her even though it was not yet winter.

Perhaps she had been too harsh after all. Not that she liked any of them, but the attention she received was diverting when the only other tasks she had to perform were washing clothes, cutting wood and tending to the vegetables.

Soon enough Autumn passed and winter swept in, and young Damijana found that she had more free time on her hands than usual as most of the wood had already been cut and stored. She spent this time on her own,

walking in the forest, kicking snow, and resting by the river to watch its watery skin turn languidly to ice.

One morning in late December, she was sitting alone by the river, as was her habit, when a young man walked past, whistling a jaunty tune.

He saw her propped up there and quickly altered his path to join her.

'Hello, young lady,' he said, tone strangely jejune. 'Are you going for a swim?'

'Excuse me?' Damijana looked at the river, the top covered with a sheet of ice. 'You can't swim here, you'll freeze.'

'Perhaps.'

'Unless you are half penguin.'

'Penguin?'

'The animal. In the zoo of Venezia.'

'Do you mind if I sit down here?' he asked, ignoring her words and pointing to the patch of grass beside her.

Damijana shrugged, slightly annoyed.

'I shall interpret that as a yes.' He lowered the stick and bag combo he'd been carrying on his shoulder. 'Or possibly a spasm.'

Damijana tried not to, but couldn't help letting out a small laugh.

'Ah, signs of life...'

She stopped the laugh quickly and instinctively looked back in the direction of the cottage to see if her father was watching.

'You seem worried. Are you expecting someone?'

'Yes,' she lied.

'Your boyfriend?'

Damijana did not answer. Instead, she stared at the ice on the surface of the river.

The young man took the silence well and lay back on the grass with his hands resting behind his head. A few minutes later he got back up, said it was quite hot and removed his shirt.

'Hot?'

'I have an atypical body temperature.'

Damijana glanced back and saw what the young man was doing but she couldn't look at him for long as...she didn't know why, but...how on earth was he feeling hot? It was close to minus two degrees.

'Is your boyfriend coming soon then?' asked the young man, now shirtless.

'I do not have a boyfriend.'

'Then who are you waiting for?'

'I'm not waiting for anyone.'

The man leaned forward, picked up a pebble and threw it at the ice. It landed, made a marginal crack on the surface, then skidded along to the other side. 'You know, some people would say it's dangerous for a woman as pretty as yourself to be all alone like this.'

'Some would say it's dangerous for a man as well.'

'Would they?'

'They would.'

'And why would they say that?'

'Local history, I suspect. You see, in the last ten years, there have been sixteen hangings in the village, and seven of those hangings were women.'

'A fair representation.'

'Yes, fair, but each one of those women was hanged for the same offence, that of killing a man.'

'Self-defence, I assume.'

'Two of them, yes. Self-defence.'

'And the others?'

'One of the women would not say the circumstances, therefore it is impossible to know, but the other four women were hanged for the exact same thing: sitting by a river on a winter's day, enticing passing strangers to sit with them, passing men to be exact, seducing those men, having sex with those men...then slitting the throats of those men and throwing their man bodies into the river.'

'Under the ice?'

'Yes. And the strange thing is all four women claimed they could not remember a thing. Neither the sex nor the killing. Nothing. Some say that they were possessed by an evil spirit, but I am not so sure.'

'That cannot be true.'

'Which part?'

'All of it.'

'It can, it is true. You may go to the village and check the records if you do not believe me.'

'I may do that. Later. If I have time.'

The young man looked at his bag and, to Damijana's surprise, did not go anywhere. He picked up another pebble and threw it at the ice.

'Are you really not cold?'

'I am not.'

'Not even a little?'

'I told you, I have an atypical body temperature.'

Damijana picked up a blade of grass poking out of the snow and threw it onto the ice. She stayed a while longer, not wishing to seem nervous, then stood up and told the man it was time for her to go back home.

'Will you come here again?' he asked, stroking the hairs on his arm.

'Why do you wish to know?'

'No reason.'

Damijana tried to think of another question, but could not, and what's more, couldn't think of a good reason why she was even trying to prolong this encounter. She did not know this man, she didn't want to know him, he wasn't particularly clever or interesting, nor was he-...

When she got back home, the cottage was empty. Assuming her father had gone into the village, she went out back and took some logs from the pile.

As she put them in the basket, she thought of the young man.

It was true, she did not know him or like him or want to know him any better, but it was also true, conversely, that she didn't care about not knowing him, did like him, and did want to know him better. Specifically, she wanted to know how he could lie on the snow without a t-shirt in the middle of December. And if he really was going to go for a swim. Was he mad? An escaped criminal from Innsbruck? Maybe he was just someone who was a little bit heterodox...an atypical sort?

In fact, the more she thought about it, the more he reminded her of her own father.

If I go back, she wondered, what will happen?

She knew the answer and, although it would no doubt anger her father, she decided she didn't care in this moment as she was young and what was the use of being young if you couldn't make mistakes?

Besides, her father might actually like the man...and his unusual ways.

Placing the basket of logs next to the hearth, Damijana walked quickly outside and onto the forest path that would lead her back to the river.

There were many voices in her head, telling her to turn back, to walk faster, to jump on the man as soon she saw him, to slit his throat and dump him under the ice on the river, but none of them lasted more than a second and the only one to repeat itself was the prompt to walk faster.

When she got to the patch of grass that she'd been sitting on earlier, her heart sank, as did her adrenaline levels.

The young man was gone.

She looked up and down the riverbank to see if he'd moved positions, but there was no one around.

Maybe he's found his way to the cottage, she thought, and was about to turn back when she glanced towards the river and saw a large hole near the middle.

Had that been there earlier?

Surely not.

She moved closer and, to her horror, the man rose up suddenly from the water beneath. Or the top of his body at least.

What was he doing?

'What are you doing?' she called, but it was too late as he was already back under the ice.

'Hey...'

She stood frozen on the riverbank, waiting for a sign that could force her to skid across the ice and pull him out, and, after ten, fifteen seconds, that sign came as the man's arm sprang upwards from the hole, quickly followed by his mouth, gasping for air.

'Wait, I'm coming,' Damijana shouted, taking off her outer garments to reduce her weight.

'No,' the man shouted, spitting out blood.

'Hold on...'

'Too cold. You'll freeze.'

Damijana stopped with her shirt halfway over the top of her head and stared at the icy surface. The man was right, this river was a death trap, her father had warned her never to go near it when the surface was frozen. But if the man had gotten out that far without breaking the ice along the way then...

She looked towards the man and saw that he was going under again. Moreover, the ice around the hole was turning a faint shade of red. Blood, she assumed, but why?

What had happened?

Had he slipped and cut himself?

The man's head disappeared under the surface and came back up a few seconds later to repeat the words, 'too cold,' before slipping under once more.

Damijana remembered her mother resting on the tree trunk and her father's words, 'as long as you remain kind-hearted, you will have lived a good life.'

Slide, you fool, she told herself and, stepping carefully down onto the ice, she started to crouch-skid across.

Her father was right, the ice did not feel thick nor firm, but, by using a combination of gentle slides and widely distributed body weight, she soon made it to the hole.

'Hello?' she called, staring into the murky depths.

He was nowhere to be seen so she took a breath, slapped herself in the face a few times then lowered herself into the water.

She pictured the fire back in the cottage to try to combat the sudden sensation of ice being injected into her veins, but it wasn't quite enough.

Keeping her eyes open, she searched and scanned and investigated, but it was dark down there, and there were a lot of reeds in the way.

Gods, where did he go?

The river wasn't that deep, he couldn't have sunk far.

She surfaced and looked around, hopeful that he may have made it to the bank on his own strength, but he was not there either.

Taking another deep breath, she punched the edge of the ice hole, waved her arms, slapped the cold out of her face and dived back down, this time seeing the sleeve of his jacket through the reeds almost immediately, and swimming over to grab him.

He was exactly as heavy as he looked, but she'd been cutting wood for nearly four years, and could just about manage to drag him up to the surface.

When they caught air again, he was unconscious and stayed that way until she'd pushed him up onto the ice, across the surface and back onto the riverbank.

Ignoring the shivering of her own body, she laid him flat on his back, put her ear against his chest and then gave him mouth to mouth, just as her father had instructed.

It didn't work.

There was blood all over his head, a lot of blood, so she lifted him up to locate the wound and quickly discovered the answer.

There was a huge gash running down the back of his skull, so deep she could see parts of his brain.

She dropped him on the snow and tried to vomit but nothing came out.

Who had done this to him?

Another woman?

Dr Caligari?

'Actually, it was your father,' said a voice right next to her.

Damijana looked round, startled, and saw the young man staring back at her, rubbing the back of his head as if there were nothing more serious than a slight itch.

'Though, I am very impressed by your courage, Damijana.'

'How are you talking? Your wound?'

The young man smiled and turned his head. Somehow the wound had healed.

'It's gone,' she said, amazed.

'Of course it has.'

'You're not...'

'Human? No, I am not.'

'But...'

'You look cold?'

'What are you?'

'You're shivering.' He leaned across and put a warm hand on her forehead, holding it there for a few seconds.

Damijana stopped shivering.

'Better?' he asked.

'How did you...'

'Advanced medicine.'

'But...I don't understand. Who are you?'

'It's a bit of a cliché, but I have many names, even around these parts. I believe the more superstitious people in your village would refer to me as *the devil*. *The* as apparently there can only be one.'

'You're the devil...!' Damijana had heard the name spoken by her father, and all the baggage that came with it. 'You?'

'Do not fear, I am not here to harm you. In fact, just the opposite. It is a reward you shall receive.'

'Reward?'

'I have visited many humans over the years, centuries, whatever time measurement it is that you prefer. I have performed the same test in various ways, and I have to say you are very much in the minority.'

'I don't understand.'

'It is simple, a matter of human nature. Most people, when tested, choose to watch me die. An understandable choice, but not a noteworthy one. Some feel guilt, others empty my bag. A rare few like yourself, however, choose to foolishly risk your own life to save that of someone you do not know.' The stranger stretched out his arms and rotated his shoulders. 'Granted, part of you wanted to fuck me, so there was a little selfishness inherent, but mostly it was a selfless act. And as I've always said, selfless acts are rare and the people who perform them should be rewarded.'

The young man stood up and carefully opened the bag he had been carrying earlier. Damijana watched him, not really believing that this was really happening. The devil? Here? There was a whole world out there, why would he bother with a girl in a forest in the middle of nowhere?

The man finished opening the bag. Inside was a small bottle of green liquid. He took the stopper out and offered it to his saviour.

'What is it?'

'Drink and find out.'

Damijana looked at the texture of the liquid and started to feel sick again. She shook her head and mumbled, 'I can't.'

'Suit yourself,' said the man, and threw it in her face.

The girl screamed even though it did not hurt at all. She wiped her face clean and asked the man why he'd done that and what kind of reward it was, throwing green stuff in someone's face, but the man had already picked up his bag and was walking away.

'Wait come back...'

'You may go to your father now. Tell him what happened today.'

'My father...'

'Yes, tell him that you saved me.'

Damijana looked towards the path leading to her cottage and then back at the man. 'Is it true what you said? That my father did this to you?'

'I speak only the truth, at all times.'

'But...it can't be. My father would never do something like that.'

'Of course he would. He has done it before.'

'What?'

'You know what I am referring to, Damijana.'

'I...'

'Quiet now.' He returned to the confused young girl and kissed her on the lips. She did not resist. Then he bit her. Licked her neck. Slowly ran his hand down over her breasts, up her thigh and onto the place only her father had touched.

'Please...' she said, not even sure herself if she was offering resistance or subjugation.

On hearing the word, the young man pulled away and told her again to go and see her father, tell him what happened that day.

Then he walked off, departing from the path and vanishing quickly between the trunks of the trees.

Damijana stood there, her back aching.

She did not want to think about the devil's words, so she started walking along the snow-coated path back to the cottage, but soon enough, as the cottage grew closer, she started to think about what he had said about her father.

It was strange, her father was not a perfect man, but he was no monster either, and the idea of him hurting anyone, killing them, was ridiculous.

Yet...

As she entered the cottage, her father was already putting the logs onto the hearth.

He saw her come in and reeled back in shock before rushing over to wrap her in the blanket hanging next to the door.

'You're soaking wet, where have you been?'

'I am not cold.'

'How can you not be? It's winter, you foolish girl.'

He pulled her over to the fire, took off all her clothes, sat her down on the rug her mother had made and wrapped her up tight in the blanket.

'If anything were to happen to you...'

'I am fine, father.'

'No, not fine. I will never let you go out alone again. Never.' He rubbed her shoulders through the blanket, moving down briefly onto her breasts...then seeing the face of Saul on the rug and moving quickly back onto the shoulders. 'Tell me, Dami. How could you get so wet? How? Were you near the river?'

Damijana tried to say *swimming pool* but instead the words, 'in the river with the man,' came out.

Her father stopped rubbing.

'The man that you killed.'

She instantly regretted such impudence as her father had turned as white as a sheet, but her back was hurting even more, as if her spine was trying to break free of her body.

'I didn't...' her father stuttered.

'You killed him because we were talking...because he wanted to touch me.'

'Dami...'

'And you killed mother too.'

Her father staggered back, taking half the blanket with him.

'Chopped her with an axe.'

Damijana did not know what she was saying, yet part of her wanted to say it and another part of her was in too much pain to stop it as her spine was torn halfway out of her back and...

Her father sank to his knees and started praying to the forest gods as he watched his daughter's spine exit her body, then wailed as she folded in two on the cottage floor.

'Dami...' he sobbed.

But sobbing was not enough as the spine floated through the air, paused briefly as if to look at him in disgust, then shot through his throat and burst out triumphantly the other side.

The father gargled blood briefly then fell to the floor with a soft thud.

Satisfied, the floating spine returned to Damijana's body and began reinserting itself bone by bone. The skin was folded back over to cover the wound, the blood sucked itself back in and, when it was all done, Damijana opened her eyes and screamed.

Outside the snow got heavier, so heavy it looked like someone was outside the window holding up a canvas of *White* by Paul Darrow.'

Sila laughed and lowered the book.

'Sorry, that last part was me...the snowing part was right but...it didn't say Paul Darrow.'

He peered over the bunk at Joanna and saw her pupils moving in front of the book, but it was unclear if she was listening or not.

'You probably don't know who he is...'

She picked up the Slovene dictionary next to her, put it on top of the other book, which Sila could now see was written in his native language, and started finger scanning.

'Can you at least pretend to listen?'

Some muttering in bad Slovene.

'What happened to the German book you were fake reading?'

'I'm trying to focus.'

'On what?'

'Translation.'

Sila pushed farther out over the bunk edge and read the cover of her new book: *Slovene Myths Since 1475*. 'You know I'm from Slovenia, right? I actually speak Slovene...the thing you're looking at.'

She turned the page of her dictionary and scanned for a word, saying *ah* and nodding somewhere near the bottom.

'Fine, I'll keep reading my monogatari and...you can do whatever nonsense it is you're doing. Pretending to read Slovene. I don't care.'

Sila turned the page of his own book, thought about keeping it to himself then decided, no, I'm gonna force it on her too, just to annoy her.

'Many years passed, and soon the tale of the girl who murdered her own father, and possibly her mother too, was forgotten.

New people from faraway countries came to the area, most of them seeking respite from cruel Counts and lecherous Lords. Some stayed awhile and moved on while others liked the area so much that they settled down to raise families.

One winter, after chopping wood in the forest on the other side of the lake, the side that fed the river which had once run close to Damijana's cottage, two men, a father and his son, returned by boat to their home.

However, in the middle of the short trip, a huge blanket of mist appeared out of nowhere and cocooned the lake, making it impossible for the two men to complete the crossing. Not only mist, but a snowstorm too.'

Sila turned the page.

'The two men settled down for the night inside a nearby cabin and, after eating some bread they'd packed that morning, they pulled the blankets off the cabin wall and wrapped up tight next to each other on the floor. They were so tired from their day's work that they quickly fell asleep.'

Joanna put the dictionary and the Slovene Mythology book down and rolled off the bunk. She walked over to the desk and picked up her wallet and the room key, dropping both in her pink *Mizuno* pocket.

'This isn't a new story by the way, it's actually...it's connected to the other one, the spine girl. Hey, where are you going?'

Joanna walked to the door, opened it and kept going all the way out of the hostel.

Sila thought about following, lurking behind her shoulder on the street and telling her the rest of the story, but then vetoed as a] it wouldn't really matter if she understood the background or not, and b] just like that night on the hill in Ljubljana, she clearly didn't give a shit.



CHAPTER 23

MUFEEEN AND DAN GO ZAI

The train station was pretty much empty except for the odd passenger and ten to fifteen homeless guys lying on the benches. By the looks of them, she guessed a mix of local, African and Eastern European, the latter two most likely asylum seekers.

As in Hong Kong, it was a harsh existence.

Every time it looked like they'd fallen asleep, the security guards would come along and hit them on the legs, telling them something in Italian, probably to stop sleeping on the benches, but it could've been something much worse.

Joanna pulled her pink *Mizuno* jacket tight and looked at the train timetable on the wall outside.

Her Italian was about as good as her Slovene, but she could recognise the word *Ljubljana* and the numbers indicating time, and she could guess that the column on the left was departures and the column on the right was arrivals because that's the way it was in most places, so by deduction, the next train to Ljubljana was at five past eleven.

The next, next train was the day after, which was also okay, but it was eight thirty now and Sila would probably talk all night about that stupid spine story so what was the point in waiting?

She could go back, get her stuff and be back here within an hour.

Actually, yes, why not?

One hour and three minutes later, she was back, with the rucksack pulling down her shoulders and, as she walked to the entrance of the station, a very tall guy in an Arsenal bubble jacket emerged from behind a pillar and said something in Italian.

She shrugged and said, 'I don't know', prompting the guy to quickly switch to broken English, telling her that her bag looked heavy and if she wanted a break, he could carry for her.

'It's not heavy.'

'No, looks heavy. I carry for you.'

'It's not.'

The man nodded with a smile and straightened, stretching his arms up to the Vicenzan night sky, then slouched back down again, telling Joanna she could carry the bag, it was okay, but the entrance in front of her was no good and the good entrance was round the side of the station.

'This is the entrance,' said Joanna, pointing at the huge doorless space beyond the façade arches.

'No, no good. You go there, they talk with you and try to take your money. No security there now. This way is better, go direct to trains. This way, come with me, I show you.'

The guy started walking to the side of the station, which was visible from where they were. Joanna shifted a few steps to the side and looked at a small passage with no lights and no people. Even the pavement was hard to see.

'Come, come with me, I take you.'

The man tried to take her arm, but she shrugged him off and told him that she was going inside the *no good* entrance.

'No, there is no good, no security. This way is better, come on.'

'I'll see for myself.'

'You see, it is too late. This way is better, come.'

'No.'

The man said something loud in a language she didn't understand, something that didn't sound Italian, and then drifted off into the dark passage all by himself.

Joanna continued through the church-like arches and into the station, sitting down on an empty bench. She looked around and saw a mix of locals

and foreigners seated on different benches, all of them men, some looking at the café still open in the corner, others looking straight ahead at nothingness.

She looked at the station clock. There was still about an hour and a half to go.

The Slovene folktale book was an option, but not a great one. She'd read it cover to cover seven times, there was nothing in there she hadn't analysed a thousand times before.

Though at least it gave some information, unlike that Slovene nut. At least it was trying.

Can't remember. Can't remember. Can't remember. Yeah, that's why you've got a massive scar on your neck. *Diu lei.* What was his fucking problem? Why not just say it?

Resentment? Was that it?

Wah...could be.

She'd let him get taken, mauled, it wasn't a lie, but there was no malice behind it. There was no malice behind any of them, even though they'd all deserved it. They were all perverts or racists, or worse. Except maybe the Kenyan guy. He was okay. But this one, she'd tried to be nice to him, she'd said sorry, she'd gone to all those fucking cabinets and not said a single bad thing when, as usual, they were empty. Not anything she would call bad. Even though, at its core, core level, the idea of a Dark Professor hiding in a cabinet was...

'... ..' she muttered in Cantonese.

Her mission may have been weird, but it wasn't insane. There were books on the subject, other people who'd seen the creature. It had a basis, an undeniable basis, in some form of object-reality, even if she'd never seen an actual Krsnik herself.

And this new one...a village with missing men...in winter...not even that many missing men...in a village where the snow got up to five feet deep

where people could freeze to death

where people had

throughout all recorded history

frozen to death

after walking the wrong way and getting lost and

somehow

he'd figured it was connected to cabinets and

his juvenile Dark Professor of Light and

it was just

'... .. !

She looked at the clock again and then at the café with two customers and decided she needed a coffee.

~~~

Italian coffee was legendarily small and overrated so she picked the image from the menu that had the biggest cup and sat down next to the window.

A few minutes later, one of the asylum seeker types came in, an African in what looked like another football jacket, and talked to the woman behind the counter. She shook her head. He put some coins on the counter, but she still shook her head. He looked around the café, saw Joanna and walked over to her, hesitated for a few seconds then folded his hands together in a praying gesture.

His first words were what sounded like Italian, followed by English when he clocked her blank expression.

Joanna opened up her wallet and gave him twenty Euros in two ten notes. It took him a moment to process before he shook his head in two swipes, said, 'I think only need ten,' then walked off.

He returned to the counter and ordered again, but the woman still wasn't interested. They had a brief conversation, with the woman pointing towards the clock on the wall.

The man paused for a long time, staring at the woman, then turned and walked out of the cafe. Joanna watched him sit on the bench outside, watched his lips as he seemed to mutter to himself then picked up her book and stared at the words on page seventy something.

'Krsnik will often toy with its victim before delivering the fatal blow. In the case of *Calo Slavetic*, a farmer from a town near Maribor, he was even allowed to return home to tell his story, before disappearing three nights later, never to be heard from again.'

Joanna stopped reading and watched an Italian man enter the café, joke with the woman and receive a midget mug of fresh coffee.

Going back to her book, she got through a few more lines then put it face down on the table and went to the counter, pointing to the same picture on the menu as before.

The waitress looked at her table and the cup already there then, with the slowest ever hand movement, took the money and poured the coffee.

When she was done, Joanna pointed to a muffin and paid for that too.

She took the coffee and the muffin back to her table and then went outside to the African man sitting on the bench. It took two attempts to get his attention as he seemed to be in some kind of trance, and when he did come round, he spoke Italian.

'I bought you a coffee and muffin.' She pointed at her table in the café but he was still confused, so she tried again. 'Coffee for you.'

'Me?'

'Yes. Come.'

She didn't say anymore, she just walked back into the café and sat down, picking up the book and resuming from where she'd left off.

The man followed, sitting down opposite her. He glanced over at the waitress, saw her muttering something in Italian then turned back to the coffee.

Reaching inside his jacket pocket, he pulled out the ten euro note, placing it on the table. 'I forget to give this.'

'You can keep it.'

The man looked at the note then pushed it closer towards her. 'Please, you take it.'

Joanna shrugged and took it back.

The man drank some of the coffee and closed his eyes for about thirty seconds. When he opened them again, he said, 'this is the second coffee I have in this place.'

'Okay.'

'I am here for almost two weeks, every night. First night, there is a different woman staff. She has no problem. This one...' He trailed off into slurred French.

'Is the coffee good?'

He put the cup to his nose, sniffed then put it back on the table. 'No.'

Joanna nodded and went back to her book. The man looked at the cover and thought about asking what kind of monster it was she was reading about, but then veto-thought, she looks really focused, maybe she doesn't wanna talk about it.



Five minutes passed.

The man got tired of looking out of the window and asked Joanna what she was reading about.

'It is a Slovene monster...'

'Slovene...Slovenia?'

'Yes.'

'The next country?'

'Yes.'

'Slovenia. I hear it is a good place. My friend tells me, it is better than here, but I don't know. It seems small, so I think, can the economy really be good? I don't know.'

'It is okay.'

'Is the economy good?'

'I don't know.'

'Only Slovene?'

'Slovene people?'

'Yes. White, Slovene.'

'Most of them, not all. I saw some Indians, some black, some like me. Maybe they were Slovene. I'm not sure.'

The man nodded and drank more coffee. 'Your bag looks heavy. You travel alone to here?'

'Why?'

'I see some Chinese here before, but they always walk in the big group. Sometimes, a girl or boy alone, like you, but most times, no.'

Joanna looked at him, at the orange *Roma* badge on his jacket, then the pupils in his eyes, until the man clearly felt uncomfortable and looked out the window. He wasn't a huge guy, average height, a bit scrawny, not at all like the one who tried to get her to follow him down the dark part of the station. There was a chance he'd try something at some point, most men did eventually, but all she had to do was get him on the train and up to the castle and then it wouldn't matter.

Unless the Krsnik was still absent...

'Sorry, I am not a bad guy. I only ask what I think, no bad intention...intention...*oui*, I think maybe the same in English...I say it wrong, I don't know...intention, no?'

'I understand.'

'Good, because you buy a coffee for me, this food too. I don't want to make you scared.'

'You're not.'

The man leaned back in the chair and played with something on his finger. 'It is hard. I don't know how to say. This is not my country. I have a wife, she is at home. I have a daughter, at home. I don't know what they do now. It is hard here. I don't know how to say...it is like a puzzle, all this city, this country...difficult to get out.'

'You said you've only been here two weeks...'

'No...'

'You haven't?'

'No. Here, yes. Other places, no.'

Joanna looked at the thing he was pulling up and down his finger and saw a ring. Was that there earlier? She couldn't remember.

'So you don't know where your family is now?'

'I know where are they, this is okay, but I don't know what they do. I can guess, I send e-mail sometimes to them, if I have money, but today, what they do at 9am, 1pm, 5pm, I don't know.'

'Why don't you go back to them?'

'*Non*. Very difficult.'

'You can sell the ring and go back. It must be worth enough for the flight or boat or...'

'No.'

'It's just a ring.'

'No. I don't sell.' He came closer to the table, eating more of the muffin. 'Maybe it is good to talk the different topic.'

Joanna looked at her own ring and nodded then went back to her book on Slovene monsters.

The man tried to think of other things to talk about, but it was hard when he was doing all the work and didn't even know English that well. Was she Chinese? Did she want to talk about Chinese things? It was impossible to

know. She was reading a book right in front of him, maybe she didn't want to talk at all and all the things they'd just said was out of politeness. Or maybe she was worried he was going to make a move on her?

He left the muffin and drank more of the coffee he didn't even like. While drinking, he looked over at the waitress. She had her eyes pinned on him like a hawk, a fascist hawk that really didn't like men from the Ivory Coast.

Would a hawk like that ever do anything?

When the place was empty, the lights out, would she...

Shit.

He knew it was coming and tried to quickly think of prosaic things like making toast and Bamba Bakary on *La Première*, but it was too strong, the picture forming inside, his own body, naked, pinned down on the counter with the waitress riding him hard onto the floor, the local men watching, impotent, then the reverse, the hawk up against the coffee machine, him behind, fucking her fascist white cunt while she moaned again and again, coffee machine's broken, coffee machine's broken, and

this wasn't him, it was anger, it was the Id

it was this station

it was the waitress

it was

He put down the coffee and looked at the Chinese girl's rucksack. Rucksacks carry things. Rucksacks are functional. Rucksacks have zips and you can open them and put things inside like textbooks and water bottles. Rucksacks could be carried on one shoulder or both. Rucksack, rucksack, rucksack, rucksack.

It seemed to work. The hawk and the coffee machine faded and the still life café set returned. To calcify things, he remembered a line from *Moussa la taximan*, 'you can't blame people for what they think, only what they do.' It wasn't his favourite film, but for some reason that line had always stuck.

'You're sweating...' Joanna said, glancing up from her book.

The man wiped his head and said sorry, he didn't really know why. He looked at her rucksack again. 'You go on the train tonight?'

'Ljubljana.'

'The train in Slovenia?'

'Yes.'

'The train comes late here many times. Maybe it comes, maybe no. You know someone in this place...Slovenia?'

'I do.'

'Boyfriend?'

'Yes.'

The man drank the last part of his coffee then focused on the muffin again. He went through it fast and, when it was done, he stood up and said his name was Patrice.

'Joanna.'

'Jo-anna. This is not a Chinese name, I think.'

'My Chinese name is difficult to pronounce.'

'You mean difficult to say?'

'Very difficult.'

'*C'est vrai*, I understand this. Some people, they call me Patrick before.'

'Patrice is quite easy to say.'

'I think so.' Patrice looked at his empty plate and the bench outside. 'Thank you for the coffee, Joanna, and this...I don't know how to call it in English...'

'Muffin.'

'Muffin?' He smiled. 'It is the same for French. Most the same, maybe there is more the 'E' sound for French, but I think most the same. You know some French?'

'Just muffin.'

Patrice laughed. 'Muffeen. It is a strange place to start, but okay.'

'Muffeen.'

'*Pas mal*, very good, but I think you do not need. You know English very well.'

'Victim of routine. I've been speaking it for almost nine months straight, no break.'

'Nine months? You speak in England or...'

'Many countries. Slovenia, Germany, Denmark...'

'But you are from China, no?'

'Hong Kong.'

'Hong Kong. I never go there before.' He looked at the empty plate again.  
'How you say in Chinese...this?'

'Muffin?'

'Yes.'

'Muffin.'

'Yes, how to say?'

'No, we say muffin. It's the same.'

'Is the same...why?'

'Or you can say *dan go zai*.'

'*Dan go zai*.'

'Close enough.'

'This is also muffin?'

'Cake or muffin. You can say either, people would understand.'

He nodded without repeating *muffin*, said, 'thank you again, I go now,' then walked out and sat back down on the bench he'd been zombified on earlier.

Joanna stayed where she was, sipping occasional coffee, saying the phrase *drink coffee* in her own language so it wouldn't sound strange to her.

She continued re-reading the book on Krsnik until the time the train was supposed to arrive, then got up, loaded the rucksack onto her shoulders and took the two cups back to the counter.

The waitress slurred something to her in Italian as she left, and Joanna turned and said, 'you can close now'. It was unclear if the waitress understood; her face was bitter, but it'd been that way for the last hour and a half, so Joanna ignored the gutter Italian that spewed out after her and headed to the platform.

It was cold outside, but not cold enough to make her doubt what she was doing.

She'd taken a break for too long, but this was fate, this was a test of their relationship, and if you doubted fate then you may as well head to the nearest water tower and jump.

Planting herself near the edge of the platform, she de-planted almost immediately and walked in small lines to keep some warmth.

It was already eleven seventeen, but this was Italy, trains were often late, so she'd heard.

But that was other trains, and this was her train and

by eleven twenty-three she realised the train information wasn't even on the board anymore and

went to the only other guy on the platform, asking him softly what was going on, and he replied, train cancelled, train not coming, finish, and when she asked why, the only words he could say was, 'dead man on track,' which was quite weird as most people who couldn't speak English wouldn't have known the word *track*, but for some reason - constant travel, train fandom, *Throw Momma From The Train* - he knew it and that's why the train wasn't coming, because some guy had decided that tonight was the night to give in and get in the way of her mission and

when she asked the platform guy if the trains would run the next day, he shook his head and said, summer maybe, not now.

'Summer?'

'Maybe one day, two days, to fix, then train go again.'

She breathed out, said *okay* and left the station, following an elderly couple down the main street for a few hundred metres before detaching and turning left onto the road with all the beautiful buildings

most showing small cracks and chipped stone and

probably

secretly

awaiting restoration.

~~~

For a woman on her own, the walk back to the hostel should've been the equivalent of walking through Compton at three in the morning with a *Kid Rock* t-shirt on but she'd been to Compton before with Yute Long and they'd met a guy with a guitar on his back, not stereotypes with guns, so she wasn't surprised when it turned out that the streets of Vicenza were empty and all the buildings were closed.

Wherever the bars were in this city they

weren't near the city centre.

When she got back to the hostel, the man diagonally tilting his head at his phone behind the desk looked surprised, asking her where she'd been, but she just smiled and went up to the room and

sat on the bunk below Sila, who was still reading the same book as earlier, and the only thing he bothered to say to her was, 'if you're not gonna fuck off then you're paying for the room tomorrow night.'

And Joanna said back, 'if you say so.'

CHAPTER 24

HALF-HEARTED FRENCH ARC

The next morning, Sila was up early, translating a local article into Slovene, only this time he didn't care enough to tell her the results.

Sliding off the top bunk, Joanna exited the room in *kung food fighting* t-shirt and *OB* knickers and brushed her teeth in the bathroom one door down, half-listening in on the two blonde women speaking Polish next to her.

She didn't know for sure it was Polish, it was more of a guess, based on its tonal similarity to one of the guys she'd taken up to the top of the hill in Ljubljana. He was Polish, or so he claimed. With a masters in Life, Literature & Thought. And an ex-girlfriend from Turkey.

It was strange, why did she remember all that?

Maybe cos he was the only one who'd tried to fuck her on the path leading up to the hill?

Perhaps.

As she brushed her teeth she said *cha ah* a few times then *cha yune*, then *zau la* as she left the hostel and walked to the train station timetable to see if anything was running that day.

The board was light-less, stained with *CANCELLATO*, so she steered left and asked the man behind the glass.

'No train, two days.'

'None?'

'No train, two days, nothing. Come back two days after and train.'

Joanna looked at the woman reading an Indian cook book behind the next counter and asked her too, just to confirm.

'No train, two days,' she replied, not looking up.

'Really? There is no train today, not one?'

'No train, two days, nothing. Come back two days and train.'

'Okay, thanks.'

There were still a few asylum seekers in the station, harrowed, hollow, bored, though most of them had relocated to the cold sun outside. She saw the man from the night before, Patrice, and asked if there were any buses going to Slovenia.

'Don't know. I never see.'

Joanna looked down the road and spotted a line of black-on-white stripe buses sitting dormant in a car park.

Patrice followed her look and said, 'ah, you say bus. Yes, they are there.'

She walked over to the car park without thanking him and asked an Italian man with a thin cigarette if any of the buses were going to Slovenia.

He said, '*cosa?*' a few times then repeated *Slovenia* in Italian, which didn't really sound any different to her ears.

'International bus is only at morning. Today bus is already go, tomorrow bus, it is same time.'

'What time?'

'I do not know. Is early.'

Another local guy with the Fonda cut from *Klute* overheard them speaking and strolled over, asking Joanna in very broken Mandarin what she was looking for.

Luckily her Mandarin was almost as good as her Cantonese, so she told him she was looking for the bus to Ljubljana and this guy had told her it was not until the next morning, but she was hoping there might be one leaving today.

The *Klute* man nodded and continued in his own version of Mandarin, with majority off-key tones but still just about decipherable, 'I think, yes, there is bus today.'

'Is it going to Slovenia?'

'What time, I don't know.'

'Okay, but does the bus go to Slovenia?'

'I don't know. You look at that. It has what time is it.' He was pointing to a sign so she walked over to it, followed by the *Klute* man, who continued to speak weird Mandarin at her even when she'd stopped saying anything back.

'You are China?'

The sign was all in Italian but again she knew what the word for Ljubljana looked like and it wasn't on there.

'You are China person?'

She thanked him and said she would come back the next day.

'I don't know,' said the *Klute* man. 'But...I show you this.' He pointed at the renaissance buildings across the road, presumably not knowing the word for *city*. 'You like it?'

Joanna said in English that she was with her boyfriend but thanks for the offer.

'Boyfriend...I do not see. He is no here so...!' It was a mix of English and Mandarin now. 'Come, I show you, very old buildings. You must like it.'

She stopped speaking and started walking, the *Klute* man pursuing her back to the train station entrance.

'Where you go, I show you this. It is good choice.'

She stopped next to Patrice, who was sitting on a bench outside, throwing a coin up and down, and asked if he wanted to go for lunch together.

He looked up, confused, dropping the coin.

'What, this is boyfriend?' the *Klute* man said in raw English, almost jabbing Patrice in the chest.

'I'm hungry,' she continued, positioning her back to block out the Italian. 'Let's go eat lunch.'

'I don't have money for this,' Patrice said, bending down to pick up the coin.

'I'll pay.'

'No, I don't want to take from you, is no good.'

'This?' the Italian said, a few decibels louder.

'You took ten euros from me last night.'

'Ten euro...no, I give it to you. I say thank you for coffee and the muffeen.'

'I know, but you didn't give the other ten back straight away.'

'Other ten? I don't-...'

'You went outside first, back to the bench.'

'No...I give it to you. Yes, after bench, I give it.'

'This cannot be your boyfriend.' The *Klute* man was looking around for spectators, but no other Italians were interested. 'Cannot. Impossible.'

'Okay. How about this? I buy you lunch, you teach me French.'

'French?'

'You speak French, don't you?'

'*Oui*. I speak French. How you know?'

'You told me last night.'

'Do I?'

Joanna moved closer to Patrice, shifting her feet again to block out the guy behind. 'Look, can you wake up, this guy is *ho ma fan*. Do you want lunch or not?'

'You really fuck black?' asked the *Klute* man, jabbing the air in front of Patrice again. 'You have sick in your head? Think he is famous footballer, like this?'

'Can we just start walking?' she asked, refusing to look at the Italian guy.

Patrice stared at the *Klute* man's finger hovering near his cheek, how easy it would be to bite off, then said, '*oui*, go for lunch,' and followed after her.

They walked back onto the main street leading to the beautiful renaissance buildings of downtown Vicenza, ignoring the *Klute* man, who trailed after them for twenty metres or so before giving up and calling her a troubled fucking dog in wonky Mandarin.

'What does he say?' asked Patrice, putting the hood of his Roma jacket over his head.

'He thinks you're a dog.'

'Me?'

'Both of us. But mostly you.'

Patrice nodded, noticing an elderly Italian woman coming the other way, giving him a funny look. He put his hood back down and smiled at her.

The crone swerved left and quickly crossed the road, not checking either direction for cars.

'Dog...' he muttered to the ground, the grey sludge pretending to be snow.

'Troubled fucking dog,' corrected Joanna.

'What?'

'But no need to drown yourself, his Mandarin was shit.'

'Shit...'

'Like a drunk four year old.' She zipped up her pink *Mizuno* jacket to the tip of her chin. 'Let's speed up a bit, it's freezing out here.'

~~~

The French lesson was pretty straightforward. Painfully straightforward actually, so much so that after saying her name and age and how are you thirteen times, Joanna put her coffee down and asked how to say, 'it is illegal for asylum seekers to work, but there are ways around it.'

Patrice didn't understand the second part, but said, actually, he wasn't an asylum seeker, he was a skilled worker.

'You know asylum seeker?' Joanna asked, starting in on her third tiny cup of coffee.

'*Oui*, I know this. I know this in Italian too. Most of the other men, at the station, they are asylum seeker. West Africa, East Europe, Afghanistan, Bulgaria...'

'And you're a skilled worker?'

'*Oui*.'

'What work?'

'I don't know how to say. *Ingénieur en structure*. I build...but not build. It is different.'

'Structural engineer?'

'I forget. I know this word in Italian, but it is no good. The company tells me to come here, to Italy. Usually, I will not come, but my friend, he recommend this to me. Maybe not a friend, but I know him a little and I speak Italian a little, so I come here, come to Vicenza, but no company, only some men. They say wait two weeks, job is coming, so I go to bad hotel, wait two weeks. Nothing happen. Then two weeks after, the men come again, they...pardon, you really want to hear this?'

Joanna came back from the *Tenebrae* poster on the wall next to her. 'If you want.'

'It is not French.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'You do not want this lesson or... ' said Patrice, turning and looking at the rest of the cafe to see what it was that she kept drifting off to. Nothing apparently. Just Italians and posters of old giallo films. He turned back, taking the tiniest sip of his coffee. 'We can change if you like?'

'What did the men do?' Joanna asked, eyes back on him.

'The job men?'

'They took your money?'

'No, the men, they do not take only money, they take my passport. My phone also. They say it is *une garantie* I do not go back home. Then they say do work, but it is for nothing, six months, so I say no. They say, okay, live on street, they do not care. If I have money now, new passport, of course, I will go back home, but...'

'To your wife?'

'*Oui*...wife...but first I need money. No money inside my pocket, no chance to go to bank, cannot get new passport, so...'

'What about your embassy?'

'*Oui, oui*...I know you say this.'

'They can get you a new passport, two weeks. It happened to my friend in Thailand, he lost his passport in an ice-cream shop, two weeks, he could get out.'

'No, I try this, no embassy in Vicenza.'

'Milan? Venice?'

'Roma. But cannot, need money for train.'

'You can't go to the bank, take out cash?'

'Cannot.'

'They don't have your bank here?'

'Here? No, they have the connection, can use, but I have no card. They take it from me, when they take the passport. I try to get a new card, but...it is a big story.'

Joanna nodded, pulling her chair in so the toddler from the next table wouldn't bump into it. 'You can't get enough money to go to Roma?'

'No.'

'Not even close?'

'*Je comprends pas.*'

'Do you nearly have enough money for the train?'

'No, not near. Hotel, food, *autres dépenses, pots-de-vin*...everything. *C'est trop...trop, trop, trop.*'

Joanna finished off her coffee, trying to remember from the station sign how much the train tickets were.

'*Je suis désolé.* Sorry. You do not need to think about it, I can do this problem. Do not worry.' Patrice glanced at the *Profondo Rosso* poster just past Joanna's head, the skewed silhouette...the white silhouette...and immediately came right back. 'We should speak more French, no?'

'How do you make money?'

'*Ici? N'est facile pas.*'

'*Quoi?*'

'*Ha, tu te souviens de quoi...*'

'*Quoi?*'

'You remember how to say *what*. It is good.'

'It's one word.'

'I know. I try to...*comment dit-tu*...make you feel good about your French speaking.'

'*Merci.* How do you make money here?'

'You want in English?'

'If you want this to be a conversation.'

Patrice smiled, shifting his leg as the toddler ran past again. 'Ah, make money here. It is not easy.'

'That's it?'

'I don't know.'

'It's not easy, that's your full answer?'

'It's true.'

'What is?'

'*Je comprends pas.*'

'What is true?'

'The thing I say. It is not easy to make money here. Make is not the good word for this, I think.'

Joanna looked at the dregs of foam in her empty cup. 'How much do you need to go back?'

'No, I don't want. You give me too much before.'

'*Fong sum*, I wasn't offering. I'm not Lei Ka Sing.'

'*Quoi?* Layka sing?'

'Twenty euros is okay, but that's all. I need the rest of it for Ljubljana. I've been running quite low recently.'

'Running low?'

'The man I'm stuck with, he travels around a lot, and I'm already halfway through my pension so I don't know how much longer I can keep up. And he still doesn't tell me what happened in the cave. He just keeps me following him around Europe, on the dog rope. I don't know. I think it's a waste of time. Actually, I thought that last night. That's why I'm trying to go back to Ljubljana.'

'Pardon, I do not understand. Why do you-...'

'But now the trains are delayed and the buses are acting like it's the countryside of Mongolia. How can there be one bus a day to the place right next to you? How does this country even function?'

The Italian toddler stopped by Joanna and said, 'wah.' Then grinned like a Djinn in a cul-de-sac and ran off.

'Italy is not so good if you are not Italian person. You are black, no good. Chinese, also no good. If I am you, I will leave. But I am here and have no money so...'

'I don't like this place. Feels like I'm stuck in Fanling while everyone else is eating sushi in Tsim Sha Tsui.'

'Yes, I don't like too.' Patrice loosened his grip on the butter knife he didn't realise he'd even been holding and looked at the clock next to the *6 Donne Per L'Assissino* poster. 'It is almost two hours. You want to speak more French?'

'I'm gonna go back to the hostel.'

'Hostel...! *hostel?*'

'See if Mad Sila's found any more cabinets to stab.'

'*Quoi?*'

'Thank you for the French lesson.'

'You stab cap nets? Stab is with a knife, you mean?'

Joanna stood up and zipped up the *Mizuno* jacket as far as it would go. It was snowing outside now, just like in Austria, and Germany, as if the whole cold front was chained to her ankle.

'You go now?'

She nodded, giving him another ten euro note. 'Take this, you can buy another coffee. Some dinner later too.'

'I cannot.'

'Okay then, I'll leave it here. Either you or the waitress can have it.'

She put the note on the table and walked out of the café and onto the old streets of Vicenza without looking back. If she had looked back, she would've seen two Italian men approaching Patrice at the table and imagined something bleak instead of what they actually said, which was, 'we overhear what you talk with Japanese girl and we want French lesson too.'

Patrice waited for the *we're joking, you fucking black*, but it didn't come.

'How much for two hours, four times in one week?'

'You want me teach French with you?'

'Sì, how much?'

Patrice took a sip of coffee to give himself time to think. He had no idea what the market price was. He was a structural engineer, not a teacher. He didn't even have a textbook, didn't know the technical words of language, the grammar. There was noun, verb, adjective, he knew those, but what else?

'We see she give you 10 euro. This is for one hour, no?'

He thought about lying and saying, yeah, one, but then remembered that asshole back in Abidjan who'd sold him the cooling unit for four times its original price. Whatever he'd done since he'd been here, he wouldn't be that guy.

'It is two hours with the girl.'

'Ten for two hours? Okay, there is two of us in one lesson so we give you 20, okay?'

Patrice conferred with the silhouette on the *Profondo Rosso* poster then nodded and said, 'okay, we can start tomorrow.'

The two men wrote down their phone numbers on a tissue and handed it to Patrice, who said he'd meet them back in the same café the next day for the first lesson.



'You don't have house?'

'Here is better.'

'Why, where you live?'

'Near.'

'Where?'

Again, he thought about lying, but didn't wanna struggle if they asked him which hotel, which room, which street. He was no good at deception, never had been. '*La gare*. The train station.'

'Ah...I see.'

'So...here is okay for the lesson?'

The two Italians - possibly students, thought Patrice - looked at each other. One of them shrugged and muttered, 'I don't care,' in Italian. The other one turned back and said, 'okay, here, tomorrow, this time.'

When he was alone again, Patrice borrowed a pen from the waitress and wrote down estimates on a new tissue: how long it would take him to save enough cash for a ticket and passport renewal, if he had enough now to buy a cheap phone from the market, and how many more nights he'd have to spend at the train station.

And an extra note at the end: is this a magical café or a cruel dream?

He looked at his two new students walking past the window outside, nodding at him, then turned back to the faces in the café. They were either old or middle-aged, and fifty-one per cent of them were staring at him like he'd just kidnapped their children.

Ah, that's what it was

a horrible fucking ocean of misery with a tiny boat of life called *Amateur French Lessons* anchored in the middle.

## CHAPTER 25



The hostel room was empty when Joanna got back, except for a note on the desk that said:

*'you may not give a shit, but there's a cabinet in a castle near a town with a giant chessboard in the main square, the castle possibly built on the ground where the spine girl demon's cottage used to be. Though the castle also seems to be on top of a hill so that might be wrong. Anyway, that's where I've gone. Not that you care. I expect you'll be gone by the time I get back. Two months and nothing. Just Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Ljubljana, every single day. No wonder you don't have any friends.*

*Fuck it, do what you like, I don't care.'*

Joanna read it once and then half of it again, instinctively making defences in her head:

*He's too self-absorbed to have insight*

*He doesn't know what I've lost*

*I said sorry for the hill thing*

*He's a child*

and all the defences were strong enough to ossify a wall around herself and everything she'd done, though she only needed two defences for those twenty-two other men.

They were sleazy wretches who wanted sex.

She didn't kill them, the Krsnik did.

Putting the note back on the desk, Joanna picked up the little blade she'd bought in Ljubljana eleven months earlier.

After indulging in a few seconds of rouge *wai gau*, she washed it in the sink with hot water, dabbed some alcohol onto a cotton bud and sterilised the edge. I should probably clean it more, she thought, but it's only me using it, sometimes the child too, no big deal.

The vial of *grey vasic* was in the same place she'd left it that morning, untouched. She only needed two drops to get her through the rest of the evening, though part of her wondered if there was really any point. The only thing she'd be doing would be sitting on the bed, or maybe lying on the bed, reading a German book, and even when she did move around outside, it didn't seem to change much.

In fact, she'd gone all the way from Denmark to Italy and remembered pretty much everything.

Was the effect of it wearing off on her?

Maybe.

There was no surprise about where she found herself anymore. A little disorientation, one or two short term memory gaps, sure, but not always. Mostly it was just a brief sense of, *oh, that happened*, followed by a dull feeling in her head.

Maybe it would be that way again now.

Or maybe not.

Maybe this time she'd come round back in Ljubljana, on the hill, the Krsnik waiting with its hand out, claws retracted.

This way to the cave, loyal Joanna.

Down the hill, quickly, he's waiting for you

skinnier than you remember, perhaps

but

not a skeleton.

She picked up the vial and eked two drops out onto the blade, enough for five or six hours.

'... ..'

Just as the blade was being lined up against her left forearm, the door opened and Sila stumbled in.

'... ..'

Joanna watched him through the sink mirror as he staggered over to the bottom bunk, making no move to assist.

Did he even need it? He's probably exaggerating, she thought. There's no such thing as a Professor of Dark Light, which meant the only thing he could've met in the castle was a junkie. Or a wild animal. Did Italy have bears or wolves? Wild dogs?

Sila mumbled, 'thanks for your help,' and peeled off his *Criolo* jacket, and then his *Old King Matjaž* hoodie. There didn't seem to be any damage, until he rolled up his sleeve and four, long red lines appeared.

'You were attacked?'

'Thought it was a statue...fucker moved when I turned my back. Hit me so hard I fell over.'

'A human?'

'Lucky that it did... very lucky. Gave me a chance to get the knife. Stabbed it, second time it attacked. Fucking ugly thing...creepy...just like the other one. Maybe a cousin or something. Italian cousin...'

'Cousin of the Krsnik?'

'Yeah, that guy.'

The *grey vasic* blade dropped into the sink basin, Joanna turning to face the bunk directly. 'It was the same creature?'

'Pass me that alcohol will you?'

'Was it the same creature?'

'Yes, the same. Or similar. Alcohol please.'

'Did you kill it?'

'I'm bleeding out here...'

Joanna took the bottle from the bag by the sink and threw it roughly towards the bed, so roughly that Sila was forced to reach out and catch it with his injured arm. The effect was immediate, a half-muffled scream and then *fuck* in Slovene as the wounds stretched out.

'Try not to move, it widens the cuts.'

'Yeah, obviously.'

'Then why did you move?'

'Cos your throw was shit. And I'm fucking delirious. Fucker was going for my throat the second time, just like the other one...'

'You survived.'

'Somehow. Out of pure fucking luck.'

'Did you kill it?'

Sila rode through the last of the pain spasms by rotating the bottle, either scrutinising the liquid or the label. 'Maybe dead. I don't know. It stopped moving.'

'Completely?'

'Almost...its eyes were open, but...'

'It was still breathing?'

'Maybe it's just injured...badly hurt. Yeah, it was still breathing. Doubt it's gonna make it to a hospital though.'

Sila finished with the label and tilted the bottle over his wounds, but not enough to let any alcohol drops come out.

'You have to turn it more,' Joanna said, edging forward.

'I know how to do it.'

'You're not turning.'

'I am, slowly.'

The makeshift nurse grabbed the bottle away from him before he could stop her and tipped it for him. Six or seven drops spilled out quickly, covering all four marks.

'There.'

Sila punched the bed three times and made feral sounds in Slovene. Joanna put the bottle back on the bed and went over to the desk, picking up the blade, adding an extra drop of grey and slicing her forearm.

'You're doing that shit now?' Sila asked, folding a tissue and putting it over his wound.

'Which bus did you take to the castle?'

'What?'

'Which bus?'

'Don't know. The one with the town's name on it.'

'What is the town name?'

Sila gestured with his face towards the *Italian Monogatari* book. 'There's no point going, it's dead already.'

Joanna flicked through, found the page with a giant chessboard and made a note of the town's name. 'You said it was still breathing.'

'Yeah, and bleeding out. It must be dead by now.'

'How long does the bus take?'

'Even if it's not, it won't say anything.'

'The bus journey, how long?'

'It's not even human. Seriously, Joanna, it's dead, there's no point. And there won't be any buses going there now anyway, it's nearly midnight.'

'Then I'll get a taxi.'

'Yeah, in the middle of the night, a Chinese girl on your own, going to a deserted fucking castle.'

'You don't need to wait for me.'

'Wait for you? I can't even...'

Sila stood up and reached out with his arm to stop her but it was the wrong arm again. And it didn't matter anyway, as the *grey vasic* had started to work its spell in Joanna's blood, even though she'd cut no vein and

before she could figure out how to ask the local taxi drivers to take her to the town and get to the castle she

was standing next to a bus with the town name above its windscreen and there was a clean-shaven Italian guy with a huge chequered scarf erasing his entire neck beside her, saying something in broken English about taking her there personally, making sure she was okay, and she thought about saying *no, there's really no need*, but by the time she'd mapped out the words she was

getting off the bus in front of a stone arch and the Italian man was still next to her, still...no, wait, it wasn't the Italian, it was Patrice, in his black bubble Roma jacket, and his hand was pointing towards a castle on the hilltop that had to be the castle she was aiming for and there was a path nearby and what

the hell was Patrice doing here, it wasn't the station, or a cafe, so she turned and asked him direct if he'd just happened to be on the bus or...

'You ask me this same thing three times now,' he replied, holding up three fingers to emphasise. 'Then you go to sleep or...your eyes are open on bus, but you look like sleep...I don't know the word for this.'

'I can't remember...'

'You ask about the Italian man too.'

'Italian man?'

'On the bus.'

'He got on the bus? The Italian man from the bus terminal, with the big scarf?'

'He is on the bus. Then, later, he is off the bus. You don't remember?'

'Wait...'

Joanna turned to the forest surrounding the town and stared at the pockets of darkness between the trees. She recalled an old TVB drama where the female police officer would be struggling to remember something important and to trace the past she would close her eyes and put two fingertips to her temple and if it worked for her then...

'What are you doing?' asked Patrice, zipping up his jacket right to the top.

'Quiet.'

'You see something in the trees?'

'.....'

'What?'

'I don't have time...need to focus.'

'That is Chinese?'

Joanna tried to cast out a temporal net and drag back the last memory but the only thing willing to be dragged was the bus terminal and the Italian chequered scarf guy.

'We are still going to the castle, no?'

She dropped her fingers and looked at the medieval-looking construct looming on the hill. 'This is wrong.'

'I ask you this before, you don't answer to me.'

'Whichever part of me decided to-...ended up doing this. The darker pockets. Id-void.' She turned to Patrice and gripped him by his upper arms, which wasn't easy as his jacket was mostly padding. 'You have to go.'

'For the castle?'

'I don't know how I dragged you here...what exactly I said...but there is a dangerous monster hiding up there, in the castle. You know monster?'

'*Oui*, many. Usually offer to me something. Why?'

'This monster, in the castle up there, is not human. And it only kills men. Or takes them, not kills. Wounds and takes them, kills later. It does not touch women.' She moved his body backwards a few steps, surprising him enough to let her finish doing it. 'You stay here, wait for me. Do not come up.'

'You move me like a doll.'

'Do not come up, okay?'

'I can use my arms now?'

'You promise not to come up?'

'Promise...this is like a vow?'

'Yes.'

'You want me to stay here? In this place?'

'Just until I come back.'

'*Je sais pas...*'

'What?'

Patrice looked up at the castle. To him, and to anyone who'd ever seen the Roger Corman Eddie Poe adaptations, castles on hills equalled psychopathic rich people, and Patrice had seen that film fourteen times so there was no way he wanted to go up there, especially at eleven thirty at night, but then if he didn't, he'd be letting Joanna go up there alone, and...what if, somehow, Vincent Price or a Vincent Price fanatic or, worse, an Italian man with a large chequered scarf, really were up there...

'Are you listening?'

'*Quoi?*'

'Stay here. Do not come up.'

'*Oui*, I can hear you.'

'So you won't come up?'



Joanna released her grip on his arms and watched him go into thinking mode again, but she didn't have time for this, her head was already starting to throb, and it wouldn't be long now, she'd already been lucky enough to have the minute or so she'd been given to warn him about the monster and if she didn't keep him down here then

'It seems closer when we are down there,' said Patrice, panting a little.

Joanna muttered, 'no,' and put out a hand to stop the castle, its entrance gate already half open.

'You think someone is inside?'

'Krsnik.'

'Your monster?'

She closed her eyes and opened them again and without turning told Patrice to go back down the path she couldn't remember climbing up.

'*Quoi?*'

'You have to.'

'We talk about this before.'

'And somehow you managed to twist it back around and play the sacrificial clown.'

'Sacri-...*quoi?*'

'... ..'

'What?'

She looked at the castle door, ran her eyes round its entire frame, then breathed out hard and told Patrice to fuck off, she was sick of the sight of him.

'Fuck off?' You want to say this?'

'Yes. Please, fuck off.'

'I do not understand. You told me it was okay, come up.'

'Don't care. Fuck off now or I will tell the police you tried to attack me.'

'Attack you...'

'Stop repeating my words.'

'Why you talk like a football player?'

Joanna moved forward and pushed him in the chest, as hard as she could, so hard he tripped, fell backwards and rolled down the path a little.

'Go, leave.'

Brushing powdered snow off his Roma jacket, Patrice struggled back to his feet and shouted something in French, more to the sky than her.

'Get out of here, fuck off.'

'You fuck off!' He picked up a stick and threw it at a tree. 'I fucking help you and you say fuck off.'

'So fuck off then.'

'I am.'

'Go.'

'*Oui*, I go...'

'I'm tired of looking at you. Stupid blank face.'

Patrice said something in French, a few things, picked up another stick, aimed to throw it at the same tree then stopped, broke it in half and threw both parts on the ground.

'Are you going or not?'

'*Quoi?*'

'Go.'

'No.'

'I don't want you here. Go. Leave me alone.'

'... ..'

'Stop talking and go.'

Patrice looked at the castle without lights and the trees without visible green. 'It is too dark here, too dangerous. Maybe there are more Italian men inside this place.'

'... ..'

'I stay with you.'

'No.'

'You can say fuck off seven hundred times, I don't care.'

Joanna didn't say *fuck off*, she just moved forward and pushed him again. He was ready for it this time, and moved his arm to intercept, but she was ready too, hooking one of her feet round the back of his left leg, pushing again and sending him awkwardly onto the ground.

'I'll roll you all the way down if I have to.'

'*Putain*,' shouted Patrice, crawling back a bit then standing up. 'Kung fu now?'

'Drag you down by the hair...'

'*Que fait tu?* I don't have hair.'

'...by your sleeves...tell the police you tried to take my money.'

'Your money?'

'Tried to take my money and hit me.'

'*Je comprends pas.*'

'I will.'

'Why you change like this?'

'... ..'

'You drink something?'

'... ..'

'You need pills?'

'... ..'

Patrice brushed more snow [quite easily] off his Roma jacket and looked at her, putting all the threats to one side and trying to do what his wife had always told him to do with public lunatics: calm down and look for the root of the anger. From everything she'd done in the last two hours, he guessed she was probably on drugs. It made sense, the sudden mood swings, the marks he'd seen on her arm, but if it was drugs, it still didn't make much sense. Why were they here, at this castle? Why would drugs make her do that?

'... ..'

'I do not understand Chinese.'

Joanna picked up a twig from the ground and threw it at him, missing by a mile.

'You try to hit me with that?'

Joanna picked another twig and made the motion to throw it, but stopped halfway and kept it in her hand like a knife.

'You want to use the branch?' Patrice was staring at the twig. 'You...' he mimed a stabbing action to his stomach, 'really do this to me?'

Joanna looked at the rough patches of bark on the twig, the jagged tip, and tossed it on the ground.

Patrice took a step forward, hands raised and out flat. 'We calm down first, okay?'

'I don't want you here.'

'We calm down and go to bus stop.'

'I won't.'

'We go to hospital, or to your hotel, everything is okay.'

'I'm going inside. Alone.'

'No, not inside. We go now, to the bus stop. I forget the tree thing and the *fuck off*...you help me before, I help you now.'

'I have to go in there alone.'

'But when we go to the hotel you tell the man I'm your friend. If no, I have a problem.'

'... ..'

'This is Chinese for yes?'

Joanna picked up another twig and threw it at him, replacing his head with the Polish sleaze in Ljubljana, telling him in Cantonese he wouldn't feel so fucking noble when the Krsnik had ripped his throat out, but it was useless, he didn't even know the word for *he* let alone *rip your throat out*, so she went back to bouncing twigs off his bubble jacket and he just stood there and did nothing until the third stick when his head divided into four and then eight and spun around a castle wall and

## CHAPTER 26

# HER NIGHTMARE CASTLE



'Are you sure?'

The words were said without context or stealth, but as soon as they were out of her mouth she knew exactly where she was and what was happening. They were in the castle. Both of them. And they'd been there a while.

'Quoi?'

She focused in on the trestle table nearby, the paint cans she felt should've been on it. *Tell him to fuck off again. Hit him on the back of the head and roll him down the slope. Just leave.*

'Are you sure it's empty?' she asked, finally.

Patrice and his Roma bubble jacket popped back into the room and said, 'no, you are correct, it is nothing inside here.'

'Did you check all the corners?'

'It is nothing. I check everywhere.'

Joanna looked around for more potential hiding places. 'There's another staircase over there.'

'Where?'

'There.'

'We go up these stairs twenty minutes before, you do not remember?'

'No, we didn't.'

'Yes.'

'That was a different one. On the other side, the left part of the castle, not this one. This is the right side.'

'I tell you, it is nothing inside here. We look everywhere, nothing.'

'There must be.'

'It is a castle, at midnight, who will be inside here?'

'It's hiding somewhere.'

'*Oui*, hiding, like *Jack et le haricot magique*...the big plant, how to say...the fairy tale story, Jack and the-...'

'I'm going up the stairs.'

'Jack and the magic plant.'

'Wait here, or go outside. Grab a weapon.'

'You go up there? Okay, no problem, I will come too.'

Joanna looked at the slabs of stone that made up the floor then the tapestry rugs pinned up against the far wall. Nothing usable as a weapon or a shield.

'You okay?'

She started walking, not checking back to see if he was following. But when she got to the staircase, and still couldn't hear any footsteps, she turned to see where he

'Stop messing around.'

'*Quoi?*'

'I said stop.'

Patrice looked serious for about two seconds then raised his arms in a bear pose and did quite a decent Lou Chaney impression. 'I am the wolf man.'

Joanna looked at him and the painting of the hairy man on the wall to the side, resisting the urge to rub the haze out of her eyes. There was a slither of eerie recap then revelation. The painting...it was an almost exact replica of the

one she'd seen with Sila in Innsbruck. And only *almost* cos an absolute flawless twin seemed impossible.

'I am the wolf man still,' Patrice repeated, adding a soft growl.

'You don't have any hair on your arms,' she replied, matching her tour companion to the painting.

'Boss of this castle.'

'Or your head.'

He stopped, lowering his arms. 'You think I am not a good wolf man?'

'No.'

'Ha, *si directe*. But it is only because I am the better wolf man to you.'

There was a noise from the end of the corridor, drawing both of them away from the painting. Not completely clear but sounded like metal hitting stone.

'It is outside,' Patrice said, giving up on the wolf man act.

'Maybe not.'

'It was, I hear it.'

'So did I.'

'I have super ears, ears of the wolf man.'

'Quiet.'

'Look, right here.'

Joanna turned back to tell him direct, shut the fuck up, but that was hard to do when he was pulling up the top parts of his ears, trying to make them Vulcan-like.

'You're just embarrassing yourself.'

'*Quoi?*'

'Embarrassing. Like a clown.'

'Ah, I know...I just try to give *légèreté* to this...'

'Leg what?'

'*Légèreté*. I do not know the English for this.'

'Then why say it?'

'It is like comedy maybe. Make things not so serious...you know this word?'

'Levity?'

'It means not serious?'

'Kind of.'

'I trust you then. Your English is better than me.'

'It is.'

'What is the Chinese for this word?'

'Wait...'

'You do not know?'

Joanna held up a finger.

'What is it?'

There was another noise, definitely not coming from outside, Joanna thought, so she told Patrice to stay where he was, blend into the painting, pretend to be a statue or something, then took out the blade from her jacket pocket and walked slowly to the end of the corridor

well, walked slowly for about ten yards then got impatient and increased speed, turning like a dervish at the empty suit of armour propped up in the corner and stabbing forward instinctively before the Krsnik had a chance to sedate things and run away.

There was nothing, just the door leading out into the courtyard.

She waited an imagined minute and then the noise came again. Ah, it was the door, the wind running through the cracks and forcing it against the hinges.

'... ..'

The blade stayed in her hands even though she knew it would be of no use. Whatever Sila had bumped into, it was long gone now.

Probably a wild animal scared off. Or bored off by Sila's talk of cabinets and dark light.

'No monsters?' shouted Patrice.

'... ..'

'*Quoi?*'

'No.'



Joanna returned down the main hallway, past the [possibly nicked] artefacts locked up in glass cases and back to the line of paintings beside the castle entrance.

'I think it's gone,' she said, finally putting the blade back. 'Or maybe it's just a well-hidden corpse. I don't know.'

'*Ça fait rien.*'

'What are you doing?'

Patrice was still standing next to the wolf man painting, the poor Spanish noble whose whole body was covered in hair. Without a doubt the same guy who'd had his portrait up in Innsbruck. Must've been on a tour of middle Europe, Joanna thought, ignoring Patrice's call for her to take a picture and switching to the portrait next to it, the knight with abyssal darkness in place of a human face.

'Come on, photo.'

'Wait.'

'*Quoi?* For what?'

Joanna placed herself next to the knight and pulled up her collar and the scarf she couldn't remember putting on, and then held her arms straight at her side.

'Ah, *légèreté...*'

'What do you think?'

'Your jacket is very pink.'

'Forget that bit.'

'You have too many hairs.'

Joanna half smiled, then quickly returned to her impersonation. 'I'm a better knight than your wolf man.'

'No, no, no...'

'Are you taking a photo or not?'

'Of this?'

Joanna nodded sharp, no smile.

'I take a photo of you, but you not take a photo of me. Is this fair?'

'Hurry up.'

'I don't think it is fair.'

'Quickly, my scarf is slipping.'

Patrice said *no, not fair* a few more times then pulled a phone out of his pocket and lined up the shot.

'You have a phone?'

'Now, *oui*. I buy this yesterday...bought, sorry. It is very cheap.'

'Did you call your wife?'

'Me? No, no...'

'Why not?'

'It is too expensive to do this.' Patrice looked at the phone. 'Better to keep money for my ticket, or passport.'

'I'm confused.'

'*Quoi?*'

'Why did you buy a phone if you're not gonna use it?'

Patrice opened his mouth then closed it quickly.

'You should at least message her.'

'Tomorrow. If I really do this lesson, can really get money, maybe I call.'

'What lesson?'

'*Oui*, I tell you before. You forget this too?'

Joanna closed her eyes and scanned back. The fragments were out of joint, as usual, Germany mixed with Vicenza mixed with Copenhagen mixed with a bus ride to the castle. Finally, she reached something that seemed to fit. 'The two Italian men...in the café.'

'*C'est vrai*. It starts tomorrow, in the afternoon. This is why we need to go soon. If we stay very late here, maybe I look tired, like a heroin guy.'

'They're paying you?'

'It is what they say. Maybe it is a trick, I do not know.' Patrice looked at the phone again and said something in French.

'What's that?'

'Idiom from home. It is nothing.'

Joanna nodded, turned to look at the wolfman painting then spun back when she glimpsed a blur of movement to her side. 'What are you doing?'

'We take photo, no?' Patrice was now on his knees, pointing the phone upwards. 'This way can make you look bigger.'

'And pinker.'

'No smile, please.'

Joanna didn't know she was doing one, but straightened her mouth anyway.

'Okay, good. Now...tell me to fuck off again. Like we practise outside. Fuck off down the hill, Patrice.'

Joanna smirked, but didn't give him the reward of a full smile or laugh.

'Okay, done.' Patrice handed her the phone and stood next to the wolf man painting again. 'Now it is me.'

Joanna checked her own photo, the pink Chinese knight, then lined up the shot for Patrice.

'You want me to bend down too?'

'Bendown?'

'Like this...' Joanna bent down. 'Make you scarier.'

'Yes, scary is good.'

Joanna looked back at the camera and took a shot, but when she checked the image it looked a bit tilted so she told him to keep the pose, she was gonna take another.

'Okay.'

Lining up the revision, she felt an abrupt pain in her head, on the left hand side. Like someone prodding from the inside of the cortex. She reached up and massaged it with three fingertips, closing her eyes for a second, and when she opened up and looked at the camera, it was gone, her hand was empty and

forehead sweat, as if she'd been running, but her breath rate was steady so it couldn't have been that fast and

she looked at Patrice to see if he was sweating too, but he wasn't there, neither was the wolf man, or any of the other paintings, no wait, there was a stern monk portrait, she could see it out of the corner of her eye and

what else?

Her vision blurred a bit as she looked down, then rallied, sharpened, and she could see the floor was still the same, ridiculously giant stone slabs in mathematical formation, but now there was a river of mauve too, running into the cracks, and

she said in Cantonese, *shit, someone spilt wine*, then corrected herself and said again in English, 'someone spilt wine, Patrice,' but

as soon as she said it, logic returned to her brain and she realised it wasn't red wine she was looking at, it was blood, someone's spilt blood.

On Washizu instinct, she looked around frantic, then alert, then measured as she spotted a shadowed human lump a few metres down the corridor, sitting on the floor beneath the monk painting, their back up against the wall.

'Patrice...!' she muttered, rushing over and putting her hand on his shoulder, but he didn't answer or try to shrug her off, he just lay there on the castle floor, body slumped against the wall, blood leaking out of his neck.

'No, no, no, no...!'

She slapped herself in the face, harder than usual, then bent down and tried shaking him by the jacket, but that just made the blood flow out of his neck faster. Stop, try to think, she told herself, how do I wake him up, he can't be gone, wake him up, how...focus, you witch, how? and the only sound strategy she could come up with was to annoy him.

'Patrick...!' she said, practically hissing it out.

His eyes opened, marginally, but the rest stayed static.

'Patrick, listen to me. Wake up. Wake up, you lazy fuck. Open your eyes. Patrick. Wake up.'

The eyelids started to shut again so she got a hold of his collar and slapped him in the face, shouted at him to wake up, but it was no good, he wasn't speaking, no other part of his body was moving, and the wound on his neck...

'Mon cou...!'

Joanna stopped, hand already halfway towards the next slap.

'Mon cou...un loup...!'

'Don't move,' replied Joanna, leaning down to pull him up then changing her mind when she touched the moistness of his bubble jacket. 'Need a bandage...or a cloth.'

'The dog...!'

She unzipped her pink *Mizuno* jacket and tried to tear her shirt underneath, but it was tough material. Ah, the knife. Pulling it out of her pocket, she grabbed the cuff of her shirt and started to slice.

'Nearly done,' she said, looking up to confirm it to him with her eyes and realising that he was out again.

'Patrice...'

His eyes stayed shut.

She stopped slicing, deciding the piece wouldn't be long enough and took off the whole shirt instead. There was still the *kung food fighting* t-shirt underneath, she'd be okay. Colder, but okay.

'I'm gonna stop the blood, okay?'

Putting her jacket back on, she leaned down and tied the shirt around his neck, tightening it. The blood didn't stop, but it didn't dribble any farther down his shirt either. 'There. Done.'

His eyes opened, the tiniest possible slits, and he muttered '*mon cou*' again.

'You're gonna be okay. I stopped the blood.' She checked the shirt bandage again, determined not to be a liar. 'Mostly stopped. I think the wound's not that bad. We just need to get you out of here. To a hospital.'

'*Mon cou*...'

'*Mon cou*? What does that mean?'

He looked beyond her, something triggering his eyelids to stretch into *raw fear* mode.

'Cold? You're cold? Is that what you're saying?'

'*Cours*...' he said, lifting his head up and loosening the shirt, forcing out more blood.

'Stop moving, you'll-...'

'Run.'

'What?'

'Please...'

'Run?' Her brain finally processed the word and then added another: *Krsnik*. 'Something behind me?'

He was out again, eyes closed, head slumped *ho* awkward against the wall.

'Patrice,' she said, shaking him, careful not to open up the neck wound any wider.

It didn't make any difference.

She let go of Patrice's collar and wiped the cold sweat creeping up on her forehead. She could hear something breathing nearby, a kind of click-breathing, not like an animal exactly, but definitely not human either.

'... ..' she whispered in Cantonese.

It was close, maybe two, three metres away, but the clicks weren't getting any louder. Which meant it was stationary. Observing her.

Calm down, she told herself, pushing nails into her left palm. It doesn't attack women, you're safe.

Her breathing steadied a little, from a hundred and twenty breaths per minute to a hundred and eighteen.

It doesn't attack women, she repeated, so get up, wave your arms, get it away from Patrice.

She stood up and faced it, edging slowly towards the other wall.

It was difficult to tell exactly what the thing looked like as the castle was costumed in shadow and there was only one window in the corridor, with trees outside blocking the moonlight, but she could see the outline of it, see that it was taller than most humans, scrawnier too, with nails or claws that looked almost like they were glowing.

She pulled out the mini Slovene-to-English dictionary she'd been keeping in her jacket pocket and looked up the words for *are you from Slovenia?* before realising that she already knew how to say that phrase.

*Diu.*

*Fuck.*

Lowering the dictionary, Joanna looked at the Krsnik holding what she assumed was its stomach and asked, in lethargic Slovene, if it was from Slovenia or Italy. As the words came out, she took three steps back towards the other end of the corridor, a move that would either draw the creature away from Patrice or offer his body up on a plate.

When there was no response, she tried the question again, putting stress on both country names.

The Krsnik reacted, scraping one of its claws on the floor. Either it didn't understand or it felt insulted at being connected to one of those places.

Joanna took a breath, then repeated the line, without the Italy part, and this time it provoked the Krsnik into crawling down the corridor towards her.

'... ..' she tried, switching to Cantonese.

The creature paused for a moment, as if recognising the sounds then groaned and continued its advance. Joanna had no choice but to shuffle back, shuffling so badly she fell sideways into a suit of armour.

'... ..'

Somehow the armour stayed as it was, wobbling a little then settling back into sentry duty.

Joanna stared up.

*Diu*, another suit of armour, she thought. Maybe the same one from the painting. Standing there like a gormless spectator.

She switched back to the corridor, sliding a hand inside her jacket pocket, gripping the handle of the knife.

'... ..'

The Krsnik had ventured forward again and was now stooped over Patrice, its claw dipping lightly into the neck wound.

'Get off him,' she cried, back in English, jabbing the blade forward at the air.

The claw rose up from the blood and vanished into the dark oblong shape that had to be the Krsnik's face.

'Fuck off!'

She pulled herself onto her knees, reaching out a hand towards the leg of armour, trying to prise it off, use it as a club to beat the Krsnik but

her head

it was starting to throb

vision blurring

her arms

outside on the snow

a hedge above her or to the side and

there was a weight pushing down

an animal with

no

not animal

Krsnik, it was on top of her, trying to scratch skin

cold claws and

wait, it wasn't scratching, it had fallen, with a blade in its neck, her blade, her *grey vasic* blade, but...was that her, did she do that, where was Patrice, was he okay, and

as the Krsnik toppled off chest, onto the dark snow, she adjusted position and

not screamed, shrieked

dry, broken.

'... ..'

The pain was ice cold and coming from her leg. She looked down and saw blood mixed with tattered trouser material.

It had got her, how bad?

She pulled herself up slowly, moving the leg little by little and finding the pain more bearable each time, more familiar, which meant it probably wasn't as bad as the initial shock suggested.

'... ..'

She turned and looked down at the Krsnik.

It was staring back up, breathing like an arthritic pensioner.

'Not a man,' she said in slurred English, pulling out the bottom strands of her hair.

The creature didn't answer; it just continued staring a yard past her, its expression hard to read as its features didn't seem to shift or crease. Like a Slovene folktale version of Tommy Lee Jones.

Joanna took out her dictionary, surprised it was still there after what she assumed had been a brutal struggle through the castle and onto this snowy garden outside. She was also surprised she had lasted this far as she had no clue how to fight and her running was sub-standard at best. But then she remembered, the Krsnik was already injured, stabbed by Sila hours before.

Perhaps by Patrice too.



She looked up the words *dead* and *still* and tried saying them even though she knew the grammar was probably wrong.

The Krsnik's eyes stayed fixed just past her neck, its breaths getting raspier.

'You are from Slovenia?' she asked, raising her voice above the sudden wind whistle from the trees.

A clicking sound, mixed with staggered breath.

'Slovenia, yes?'

More clicks, followed by one of its eyelids starting to drop.

Joanna clutched the injured leg and dragged herself closer to the creature. It made no moves to defend itself.

'Are you from Ljubljana?' she said, into what she hoped was its ear.

The Krsnik's eyelid closed completely so she reached across and, without any hesitation, forced it back open. She didn't think about why it only had one eyelid.

'Where's Yute Long?'

She slapped the creature in the face, getting back a wailed growl.

'Chinese man,' she said in Slovene. 'Where is he?'

The Krsnik didn't answer so she tried to slap it again, only this time her hand was swatted away and a claw shot up onto her neck.

Not slashing but squeezing...choking...

'... ..' she eked out in Cantonese, digging her nails into its arm, its claw, trying to push it off

but the grip

it was too strong and

the Krsnik squeezed tight for ten seconds, fifteen seconds, twenty seconds and then loosened and loosened as its single eyelid closed again and its breaths became slower and slower until finally they ceased and Joanna was dropped onto the Krsnik's body, landing almost face first in its stomach wound.

'... ..' she screamed out in Cantonese, pulling herself back up and wiping the creature's blood off her face. '... ..'

She looked at the blade in the Krsnik's neck and then its face and finally she noticed the single eyelid, but it didn't matter, the thing was dead, it was...

'Patrice...'

Her face turned and her legs pushed up and she tried to walk fast across the snow, to go find him, see if he was okay, but her head started to throb again and, as soon as she felt it, her body was already falling back down onto the snow.

'... ..'

The *grey vasic* was almost spent, which meant if Patrice was alive, she'd have to drag him back out of the castle, down to the bus stop, in real time, with an injured leg, all by herself.

It was impossible, maybe not physically, but mentally, mentally she was weak, without the vasic, she was weak. She'd never last all the way down, her mind would shift, tell her to ditch him and get her own wreck of a body back instead. It was inevitable, the nature of her brain

unless

Joanna self-argued for around two seconds until Patrice's neck wound popped back into her head, forcing her quickly into tyrant mode.

She bent down and pulled the blade out of the Krsnik's neck, alien veins and gore tangled around it like seaweed. A picture of her mum cutting off a fish's head in her childhood stopped her from bringing up bile as she picked them off bit by bit, being careful to keep the creature's blood on the edge. Wiping the final bits off on the snow, she poured the dregs of *grey vasic* onto the blade and paused for a second before shouting *do it, you wretch* in Cantonese and slicing her forearm. If she were lucky, there'd still be enough on it to get both her and Patrice back to the hostel.

If she wasn't lucky, it could mix the Krsnik's blood with hers and

what?

Kill her?

Or worse, turn her into something that would have to spend the rest of its life in castles, preying on men like Patrice or Sila just to

blinked and quickly sensed the environment had changed.

She was standing behind a wraith tree, breathing heavy, and there were other trees around, and the castle, she could see the wall of it, one of its walls, about two hundred metres away, which meant she was on the hill, in the forest on the hill nearby and,

how did she get here, for what reason, why was she behind a tree, was she hiding, where was Patrice, his leaking neck wound?

Poking her head round the trunk, she saw nothing except pale light and other trunks and endless indigo snow, wait, pale light, that meant it was nearly morning, meant the *grey vasic* was working, there'd been enough on the blade and

the pale light was gone

replaced by no light and stone floor and

she was leaning against the wall next to a blood stain, but no Patrice, no blood trail leading off that she could follow, but maybe that was a good thing cos if there was no blood trail, there could be no corpse.

She stared at the stern monk painting on the wall and said, no, no, no, he's okay, he got away, neck wound was superficial, he got up and got away, he might even be waiting down at the bus stop for her to catch up and wash his makeshift bandage and

the monk's robe in the painting became larger and larger and then darker and tree-shaped and tired eyes forced her down to the stone floor, but it was gone and

back in the forest again, not behind a tree, on the path, she was walking down the main path

no

not walking, limping, limping down the path and

she turned and looked back to see how far she'd come and it was quite far, halfway down and if Patrice had somehow got behind her it wouldn't be hard to find her trail and follow her down cos she was still dripping blood, not much, but enough to stand out on dirt-free snow and

as she looked at the patch in front of her to confirm its whiteness

the whiteness became total, absorbed the trees, absorbed everything except some of the twigs which knotted together to form a ladder and the ladder became a sign with Italian words and

when she looked behind, the entrance to the town looked back, and when she looked in front, the road appeared and

she realised she wasn't limping anymore, she was standing in the bus shelter at the bottom of the hill, and there was still no Patrice, but that was okay, he'd probably got an earlier bus or a taxi, if he had enough cash, which he didn't, but he must've had enough for the bus otherwise how did he get here, cos she paid?

No, he hated that, wouldn't have let her do it, and he had the money she'd given him earlier

and the lessons he'd started

the phone too

he had to have something, some coins at least.

She checked the timetable on the side of the shelter and pulled out her phone, which was almost dead, and realised the first bus hadn't come, it wasn't due for another seventeen minutes, which meant Patrice had

he'd probably

he must've gone a different way or

or maybe he'd

She bent down and wiped some of the blood off her pants, telling herself that his throat was cut not torn, he was fine, not fine here, but fine somewhere nearby, and

she ignored the looks of the two elderly women standing adjacent, staring at her leg, and focused instead on the sunrise sneaking up over the hills, trying to suck in its beauty and the beauty of nature in general, and not the nature of Krsnik or the beauty of its corpse on the blood covered grey snow, with castle horror backdrop behind it, and

despite her sapped efforts

the two images combined to make a scene from an old Gum Yong TV series she'd watched when she was young, *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, and

the image stayed with her throughout the bus journey, which was a twenty second shot in her head and the walk through the main street of Vicenza, with a leg wound covered by some cloth she'd picked up from somewhere, perhaps the side of the train station, and

stared at the *COME TO ROMA* poster on the wall in reception and said, 'don't talk at me, I'm fine,' to the hostel manager, ignored his response and scrambled to the room and the image of the condor heroes had gone, replaced by Patrice and his torn out throat and the words she could now hear from outside the bus station, can you come to the castle with me, please, can you come, it'll be an adventure, can you

opened her eyes and there were two faces above her, but they were no objects she knew so she closed her eyes and

in a green-walled room, with Sila and a lady in a doctor's costume peering down at her from above, and she muttered as delayed signal, 'it wasn't my fault, he followed me,' and Sila replied, 'what wasn't your fault? Who followed you? What happened?' and all she could think of was to repeat it in drained Cantonese then touch her dry cheeks and realise that, even now, she wasn't crying cos

deep deep down,

and despite the *can you come to the castle with me?* line, which she may or may not have said,

she knew it wasn't her fault

not completely.

SCRAPED  
VENESSE



CHAPTER 27

SCRAPED  
FORGIVENESS

SCRAPED  
FORGIV

Being low on cash and a full mile from the train station was object-fact in this realm, but Joanna skewed all that analytical Popper shit and made it, in scattered bursts, to the taxi rank outside the hospital before her legs finally gave way and the body followed.

'Stop being sneaky,' Sila said, lifting her up into a wheelchair and pushing her back inside.

Joanna didn't answer beyond a guttural *wah*. If she did, she might elaborate too far. And then they'd ask her what happened in the castle again, and she'd already forgotten her original story.

What had torn her leg up in that version?

She couldn't remember.

Defensive wolf?

Out of town bear?

'You don't have to say anything, it's okay,' said Sila, steering her back into the room with a *Vicenza in the Silver 60's* painting on the wall, and laying her gently down onto the bed. 'I'll do all the talking.'

Joanna muttered raw Cantonese and pulled the blanket over her head.

'They said we can leave tomorrow. Officially leave, I mean. Your injuries aren't that bad, mostly just shock, the doctor said, though you're lucky they didn't find anything in your blood.'

No movement from the blanket.

Sila picked up a pamphlet, said, 'ah, this place,' and pointed at it even though she couldn't possibly see anything.

'I figure we can go here next.'

The blanket creased as Joanna shifted onto her side.

'Genoa. You know where it is? I think it used to be a famous port in medieval times, one of those city states. Can't find any info on cabinets though...at least not yet.'

He placed the pamphlet on the bed, close to where he thought her hand might be.

'I did do some research on trains to Spain and, apparently, it's easier to just get the ferry from Genoa. It goes direct to Barcelona, eighteen hours, a pretty long stretch. I always thought the sea wasn't so wide over there, but, I don't know...guess they're going as fast as they can. Probably. Nah, must be. You pay for your ticket up front so they wouldn't need to keep it slow on purpose.'

He noticed that her pillow was hanging off the side of the bed, so he reached forward and pushed it deeper under her head.

'I worked out a plan, pending my travel comrade's approval, of course. You wanna hear? Doesn't matter, I'll just say it anyway, repeat it later if you're really asleep under there. Ja, it's not that far, actually. We get the train from here to Milan then change for Genoa. About four hours total. I mean, if you're feeling tired, we can stay here another few nights. Not really a problem, I already paid the hostel guy for tonight, and there's no one else in the place so...'

There was a knock at the door. Sila didn't say anything, but a policewoman in a purple *North Face* jacket came in anyway, said they'd been up to the castle and found the bloodstains, some marks in the snow, but no sign of the wild bear Joanna had told them about.

'I guess it crawled away into the forest,' said Sila, gently stroking the head shape part of the blanket.

'Yes, that is likely. We found some evidence of something, some holes in the snow going into the forest. They were not human.'

'Bear prints?'

'We also found a Roma jacket, near those same holes. Quite large, man-size...ripped, lots of blood, claw marks. We're still waiting for results, but looks like an animal did this. Probably the same one who attacked your girlfriend.'

The lump under the blanket shifted, subtly, the head shape tilting towards the policewoman.

'Shit. At the castle?'



'In a field, two miles away. From the blood trail, it looks like the jacket person was attacked near the castle then tried to walk...somewhere...we don't know. One mile walking, the other mile, they were either dragged or crawled by themselves.'

'So there was definitely an animal of some kind up there.'

'Yes, looks like. We think the creature followed the jacket person, attacked again, and pulled the second mile. Actually, if it is a bear, it could explain many things. There are other cases we have in this area.'

'You mean the missing men?'

'Missing, sì. You know about this?'

'I read about it online. They've been going missing for the last seven, eight years, right?'

She nodded, pulling down the zip of her *North Face* jacket, wiping something off her neck. 'But it is strange...fifteen separate men and only now we have the first evidence of attack.'

Sila thought about saying *the bear got sloppy* but decided it could make him look like a sociopath and just let out a soft *yeah* instead.

'No sightings, no reports, we don't see a bear here for many years. But if it is not a bear, then what can it be?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe another animal, a wolf, wild dog, we don't know.' The policewoman looked at the shape under the blanket. 'Is she sleeping?'

'She wasn't two minutes ago.'

'Why is the blanket on her face?'

'To block out the world, probably. I don't really know. Ah, she might be asleep. To be honest, she falls asleep pretty fast, even when she's not injured.'

'Did she tell you anything more?'

'No, just some random murmuring in Cantonese.'

'Did she mention the jacket person? Seeing someone near the castle?'

'Not that I'm aware of.'

The policewoman looked at the bed. 'Okay, well when she takes off the blanket, if she remembers anything new, can you ask her to call me?'

'Sure.'

Zippering her jacket back up, she nodded and left, leaving the door open behind her.

'Did you get all that?' Sila asked, shaking the arm area of the blanket.

It didn't respond.

'Looks like the Krsnik got someone else too. That makes sixteen in seven years, pretty prolific. Don't know what that person was doing up there though. Trying to walk to Germany or France? Midnight vlog recording? Or maybe they just started walking from Vicenza and got lost. What do you think? Did you see anyone else up there? Hear any noises?'

No answer.

'Sorry, I forgot. I do all the talking, right?'

The blanket did a nodding motion, making Sila smirk, though he stopped short of a sound to couple it.

'Okay, well...Genoa then. Off to Genoa. Stay at this hostel two more nights, if you need, then train it to Genoa. After that, ferry to Barcelona. And no more sneak attempts to get a taxi, okay?'

The blanket was static again.

Sila picked up the pamphlet and re-read it, checking the sailing times for the ferry and noting that Barcelona was only one stop, and the final destination was actually Morocco.

He folded the pamphlet and put it in his pocket.

'The more I think about it, the luckier I feel about the Krsnik getting away.' He looked down at the green spiral patterns on the blanket, the edges beginning to fade. 'Or not lucky, someone still died, but...I don't know. Would've been difficult to explain if there was an actual Krsnik body...like, what it was, what kind of animal, its species, why no one had ever seen one before. Though I guess it wouldn't have been our problem either way. You said bear and, technically, the thing I saw looked a bit like a bear too...or pretty close to one. And it was dark, so...'

Sila stopped talking for a while and looked at the TV up near the ceiling, rigged onto a nailed-in frame. He'd always wondered why they put it up so high and he wondered it again now. Wasn't it bad for the patient's neck?

Rising off the bed, he haze-walked over to the window and surveyed the forest in the distance. Somewhere in among all that canopy, all those trees, was a creature, crawling back to Slovenia, bleeding out. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe she'd killed it, and it was lying in a shallow grave. Or in a shack basement, tied up, waiting to be waterboarded. It wouldn't be the first time she'd held something back from him

nope

it wouldn't even be the seventeenth time

she was an expert at not telling him things and

not just him

twenty-two other men also

all dead

each one having had no idea they were about to be dead cos she didn't say a word and

why

why the fuck should he care at all

about a few cuts and bruises and dizziness?

She'd tried to kill him

hadn't she?

He sat back down on the bed and thought of at least three more reasons why he was right and she was wrong before something in his brain, the review trigger, kicked in and told him you can't make your own barricades, it's not valid...no, worse, it's dishonest, disingenuous, dis-...it's just the same way you always think when you see topics you have no bias in, ahhh, why don't both sides just switch and argue the other's position and that way they can understand what the other person is trying to say

but

even with Nazis?

Murderers?

Did any of this make sense? It didn't. Or it did and it didn't. At some point he knew what he'd been trying to express, but now he'd mentioned Nazis and

had she tried to kill him...genuinely tried to do it?

And hadn't he just done the same thing to her?

His eyes went to the window again, viewing a blurred forest through the condensation.

To move forward, you have to be flexible, a guy in a bar had told him once. Like Jeri Ryan and her volcano nude scene in *Magma Carta*. Dip in, strip off, restructure your defences, smile.

Was that more valid?

Sila looked up at the TV. There was an Italian drama playing, a police woman hiding in a fountain, watching two men talk about something in hushed tones, crime probably.

She put a phone to her lips and spoke to another guy, her partner. He made a joke, she laughed. Clearly nothing bad had happened to them yet and, judging by the light, jaunty tone, nothing would.

'It's weird,' he said, taking out the pamphlet yet again and pretending to look at the *world-famous* Genoa Aquarium on the front cover. 'I really thought it was dead. It looked dead, when I left. Wasn't moving at all. Not even the eyes.'

He turned a page of the pamphlet.

'Guess my knife isn't as sharp as I thought. Or the Krsnik's got tougher skin. Like chainmail, or a shark.' He reached over and touched the blanket covering her arm. 'Next time I'll go for the throat. I promise. And chain you to the hostel bed afterwards.'

He laughed at his joke cos the blanket lump didn't, then pulled his hand away.

'I'm gonna get a coffee. They're a bit bigger here. Not toy town size.' He stood up, pulling the sleeves of his jacket down. 'You want one?'

The blanket nodded and a voice broke out. 'Black, no sugar.'

~~~

The next morning, Joanna was released and, though it had only been three days, her leg had recovered to such an extent that she didn't need to stumble around in a wheelchair anymore, which was convenient as the only way she could've taken one out of the hospital would've been to pay for it

and

she was really low on cash.

Sila came early to take her from the hospital back to the hostel, apologising for not being even earlier.

'I forgive you,' Joanna said, allowing him to drape her arm over his shoulder.

'Grazie.'

'Do you forgive me?'

'For what?'

She paused, giving way to pedestrian noise and traffic until they were in a taxi, then leaned over to his neck and said, 'Ljubljana.'

'Huh?'

'All the terrible things that happened there.'

Sila stared out the window, cycling through the various phrases that he'd rehearsed ever since they'd slept together back in Innsbruck and then forgetting them completely and just squeezing her hand.

'My leg hurts,' she said, resting her chin on his shoulder.

'You okay?'

'Leaning over makes it hurt.'

'Sit back then.'

She scrunched up her face like a cartoon and pushed herself back towards her side of the taxi. Then the window took her, the *passato* architecture of Vicenza, the pillars and balconies and walls that had been there for centuries

and the surveillance cameras

which looked hawk-like

and brand new.

'Better?'

~~~

Back at the hostel, Sila told her to lie down on the softer bunk and get a few hours rest, but she refused, saying it was better to keep moving forward, like a squid.

'Like a shark?'

'Squid.'

'Not shark?'

'Squid.'

'Err...okay. Squid.'

She asked what time the next train was and, as Sila took out his phone to search, started packing her bag. All the important stuff went in first, her

Slovene to Chinese dictionary, the German gift for Yute Long, the book on Krsnik, which she looked at for a long, long time.

It was hard to know why, she'd read it so many times, what more was there to learn and, clearly thinking the same thing, Sila stopped scanning the train timetable and asked her direct, 'you still wanna go down that road?'

'What road?'

'The Ljubljana brick one.'

She patted her bag and replied, 'I don't know, maybe,' which didn't mean much cos roads were fairly permanent and Ljubljana wasn't going anywhere in her lifetime, so a side mission to Genoa or Spain or the Arctic Circle didn't make that much difference, if any, and her *I don't know, maybe* told Sila exactly that, allowing him to skip a sequitur about cul-de-sacs and focus on packing his own bag, the green knife, the Italian Monogatari book, the new English to Romanian dictionary he'd picked up the day before, and, as he was taking out his wallet, he found a loose vial of *grey vasic* and, remembering the black hole gaps, the ease of all those half-acted journeys

turned to his sometime Misako and

asked if she needed any.

Joanna stared at the vial as if it were the shadow of Prince Taob, the liquid congealed inside the Id of his brides.

'It might help,' Sila said, taking out the stopper.

Giving an answer in sharp Cantonese, she snatched the vial out of his hand and hobbled into the bathroom. With one hand clamped on the mirror to steady herself, she poured the vasic down the sink, shook out the last drops then dropped the glass remains in the tiny bin, saying Aiwass-defiant to the ugly tiles,

'don't want it,

don't need it,

don't ever ask me again.'



Alpine postcard

rough lindenwood panels surrounding

black hole

shouts of accented English

the Chinese girl

Joanna

saying she had to follow, it was wounded

door open

cold wind, specks of snow

laboured attempt to shift a leg

tearing his own wounds

falling out of into

alpine postcard, wooden panels

white face

white cup, white floating bowl

scattershot Italian

'can rest, take care of you'

four hazy masks

spinning wooden panel show

black hole.

~~~

The Italian followed him past the event horizon and into the café he used to visit in Marcory, telling him to eat some soup, or drink it, whichever verb he preferred, as it would give him strength back and possibly heal the neck wound too.

Patrice tried losing himself in the scooters and cars blurring past outside, but they'd been replaced by the alpine postcard scene, jagged, snow-conquered peaks, a huge brush of forest in the foreground and

a hovering bowl in the slightly closer foreground

getting closer

the woman's face skewed, tilted,

'it's soup made from home-grown vegetables

picked especially for you

try.'

'Where?' came out of his mouth along with the sharpened image of the window that wasn't a postcard, the room that wasn't lodged inside a pocket within a black hole, and the woman in a white nightgown and deep crimson neckband, who was still speaking Italian, telling him soup was just this meal, not a long term diet.

'Where?' he repeated, reaching an unsteady hand out towards the woman's arm and catching her hair instead.

Her fingers stayed wrapped around the bowl, her cheek leaning into Patrice's knuckles.

'My home,' she replied, mostly hushed breath.

Patrice pulled his hand back, the abruptness of the movement opening the cut on his neck. The pain was blunt, atavistic, but grabbed-memory of worse pain nullified it.

'Soup,' the woman said, pushing the bowl towards his mouth.

'Where is here? Your home...'

'Soup first, then rest.'

'Vicenza?'

'Soup. Rest.'

'Please...is it Vicenza?'

She put the bowl down on the bedside table and ran a cold finger down his leg. 'Vicenza is not far. But it is also not near. You can stay until your strength returns.'

How did I end up here was the next question in Patrice's head, but her finger was on his thigh, still moving upwards...

'Need to go...' he said, shifting so far across the bed that he slipped off and landed head-first on the surprisingly hard floor.

Fourteen spinning wooden boards materialised

plus the woman's distant voice

'your hand, clumsy French man,'

abandoning him

as he slipped back into the black hole.

~~~

Both his old house in Treichville,

and the primary school opposite

full of half-friends and blurs and

him on the slope leading to the sports field

trying to balance a plastic cup

then in the yard, roaming

searching for his wife

finding couples he didn't know arguing about Ernst

not art, great art, not art, great art

and a white woman

in a dirty white gown

red scarf tight around her neck

telling him it was okay  
her skin would warm up eventually,  
you'll get used to it.

~~~

Light and snow and wooden panelled walls
talisman with flower, key, moon, chicken
open door
and

in a greenish-white flash that may or may not have been real
he was awake again

aware of the woman's hair next to him, the pale skin of her shoulder, the
red neck band choking her out.

Vicenza, he thought, pushing the blanket away and sliding off the bed onto
the cold floor. His clothes were missing, even his pants, but there was a *Neon
Kropotkin* t-shirt and adidas trackies and

his Roma jacket, stained with dried blood on the collar, most of it his own,
some of it the Krsnik's.

'You're leaving?' asked the woman, her head turned in an almost unnatural
way, eyes pastel blue.

Patrice stumbled to the chair, picking up the Roma jacket and holding it
over his dick, the entire archive of human consciousness ordering him to get
back in the bed, merge with the lunatic woman who'd cleaned up his wounds,
and

a vague outline of his wife agreeing
saying yes
merge with her, Patrice
merge, merge, merge, merge
merge

yet his hand was already on the door and beyond that there was a cabin
type room that he noticed just enough to know that there was an old-

fashioned fireplace, and a fire, and another door straight ahead, with another, larger talisman pinned up, and

jacket on, he ran out into the flip side of the alpine postcard, through the dark gaps between the trees, thinking of the woman in the bed, the monster who'd brought him to her, the Chinese Joanna who'd left him to die

no, tried to help him then left him to die

no, ran after he'd told her to

let him save her as his final act before

this

a bed with a naked witch feeding him soup and

the cold of the snow finally broke through, to his neck wound and the soles of his feet, forcing him earthwards in a slow tumble, mouth sliding impossibly onto an icy twig and holding it there like a dog as another twig careened off onto the frozen surface of the river nearby, cracking it and

he commanded his legs up

but it was mutiny

reflected audibly by a louder cracking sound

the river skin breaking

and

~~~

He woke up not in the snow, but back on the bed.

Naked, with a warm towel on his head.

A quick scan of the room told him nothing had changed. It was still snowing outside, or had been snowing. The jagged snow peaks and dark forest endured, as did the eerie talisman.

'She was crying with wild entreaty, the way one vomits,' said a voice close by, in soft Italian.

Thankfully the woman with pastel blue eyes wasn't in the bed with him, she was sat cross-legged on the chair, reading from a blank-covered book in her left hand.

'So unsettled by love and the sense of her nakedness that her voice shrank in her throat.'

Patrice could understand about half of the words, and guess a few others, but he was too dazed to put any of it together. And curious. As to how she'd got him back into the bed. Did someone assist her? Was there a second person in this cottage? A butler?

And where the fuck were they? His mental state wasn't the clearest, but he was certain he'd run at least a mile. And seen nothing.

No one.

Not even lights or smoke or music from a neighbouring house.

'She was weeping, in her wild nakedness, as she approached my bed, which to me was a death bed.'

'How did I come back here?' he asked in serviceable Italian, putting a hand up to his neck and patting a dry, obviously fresh bandage.

She looked up from the book, smiling awkwardly.

'Someone carried me?'

Uncrossed her legs.

'A man?'

Stood up from the chair.

'Where is this?'

Placed the book on the bedside table.

'Near Vicenza?'

Glided closer to the bed.

'Who are you? A private nurse?'

Lifted the blanket up.

'What are you doing?'

Climbed on top of him.

'Please...'

Took hold of his semi-hard dick and positioned it against herself.

'My wife...'

Put her spare hand against his bandage, and said, 'you are strong enough now. It will help.'

'*Non, arret. I'm married, I have a-...*'

He swatted away her wrist and turned on his side, forcing her off...then catching her by the arm before she tumbled all the way down to the floor.

They hung in that position, painted by an imagined Varo, caught in the sub-space pocket between *fuck* and *better not*, or *fuck* and *would like to but wife*.

Finally, Patrice shuffled back and set up his left arm as a lower guard, saying again that he was married, and he just wanted to go home.

The woman stood up and straightened her gown, adjusted her red neck band then walked to the bedside table. There was a cup and a plate of bread, which she looked at for an uncomfortably long period of time, so uncomfortably long that Patrice started rehearsing *sorry* lines in his head.

'You need sustenance,' she said, finally, pouring what looked like coffee from the cup evenly over the bread. 'To fix your brain.'

Bringing the plate over to the bed, she tilted her head and offered it to him.

Bread on a coffee puddle.

'I'm not hungry,' he lied, pulling the blanket up to his neck wound.

She stared at him, head tilting a few millimetres more

then put the plate on the blanket beside his arm

and left.

~~~

Pulling on the adidas trackies, and the Roma jacket, Patrice scanned the room for socks and shoes and was about to head out into the main cabin room to expand the search when the woman appeared in the doorway, holding a fold-up map.

'This will guide you back to Vicenza,' she said, holding it out towards him.

He took it, avoiding the pastel blue eyes as best he could...then remembered how soothing they were and looked dead into them.

'Thank you...' he mumbled, failing to think of anything beyond, except *let me swim inside you* and *please don't have a knife in that hand behind your back*.

Misinterpreting, the woman told him her name was Damijana.

'Patrice...' he replied, a little slow.

'From Vicenza, you can find your wife, Patrice,' she continued, guiding him by the jacket sleeve out into the main cabin. 'If you get lost again, if your strength should desert you, call my name and I will come.'

'I think I'll be okay.'

Damijana pushed him a little further then detached her hand from his waist and diverted to the fire place. There was a totem on one side - a winged, amphibious creature with human limbs - and she placed her right hand on the head of it.

Unsure what else to say, Patrice muttered a supplementary *thank you* then pulled on the door handle and walked out, his cheek brushing against the talisman as he went.

~~~

The river he'd seen the last time hadn't been an hallucination, which was a good sign, but it also didn't appear to be on the map.

In fact, nothing did.

The small village that was supposed to be just beyond the forest may have been real, but he had no way to tell as there was no end point to the terrain, just lines and lines of trees and the shadowed strips between them, and there was no distance key on the map, so he had no idea if he was one kilometre off or a hundred.

After an hour or so of treading breadcrumb snow prints alongside the frozen river, he pulled out the map again, rotated it, whispered REVEAL, blew on it

then threw it at the ground in frustration.

At that exact moment, either from a pagan dimension or one cloaked mockingly in front of his face, a gust of wind sailed through the forest, scooping up the map and carrying it in soft dada fashion over and into a tiny fishing hole in the ice.

*Fuck all the mothers* would've been the normal response, but the map was useless anyway and the bigger concern was the swirling mist advancing from the other side of the river, plus the zig-zagging trees and

the black holes growing from different sky points

around him

below him

beyond his-

'Help...' he screamed, unable to hear if his own voice had body to it, 'Damijana.'

The name travelled outwards and nowhere

lost in the burgeoning mist cloud

impotent

not even shrill enough to make birds fly out of the canopy in annoyance.

Damijana, he thought, swiping at the mist.

Dami Jana

Dami of Jana

Dami

~~~

You worked with him again, didn't you?

No

You saw him again

No

You did this

No, I-

You worked with him and he did this, you let him do this, you didn't do anything to

stop, please, I didn't-

Patrice woke up repeating the words to warm air.

'Didn't see him, he was-...'

The room had sucked him back in and the alpine postcard was fixed to night mode. The talisman on the bedside table. No plates or cups. Human noises from the cabin room. Oddly warm air.

He pushed off the blanket and pressed his feet to the floor.

Waiting out a few seconds to make sure there was no residual dizziness, he lifted himself fully up and put on the *Neon Kropotkin* t-shirt.

In the room outside, the noises increased in volume. Either an argument in slurred Italian or intense fucking.

Edging forward with first day ninja footsteps, he put a fingertip against the door and pushed open a small gap.

He was half right.

The back of Damijana was upright and swaying by the fireplace, a naked man with a grubby beard beneath her. Most of the noises were coming from him, punctuated with random shouts of, 'fuck me witch,' and then a shift to, 'take that big pagan dick,' as he manoeuvred her around into the dog position.

No, no, no, no...

Patrice looked back into the bedroom, at the postcard window, wondering if it had a latch he could unhook.

Nothing visible.

Putain...

Front door was clearly out of the question, and he couldn't stay where he was cos at some point they might get bored of the fireplace and come in and then

what would he say?

Hi, I'm the guy she was trying to fuck while you were away.

If it was her boyfriend...

Her husband...

The noises outside became grunts and bursts of *fucking witch whore* over and over, the aggressiveness of the latter pushing Patrice back to the gap in the door.

A cold shiver ran up the length of his arm, all the way to his neck wound.

The man had Damijana on her back and was looming over her, pushing in with hard, staggered thrusts, his hand tight around her throat.

Was this consensual?

BDSM?

Patrice wiped his palm on the door frame, looking back at the wall, the bedside table, anywhere for a weapon.

The key of the talisman could potentially work, but...

Outside, the man changed tack, grabbing a horse whip hanging to the side of the fire and using it on Damijana's stomach.

One thrust, one *fucking witch whore*, one lash of the whip.

Continuous repeat.

Stuck to the wooden floorboards, Patrice stood there and watched, lost on a hundred different channels, trying desperately to think of advice columns he'd read or films he'd seen or reality shows he'd slept through where this kind of sex play was normal.

And then Damijana spoke,

'I can't take it anymore, please, I can't take it,'

and that was the switch.

Grabbing the talisman in his left hand, the Roma jacket in the other, Patrice flipped his brain to Crowley mode and rushed out.

The man was too busy with his whipping routine to notice the blur of movement, and when he did finally detect it, he must have thought it was a mirage as he just knelt there, frozen with his dick at the gates, watching the Roma jacket fly towards his head.

Then he changed to thinking it was a bat, his hands flailing and then grappling with the jacket, throwing it on the couch only to have the talisman land on his neck and

after that, Patrice's hand

hitting his cheek, his temple, his jaw, then pushing him back against the table with all the candles on.

'Back...' shouted Patrice, grabbing the winged totem creature and waving it at the man, who spat out blood and slouched back against the table, allowing another candle to drop on his head.

Hearing heavy breathing behind, Patrice turned and saw Damijana pulling herself up to her feet, bones cracking someplace.

'He was hurting you,' Patrice said, halfway between a question and a statement of fact.

'Unoriginal,' she whispered in reply, making no attempt to cover herself.

'What?'

'Predictable, feeble. And still, I would've tolerated him...'

Patrice reached with his free hand for the Roma jacket, handing it to her.

'...for a short while.'

The sound of the last word was drowned out by more cracking sounds, Damijana's neck twisting left, her back bending, the spine feeding its way out like loose string...

Patrice stood there, totem hanging limp from his hand, watching her transform. Snap in half. Die horribly. Something.

Then closed his eyes a second after the final form emerged; the top of the spine like an adder attached to the base of her back, the skin and flesh draped forward like a chunky bib.

The cracking sounds resumed, followed by screams from the man, and finally silence.

Don't look

Don't look

Don't look

Don't

Patrice opened one eye.

The spine creature was still there, its *mouth* feeding on the broken corpse, the Damijana aspect asleep.

Then it stopped and

the metamorphosis reversed itself, this time on fast forward, Damijana's flesh and skin wrapping itself back around the deviant spine and

with pastel blue eyes active

sealing itself up with a final flourish of cracks and squelches of lost blood.

'Teamwork...' Damijana said, tilting her head and, for the first time, smiling.

Patrice nodded, threw the totem at the naked monster, and ran towards the door

knocking the talisman off as he yanked it open

saying *putain*

then picking it up and throwing that at her too.

It missed by a metre, but he didn't care, he was already sprinting

shoeless through the snow

into the forest

images of sapient spines cruising after him

swiping through the canopy
digging ancillary bones into his chest and
a branch came to life, hooking his foot and bringing him down diagonally
onto the river ice
his cheek slip-scraping against it
ears picking up the cracking sound
not bones this time but
void stillness.

He stared up as the black hole swelled behemoth and sucked him in,
soaked his flesh in cold entropy,
the dark branches in the window above his only respite and
he begged
please
please don't appear, please don't appear, please don't appear, please don't
but it did
the woman's face
those pastel blue eyes
red neck band refastened
staring down into his pocket river abyss
observing him
letting him know
that there was worse
much worse than the Krsnik
if he

~~~

Head in a dome  
scientists speaking solely in Twi  
a glass cylinder

you can take a little more

you have a good head

a little more

the giant scientist detaching his arm and using it to press a large red button that activated a green haze that

created the woman

in a transparent lab coat

her pastel blue eyes telling him, in a vague electronic tone that

she'd been alone in the cottage for a long time

was accustomed to it

but recently more men had come, possibly due to this internet machine they'd told her about.

Patrice rubbed his head and watched as the other scientists blinked out one by one until finally only the pastel blue-eyed woman creature remained.

He opened his eyes, unsurprised to see her sitting on the chair in the usual white gown/red neck band combo, cross-legged, spine intact, left hand resting softly on the back of his.

'Ah, you are awake. Did you hear what I said?'

'The forest...'

She nodded, patting his hand.

'You bring me back here...again.'

'I did.'

'Why?'

'The river is quite cold this time of year.'

Patrice pulled his hand away, but not far enough, her fingers crawling after it and settling on the back of his wrist.

'If you're referring to motive...well, to repeat myself, I have been alone here for a long time. Since father died. The only respite from my solitude is the occasional male visitor. Most of them turn out to be iterations of my father, and are dealt with as per the curse, yet sometimes...I receive surprises, like you. At least, it appears that way. Perhaps it will wear off as you regain your full strength. I do not know. But it has already been more than a week...so perhaps not.'

'A week?'

'Eleven days to be precise. Most of that time you were unconscious. Blood loss.'

'And the police...they do not come?'

'It is a remote place. Not easy to find...'

'So they don't know I am here...'

'...not easy to leave. No, they do not.'

'You are going to kill me?' Patrice muttered, watching her nails run through the hairs on his forearm.

'If I did that, how would you be reunited with your wife?'

He closed his eyes, not sure if he'd heard right.

'You do want to see her again, don't you?'

'I can't...the forest, it's too dense. Won't let me leave.'

'Incorrect. It will not let you leave me.'

'*Pardon?*'

She left his wrist and stood up, moving over to the window. 'I have been within the walls of this cottage my whole life. If you plucked out my eyes, I could still describe every molecule of it. I could still walk around and perform all the daily functions, by touch alone. Yet, recently, I have begun to find it quite...enervating...somehow.' She turned back, fixing her red neck band. 'I will take you to Vicenza, Patrice. As a guide.'

'Take me?' He rubbed his head again, trying to block out the spine slaughter from the previous night. 'I don't know if-...'

'You do not need to squirm. I have no intention of harming you.'

'Okay...but-...'

'The world is far more interesting having you within its walls. I believe that is a quote from somewhere.'

'I'm interesting?'

'Innately, *sì*. Your behaviour. Even the way you say *help*, or *let me drown* in that accent.'

'I cannot remember...'

She moved her hand onto his hair and weaved her way through it, across to his ear.

'Get some more rest. We'll leave for Vicenza in the morning.'

'We can really go there?'

'In a matter of hours. Now rest, please.'

'*Oui*...okay.'

He flinched as her fingernail moved onto his stubble, then settled into a dream-like haze as she leaned down and kissed his cheek.

The room shimmered, the black hole returned  
its darkness dotted with swirls of pastel blue and  
detached spines with smiling faces  
saying, 'hi there  
Patrice  
would you try to be one of the good ones?'

~~~

Despite doubts and nightmares dramatizing said doubts along abstract lines, the pair did leave the cottage together the next morning, him in his blood-stained Roma top, her in a Juventus bubble jacket.

When he first saw her in it, he laughed

asking if she knew who that team was, who any of the players were, but then she reeled off a list of the current first team plus subs and he laughed again, saying she was truly a mystery.

'One of my previous visitors was a Juventus supporter,' Damijana replied, pointing at a path trailing left through the forest.

'Oh.'

'He talked endlessly about football. It was quite a relief when he tried to strangle me.'

Patrice looked right, checking for another path, or another crack in the river ice.

'Perhaps it's best if we do not talk about past men,' she said, squeezing his gloved hand.

'Good idea.'

~~~

After nearly an hour of overbearing canopy and unverified wildlife noise, they came across a small village.

It wasn't the Vicenza he was semi-hoping for, but Patrice clapped his hands anyway, telling Damijana she was a sky-born genius.

'This is my neighbourhood,' she replied, caustic, stopping next to a car and stroking its bonnet. 'Though it looks a lot different now. Not so much horse shit on the road.'

'You've never seen a car before?'

'That is what this is called?'

'Sì. It's the modern version of a horse...basically.'

A gruff male voice shouted from across the street, telling them to get away from his baby. Damijana kept her hand on the bonnet, confused.

'I said, get your fucking hands off it,' repeated the man, who was planet-sized and coming their way, rolling up his sleeves, honing in on the black guy.

'Sorry, she was just curious,' replied Patrice, pulling Damijana away by the sleeve of her Juventus jacket.

'Hey, you okay?' the man asked, switching targets. 'Is he bothering you?'

Damijana tilted her head, one of the neck bones making a cracking sound that made Patrice say *oh fuck* and the Italian mutter *fucking weirdo, witch psycho* as he backed off, clipping someone's else's car on the way.

'Seems as though cars are very valuable,' she said, straightening her head and taking Patrice's hand.

'*Oui*, to some people. Come on, let's see if there's a bus or train around here.'

They kept going, eventually finding the bus station and discovering as Joanna had a few days before that Italian buses were erratic and the next one wasn't until the morning.

'We'll have to stay here for the night,' said Damijana, sticking hands in her jacket pocket.

'That might be difficult,' Patrice replied. 'I do not have any money. Or even my phone.'

'Do not fret, it's on me.' Damijana pulled her hands out and showed off two wallets, part of a fifty euro note sticking out at the top.

'Where did you get those?'

'Donations.'

'From?'

'Come, this street here. Let us find somewhere with a nice view of the slopes.'

~~~

Being a small village omitted from the main tourist roster meant that there was only one hostel with a view of the slopes, but, in a rare shot of good fortune, almost all of the rooms were vacant.

And the hostel lady was quite amiable too, signing them in without any weird looks, and offering them a basket of fresh fruit in case they got hungry after dinner.

She even spoke a bit of French to Patrice, somehow guessing that he was from the Ivory Coast and asking if that's where the two of them had met.

'We're not a couple,' he clarified, sitting down in front of the only computer in the hostel and logging into his e-mail.

'He's married,' added Damijana, putting her hands on Patrice's shoulders and starting up a light massage.

'I see,' said the hostel lady, squinting, then pretending to spot something that needed dusting in the corner and dashing off.

'I don't think she believed us,' said Damijana, moving her fingers down Patrice's back.

There was no response.

'An unwelcome letter?' she asked, leaning closer to the screen, attempting to sound out the foreign words.

Patrice muttered something in French, letting his body slump forward. Then re-read the e-mail.

'From your wife?'

After going through it three times, he laughed and said, 'good for you,' in Italian.

'For who? What does it say?'

Patrice said it didn't matter, it was just basic talk from his wife, then looked around at the small bookshelf nearby – with a sign saying HOSTEL LIBRARY on the wall above – and nodded.

'How about a bit of reading?'

'I don't mind.'

'Sì, can practise my Italian more.'

'Me too.'

'You?'

'A lot of my vocabulary is outdated. From a different era. With the exception of the some film and football slang.'

'I can understand it okay.'

'Sì, that is odd. Perhaps it is not that bad. Hmm, I shall read something modern and see...'

Settling into the two cushioned chairs next to the bookshelf, Patrice and Damijana grabbed *My Brilliant Friend* // Ferrante and *Prison Notebooks* // Gramsci and, after an hour of muttering the words out loud, traded thoughts.

To Patrice, it was mostly blank as he was just trying to understand the text, whereas, to Damijana, both books were a little bit tedious as they were all about Italy.

What she really wanted was to read foreign stuff, like books from Mongolia or Pakistan, or the Ivory Coast.

'Don't think there's any here.'

'In Vicenza then.'

'Maybe not there also.'

'Not even a translated script?'

'It is not that popular. Some Nigerian writers can maybe do it, but...not that common.'

'Understood. Then I'll have to go there myself. With you.'

Patrice shifted position in his seat, eyes going back down to Ferrante.

'Your wife wouldn't approve?'

There was something unbearable in the things, in the people, in the buildings, in the streets that, only if you reinvented it all, as in a game, became acceptable.

'Patrice?'

He looked up, the words he'd just read non-existent. The thoughts in his head scattered. The image of a poster sketch of a child on his wife's stomach. Her voice telling him to stop blaming himself. And the echo coming back, telling him it was all his fault. The pictures of her and the shadow at the pyramids. The man who now shared her bed, who had nicknames for her, who had put a stronger seed in her belly.

He could feel the wetness building in his eyes but there was no point going back to the book and pretending.

She'd just keep prodding and

it was done

years ago

before that even

better just to say it out loud and

what?

Confess to a monster?

A pretty, sometime monster with pastel blue eyes...

Patrice closed the book in his hand and leaned forward, telling Damijana in one long burst everything

rubbing the faded part of his ring as he spoke

then finally slumped back in his seat and mumbled,

'there, a surprise.'

~~~

The room they'd been given had all the basics plus a black and white portrait of Italo Svevo, a crucifix, one double bed and no covers for Patrice to use on the floor.

Didn't matter either way, as when he suggested it, Damijana said if he tried to sleep on the floor, she would too, and as the bed was generally more comfortable, then they should both sleep there.

And watch the hanging TV.

'You've never seen one before?'

'Not outside of photographs. Do I have to press a button to open it?'

'Err...remote is okay.' Patrice picked up the control from the desk and sat down on the side of the bed. He was still wearing his Roma jacket even though the radiator was on, while Damijana had stripped down to nothing as soon as the door had closed behind her, and was now under the duvet with the fresh fruit bowl on her lap.

'I think there's a nightgown in the cupboard,' he said again, keeping his eyes on the TV.

'Do they have foreign films?' she countered, taking a banana out of the bowl and sticking it straight in her mouth.

'Wah, wait...'

She stopped, mid-bite.

'You have to peel it first...'

'Peel?'

'The banana. We don't eat the skin.'

She took it out of her mouth and examined the bite marks. Then fumbled with the top of the banana, finally managing to pull a strip from the top.

Patrice leaned across and tried to help her, then laughed when he saw the bite marks.

'First time I've eaten a banana,' she said, taking a bite.

He stared at her chewing, the pastel blue eyes looking back at him, the hair rambling down over her shoulders, the upper slope of her breasts, the ecstasy of being together with-

Damijana leaned forward, kissing Patrice on the bottom lip, wrapping her arm around the back of his neck, pulling him down on top of her

the football jacket coming off, the *Neon Kropotkin* t-shirt

his hands everywhere, tits, stomach, thighs

hers on the stem of his dick

stroking it

rubbing it against herself and then smothering his protests of *I can't, I can't* with the palm of her hand and guiding him inside.

Patrice looked down, all senses locked in tight, thoughts Derridean, anxious, euphoric

the dogged fear of cumming within seconds

the urge to go faster

full purple nihilist and

then the other man appeared, the corpse with the horsewhip

calling her a *fucking witch whore*

and his wife

laying rigid beside them

asking why he never did it this way with her

with no phone

no cash

not deserving of

He stopped mid-stroke, staring down at Damijana's pastel blue eyes.

'Don't say *I can't*,' she told him, smiling.

He opened his mouth, stuck.

'Don't say it.'

'I...'

'Don't.'

Her hand slipped round his back and the fingernails trailed down the spine, and again, she pulled him in, bringing his whole body down in the same motion, whispering, 'hold me tight, fuck me,' into the nascent scab of his neck wound.

~~~

After it was done, they lay on the bed, heads at the same level on the same pillow, with Patrice glancing at the back of Damijana's neck every few seconds.

'It's in slumber,' she said, finally, putting a hand on his cheek and guiding him back to her face.

'Sorry...'

She took his hand and kissed the back of it. 'Perhaps never to waken again.'

'Perhaps?'

'I could be attacked by a strange man.'

'No...'

'Not something I want to think about, but it could happen. If you left me alone somewhere.'

'I won't.'

Patrice kissed her soft on the lips and let her guide his hand over her breasts, then down lower...

~~~

'Told you it was sleeping,' Damijana said again, smiling as she rolled off Patrice and over to the remote control. 'Shall we watch TV?'

'You know how to work that?' he asked, breathing still a bit ragged.

She pressed the ON button and pointed with revelation face at the screen as it flashed on.

Soon enough, she figured out that it was connected to the internet and asked Patrice to pick a country.

'For film selection?'

She nodded.

'India.'

'Genre?'

'Err...action. No, wait...horror. Horror's better.'

She gave a stern look then started flicking through the maze of options until she found the search function, making Patrice laugh again as the button had *search* written right next to it.

'Indian horror films,' she said, typing it out.

The first one was monochrome and labelled *Madhumati*. The rating was good so Patrice gave her the greenlight to click on it.

'What are we gonna do next?' asked Patrice, as the film started.

'Adventures,' she replied, laying back down next to him and placing the remote control on his chest.

'That might not be easy.'

'Why not?'

'I don't have a passport.'

She mouthed back the word, frowning at the Indian woman on the screen.  
'What's a passport?'

'*Merde...*' said Patrice in French, whistling out Jarmanian breath then spotting the half-peeled banana on the carpet and laughing

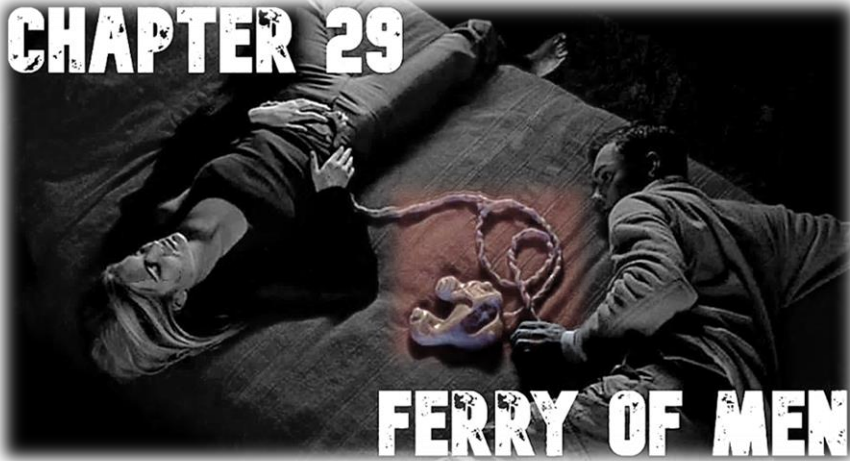
laughing like he had at the castle

until he heard a bone crack.

'We'll figure it out,' he said quickly, stroking the back of Damijana's neck, peering down at the line of her spine as, on the TV screen, an Indian woman climbed up onto a balcony, her face muted

possibly enervated.

## CHAPTER 29



FERRY OF

FERRY OF

FERRY OF

The words *Ferry Terminal* may have been written in Italian, but almost everyone waiting inside was North African, and it wasn't until he double-checked the boat timetable that Sila realised there were two stops in total, Barcelona and Tangiers.

Then realised further that he'd known that before, back in Vicenza. The ferry goes to Morocco *and* Barcelona. And at some point since, his brain had sublimated it. As his brain often did...with everything except cabinets. Or in favour of them.

He walked back, sucking coffee through a straw, wondering if the way the North African guys were acting was similar to the way Iranian guys would if they were on the plastic seats instead.

He'd always wanted to go there

to Iran

but it would be hard to get the green knife through customs, unless he travelled by train or car, which would inevitably lead to other problems

called Syria

and probably death by sarin gas or

*cleansing artillery.*

Maybe if he got a tan and grew a beard, learnt some Arabic, learnt some slang

he could make it past the border

all the way to Tehran

as long as they had their eyes closed

but then

what about Joanna?

Where would that leave her?

~~~

The Chinese patient was sitting on one of the green plastic chairs near the ferry entrance gate, surrounded by men. Ten minutes ago, when Sila had left to buy a coffee and a bottle of *not Evian*, it had been seventy-five per cent empty, now it was standing room only.

'Thanks for saving me a seat,' he said, flashing the tickets.

'They didn't ask.'

'Wah, first three words of the day. Amazing.'

'I spoke before.'

'When?'

'This morning.'

'You mean, *where are we going?*'

'Are they not words?'

Sila shrugged, annoyed she'd tricked him by going into pedant mode, and said, 'barely.' Then segued into the huge glass window framing the prettier part of Genoa harbour, trying to remember her shape lying in the hospital bed, vulnerable, depressed, apologetic, incapable of facetiousness.

It may have been wrong on a technical level - they were words, and there had been others - but the essence was true: she hadn't said much the last day or two. In fact, she hadn't said much the whole last week, not since they left Vicenza, except for basic *where* and *what* questions and, 'it wasn't my fault,' on intermittent loop. But that was weird too as each time he'd asked her about it - *what wasn't your fault, the Roma Jacket guy?* - she'd shut down and said, 'nothing, let's talk about something else.'

And then to every other topic, she'd just churn out a basic, 'I don't know,' and go blank, even to a simple question like, *do you speak any Spanish?*

'You want some of this coffee?' Sila asked, mentally slotting back into the surroundings and handing her the carton.

She didn't move either hand, so he assumed it was a no.

'Water?'

Didn't want that either.

A group of men on a nearby row of plastic chairs cheered or swore, it was hard to know which as it was in screeched Arabic, and, to crown the moment, one of them threw a cigarette at another man's beard. The beard guy said something brusque back then picked up the gift, wiped it on his PUMA jacket and lit up.

'Will they be this noisy on the boat?'

'Probably.'

'How do you know?'

'I've been to Egypt.'

'Are they Egyptian?'

'No, Algerian. I think. Maybe Moroccan. But the culture's not that different, far as I know.'

'It's annoying.'

'Nah, they're not actually angry, they just speak loud. Same way Korean people do. Or the Irish.'

'Feels like I'm in their living room.'

Sila laughed.

'Their body language, voices. Wah, those ones have bare feet.'

'It's their culture.'

'To not wear shoes?'

'I think so.'

She pointed at another group of men. 'Those ones don't have bare feet.'

'They might have. Later, on the ferry.'

'They're smoking.'

'Also their culture. Possibly.'

'There's a *NO SMOKING* sign above their heads.'

'Ja, I know.'

Joanna sat up and stared at the other people around her. 'I don't like it. Doesn't feel comfortable.'

'Why? They're not doing anything bad. They're not drunk.'

'Reminds me of the mainland.'

'Which one? China?'

'Not Guangzhou, just Shenzhen, Wuhan, Hong Kong sometimes. Parts of Hong Kong. The east rail line from Hung Hum to Lo Wu mostly. Some of the uncles, they take up two seats on the train and shout a lot, push on when the doors open.'

'Don't know. I've never been there.'

'I wasn't asking for your view, I'm telling you a fact.'

'Okay. I'll shut up then.'

'I wasn't asking for that either.'

'Err...it was a joke.'

Some of the smoke from the Moroccan guy drifted over, along with a complete lack of effort to stop anymore from following it.

'We need a vacuum cleaner,' said Joanna, swatting the smoke back towards the guy.

'You want me to grab a fan off the wall, point it at him?'

'They wouldn't let you.'

'Yeah, I wasn't actually gonna do it. I was just-...'

'And it's too aggressive.'

Sila bit into his straw, stifling the laugh. 'Fuck, you're so pedantic sometimes, it's insane. You say something weird, like the vacuum cleaner line...I go on the same level, the same weirdness, and then you switch back to realism again...answering deadpan like I'm an idiot for saying weird shit when you're the one who started it.'

'... ..'

'What?'

'You should calm down.'

'Fuck, not that-...I am calm. Very calm.'

'Think about the sea.'

'Very, very ca-...ah, the sea, sure. The stillness of it, the waves...'

'Or space.'

'...the soothing current. Yeah, space. Good idea. Thanks, master...'

'Anywhere without noisy men.'

'...you're so wise.'

Nearby, the largest of the ferry staff shouted something in Italian then opened the gate. When only a few people moved, he repeated it in gruff English and half the passengers grabbed their luggage handles and rose to their feet. The smoker nearby dropped his cigarette on the floor, using his heel to stub it out.

'This is going to be annoying.' Joanna stood up and stretched her arms. 'Think I'll try and sleep through it.'

'For eighteen hours?'

'Or check the ship first, see which parts are safe. If there's anywhere with people wearing shoes and reading, I'll sit there. If not, just hide in the cabin.'

Sila opened his mouth to call her racist, then modified to *think of the sea*, then stalled completely. Was she really saying anything that bad? Those specific guys were loud and annoying, others weren't. Didn't have to mean anything. And she did relate it to Hong Kong uncles.

But what if it was just the first of many complaints?

Others might do something else to irritate her, women as well as men, then the pool of acceptable people would grow shallower and shallower until the only ones left were the people who hated their own culture or idolised hers.

Was that the way it worked?

He remembered the Polish guy he'd met at Uni, the one who hated all Russians and Communists except for the Russian who also hated Communists and revered General Sikorski. That guy was okay, apparently. What did they call it? Exceptionalism?

'You daydreaming?'

He stared at a vague shape, which rapidly reformed as her face, staring back at him, hand tapping on the handle of her luggage.

'Little bit...'

'Doesn't matter. Noisy ones are still queuing.'

He looked over at the gate, hearing the soundwave disruption of those noisy ones before seeing their translated forms.

'Hopefully they all go to the same part of the ship.'

'Doubtful.'

'Or push each other overboard.'

Sila picked up his bag and checked the floor, spotting the still-burning butt of the guy's cigarette. 'They're not that bad,' he muttered, stepping his shoe into it.

~~~

The ferry was akin to a little pocket estate [*brez aristokratov*]  
possibly due to the length of the voyage  
with three integrated cafes  
a makeshift casino and  
even a nightclub.

The last one was out of the question, but the cafes weren't all loud and overbearing, and if they stuck together initially, going through the Barcelona itinerary perhaps, then slowly branched out to other couples on the tables nearby then she might eventually have something close to an okay time.

Sila waited until they were in their very cramped, two bed cabin before deciding to phase thoughts into targets. Obviously, she wouldn't listen, she never did, and it was a little patronising as he wasn't much better, often thinking the same irrational way towards Americans, but it was worth a shot.

'You know,' he started, taking a spot on the bed opposite to the one she'd chosen to lie diagonally on, 'I think the worst thing you could do in this situation is stay in the cabin.'

'Didn't say I would, said I might.'

'If you don't know a group of people, and you don't like that group of people, the best thing is to immerse yourself in that group and get to know them...with an open mind.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'What, the open mind part? Yeah, it's tough, but...honestly, if you've never met a North African before, and you don't feel comfortable, the best solution is to meet a lot of them, talk to them, interact. That's what Samuel Delany said.'

'I don't know who that is.'

'Sam Delany...American sci-fi guy, wrote *Babel-17*, *Dahlgren*. Very perceptive, if you ignore the NAMBLA debacle.'

'Was he ever stuck on a boat full of rude, noisy men?'

'Err...possibly.'

'Smoking directly into his face?'

'Anyway, not everyone here's a guy. The café we saw had two women, and a young girl running around their table. Probably the daughter.'

Joanna shifted position on the bed, tucking the second pillow into her stomach.

'And there'll be more later, when it's dinner time.'

'Yes. Leaving the safety of their cabins to be stared at, targeted...'

'Jesus...'

'...harassed by hairy perverts.'

'This is gonna be a long trip. Maybe we should just stay in the cabin after all.'

Joanna mumbled something in Cantonese then picked a spot on the ceiling and studied it. Sila watched her do it then drifted off into other thoughts. Ostensibly cabinets in Barcelona, then a tangent into the Spanish Civil War and what he'd read about the Stalinist faction falling in with the fascists, acting like fascists...cos they were fascists, before a final loop back round to psychology and how to nurture back to life a depressed and wounded Chinese miserabilist. There were no clear answers, so he took out his phone and typed *what does Jung say about...*

Hearing his muttered voiceover, Joanna sat up on the edge of the bed and fixed eyes on the cabin door. 'What time is it?'

'Now?'

She slurred something in Cantonese and picked up her phone, frowning. 'Too slow.'

'What is?'

'Feels like running on sand. I'm gonna go outside, look at the night sea.'

'And the horrible boat full of noisy men?'

'We'll see.'

She got off the bed and slid into her pink *Mizuno* jacket, asking if he was coming or not.

'Do you want me to?'

'No feeling.'

'Okay, then I'll stay here for a bit, see if the other person turns up.'

'You should've booked a private cabin.'

'It is private, it's just one bed was booked already, and all the others were taken.'

'Book another day then.'

'Ja, maybe, but it's done now.'

There was a noise from the cabin door, someone turning a key in the lock. Like Sila a few minutes before, they turned it the wrong way then pushed their weight against the door, making it vibrate. A fairly loud *fuck* in English outside, then a second attempt, the key turning the other way, the figure pushing a bit too hard and the door slinging itself against the wall of the cabin.

For some reason, possibly wound-related, Joanna was still standing close by, managing to reel back just enough to avoid getting clipped, but losing her balance in the process and falling onto the bed.

'Fuck,' said the guy in a South London accent, taking a step in and realising what he'd done. 'You okay?'

Joanna stared back at him, neck tilting awkwardly into the collar of her jacket.

'Tak.' He offered his hand, no smile, then pulled it back quickly when it wasn't taken. 'You got a name?'

Convincing herself it wasn't an alien she was looking at, but a Darren Bent lookalike in a blue and black *Ellesse* jacket, Joanna finally blinked, and moved her neck into a more comfortable position. 'It is hard for foreigners to pronounce.'

'The Chinese one?'

She nodded.

'Guess I'll skip it then.'

Joanna pulled herself up and edged over to the wall side of the bed, eyes glancing to the cabin door, which was still open.

'Don't take it personal, she won't tell me either,' said Sila, standing up and putting out his own hand. 'You can call her Joanna. I'm Sila.'

The man, Tak, pulled the same face the Polish guy at Uni used to pull whenever Sila put on *Stalker*. 'Sila...'

'Yeah.'

'On Magyar?'

'Sorry?'

'Tudod, mit mondtam. Dolgozol Vele?'

'Mate, I'm not sure what you're saying. Is that Polish?'

'Where's your name from?'

'Sila? Slovenia. It's Slovene.'

'Slovenia.'

'You know it?'

Tak grunted in response, then took his hand and gripped it tight. For the sake of his bones, Sila matched him. 'You two a couple or...'

'Friends. Or travel partners. That's what she calls it.' Sila looked at Joanna, hoping for some input but she was already pushing off the far end of the bed and heading for the corridor. 'You're going up on deck?'

'Sea watch.'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'Alone?'

The last one was answered by the door closing, which wasn't a snub really as it was obviously just her going up there. Smirking to himself about the *noisy men* tirade from earlier, Sila sat down on the bed she'd vacated, giving Tak enough space to put his bag down and take off his jacket.

'You're from London?' he asked, when the humming sound from the walls started to become a bit too dominant.

'What?'

'You're British, you come from London. Right?'

Tak stopped, his jacket half off, the robot head from *Chopping Mall* peeking out from the t-shirt beneath. 'How'd you know that?'

'Your accent. It's pretty strong.'

There was a grunt in response, followed by a folding of his jacket and a very disciplined placement on the foot of the bed. Sitting down closer to the pillow, Tak looked at the cabin door then at Sila, overtly scanning from his head to the *Old King Matjaž* hoodie and down to the shoes.

'Which part of London you from?' asked Sila, pulling at his hood. 'South Brixton?'

Tak looked at Sila as if he were speaking Slovene.

'Not Brixton?'

'Bermondsey.'

'Ah, Bermondsey. Close to Millwall territory.'

'What?'

'The football team. Millwall. They have their stadium near Bermondsey. I used to live near there. Bermondsey, not the stadium.'

'Millwall. Right.'

'Where about in Bermondsey are you?'

'No place famous.'

'Near the Surrey Quays side or...'

'No.'

'The other side then. Okay.' Sila looked around the cabin for inspiration, but the walls were faded ecru and sporadic brown stripes. 'Pretty nice ferry. Facilities-wise. Are you going to Barcelona or Tangiers?'

'Why would I be going to Tangiers?'

'Err...it's the final stop.'

'Not interested.'

'Okay. So Barcelona then.'

Grunting again, Tak reached down and took something out of his bag. Sila didn't see what it was until the guy sat down on the bed and started reading it.

'So...what are you doing in Barcelona?'

'What?'

'Barcelona...what are you doing there? Holiday or work or...'

'Work.'

'You have a job there?'

'Sometimes.'

'So you work in Genoa too, or was this just a holiday?'

'I don't work in Genoa.' Tak wasn't looking at Sila, he was flicking through his book, clearly searching for a specific page.

Sila formed a fist with his hand, annoyed that he was doing all the leg work. Who was this guy? Didn't he realise they were stuck with each other for the



next 17 hours? Fuck, there was no way he was gonna sleep in the same room as a guy who only gave one word answers and didn't smile. He already had that façade with Joanna...

'What work are you doing in Barcelona?' he tried once more, rolling up one of his hoodie sleeves...then slowly rolling it back down again.

'Paid.'

'Teaching?'

'No.'

Sila tried to think of other jobs, but the only one that came up was drug dealer. Vetoing that, he pulled his bag up onto the bed and rummaged through, pretending to look for something. Then spotting the *Italian Monogatari* book and thinking, should I?

'Question.'

The voice was abrupt and vaguely officious, causing Sila to look across to the door, and then back at his new cabin mate.

'Sorry?'

'Your travel partner,' continued Tak, seemingly asking the book in his hands. 'She's Chinese?'

'Joanna? Yeah. Why?'

'Which province?'

'Huh?'

'The province she lives in, which one?'

'Err...not sure. Bermondsey.'

Tak looked up, sharp, said Bermondsey wasn't in China then repeated the original question.

'Why do you wanna know?'

'Research.'

'You're going there?'

'Maybe.'

'Okay. Well...far as I know, she's from Hong Kong. Which is maybe...in Guangdong. I think. Though you should probably check a map to be sure.'

Tak went back to his book and scanned the page. Sila looked at his bag on the bed and thought again about pulling out *Italian Monogatari*, but he didn't

really want to read in silence next to this guy. Better just to go upstairs and spar with Joanna. At least she was funny now and then.

Standing up to full height, Sila put his still torn *Criolo* jacket on over *Old King Matjaž* and walked towards the door.

'Wait.'

He stopped, heart picking up a few more beats, no idea why. It was just a guy...a pretty rude guy, but nothing to be scared of. 'What?'

'I'm not done yet.'

'Sorry?'

'Your travel partner.'

Sila turned, half reaching for his jacket pocket. 'Okay, mate, I don't mind directness...much...but this is getting a bit weird. You're sounding like ship security or something.'

'Security?'

'Your tone, the way you're speaking. Maybe you could be a little less sharp...and not say *stop* like it's a command.'

Tak stared at him then tilted his head and stared at him even more, as if each word Sila had just said were being interrogated philosophically. Finally, he grunted, adding a wisp of breath this time, possibly an olive branch.

'I have some other questions,' he said, stopping Sila mid-turn back to the door.

'For me?'

'Yes.'

'About?'

Tak looked at his book. 'Your travel partner, does she sleep continuously at night?'

'What?'

'How many hours specifically does she sleep?'

'I don't know.'

'Give me an estimate.'

'Why? What's this for?'

'Research.'

'For what?'

Tak flipped a page, mouthing out several lines of text before converting them into actual sound. 'Does she ever go into a trance and speak in a language you don't understand?'

'Yeah, Chinese.'

'Within a trance state?'

'Not a trance exactly, something else.' Sila didn't know how to describe the state of being related to *grey vasic*, but then why the fuck should he? Who was this guy, Matthew Hopkins? 'No, she doesn't go into anything. Listen, mate, I'm gonna go now. Maybe you can ask her yourself when she comes back, see how she reacts.'

'That won't work.'

'Then she can ask you some questions too. Like, what do you do in Barcelona?'

'She won't ask me that.'

'Ah, she will, trust me. Whatever you think she won't ask, that's exactly what she'll ask. It's her M.O.'

'One more question.'

'Mate, I'm going.'

'Stop.' He scanned the page, muttering to himself.

'Can you stop saying *stop*?'

'Ah, this one. When she washes her hands, does she make a noise? Does she say anything?'

'That's in your book?'

'Does she make a noise like... ' He stopped and scrunched up his face, as if someone had just hit him with an electrical charge.

'You okay?'

Tak grabbed a handful of his own hair and then pounded his fist on the top of his head. After twenty seconds or so, he graduated to his Ellesse jacket, scrunching it up into an artistic mess, then stopped abruptly and said in an oddly incongruous tone, 'forget it, I'm fine.'

'You got a migraine or...'

'I'm going up deck, get some air.' He put the book back in his bag then tucked the whole thing under the blanket. 'Don't touch my stuff while I'm gone.'

'Sure,' replied Sila, chipping off about a hundredth of the reflex mordacity.

'I'll know if you have.'

'I won't.'

Tak put his newly creased jacket back on and walked past Sila to the door. 'Don't tell the Chinese girl any of this.'

'Tell her what?'

'You will though, won't you?' He gripped the handle, pushing and then pulling it, seemingly confused when it actually opened. 'Doesn't matter, I can account for that. Okay. Tell her what you want. It's fine, I don't care.'

The light blue patch of his jacket merged with its cousin wallpaper outside and then he was gone, leaving the door ajar and Sila on the bed, alone, wondering what the *Harmony Korine* just happened.

~~~

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened again and Joanna peered in. Satisfied that the bathroom and the other bed were both empty, she entered fully, closed the door gently behind her, took off her pink *Mizuno* jacket and said, 'nothing out there except sea and weird purple mist.'

'Purple mist?' repeated Sila, slipping his phone back in his trackies pocket and getting up from the bed.

'Light purple.'

'Outside?'

'All over the sky. Very eerie.'

'Huh?'

'Much better here.'

She took off her *hopping zombie* t-shirt, not caring if Sila saw anything or not, and changed into one of her others, the one with *Kung Food Fighting* printed on it, next to pictures of warrior vegetables. Then she dropped like a corpse onto the bed and draped the blanket over her face. She didn't ask where Tak had gone, so Sila didn't bother telling her. Instead, he sat down at the foot of the bed and asked if she'd found anywhere peaceful to sit?

The *no* was muffled, but he caught enough of it.

'Not one single place?'

'No.'

'Come on, it's a pretty big boat. There must be some place where there are no men.'

She stripped the blanket off her face. 'There was one, for two minutes. The space below the front deck. Then some Spanish men appeared.'

'Not North Africans?'

'Key point, men. Loud and annoying. One of them kept trying to look down the front of my jacket.'

'How do you know?'

'He pretended to read the ship guidelines four times.'

'I don't get it.'

'They were hanging on the wall behind me. Protected by glass.'

'Still don't get it.'

'... ..'

'Huh?'

'I said, you're not a woman, it's beyond you.'

Sila pulled at the fringe of his *Okay Aswang* t-shirt, a substitute for biting his whole fucking tongue off. 'Right, okay...so you're saying the guy stood up and pretended to read the ship guidelines, but really he was trying to look down your jacket? Is that it?'

'Four separate times.'

'And it's impossible that he actually might have been interested in the ship's guidelines?'

'Yes.'

'That's quite presumptuous.'

'It's fact.'

'Pretty insulting too. And it's not fact, it's theory. A valid one, maybe, probably - depends how close the guidelines were - but you can't go nuts over something that's just a theory. That's like saying...' Sila searched the walls for inspiration and hit the brown stripes, which were even uglier now he could see them close up. 'I don't know. Can't think of a good analogy, but it's definitely not fact.'

'... ..'

'Chinese again?'

'This is draining. I'm going to sleep.'

'Wait, don't switch off...'

'Goodnight.'

'I wasn't saying you were wrong, I was just saying-...you can't say you're 100% right.'

'Sleeping.'

'Come on, seriously? It's only half five, you can't go to bed this early.'

'Can.'

'It's not even dark yet.'

'Turn off the light, please.'

'Jesus...'

'Thank you.'

'If you sleep now, what am I gonna do?'

'Go and hang out with the Spanish men. You can look at the ship guidelines together.'

'We're supposed to be travel partners.'

Joanna turned over and faced the cabin wall, her nose practically touching one of the brown stripes.

'Besides, if I leave you here, that guy might come back and start his interrogation again.'

'The African guy?'

'Ah, that got your attention. Yeah, our new cabinmate. He's British, actually. From the Chinese province of Bermondsey.'

'He was interrogating you?'

'To a degree, ja. But all the questions were about you. I told him to ask you himself.'

'What questions?'

'Weird ones. Lots of them. Still feel like sleeping?' Sila put a hand on her shoulder and gently shook it. 'Come on, up you get. We can go above deck, look at the purple mist, have a few drinks. It'll be fun. And it means you won't be here in his spotlight, saying how many dreams you've had...or what primary school you went to.'

'Questions are meaningless if I'm asleep.'

'He might wake you up.'

'Then I'll stab him.'

Sila took his hand off her shoulder, checking the blanket for the lump that would show where her hand [and the knife] was. 'You're joking, right?'

She pulled the blanket back over her face. 'If I'm still asleep in fifteen hours, wake me up.'

'Fifteen?'

'We can have breakfast before we disembark.'

'No one can sleep fifteen hours straight, it's impossible.'

The blanket creased a little, but there was no sound from underneath

'Hang on, breakfast. What about dinner?'

just faint breathing

'Hey, what about dinner?'

and the sound of the engine room far away

'You can't sleep for fifteen hours. It's bad for your health.'

apart from that, a dormant lump

'Joanna?'

slipped into the void.

'You can't be asleep already.'

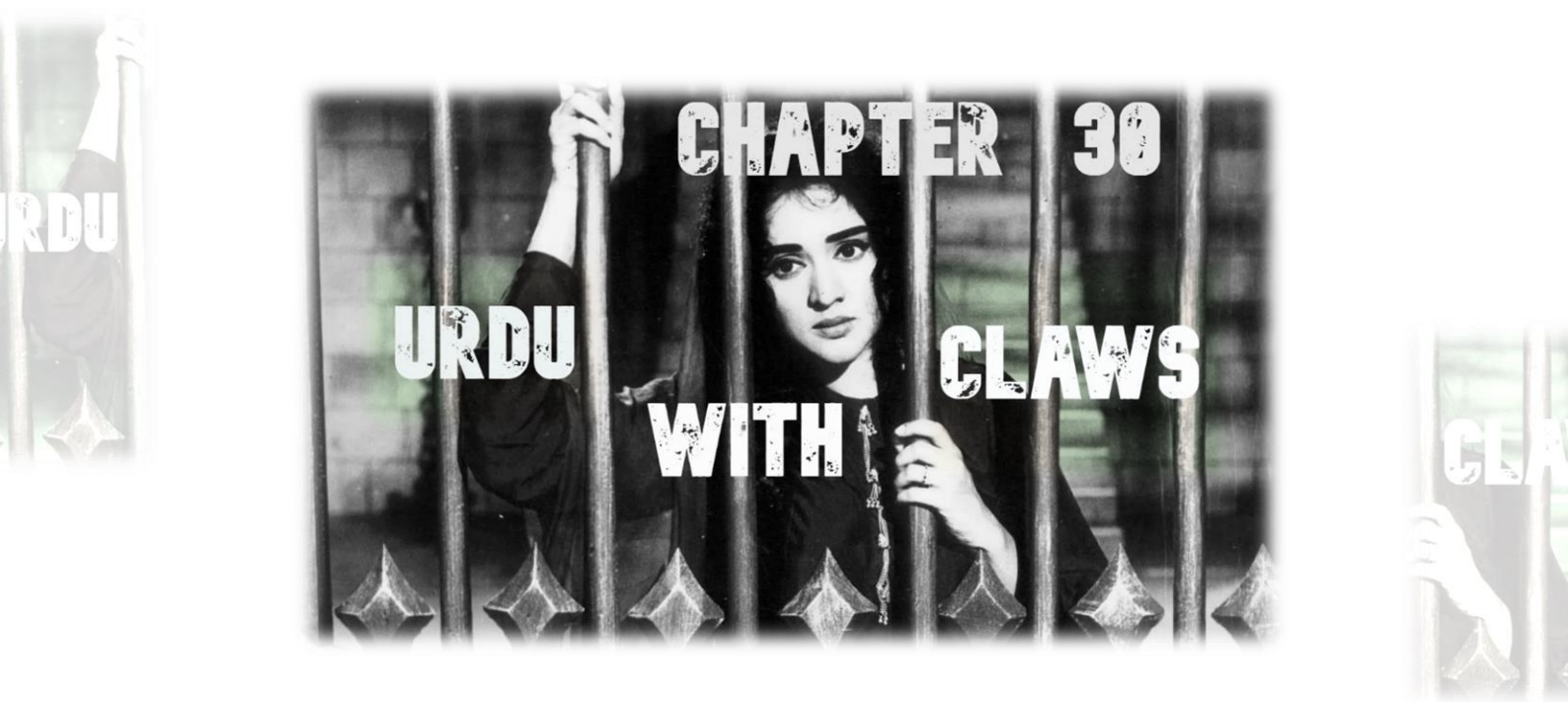
a private niche within.

'Seriously?'

her and hers alone.

'Fine, sleep then. I'm going for a walk.' He stood up and put the *Old King Matjaž* hoodie on, then the *Criolo* jacket. 'See how you get on with the Witchfinder General.'

Once again she didn't answer so he went to the door, hesitated, looked at the sleeping lump on the bed, briefly imagined himself next to it then pulled on the handle and went out.



The upper deck was freezing, sub-Moodysson with

nothing to see except bearded Moroccan men, life rings, the ship guidelines and a huge wispy cloud of lilac mist particles coating the sky to the left, the same purple shit Joanna had talked about in the cabin, most likely harmless and naturally occurring in the area, though it did look more than a little insidious, like a sapient haze beast encroaching on its sedate, not-on-the-lookout-at-all ferry prey.

And when it hit, driving them all into sexual frenzy

fucking and the threat of it

perhaps inter-dimensional death doors, new forms of cabinet, ether aesthetics

yet

for now

it was keeping its distance.

Maybe it also feared Moroccan men?

Sila laughed to himself, stubbed out an imaginary cigarette then crossed the deck and went back inside. Or attempted to. The door seemed to be locked from the other side, the handle stiff and implacable.

‘Fucking boat mechanics,’ he muttered, putting his shoulder against it, and without warning-creak or alarm

fell ahead at light speed

tripped on the lower door wedge, prepped for severe head trauma when he hit the bottom of the metal steps then

in a dizzy reversal of near-death physics

got yanked back hard at the last millisecond.

'An impressive move,' said an accented voice attached to a Pakistani-looking guy whose brown irises stared directly into his own, bobbing gently on anime-white sclera.

Not Amir

same hair but

facially different, eyes different

wouldn't take all the blanket

not him

not Amir

'The door...' Sila stammered, figuratively dusting himself down via convulsive blinks, then peering over the railing to see how far the steps went down.

'Wouldn't have killed you necessarily,' finished the Pakistani man, following his line of sight.

'You were on the other side...trying to open it?'

'Briefly.'

'And then let go?'

The man who wasn't Amir, who didn't look a thing like him, looked ten times better in fact, like he'd just walked out of a lagoon that was in truth the mask for a hidden lab under the waves

dipped his head, perhaps attempting a smile.

Sila hadn't noticed, but their hands were on the sleeves of each other's jackets, though the man was bolder, his fingers sliding along to the bare skin of his wrist and stroking.

'You're not Moroccan...'

'Very perceptive.'

'Pakistani?'

His fingers progressed onto Sila's hand, sliding through the gaps and tightening. 'It is noisy on this deck. How about we go somewhere a little more secluded, to talk?'

Not Amir, definitely not Amir, more of an Innsbruck vibe, the nights before the doppelganger, wretched and

god, okay

your fucking cabin

green cream, slurred Slovene, slurred Urdu, dick in full and bareback, or another option, I jump on you right here and drill you up against that fire alarm you beautiful-eyed, Urdu-speaking-

Sila pulled his hand back, glancing at the steps leading down and away from this chaos

chaos that was lodged in his brain and would just follow him down

chaos that had been switched on by this

Kurszán in a Pakistani skin suit

this clone

soft-voiced, assertive, quiet-cabin possessing

no one would ever know they'd fucked

guy with all the-

'I sense you want to talk to me,' whispered the man, leaning into Sila's neck and pressing lips against his stubble, left hand running up his thigh.

'What...'

'Nothing is fast when time declines to compete. If that's what you're concerned about.'

'I don't-...'

'Or is it someone else?'

Sila closed his eyes and mouthed the words back to himself, *is it someone else*, letting the Pakistani siren curve his lips round and

there was no fog horn or sudden shout

only the image of an empty rack in a back-lit dungeon, waiting for him to-

The words played again, pinned to the man's voice.

Is it someone else?

Is it?

Is it someone who's been hiding all this time, that yellow-eyed demon wretch, coming here, pretending to open a stubborn door and

'Sorry, I'm taken,' blurted out Sila, breaking free, his sweaty hand hovering close to yet another copy of the ship guidelines on the nearby wall.

The Pakistani male model dropped back and dipped his head again, possibly a polite bow, muttering to himself in what had to be Urdu.

'A partner...'

'She's in the cabin.'

'Hmm. I see.'

'Sleeping.'

'It appears I have misjudged.' He straightened his jacket, dipped his head an inch, then, without another word, pushed open the now amenable door and disappeared onto the outside deck.

Re-absorbed into the purple, Sila thought, slowly drawing his hand back from the ship guidelines and wiping it on the sleeve of his *Criolo* jacket. Sucked into the black hole void of Innsbruck, that fucking castle bathing hole, where you belong.

Or not.

The door closed, ending with a sardonic creak.

No, probably not.

Just a fast-moving Pakistani guy, aware of his looks. Hoping to fuck. No, going to fuck. Someone else.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again fast as two Moroccan men came up two steps at a time.

'Careful with the door,' he said in English, ignoring their bemused faces and heading down the metal staircase that had almost lured him to his death

aiming for somewhere quiet

serene

where he could blot out the continual green cream ads and cosy bed shots of his dick halfway inside that Pakistani god mouth that were coasting didactic around his head,

his Id, his soul

his neck

all of it.

~~~

One deck down, past the staff recrimination room, past the *not yet sunk* certificates, was the largest of the ferry's three integrated cafeterias.

Quickly finding a seat, Sila opened his Romanian dictionary, sat back and stretched his legs out under the table. There was a group of bare feet guys playing cards on the table next to him, shouting every time they put down a card, which helped him dilute the Pakistani encounter pretty fast, yet

the shouting continued

even past the *fuck thought* elimination point

Breathing out *want to* in Romanian, Sila counted five minutes, told himself they were just loud, don't be racist like the cabin dweller, then got up and moved to the opposite side of the cafeteria.

It was noisy there too, but not to the same degree, and it had a vacant table with a window view, purple glow above, dark surface of the sea below. He kicked away a cigarette butt on the floor and sat down, resuming his study of the Romanian dictionary.

It wasn't easy.

Not just the vocab, but the background audio dynamics, the complete lack of group filter from any of them.

One table in particular was noisier than the others, six men shouting, not laughing, one of them standing and jabbing down at another.

Fuck, was this real, were they not friends?

Why was he sticking his finger in the guy's face?

Using the dictionary as cover, Sila looked at the guy, studied him and decided he was a cunt.

Then looked at the other guy, the one being jabbed and decided he was also a cunt, a smug cunt, and if they didn't both stop shouting, he'd get up and drag them upstairs by the hair, pitch them over the side of the ship and not tell a soul, not even Joanna

fucking noisy cunts

it's not your fucking living room

go read a book or punch a wall, grope yourself in the nightclub

just go, leave, fuck off

and

as soon as he started thinking it, reality altered itself, the jabbing guy shouting one last time then grudgingly shaking the hand of the smug guy and the six of them went back to their card game leaving Sila staring at page 24 of the dictionary embarrassed, annoyed and weirdly determined to read that Turkish book of short stories he'd bought in Budapest last year.

Night of the Beetle Scarab?

Scarab Beetle Nights?

Scarab something.

~~~

After half an hour of repeating campsite vocab in Romanian and blocking out renewed din from the six tenors, Sila rotated his chair and tried the window.

The sea was visible but only just as the purple mist he'd seen earlier had descended and was now sticking to the surface like his mum to the washing machine. Yet, at the same time, it wasn't attacking the windows or the upper deck

opting for a sandwich effect instead

mist above and below

ferry the meat in the middle, oblivious.

Wah, it really was purple, to an impossible degree.

Where was it coming from?

Space?

The Kuiper Belt?

There was no one around to answer the question, no one he wanted to ask either, so he turned again, back to the main floor.

Their arrival had obviously gone unnoticed, but there was a man and, presumably, his wife sitting on the carpet by the vending machines, with their baby in the dad's arms. A young teen was looming over them, talking loudly in Arabic and trying to pull on the man's sleeve.

Sila didn't understand the words, but he could guess what the boy wanted, to go above deck or to the nightclub or somewhere else that needed his dad's cash, but the dad resisted and took back his sleeve, though, to his credit, he didn't scream at him.

Ten minutes later, the boy got tired of ranting and walked off.

As he reached the doorway back to the cabins, an Indian woman in a scarf wrapped around both head and neck came the other way, either the fifth woman on the whole boat or one of the earlier ones Joanna had tagged. Probably a fifth as she was so striking that Joanna would've called her out. Unless Asian women didn't think women like this were striking?

It was possible, he'd heard from Chit Yu at Uni that some Chinese people had a specific slur for Indians, but

then again

not that possible as this woman wasn't just striking, she was alluring, magnetic, perhaps Pakistani not Indian, definitely not white, and as she sat down on the table next to Sila and unravelled her scarf, he could see that she wasn't worried at all about being on a boat full of men as the cropped red dress she had on wasn't excessively tight and every time she leaned forward the five guys on the table behind leaned forward in unison.

Before long one of them thought enough of himself to stand up and go over and ask her something in Arabic, which she let drift past with the ventilated air, then something in another language, maybe Spanish

actually the first one could have been Spanish

or Urdu or Hindi or

some other language Sila didn't know cos he couldn't recognise any of the sounds, he just knew it wasn't English or Slovene and it didn't matter as her tone was sharp and the man's reaction was to scuff the back of the chair and walk back to his game of cards.

Was that Uno they were playing?

Or Monopoly Deal?

It wasn't clear and, really, he didn't care. What he wanted to do was look at one of the only five women on the whole ship. Who didn't live in a castle. Or act as a vassal for yellow-eyed fiends. Or tell him they couldn't go to Egypt together as people might see. Or call him *ho mo liu* all the time. Take him up hills at midnight and-

He looked down at the Romanian dictionary, flicking through the R words and occasionally looking up at the wall beside the Indian or Pakistani woman,

to see what she was doing, and the third time he did it, he coughed, realising the ship guidelines were pinned up there too.

Gods, was it wallpaper? Had Joanna come here and put them up?

Didn't matter, cos out of the side of his eye he could see that the woman was looking at him, no, staring directly at him, like Serbian women did.

He quickly went back to the Romanian dictionary, telling himself she was looking at the window behind his head, not him

even though there were other windows

three of them closer to her table

but

rabat, răbdare, rac, răceală, rachetă, rachiu

a dozen more *r* words then another glance.

There was a pocket book in her hand now, no title, no picture, and her eyes were fixed to it.

And then, suddenly, they weren't.

The window

Behind my head.

The ship's guidelines to the left.

No one fucks strangers on overnight ferries

She's too pretty

An Israeli tycoon back in their VIP cabin, waiting for her to come back with the wine.

Standing up without bending forward, the woman glided slowly over to his table, utilising the same *maybe a smile* that Amir used to do as she draped her curtain-sized green scarf over the back of the spare seat.

Then pulled it out a few inches and sat down.

Sila opened his mouth to say, *sure, it's okay, no one's sitting there*, but

he couldn't

cos it might cut the thread leading to her cabin

so he picked up his Romanian dictionary instead, pretended to read page 247 three times, and acted surprised when the woman leaned forward, put her ringless hand on his forearm and said in the lightest of accents,

'... ..'

'Sorry?'

She shifted to the cover of the dictionary. 'You do not speak this language?'

'Me? No, not really. A little.' He flashed the inside pages, random *r* words. 'Still learning.'

Nodding, she moved her fingers further up his forearm, eyes locked to his own. 'I admire people who learn languages.'

'Me too.'

The stroking ceased.

'I mean, I admire people who can become fluent...who really try hard.'

'Dictionaries can only get you so far,' she replied, leaning back, taking one end of the scarf from the seat.

'Yeah, just supplementing...supplementary. If I knew any Romanians, I'd speak it, but...not many around.' He paused, permitting a hundredth of a second scene of himself under the table, head between her thighs. 'I noticed you were reading a book too...but no cover or title.'

She held the scarf up to her eyes, concealing one of them. Then took out the title-less book from somewhere lower down and placed it on the table. 'Mythology. From my native country.'

'Ah, that's weird, I have some too. Italian, the last one I went to, Slavic myths too. Is that one Urdu? Hindi? Actually, where are you from?'

'You appear heightened?'

'Err...ja, I suppose. If you mean excited?'

'It is an attractive trait. Passion for a topic, and other cultures.'

'I travel a lot. Never been to India though...or Pakistan.'

Her fingers dropped to the mythology book, running a line down the spine. 'Quetta.'

'Sorry?'

'It is my home. You should add it to your travel list. And perhaps an Urdu teacher too.'

'Urdu...that's your native language?'

'In fact, I possess some experience in that area. Assuming you are not intimidated by non-European languages?'

'No, no, anything is okay. I learnt some Japanese before...' An image of Joanna flickered ethereal in his head, more duvet than human, calling him *ho mo liu*. 'A little Cantonese too.'

'Urdu is a different beast...more poetic, sensual...' she said, her fingers moving back to the scarf, folding it against itself.

'Yeah, all those squiggly lines...'

'...intimate.'

'...I always wanted to learn what they meant, how to read them. Maybe after Romanian, I can give it a crack. Go to Quitta and look you up. If that's where you still live?'

'.....'

'Sorry?'

'The future, to me, is a moment from now.'

'Ah. Sounds like a proverb.'

She sat forward, contracting the whole room, the whole ferry. Her lips did more than smile, they promised. The scarf snaked upwards around her neck, mesmeric, pulled by soft, dark fingers with green painted nails. 'There are fourteen more hours before the boat docks in Barcelona.'

'Quite long...'

'We could speak a lot of Urdu during that time.'

'Ja. Me saying *what* a lot, probably.'

Some muttering in Urdu or Hindi, a tightening of the scarf, a glance at the steps leading above deck. 'I'm offering you conversation.'

'Sorry, I didn't-...' Sila stretched his hand across the table, stopping an inch from her mythology book then pulling back and performing an odd scratching motion of the surface plastic. 'I thought you were making a joke.'

'Do you wish to practise my native Urdu, with me?'

'I do, but...I won't be able to say much. The *what* thing wasn't completely inaccurate.'

She looked around at the other tables, half the men quickly going back to their cards, the other half staring right back at her. 'It is noisy here. My cabin is not.'

'Your cabin?'

'It is deluxe class, very quiet. Perfect for Urdu practice. Shall we go?'

'You mean...what? To your cabin?'

'There is no need to sweat,' she said, letting go of his arm and standing up, 'I will not force myself on you.'

'Just...the two of us?'

'Follow if you like. Remain here if you do not. Cabin 47 if you are undecided.'

'No, I want to, it's just-...I don't know if...'

Before Sila could fully flesh out his Hamlet impression, the woman had already gone, past the men at the neighbouring table, past a man on the floor, dropping her mythology book at his feet and allowing him to pick it back up, then on towards the corridor that Sila knew ran through to the entertainment room which ran to the stairs that ran down to the cabins that would inexorably run to her deluxe room and her currently empty bed.

When she was almost out of sight, she stopped and looked back at Sila, not giving any gestures, just staring. Or glaring. It was hard to know the difference when there was no smile.

Follow, you fool

you fucking idiot

get inside her

say it's too good in Urdu

tell her about the cabinets

the green knife

your mission

cling to her fucking lifeboat tits

Sila feigned interest in the wall again, attempting to read a few of the ship guidelines, and when he looked back she was still there, staring/ glaring at him and

even though he hadn't taken any of the grey stuff

it felt like something similar was happening in the time-space vortex surrounded this ferry, the vortex somewhere between Genoa and Barcelona, the vortex that was making him pick up the dictionary and stand up and follow her through the entertainment room, past other transfixed men, down the stairs and along the corridor, right and then left and then right again until he was ten feet behind her and she was standing, half her body visible, in what he presumed was the doorway to her cabin and this time there were no ship guidelines to stare at, only this hypnotic weird-looking woman with a

hopefully euphemistic scarf who had realised that every other guy on this boat was a pervert except him

cos he was a monk

a pervert monk who pretended to read ship guidelines so he could look down some Pakistani woman's shirt

a fucking pervert who hadn't been with anyone since

since

her, that one

the Chinese blank, murderer, sulk

but that wasn't anything

it didn't even happen, not as long as *happening* meant he had to be mentally conscious of what was going on and physically able to record the process of hand moving from A to B and

it didn't happen if he couldn't remember it all, only the after part, maybe a phantom playback of the last few strokes, maybe her teeth on his dick, but that wasn't conclusive as it was dream-like, phantom and

she'd never told him what happened before that, how they'd ended up locked together, in the same bed, him saying they should've done that weeks ago, her saying nothing,

maybe cos she didn't know either.

Does she make noises when she washes her hands?

Does she sleep long at night?

God, that guy, the interrogator, he was probably in there now, asking her those same questions, maybe worse, maybe a lot worse

shouldn't he be there?

The guy could be anyone, a pervert like the others

why not?

He never even said what he did, what he was doing for work in Barcelona and

he could be in the cabin, right now

could've waited till I'd gone, thought Sila, and then crept back in and

before he could sketch out the scene, the vortex that had dragged him to the Pakistani woman's cabin was pulling him backwards in short steps, left round

a corner and right, and left again, up the stairs and then right back down the same way when he realised he was also staying in the cabins, not the deck area, and, finally, on towards his own room.

As he left the Pakistani woman's corridor, he was replaced almost immediately by the teen who'd been hassling his father earlier, the thirteen-year old who'd seen the siren's scarf act, her cropped red top and gone immediately to the ship toilets for his third ever wank.

That boy was now following her, the woman who was at least five inches taller than him, into her room, sitting on the edge of her bed as she unpeeled her endless green scarf, her cropped red top, her skirt, her bra and

her lilac knickers.

Leaning forward, she pushed him down with one finger until his head was on the pillow then whispered in his ear,

'... ..'

The boy didn't understand, but he was too excited to ask her to repeat herself so he just lay back and let her put a soft hand over his eyes, slouching back into his private cinema, picturing the Indian porno he'd watched two days before

unaware of the words being spoken

the claw extending

the Pakistani woman's lilac eyes staring down at his not yet fully developed chest and

one specific nail

tracing out a preparatory outline of the poor sop's heart.

CHAPTER 31 SHE SIREN



It turned out that fifteen hours straight was impossible, but Sila kept *I told you so* in his *King Matjaž* hoodie pocket as Joanna opened one eye, kicked at his thigh from under the duvet and asked where the black guy was.

'You mean the Interrogator General? Don't know. Just said he was going out again.'

'He came back?'

'Ja.'

'When?'

'Just now, when I opened the door. Had that book open again. Don't know if he was trying to ask you anything.'

'What book?'

'Probably not. Wah, I said it already, all those the weird questions he was pumping out before, about you. That book is where he was pulling them from.'

'Don't remember that.'

'Ja, cos you had the duvet over your face.'

'I remember the Spanish playboy on the main deck.'

'Fake sleeping. Real sleeping. Ah, the ship guidelines guy. Without a doubt, one of my best-loved topics.'

Joanna reached under the pillow and came back with her phone, grunting when she saw the time. 'Where did the black guy say he was going?'

'Tak.'

'The black guy.'

'Ja, his name's Tak. Not sure what it's short for, but maybe you should use it instead of-...'

'Where did he go?'

'I told you, he didn't say.'

She jabbed her phone up towards the ceiling. 'Are there still people out there?'

'Where?'

'Upstairs. Near the Cafeteria.'

'Don't know, I've been sitting here, reading.' Sila held up the Romanian mythology/history book he'd been reading. 'Non-cabinet stuff.'

'Where did you go?'

'When?'

'Before.'

'Nowhere.' He looked at the front cover of his book, then got up and walked over to the bathroom doorway, briefly peeking in. 'Above deck. The cafeteria.'

'What were you doing?'

'Nothing much. Studying Romanian. Reading the ship's guidelines. Hanging out with very loud men.'

'Man boat.'

Sila nodded, mostly to the brown stripe wallpaper, then sat down on Tak's bed. 'Actually, there was one woman. Quite weird-looking, calm, wearing one of those traditional dresses. Like, blood red with little spiral patterns on it. Said she was from Pakistan.'

'Boat of man.'

'One of the North African guys tried to hit on her but she shrugged him off. Quite bold. Seems like she's alone too, so really bold. Unless there's some guy tucked away in her cabin.'

Joanna lay back down and spread the duvet over her face.

'What are you doing?'

'Sleep.'

'Again?'

'Don't feel good.'

'We've still got another six hours...'

'Don't care.'

'But...'

'Wake me up in five hours.'

'What about me?'

'Use that side,' she replied, pointing at the narrow strip of mattress next to her.

'You're sleeping diagonal, there's no space'

'Try.'

'It's impossible, I already-...hey, zombie face, don't sleep, it's too early. I'm bored. Hey. Hey, you hearing me?'

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight is not a solution. Hey, Jo, don't close your eyes. Wake up. Talk to me. Where am I gonna sleep?'

Joanna clearly didn't give a shit where he slept, even though it was nearly one in the morning and he couldn't keep reading the same page about Vlad for six more hours, his eyes would go bloodshot, and he couldn't stay sitting on the bed much longer either cos the black guy would come back soon...no, Tak...Tak would come back and he'd want to sleep, probably, so what was he supposed to do?

Sleep on the floor?

Was it even possible?

The cabin was tiny and the space between the two beds was about the width of Charlotte Gainsbourg's waist, nowhere near enough for a normal-sized man who wasn't dead, who didn't have both arms folded on his chest.

Maybe he could sleep head to toe with her?

Would there be enough space?

Probably not, he could see her body shape through the blanket and it was worse than diagonal, it looked like a running icon, but if he couldn't sleep on the bed he'd actually paid for then the only other options were to

a] walk around the ship for six hours, occasionally reading a book

or

b] go where he should've gone four hours earlier, to fuck the Pakistani temptress who'd practically dragged him into her room

or

gods help him

c] play cards and make new friends.

There was a noise from the lock of the cabin door, the key turning the wrong way then the right way, and then the shadow form of Tak, drifting in, putting his mystery/occult book down, removing his jacket and, without a stutter, laying himself on the bed next to Sila.

'Sorry man, I'll get up.'

Tak stared at the ceiling and rubbed his head.

'I was being kicked off the other one,' added Sila, pointing to the bed Joanna was lying on.

Tak stopped rubbing and turned to the other side, either acknowledging what Sila had said and checking that there was still a second bed or...

'How long has she been asleep?'

'Sorry?'

'Her.' He pointed at Joanna's blanket head shape. 'How long has she been out?'

'Just woke up and went straight back down again. She's probably not even asleep, to be honest.'

'She has a duvet over her face.'

'Ja.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you not sleep with her?'

'What? No, I-...'

'Do you sleep near her?'

'Mate, why do you keep asking this stuff?'

Tak tugged at the robot head on his t-shirt, then got up and walked over to the other bed.

Sila sprang up, reaching for the inside of his hoodie pocket. 'Mate, what are you doing?'

Tak didn't pay any attention, he just flicked the corner of the duvet up and looked down at Joanna's head.

'Fuck, back off...'

'It's not there.'

'Are you deaf? Get off her, you weird fuck.'

Tak released the duvet corner and turned to Sila, who was on his feet now, grabbing hold of Tak's *Chopping Mall* t-shirt.

'Relax, sailor, she's clean.'

'Clean?'

Tak took hold of Sila's hand and detached it from his t-shirt like it was stray seaweed. 'You done?'

Sila didn't make any attempt to re-grab, so Tak moved past him, got a fresh [no cover image, dark red] book out of his bag, sat down on the bed and started flicking methodically through the pages.

'Clean of what? For what?'

Tak stopped on a page and nodded, muttering something Sila couldn't quite catch.

'Why is she clean?'

Another mutter, this one a question.

'Hey...Tak...'

He stopped, nodded again at the page then sat for a few seconds in silence. Then closed the book and pushed himself up off the bed, put the *Ellesse* jacket back on.

'Don't dodge,' continued Sila, watching him struggle with the left sleeve. 'Why is she clean? What were you looking at her head for?'

'Give it a rest, mate.'

'Rest? We're sharing a cabin for another six hours...'

'Yeah, so?'

'...and I can't sleep if I don't know what you're up to. Fuck, that tone doesn't help. *Yeah, so?*'

Tak looked at Sila, then patted his own mattress. 'Just take the bed, I don't care.'

'What? I didn't say anything about your bed. I just wanna know what's going on. Why she's clean. Why you're looking at that book all the time and asking weird questions.'

'Cos I'm weird. Now go to sleep and think of other stuff. Pretend I'm not here.'

'That doesn't make me feel much better,' replied Sila, shifting to the bathroom doorway as Tak moved past.

'Why do you need to feel better?'

'So I can sleep the next few hours without having to keep my eyes open.'

'You're easily rattled.'

'What?'

Tak stopped at the door, his knuckles resting on the handle. 'I meant what I said, you can take the bed. I'll be back just before we dock.'

'Hang on...you're not gonna sleep at all?'

'Don't touch my stuff while I'm gone.'

'Where are you gonna go?'

'Hunting.'

'For what?'

'Muff.'

Sila mouthed the word back to himself, not sure if he'd heard right, then laughed, finally giving himself permission to give up on the interrogation and sit down on Tak's bed. 'Fuck, have you seen any of this boat? There isn't any muff. It's wall to wall men.'

'I'll find one. Knock on doors if I have to.'

'Do what?'

'You heard me, mate. I need to fuck something.'

Sila glanced over at Joanna.

'Not her. Something else.' He opened the door, peeked his head out, looking both ways down the corridor then went out, saying, 'take the bed, honestly, I don't give a shit,' to Sila before closing the door.

Need to fuck something.

Something else.

Sila lay back on Tak's bed, lay there for a few minutes, but nothing stuck. Cabinets or Pakistani models. British weirdos or alien death doors. Losing arguments to the most pedantic pedant in Pedantsfield or...

He pulled himself back up, took out the green knife and stared at its edge
stared at it for over an hour before Joanna woke up again and asked him to throw her jumper over to the bed, she was cold, and when Sila asked why, it wasn't time to go yet, she shouted at him, asking why he'd woken her up if the boat hadn't docked yet, and even though he said many, many times, he hadn't done anything, hadn't said a word, she didn't believe him as

in her head

she'd heard him calling her name and shaking her, lifting the duvet off her head and if he was that bored, why didn't he just go and read the fucking ship guidelines again and stop messing with her sleep time like a sulky child.

'Okay, you delusional fuck, I'll go and read the ship guidelines, leave you to fate. Or the fucking book weirdo, see how you feel when he gets back and says your head's not clean, see how much of a child I am then.'

'Too loud,' she said, and then did what she did best, pulled the duvet over her head, leaving Sila to either sit on the bed opposite and wait to be re-shouted at or get up and leave

go fuck a mesmeric-looking Pakistani woman

with Urdu powers

and a semi-ethnic red dress

stern but non-caustic

Ja, that was the way, the method, system

go and see the siren

sleep in her bed, inside her muff

cocooned

if he could remember which cabin she was in.

Could he?

The general route was okay, he could visualise that, but not the exact door or number as he hadn't got close enough, and she had said it to him, but that part of the conversation was gone, edited out.

Count by doors perhaps?

Each corridor had about eight in a row, and he was pretty sure she'd passed five of them.

Yeah, it was possible, just knock on one or two doors and see who opened. It'd be her eventually. And that's what he would do, right after he'd finished the end of this chapter on Vlad imprisoned in Hungary.

Actually, the last part he'd read was pretty weird, the kind of singular anecdote only medieval history could wheel out, as back then there were kings and no regulations to keep them in check, to stop guys like Vlad or Kurszán cutting off some guard's head just for chasing a thief into his prison courtyard.

Jezus, it was so egregious that it even made the king of Hungary laugh.

But as he read more of the chapter, he got bored. There were no more anecdotes, just fact and analysis about why Vlad was there and the politics of his cousin in Moldova and it was so dry that Sila put it down and fished in his bag for the other thing, the French demon book, the one he'd picked up in Copenhagen.

He'd only read the first few pages [it was all in French], but it was a comic so he could follow the pictures when he got stuck.

Agreeing with himself, he picked the book out of his bag

'Cruisage de la Demonik'

and flicked to the page where the ship's captain was lured to the beautiful Demonika's cabin and

the French was 50% too hard to translate but

ah, it's a demon, she's sucking out his soul, or that's what it looked like. He flicked to the next page and then the next and-

'Too loud' said a duvet-muffled voice.

'Wah...I'm not even doing anything.'

'I can hear the pages turning.'

'No, you can't.'

'Can hear you breathing too.'

'Liar.'

'Go to the bathroom. Close the door.'

'... ..'

'Or the corridor.'

'Fuck...'

Sila got up and walked to the door, opening it full force and saying in a muffled yell, 'you know what, I'll get out of your way completely. Enjoy the fucking silence, Beckett.'

There was no response, cutting or otherwise, so he went out and back along the corridor, *Demonik* book still in hand, and thought about turning right and then right again and heading roughly in the direction of the woman's cabin. But as soon as he thought it, his heart started beating fast and he remembered the days in London on the tube when he was stuck between Holborn and the next station and the train didn't move for an hour and the two women were right in his face, talking and he couldn't even move his arms, couldn't stop sweating, couldn't stop thinking about shoving them both out of the way and smashing his way through the window onto the track and

wipe

delete

not good, not useful

wipe.

~~~

Without explicit command, his legs took him above deck, back to the same spot he'd colonised earlier, looking at the purple vapour support beams in the sky, and, even though it was freezing, there were other people out there, other men obviously, four or five in total, and one of those, an older, gentle-looking man, was sitting on the bench, reading a book with French words on the cover.

Choosing solidarity over sulk, Sila sat down next to him and continued reading his own *Demonik*.

The reader was North African like the others and clearly alone, clearly weird enough to be above deck at 2am in the freezing cold, reading a book that

what was it, that title?

Sila leaned forward and glanced at the cover again, catching the author's name.

Simone de Beauvoir.

Ha, that old chestnut, *The Blood of Others*, he'd read the Slovene translation a long time ago, his mum's copy, and found it weird that a female author would write the main character as a man, why was that? Because it was historical and the other way round would be unrealistic? But there were female resistance leaders surely, with tales of similar-

'... ..?'

Sila blinked and realised the oldish man next to him was asking a direct question.

'Sorry?'

'You are not French?' the Beauvoir fan asked, looking at Sila's book.

'No, British.'

'Ah.'

'British-Slovene.'

'Slovene...Slovenia?'

'Yeah.'

'But you are reading a French book...'

'This? Ja. Trying to.' Sila looked at the page he was on and pulled the same face Mark Wahlberg had after being slapped by Joanna Russ at Man-Con. If he were tested, could he say what any of this meant? Nope. Wouldn't he look like a fool then? 'Actually, I'm struggling with most of it.'

'Quoi?'

'Struggling. I'm finding it hard to understand the French words. Maybe you can help?'

'Oui...possibly. I could try.'

Sila handed him the book and the man studied the page he'd left it on. 'This page says, the woman wants to find a man, to take his heart. She says there is nothing that can stop her to do this. She gets power from the boat and the sea. Does it help you?'

'Ah, I didn't get the boat and the sea part.'

The man flicked the page over and didn't speak for about a minute.

Sila glanced over his arm and saw why.

The demon woman had stripped naked and was riding the corpse of the guy she'd just killed. Jesus, you could actually see the stump of the dead man's cock at the cusp of her vagina.

'I think this page is okay for you to understand.' The man handed the book back and returned to Simone.

'Sorry, I didn't realise it was so explicit.'

'It is no problem.'

'Wasn't like that before, on the other pages.'

He said again it was no problem, he'd grown up with French films and Japanese manga, he'd seen all kinds of things.

'Are you French or Algerian?'

'Algerian.'

'But you don't mind French film?'

'I like all film.'

'Or Simone De Beauvoir.'

'She is okay. My friend recommend to me and, you know, this boat is a long time so...'

'Ja, very long.'

The man nodded, said *it's true*, and returned to his book.

'Didn't know the sea was so wide here...between Genoa and Barcelona. Eighteen hours, doesn't seem right. But I guess they'd go faster if they could. It's not like they'd go slow on purpose.'

The Beauvoir fan said, *'oui'*, and continued reading his book for another thirty, forty seconds. Then hacked a cough, got up and walked off with a jovial 'back into the catacombs,' aimed at the nearby funnel.

Sila looked at his own book, the page currently transmitting from his lap, the demon woman with bouncing breasts, visible muff, riding the corpse, riding it because

cos why?

The power of the boat and the sea?

Cos French men liked tits?

He fixed eyes and effort onto the lifebelt hanging on the rails of the boat and pictured the Pakistani woman and her tits, in her cabin, waiting for him to knock on the door and walk in and lie on her bed and fake die so she could get on top and fuck him for at least three and a half hours

three hours and forty five minutes if he got up now and got down there

but what if she'd found someone else

it was possible

there was a whole ship full of men

but were any worthy of her, were any of them not perverts who didn't wear shoes or feigned intrigue in ship guidelines?

Okay, maybe the guy who'd just gone back into the catacombs, but he probably hadn't seen her

and she hadn't seen him

but if there was this one guy then there were probably others, sitting on their own in various parts of the boat, reading French philosophical fiction or Algerian poetry, secretly waiting for a weirdly beautiful woman in cropped red dress with spirals on it to sit down next to them and lean forward so they could look down and see her nipples, just like he'd wanted to do when she offered him Romanian lessons.

Gods, he would do anything to do that right now and he didn't know why it'd been nearly two years since

no

two years excluding the Kurszán horror in Innsbruck or the one time with the Chinese murderess and

ah fuck it

three and half hours left

she was either free and awake or she wasn't, no authentic harm in knocking.

Sila folded up the boat demon terror porn and mapped out the way back to her cabin. Then paused. Then went into full stasis.

Was that

up here

at two in the morning?

No jacket?

The spell broke and he stood up, walking auto-didact across to the railings, where the red cropped dress lady from Quetta was struggling to throw a gigantic tennis bag over the side.

'Are you okay?' was the obvious question and he used it, reaching out his left hand for the edge of the bag just as she managed to force it over.



It dropped like a corpse into the dark flatness below, creating a brief splash of dirty white and then Balearic void-quietude.

'My ex-boyfriend's things,' she said, turning to Sila and, without any nod to the God of Coyness, placing her right palm on the back of his hand. 'Please, don't tell anyone.'

'Is he...?' Sila started to reply, but the rest was opaque, and wouldn't get any less opaque cos she was staring at him and stroking his hand and as long as it wasn't the ex-boyfriend himself, who cared?

'He is not someone I need to worry about anymore.'

'Aren't you cold?'

'Sorry?'

'Your dress...'

She peered down at her own body, blank, as if her skin weren't skin but insulation fibre.

'Here, take this...?' Sila took off his *Criolo* jacket and attached it to her shoulders, helping her into the sleeves. 'Better?'

She spread out her arms and flapped them like a penguin, smiling. 'It's very layered.'

'Guaranteed warmth. Mostly. Won't keep out the wind though. Or that purple stuff up there.'

The woman seemed to instinctively know what he meant as she refused to look up at the sky. 'You are not cold?'

'Not really. I'm Slovene *and* British, lots of harsh winters.'

'Ah, that is your heritage.'

'I read that Quetta gets quite cold too. In January and February. And there was an earthquake a hundred years ago that destroyed most of the city, but you rebuilt it, and now the population is...two million? Or one million. Can't remember. Think I'm getting it mixed up with somewhere else...but it's around that number.'

'Thank you for telling me about my home city.'

Sila paused a second, checking her face was the one he thought it was, then laughed.

'What is it?'

'You sounded like someone I know.'

'Someone special?'

'Ha. More like a manacle round my neck.'

The woman moved her fingers up Sila's waist, then back down again, curving the slightest bit inwards. 'You must be getting cold.'

'Little bit.'

'At the risk of being rejected a second time, it's a lot warmer inside my cabin.'

A purple slither drifted past, about fifty feet above the deck, drawing him in.

'If you want to stay with me?'

Her fingernails scraped his attention back, knuckles brushing against the inside of his thigh as she pulled him in and...her lips...just hovered there...next to his own

whisps of cold breath

that she may or may not have scented

telling him to bring down the fucking papier-mâché barricades

come back to her cabin and

fuck her

for at least three and half hours.

'Give me twenty minutes to prepare, then come,' she said, pulling in the side of Sila's ill-fitting jacket tight to her chest, then stepping back.

'Which cabin is-...'

'47. Knock until I open.'

In his head, he nodded, but to her it may have looked like a stone statue, and it was too late to check as she was already halfway to the door, the hem of the red dress sticking out from his giant jacket.

Have to get that back at least, he thought, sitting back down on the bench and re-opening his French demon book.

And if I go that far then...

Fuck, twenty minutes.

He looked down at the page he'd randomly flicked to, the neatly-drawn nipples of the demon woman, the stump of her victim's cock, loose pubic hair, a speech bubble with 'give me your power' in huge, bold blocks.

Was this a sign?

Had Joanna sneaked a sketched page in without him knowing?

He closed up his eyes, picturing the lump under the duvet, telling him to stop being so loud.

The constant pedantry.

Get back to your own pillow.

Your mission is *mo liu*.

That's it, whispered the purple, dipping down to the bench beside him, she's willing to teach you Urdu, is pedantic in a funny way, when it's called for, like the Quetta incident, has a body you could hibernate inside, won't tell you to go back to your own pillow, won't hassle you about Ljubljana, why would she, probably doesn't even know where it is, won't be coy about fucking either, won't wrestle for control, no yellow-eyed demon detaching from her inner side, pure honesty, lucidity, anarchist eyes, dangerous yet loyal, stylish

and all of that

just off the top of my misty head.

~~~

Twenty-four minutes later, in the space between cabin 46 and 47, Sila stood rigid against the pale blue wallpaper, looking down at the same nipples, the same dick, the same page.

Fuck, this book was cruel, it really was, why would a demon want to fuck a man anyway?

It didn't make sense, the writer must have been male, or a teenage boy. Who'd probably be doing the same thing I'm doing now, if he were there, if he's still alive?

What am I doing?

He looked back, double-checking the corridor for voyeurs, and repeated his stock answer: she's either genuine and ready for sex or asleep and won't answer so either way nothing will be lost.

Okay, here we go.

He stepped forward and knocked, the first three bars of the *Blake's 7* theme, not that she'd know it.

God, but if she did, that would be-...

The door opened slowly, but there was no red, cropped dress behind it and no beautiful Pakistani face to moan that he was four minutes late.

'Hello?'

The door stopped forty-five degrees from the cabin wall, too abrupt to be natural. The rest of the room was dark, almost pitch black.

'Hello?' he called again, blanking on her name.

No answer.

Just the slight bobbing of the floor as the ferry rode out some trenchant waves.

Sensing a distinct lack of eroticism, Sila reached under his *Old King Matjaž* hoodie and stopped when he remembered the green knife was back in his cabin. Ah, probably for the best. Had to be her behind the door, messing around. No need for stabbing.

Pulling his hand back out, he edged forward into the room, tense, sexually feral, annoyed.

'Anyone here?'

No answer.

'It's me, Sila...your first Urdu student.'

Nothing. Just more waves.

As he cleared the edge of the door, he started to crane his head round to see who had opened the thing, but then he thought light switch and pressed that instead.

The effect was stark, instant giallo.

On the bed, spread out naked and silent, was the Pakistani woman he'd lent his jacket to twenty-five minutes earlier, dark red holes on her stomach and a still-leaking slash across the left half of her neck.

'What...'

The bed shimmered and it was the Pakistani man, *not Amir*, stripped with the same wounds, beautiful, dick at least ten inches flaccid.

'No...'

Calling it a *shit mirage* out loud, Sila went for his hoodie pocket again and spun, but wasn't fast enough as the person behind the door pushed full force into his back then grabbed his hood, yanked it forward and followed him down onto the bed.

His face landed just above the dead man's thighs, hovering for half a second before the subsequent force from the attacker on his back pushed him right down, onto the pubic hair.

Only it wasn't *not Amir* anymore, the mirage dick had vanished, replaced by either the clit or the labia. And the rest of the body...no idea...cos the murderer was like a fucking cargo crate on his back.

Get off came out as *guudov*, and everything after it was muffled even worse as loose bits of pubic hair got sucked into his mouth.

He tried to jab his elbows back, but whoever it was behind the door had him pinned down tight. He stopped struggling, trying to trick the guy into loosening his grip, but it didn't work, in fact it made things three times worse as the attacker used the freedom given to slide a knife to the side of his throat.

Sila froze, not even spitting out the stray pubic hair.

'What you doing here?' the attacker asked, tone way too calm. 'You know them? You working with them?'

Hang on, that voice...

'You dumping the bodies?'

Sila tried to twist round again to confirm it was who he thought it was, but the guy was as strong as a Korean builder, so he gave up and stared at the corpse instead. His potential fuck for the night. The woman who'd slinked off deck half an hour earlier wearing his *Criolo* jacket. Throat cut. Dead. Killed by the British lunatic who was probably about to do the same thing to him now.

'You're not talking,' said Tak, pulling the blade back a little.

'Drop the knife first.'

It was a rogue request, and Sila didn't expect much from it, but, surprisingly, the touch of metal vanished and, a second later, something hit with a soft thud on the carpeted floor.

'Now the arm.'

'Do you know them?' asked Tak, tightening his grip.

'Jesus...'

'Do you know them?'

'No.'

'Why you here then?'

'Met woman upstairs. Arranged an Urdu lesson. This cabin.'

'You came for a fuck?'

'Sorry, what?'

'Don't do that.'

'Do what?'

'Waste my time faking surprise. You know what I asked you, answer it.'

'Tak...'

'Dressed like a high class escort, inviting you back to her cabin. Did you come to fuck her? Is that the truth?'

'My arm is breaking off.'

'No tangents.'

'Jesus fucking...!' Sila tried to straighten his arm out, but the weirdo interrogator held it firm. 'Is this judo?'

'Did you come to fuck her?'

'I can't twist out...'

'Answer it.'

'Can't even...start the process of it...'

'Did you come to fuck her?'

'Fuck, loosen a bit...it's fucking-...'

'Okay, let me simplify. Either you're here cos you're helping the thing or you're one of their sex victims. Which one?'

'Victims?'

'Truth. Which one?'

Sila closed his eyes to try the thing he'd seen on an episode of *Blake's 7*, the idea that if you broke with reality for a few seconds, you could move outside your body and analyse the scene from afar.

But, instead of this cabin, he pictured Avon judo-forcing a Federation guard into a leg lock, squeezing his neck to snapping point and

that was no good cos

he wasn't in a leg lock and

the only fighting experience he had was amateur stuff from the cabinet hunt, and jujitsu lessons at high school, just before the teacher had been arrested for fingering Audrey Dotsey in the stairwell outside the science block.

'Stop pretending to faint...'

'I'm not.' Sila opened his eyes and was about to explain the theory behind what he was doing, hoping that honesty would mellow Tak a little, or distract him long enough so he could twist round and...do something, avenge his prospective Urdu teacher perhaps, but then he looked up from his private patch of pubic hair and saw the woman's head moving.

A reflex? Death spasm?

Seemed likely...until her eyelids lifted too...and two neon green eyes stared up at the ceiling.

'Just tell me straight...were you here for a fuck?'

'Tak...'

'Just say it. Fuck or not?'

'Tak, her head, it's...'

'What?'

'...moving, her eyes. Fuck, get off me, she's not-...'

Sila didn't get to say the word *dead* as the woman shot up and, with one swipe of her strangely sharp right hand, backhanded both of them across the cabin.

Somehow, or perhaps due to blind luck, Tak managed to twist around mid-flight, shifting Sila behind and using his body as a cushion against the impact.

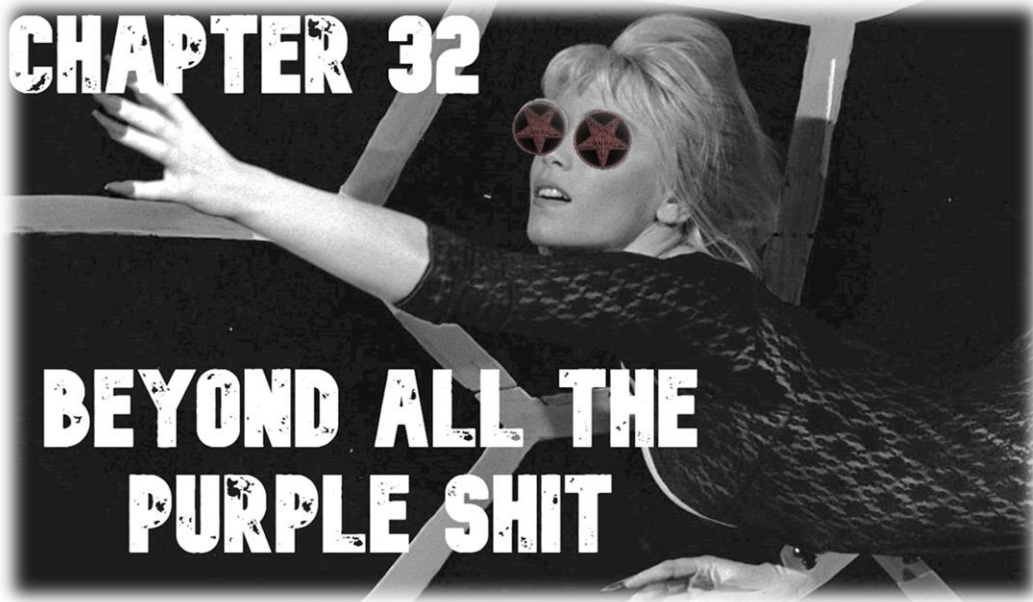
The wall felt like brick, or tiles, hurting Sila the same way the toilet wall in Copenhagen had, then dumping him onto the carpet like a used condom.

He tried to look around the cabin, to plot a way out, but his vision was blurring, his spine felt snapped, the lights were French gothic and

the last thing he saw before the familiar void was a naked Pakistani demoness, eyes glowing green, blood dripping from her neck like a nascent waterfall,

claw seizing Tak by the throat and

CHAPTER 32



BEYOND ALL THE PURPLE SHIT

It wasn't really him

she knew that

on all levels

but it looked like him and was walking like him and it wasn't on top of the hill next to the castle, it was in Sevilla, on the giant waffle

walking towards her from the other side and

she was walking towards it

saying his name

'Yute Long, Yute Long,'

yet no matter how many steps she took, she couldn't get any closer, and worse, the waffle itself was expanding, stretching out its wavy lattice motif to intercept, and she called out, told him to walk faster, but commands didn't work cos he was too busy smiling, pulling the skin of his face over the top of his head and

then it wasn't him

it was Patrice

god, how predictable

Patrice the wisp

probably coming to apologise for following her up to the castle, for not taking her seriously when she told him what was in there, that it only preyed on men and

Joanna opened her eyes.

Patrice spun esoteric into the ceiling web of the cabin, and it took her half a second beyond that to realise exactly where it was she was pinned to.

Ferry of Men

shepherded by purple threat

byzantine irony

in the way her brain twisted it.

Had twisted it.

Wanted to twist it.

She sat up and looked down at the duvet, wondering why it wasn't over her face.

Had someone moved it?

She was sure she'd put it over her head before she'd slept, or approached the idea of sleep. Maybe she'd pushed it off herself. Yute Long always said she did strange things when she slept, gritted her teeth, scraped toenails down his calf.

Could be that, unconscious movements.

'Hello?' she called, getting back distant engine grind and wallpaper throb.

Okay, the cabin was empty, but what about the bathroom? She put it in frame and saw the door wide open, the light off.

All clear.

Move, wretch.

Murderer.

Man-slaughterer.

Swinging tired legs off the bed, she waited a few seconds then transferred the weight.

Not too far, no one here, go, she advised herself, rubbing the sleep out of the corner of her eyes, but as soon as she started pushing her legs, the bathroom somehow shifted, relocating itself from three metres away to fifteen.

She tried to compensate, speed up, narrate her steps, but it didn't make a speck of difference. If anything it got worse, slower, like she was walking in a vat of glue, and the faster she moved the more it should've helped, but it didn't, cos it was fast only in thought, in intention, and the bathroom kept

shifting again and again and again, and to match it, all she could do was take longer strides and that did help a little, but

it was still too slow

too lethargic

terrifying

the bathroom door was miles away, light years away and

her head was throbbing

her legs

leg muscles were

they weren't working at all

much too tense

too slow

like an old scrap leg

an ancient Sumerian bicycle chain

rotating rusted underwater and

her head

was simply out of

not in the

fearing for

glue, whole vat, carpet stuck

couldn't get

She stopped and clenched her fists and tried to suppress the thought of the aneurism that was going to tear open her skull if she didn't make it to that fucking bathroom in the next ten seconds.

'... ..'

Fingers detached from her hand and swabbed at her forehead, rubbing off ghost sweat, real sweat, while the rest of her body played dead, stuck in cosmic retrograde, held back by hundreds of invisible *your-fault geh* urges dressed in *told-you-so* skin that couldn't let her reach the

feel any kind of relief at

the pace of things

too slow

messenger steed from neuron to limb to action fall

oil tanker physics

sloth in a lax lax mood

with the Krsnik on its fucking tail, hungry-eyed, Patrice's spine hanging
abject object from its

'... ..'

Her legs tried to move forward again, hands screaming out for the frame of
the bathroom door, but it was too far, still too far and

things buckled, some part of her, all parts

without the sensation of down

yet

unlike the bathroom, the floor coddled

let her retch, eke it all up muon by muon and, when nothing came out, two
sudden fists punched the brown carpet, four, five times, she couldn't help it,
the held-back forcefield grip, it was splitting her, garrotting her veins,
disintegrating her bones, and

even that thought

the idea of her bones cracking and going dust, it was too slow, it was all too
slow

body too slow

yet the mind

her mind was hours beyond all this, strolling round Barcelona, listening in
on template Spanish people gabbing Catalan *meh* while her body just loomed
there like a shipwreck

a slow *Song Chiu* shipwreck that was

too slow

too fucking

~~~

It took nearly twenty minutes for things to return to normal speed, for Joanna to be able to stand up and walk without undue strain to the bathroom.

Filtering out the residue horror, she splashed water on her face, regulated her breaths and refused outright to look in the mirror.

'... ..'

It had happened three times now.

Earlier on the upper deck, when the men were surrounding her, in the cabin, alone, and the first instance, stepping off the train in Genoa.

Why those times?

Why not all the time?

She knew it was because of the *grey vasic*, the lack of it, and there was nothing objective she could do. Far as her knowledge went, the only place she could get more was in Ljubljana, and the slow-downs would happen at least ten more times before she got back there to buy more.

But that was irrelevant.

She didn't want to buy more.

Patrice wouldn't let her.

And maybe she didn't need to?

The worst could be over already. It'd been four or five days and cold turkey took about that long, according to old TVB dramas, so this could've been the last attack.

And if it wasn't, it didn't matter cos there couldn't be that many more, and if there were, that didn't matter either, she could just sleep through them all, sleep through the next six hours or so, get a hostel in Barcelona, sleep two, three days, endure a few more living nightmare trips to the bathroom, and then it'd definitely be done.

'... ..'

She thought about going above deck, getting some fresh air, but then the image of a seven mile corridor or thirty minute flight of stairs popped into her head and forced her quickly back onto the bed and under the duvet.

What if it never stops happening? she thought, burying her head again.

What if slo-mo becomes *ging seung geh*?

Patrice joined her under the covers, smiling like a property agent, a giant shadow making clicking sounds behind him.

*Ging seung* and permanent, he whispered

nailed tight

porous at certain points

isn't that what you deserve, Chun Ying, on some level?

~~~

The hill was steep

and icy

and Sila kept slipping down.

Not all the way to the bottom, but far enough, and if it weren't for the Pakistani Urdu teacher grabbing his hand and pulling him back up, he would've stayed there.

But she did grab him and did say, stop embarrassing yourself, the castle's this way, so stern that

he followed her and

as they walked she started to shed her clothes and by the time they'd reached the top, which was seemingly instantaneous, she was completely naked and when she turned to face him there was blood seeping from her neck to her bush, which she didn't seem too worried about, and when he asked if they were gonna have sex now, despite the blood, she said yes, but first you have to go and stand over by the tree, that's where you'll fuck, and he went, stumbling on uneven dirt, and when he got to the tree, Joanna was there too, standing behind the Pakistani nudist with a camera and

she didn't say a word

just watched as the blood-stream Pakistani cheat changed into a latex monster costume and walked over to Sila, put her head on his shoulder and did nothing, said nothing, just stood there and

'You back on?'

dozed off, and, 'wait, are we still having sex?' but she didn't answer, and her hair was seaweed, tangled and

'Hey, fuckwit...'

slapped him in the face with a hand from nowhere and

'Kaj...'

'...being crushed here, weighs a fucking ton.'

Sila blinked a few times, not too dramatic, and looked around. Everyone was gone. The woman, Joanna, even the castle and the fuck tree. '*Kje je ona...*'

'Where's who?'

'*Gola zenska...*'

'On the railing, clown.'

'*Kaj...*' Sila blinked a full two seconds and saw a bench, then a funnel, then the interrogator chief from his cabin. 'You...'

'Yeah, me, you and this.' Tak gestured with his eyes at the thing slipping off the railing next to Sila's shoulder. 'You helping or not?'

'What happened?'

'You passed out again.'

'When?'

'Five seconds ago.'

'I don't understand...' Sila did a third scan of the ferry, ending on the purple maelstrom hanging latent above. 'It's still there.'

'You've said that five times.'

'Like we're on an alien planet or-...'

'Mate, the fucking head.'

'What?'

'The head, it's slipping out, lift it up.' Tak pointed at the piece of duvet on the railing, which he could see was either blood red in colour or had a lot of blood soaked into it. 'Mate, faster.'

'This is...'

Sila stopped his line dead cos it had all crashed back on top of him in an instant. The woman was a demon, she liked to eat human organs wrapped in skin pockets.

The cabin?

A little blurred, nebulous, but he could see most of it. Backhanded into the cabin wall, tossed around a bit, dragged to the bathroom with half-wiped bloodstains. Big mistake, she'd stopped to boast, told them two was a nice bonus, and that's when they'd got her - or Tak had got her, he'd almost relapsed and gone back to fuck mode...seeing her naked like that, aggressive, with the concussion backing up his romantic escapes

all cut off hard

by the shower head beating

which put her out clean a second time.

After that?

Panic set in, bit of gloom auxiliary, how could they explain a corpse-looking thing?

More panic, the body still looked human, vulnerable, hurt, Tak tried to strongarm him, but he was ready for it, pinned the interrogator down, forced him to admit he'd tried to fuck her too, Tak said sure, but to him it'd looked like a guy. Cos it was a succubus, designed to attract all.

Momentary urge to fuck Tak, eat out both versions of the Pakistani, pass out from blurred vision.

Blaring ship horn, back to panic.

Called a truce, both sides, wrapped the succubus up in a duvet, dragged her up on deck, got spotted by about four guys too drunk to give a fuck, manoeuvred her to the railings and

that's when I must've passed out, he thought.

'You daydreaming? Lift, before it wakes up again.'

'Too heavy.'

'Fucking know that, I'm holding most of it.'

'Like 150kg.'

'Lift, fuck's sake.'

'I am.'

'Lift harder.'

'I'm lifting, Jesus fucking-...!' Sila pushed her head and torso upwards, bending his legs to get more support cos this thing wasn't human, it was like lifting a truck. How the hell did they even get her this far?

'More.'

'Almost got it.'

'Sideways...up and sideways.'

'I'm trying...'

'Higher.'

'I am.'

'Okay, hold steady.'

'Her head's on the rail.'

'Got it.'

'Push sideways...over the side.'

'Pushing.'

'Almost done.'

'Got it.'

'Bit more...'

'Got it.'

'Bit more...'

'Done?'

'Bit more...'

Sila kept one hand on the woman's head and used the other to help Tak push her legs far enough over the railing to tip the whole thing seawards.

It worked...partially.

'Sila...' came the woman's voice, her eyes open and human brown, with a claw-like hand clinging onto his wrist.

'Fuck...she's back,' he cried, so loud that a drunk on the other side of the deck told him to eat the fucking sea.

'Drop it,' shouted Tak, reaching over, trying to detach the demon's claw then pulling back as her legs started kicking.

'I can't...'

'Twist its claw off.'

'...the grip, it's too tight.'

'Please, Sila,' the beautiful woman from Quetta whispered, eyes anchored to his.

'Don't listen to it.'

'I can't hold on much longer. Pull me up.'

'Dig your nails in.'

What fucking nails was the instinctive reply, but that wouldn't do much good so he took the sentiment of the line and started jabbing the demon woman's arm with his fingertips. 'Off my fucking arm...witch face.'

Something clicked in the woman's brain, her eyes instantly shading nebula green, her voice becoming an echo with wind effects as she told Sila the sea could never be a tomb for her kind and when she did walk out on a beach somewhere on the Spanish coast, the first thing she would do was find him, and the moor too, and their flesh was going to taste that much-

The threat ended abrupt as Tak's knife clipped her wrist, several times, and with a breath of irritation

her body dropped, limp, non-flailing, landing soft on the Balearic waves yet strong enough to make a mini-crater that sucked water in fierce and then spat it at Mach-8 back up again, forty feet high, right into their faces.

'Jesus...'

'Yeah,' replied Tak, spitting some back down.

'*Je slano...*'

'It's seawater.'

'*Je bolj slain kot običajno...*'

'You say some weird shit.'

Sila rubbed the seawater from his eyes. 'You know Slovenian?'

'Some.'

'Fluently?'

'Enough not to isolate me.'

Tak wiped his *Ellesse* jacket then walked over to the nearest bench and sat down. He leaned back and looked up at one of the funnels without saying a word. Sila walked over and stood over him, still trying to process what and who that thing was.

Processing that turned into four minutes or so of realigned breathing therapy. Meditation. Reflection with existential reach outs. Cupped by the practical. Was she really a succubus? A bad one? Would the sea be cold for her? How did she travel and eat people without ever getting caught?

'It's moving,' said Tak, quietly, cutting into the void.

Sila wasn't sure if he was talking to him or not so didn't answer. He did look up though.

'Seems brighter now, more like lilac.'

'The mist?'

'Not exactly, mate.'

'Clouds?'

Tak put his hand up and trailed a line of purple in the sky, adding a little loop flourish at the end.

'You've seen it before?'

'Look at it long enough, you'll dock and not even know it. The ship will dock, you'll still be here. So fucking purple, mate. Should be out in deep space, Oort Cloud, Helix Nebula, not this wreck. Ah, maybe that succubus called it, summoned it? Maybe it was attracted to its core.'

'The one we just...threw overboard?'

'Could be that.' Tak pulled down skin to the side of his left eye. 'There was a travel poet in Japan, 15th Century, said purple lights were enablers. You ever hear that?'

'What?'

'There's sensualism and there's asceticism and the purple enables the latter. I think that's what he said, haven't read it in a while. Though it doesn't make much sense for her being here, does it? Unless...maybe she was trying to control herself, but the boat was full of men? Or it could be for us. Some kind of hypnotic mass guiding us back inside our own heads, linking us to something big. The poet, the Japanese guy, he claimed it was wormholes, that we could travel there using our brains. Don't know how he knew about wormholes in 1400s Japan, but that's how it's translated.'

His finger switched to the skin by his other eye, stretching it down and making little circles.

'You ever read about that Emperor who tried to become a monk? Did it three times, went to a temple in West China and the treasury had to buy him back each time. Can you imagine that? A fucking emperor giving it all up to look inward. Giving up a harem, different woman every night...mate, that's discipline. Or insanity. One of the two. Insanity masked as discipline to fool those scholars, all the officials. That's what it would've looked like. Or what I think 5th Century Chinese would've looked at it as. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe he saw purple too, same shit as this.' Tak tried to point at the sky, but stopped halfway and went to the skin of his temples instead. 'Fuck.'

'You okay?'

'Need to stop looking at it, mate.'

'You got a headache?'

Tak switched from rubbing to jabbing with his thumbs. It didn't seem to make things much better.

'Just close your eyes for a bit, it'll pass.'

Tak stood up and walked stretched-out oval laps around the bench.

Giving space [and time], Sila returned to the purple mist, thinking of the wormhole line, purple planets, purple aliens with purple clothes and purple eyes.

'Who's that?'

'Where?'

Tak moved away from the bench and squinted at the funnel. There was a leg sticking out, with a slipper hanging off the foot. Muttering to himself, he circled round and edged over to the new bench, where the Algerian guy from earlier was still sitting, reading his De Beauvoir book.

Sila followed him over, but there wasn't much space, which basically forced him to perch on the arm next to Tak, the guy he barely knew, the guy who'd held a knife to his throat and somehow knew how to speak Slovenian.

Tak looked at the cover of the Algerian's book, nodded and then turned back to Sila. 'After all this, that's what you ask me?'

'I didn't say anything.'

'Yeah, you did.'

'I didn't.'

'You did, I just heard it.'

'What, I wasn't talking. I just sat down on the arm here, didn't say a word.'

'Who was it then?'

'I don't know. The wind?'

Tak leaned forward and scanned the floor of the deck, the funnels, the railings they'd just pushed a demon over. He even checked under the bench they were on, the Algerian's slippers.

'What exactly did you hear?' asked Sila, flinching at the same time as the Algerian's feet.

'Nah, one of those.'

'A voice?'

'Just wind dynamics. Ditch it.'

Sila nodded out of habit then nodded a second time at the Algerian, who had plucked up enough courage to glance up from his book.

Good job he's behind this funnel, Sila thought, wondering what would've happened if the guy had seen them dumping the duvet a few minutes earlier.

Shifting side-on, one leg over the other, Tak studied the Algerian for a while before finally saying something in Arabic, to which the Algerian replied, 'what?' in sharp English.

'Sorry, mate, I thought you spoke Arabic.'

'I speak French.'

'My French is upper beginner at best. Can't go more than two minutes.'

'We're speaking English, it is okay.'

'Yeah, we are.' Tak looked at the railings then back at the Algerian. 'You're not drunk are you?'

'Sorry, I do not drink.'

'You high?'

'Excuse me?'

'On vasic, mushrooms, something else?'

'I don't understand.'

Tak leaned back, knocking the back of his head against the funnel. 'How good is your English?'

'*Oui*...it is okay, I think,' replied the Algerian, eyes on the page he desperately wanted to return to. 'I speak some, but not politic, science, this kind of thing.'

'You know the word *demon*?'

'Demon?'

'Yeah, you do. No need to say yes. You believe in them?'

'Err...demons...*oui*, I suppose it is no problem.'

'Too vague. Do you believe in demons or not?'

'I...'

'Yes or no?'

The Algerian breathed out slow and held up his book, flicking through the pages with stuttered technique. 'Sorry, I only come here to read my book, not make trouble.'

'On Magyar? Dolgozol Vele?'

'Sorry?'

'How far does your neck rotate?'

'My neck?'

'You were watching us before, over there, weren't you?'

'Watching? I'm not-...I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know?'

'I just come to read my book, I don't watch anything.'

The De Beauvoir cover rose up again, and Sila prepped an intervention, but hadn't even got the topic past the first neuron before the inquisitor started grilling again.

'Me and him, the duvet, throwing it in the sea. You saw all that.'

'Sorry...*duvet*?'

'You saw what we did, didn't you?'

'I don't-...I only come to read my book, I didn't-...'

'Stop redacting, mate. I'm not a censor, I'm not stopping you seeing anything.'

'I'm sorry, I can't-...I didn't see anything.'

'What are you doing?' asked Sila, putting his hand as a substitute cushion between the funnel and the back of Tak's head.

'You saw us carry a demon body in a duvet up here and dump it over the side. No need to hide it.'

'Demon body...'

'He's joking, there wasn't a body,' cut in Sila, tugging on the sleeve of Tak's Ellesse jacket, trying to pull him up from the bench. 'We were just messing about by the railings. Too much alcohol.'

'I didn't see anything.'

'You saw us, mate,' said Tak, flicking Sila's fingers off him. 'We were lifting that succubus for half an hour, don't tell me you were sat here all that time looking at the sea.'

'No, not sea. I was reading my book. I did not see a thing.'

'Come on, Tak,' said Sila, switching from jacket grip to soft shoulder clamp. 'We better go back down.'

'What-...'

'Get some sleep.'

'I'm explaining things, get off me.'

'Excuse me, it is quite late,' said the Algerian, standing up. 'I'm going to my cabin now. Good night.' He looked at the sky, the sun creeping over the horizon, the purple mist morphing into monkish grey. 'Or good morning, perhaps.'

'Wait, we're not done...'

'Sorry, he's had a lot to drink,' said Sila, stepping in front of Tak and muttering *fuck off* every time he got jabbed in the back of the legs. 'Needs some time to cool down.'

'*Oui*. Good night.'

The Algerian walked off, pretending to read a bit more of his book as he went, then dropped the act completely as he got through the door and quickened his steps below deck.

'Get off me,' continued Tak, even though his shoulder and jacket were completely free.

'You were digging a hole.'

'I was explaining things.'

'For what? He didn't see anything.'

'Nah, we don't know that. He could've seen its hair, maybe its arm or tit hanging out, then thought it was a woman. But we know it wasn't. That's what I was trying to get across to him, if he did actually see it. Which he probably did. Or may have done. The arm part...'

'That's why you were trying to confess to him? Cos he may have seen her arm drop out?'

'Covering the bases, not confessing. And it wasn't a *her*.'

'No, it was a rolled-up duvet...'

'Just had the face of one.'

'...if he even saw that much...'

'And the body.'

'...which I don't think he did.'

'And the voice.'

Sila looked left towards the nearest ship guidelines, breathing out frustration. Then sucking it back in. A group of five men was walking their way, leaning over the railings as they got closer, pointing at something in the water.

'Fuck, more drunks...'

'And the way it attacked us in the cabin, the bathroom. Only a succubus does that level of gloating. Never a woman. No chance.'

'We should really get back inside, lie low till we dock.'

Tak stared blankly at Sila's hand on his sleeve. 'What you doing?'

'Trying to get you to move.'

'I can power myself, mate.'

'Okay, okay.'

'Cabin or here, I don't give a shit. Don't need a church either, so don't say it. Not even Christian. All I'm saying is...that thing was a succubus...cousin, offshoot, thing. Definitely not a woman.'

'Got it.'



Even though his Algerian audience had gone, Tak kept explaining himself all the way back down to the cabin

saying it wasn't even a fraction of a woman

or a man

or a succubus *per se*

but Dahli, a vicious demon rhizome of the succubus type from some Pakistani region he couldn't pronounce, possibly close to Quetta, and the only reason he'd known the thing was on the ship in the first place was down to his headache and

he hadn't been sure it was a dahli specifically – hence the succubus claim - he just knew the impossibly beautiful Pakistani man was not human when he appeared next to the milk vending machine and invited him to his cabin and

even though he hadn't fucked anyone in four months, Tak held his nerve and cut the dahli's throat before it could paralyse him, though due to lack of research, he hadn't realised it could survive throat cutting, which is why it came back and overpowered them and thank god for the boasting respite in the bathroom cos if it weren't for that both of them would be dead now, instead of just the demon and

with a bit of luck it wouldn't have a valid ID, wouldn't be missed

unless this dahli was a pack hunting demon

which was doubtful as traditionally they were isolated and cynical types, especially the ones using the tried and tested siren approach.

'Okay, I'll believe everything you've said on one condition,' said Sila, stopping next to the bin outside the ship's nightclub, which from a cursory half-strip glance of the entrance doorway had three guys passed out on the floor and a single cleaner mopping around and between them.

'Belief is comprehension, mate.'

'Huh?'

'You were there, you saw it.'

'Okay, let me rephrase. I'll forget about your knife attack on me and that lunatic interrogation you just did above deck, if you do one thing.'

'I didn't attack you.'

'Huh? In the cabin, when I came in...'

'That wasn't attacking, that was a security check, who you were, why you were there.'

Sila put his hand on top of the bin rail and interrogated the plastic pint cups beyond, asking them without words if they were hearing any of this.

Nothing back, not even a dribble of beer from the rim, so he turned on the wall and did the same to the poster promoting a Serbian belly dancer [weekend sailings only].

Then, when that didn't work either, he turned on the cleaner, who was busy prodding a drunk guy's leg with the end of her mop.

'You drawing a map?' Tak asked, taking Sila's hand and lifting it off the bin rail.

'Okay, forget the attack.'

'Not an attack.'

'Just...do me a favour, when we go back to the cabin. Don't tell Joanna about this.'

'The Chinese girl?'

'Ja. Just say we were above deck, chatting. Or in there, the nightclub.'

'I thought she knew about demons?'

'She does, but...'

'Ah, I get it.'

'Not that we're a couple, we're not, it's just-...'

Tak put his arm around Sila's far shoulder and guided him deeper along the passage, unaware that the cleaner had stopped mopping and was now lightly slapping one of the drunk guy's in the face. 'No need for excuses, mate. Every single straight guy on this ship would've fucked the female version and every gay guy would've fucked the Pakistani male model. That's what the dahli's designed for, the essence of it. In fact, those twenty guys we saw up top, they were probably after her too. What else would they be doing out at this hour?'

'Looking at the purple mist?' mumbled Sila, following the casual slide of Tak's hand down his arm and doing nothing to shrug it off.

'Ha, don't try and dodge, mate.'

'Dodge what?'

'You wanted to fuck her.'

'Who?'

'The cleaner back there. And the dahli, both at the same time. One in the ass, one in the puss.'

'Are you okay?'

'Ah, fine, hide in the bush, I don't care.'

Tak's hand finally left Sila's arm, leaving him free to look puzzled at the gambling machine whoring itself with flashing blue lights at the junction up ahead.

The thing alone, unused, waiting for him to put in a coin and send him back in time, or tell him alternate futures where the Swahili States won and Ghana owned the Kuiper Belt and the dahli woman thing was sucking him off in the bathroom instead of traipsing along the sea bed towards a non-erotic, baleful type of revenge that would at some point-

He blinked, looking back at the gambling creature already a few metres behind.

'Probably would've said no,' he said blank, words without any form of pre-anchor or apology for the delay.

'What, no to a sex demon? You're a funny fucker... ' Tak paused, looking at Sila's *Old King Matjaž* hoodie then shaking his head. 'Mate, I've forgotten your name again...Slavoj?'

'Sila.'

'Sila, right. Seventeenth time's the charm. Yeah, don't be embarrassed, mate. You were gonna fuck a sex demon, I was too, that's the whole point of them, you can't resist, it's chemistry. Even if it was in guy form, you would've

fucked it too, if it got close enough. No shame in it at all. I would've, the Muslim guy would've, Martin fucking Luther would've.'

They turned another corner and walked past a condom machine, the ship guidelines, then a frameless, peeling sheet of cabin regulations as the doors started to display numbers.

Would've fucked both of them, guy and lady got mashed with other thoughts – falling lady demon, seabed difficulties, anarchist sites in Barcelona, Kurszán in green face – until Sila finally settled on, 'forget the sex demon. Just don't tell her the corpse wrapped in a duvet part.'

Tak jabbed one of the doors they passed, mouthing the number on it. 'Still don't get it. You said she knows about that stuff.'

'Ja, she does, but...'

'What's the problem then?'

'It's just...' Sila tried to order his thoughts, but Joanna cropped up instantly, flicking them out of place like a squash ball. Ah, maybe Tak was right. She knew about the demon stuff, it wouldn't be a problem, she probably wouldn't even blink. Worse, she might even like what they'd done. 'Okay, fine, tell her. It doesn't really matter.'

'Course it doesn't.'

'Not like it's anything new or shocking. I mean, she tried to have me-...' Sila stopped, staring at the corridor ahead.

'Tried to have you what?'

He focused on a fire hose nearby, rolled up neat and stuck to the wall. 'Let's just get back to the cabin. Rest a bit then go our separate ways, forget all this.'

'Fuck that, you're coming with me.'

'What?'

'I need you in Barcelona, mate. At least till tonight. Maybe late afternoon, if things turn bitter.'

'Need me to do what?'

'Not just you, your girlfriend too.'

'What, why?'

'Don't make me explain. Just tag along for a while, I'll buy you lunch, we'll go to a museum or something.'

'That's your persuasion?'

'Mate, don't be a cunt.'

'I've got my own stuff to do. Solo stuff. Calling me a cunt's not gonna help much.'

'Fine. Just me and your girlfriend then.'

'She'll say no too.'

'Nah, I'll charm her.' Tak stopped in the corridor, tapping lightly on the door to their cabin. 'She's from Hong Kong, right?'

Sila muttered something in Slovene, then remembered Tak knew some of that language so changed to beginner Romanian instead.

'... ..' said Tak, possibly in the same language.

'What?'

'I said, don't hide in Romanian.'

'You speak that language too?'

'No, Hungarian. But I used to fuck around with a Romanian guy in Uni, recognised some of the sounds.'

Sila dwelled on the *fuck around* part for a tenth of a second then switched to Tak's hand stuck on the door handle. 'Are you opening that or...'

'Might do. If you promise to stick together in Barcelona.'

'Fine, I'll open it myself.'

Sila knocked on the cabin door and, when there was no answer, got out his key and opened it. The lights were dim, on the lowest possible setting, which made the brown striped wallpaper oddly bearable and the form of Joanna goblin-like as she sat slumped on the end of the bed, duvet bunched up around her, reading the Slovene book on mythical Krsnik.

'You're awake?'

She stared at Sila, then at Tak, half her face hidden beneath the book. 'Where have you been?'

'Nowhere.'

'That is not a place.'

'We were on the upper deck, getting some air.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, really,' said Tak, moving over to his own bed and collapsing diagonal. 'Above deck, dumping a demon from Pakistan over the railings. Weighed a fucking ton.' Tak swatted away Sila's suburban sasquatch

expression and stared up at the ceiling. 'What? It's pointless to lie. Waste of time.' He turned side-on to Joanna. 'You know about demons, right?'

'Not Pakistani ones.'

'Well, there's no real difference. They're tough, never truly dead, but fit well in rolled-up duvets. Your travel partner Sila here helped me with that part. Took us an hour to get it up on deck and over the side. Very tough work.'

Joanna stared at them both then seemed to lose interest and went back to her book.

'You asking her?' said Tak to Sila.

'No.'

'Don't be a sulk, mate.'

'Ask me what?' asked Joanna, looking up again.

'He wants to know if we can walk around Barcelona with him after we dock. I said no.'

'Why?'

'Good question.'

Sila turned to Tak and waited for his pitch.

'Mate, I know this city. I know where to go. You don't have me, you'll end up at all the shit places. La fucking rambla. Sagrada Family Thing. Not good. What do you say, Joanna?'

She looked at the cover of her book and then at Sila. 'I think it's okay.'

'You do?'

'Yes.'

Sila pushed her feet over a bit and sat down on the bed. 'The cover of your book told you that?'

'It did.'

'Really? That's interesting cos a few hours ago you didn't want to see anything or anyone.'

'*Goi bin ju yee.*'

'What?'

'He can help you with your cabinets.'

Sila's hand half went up to gag the Chinese liability but it was too late, Tak was already on the edge of his bed, alert. 'Do what?'

'She's joking.'

'Help with your cabinets?'

'Old artisan thing.'

'Come on, I'm not an amateur. There's what? A demon inside a cabinet? A demon cabinet? Shapeshifter?'

'It's private.'

'You told her.'

'She's my travel partner, you're not.'

'Mate, we just tag-teamed a dahli together. Open up.'

'I told you, it's private. And don't bother needling me cos it won't do anything.'

'What is it, a succubus? Door to a demon dimension?'

Sila breathed out the stale air he'd reluctantly taken in then lay himself flat on the bed. 'Too tired for this. Gonna sleep a bit. You should do the same.'

Tak made a half-hearted whistling sound, told Sila he was too guarded and that kind of shit couldn't last all day, then fell back down on his pillow. Three minutes later, he was snoring.

'He's not as bad as you said,' whispered Joanna, crawling up next to Sila and draping an arm over his chest.

'Me?'

'Quite talkative.'

The obvious response was *you didn't even use his name the last time we talked, just called him the black guy*, but Sila really was too tired to say it and too tired to think it, but

he couldn't switch off

there had to be something running the wire, and at first it was replays of the cabin assault, flipped into sex acts, then rudimentary Urdu lines, then her body dropping into the sea with a fusion bomb splash back up in his face, sending him and Tak flying onto Barcelona beach, where the tide parted and the dahli woman walked out naked, pointing her claw at him not Tak, saying she had planned to pogo-grind his dick for two good minutes before chiselling out his heart but as he'd dropped her overboard she was now going to eviscerate him, in the Cronenbergian sense, while Joanna mapped out their own private language exchange

Cantonese to Urdu

with no claws at all cos she was one of the same kind, pragmatic, doing what she had to do

to get out of this

off the beach and into the phone centre, telephone exchange, the place the anarchists held when the fake communists betrayed them

where there had to be a cabinet

of some sort

otherwise what history meant anything [beyond Lyotardian meta-type], and what was it the history of?

~~~

Brown stripes and a black and white Krsnik hid in the gaps for a minute, possibly longer, then tightened as Id furniture faded into the depths of-

'It's almost time,' cut in Joanna, shifting closer to the wall, keeping her book close to her face.

Sila reached for his phone and sat up. Half seven. Another hour and a half and they'd be in Barcelona.

He glanced over at the parallel bed and breathed out in relief when he saw Tak as a lump of jacket and duvet, both non-moving.

'What is the telephone exchange?'

'Huh?'

'You were saying it in your sleep. We have to exhaustively search the Telephone Exchange, check for fringe elements of Stalinism with the Urdu teacher. Exactly those words.'

'Dream talk.'

'Was I involved?'

'No.'

'As the villain?'

'No, you were not there. I think. I can't remember, it's already gone. What are you doing awake?'

'Koala impression.'

'What?'

'Reading my book.'

Sila looked at the cover again, pretending the Krsnik was a surprise. 'I thought we'd moved past that.'

'Retrospection only.'

'Don't think that's a good idea.'

'Hmm. Maybe you're right.' The book went down and so did Joanna, the duvet following her. 'Wake me up in an hour.'

'You're going back to sleep?'

She closed her eyes, keeping a hand on the Krsnik book.

*Got to be the most erratic person I've ever met*, Sila urged himself to say out loud, but the phone was closer and it'd been a while since he'd checked the Barcelona anarchist sites.

Starting with a generic search, he got an article from the Harvard advocate that was a thin line between *anarchist support* and *those silly utopians*

then progressed to [iberianature.com](http://iberianature.com)

with ant-sized text and oil tanker paragraphs

and then direct to the anarchist library, which was much better, more detailed, but had nothing on cabinets.

Maybe punishment of some kind, he thought, clicking on a link to Durruti quotes, for not searching the last two weeks, for wasting time on someone unrelated who

still, undeniably

tried to have him murdered next to the red wall of Ljubljana Castle.

Was that supposed to have expired by now?

Cos they'd fucked twice, one time under the influence of *grey vasic*?

Cos she'd been wounded, traumatised?

He dropped the phone and picked up the Krsnik book, which was still on the page she'd left it.

A tale about a farmer near Maribor, forced to give up his son to a Krsnik disguised as a salt merchant.

This was retrospection?

Folk tales?



~~~

An hour or so later, the ferry horn blew the starboard section apart and forced all three of them awake.

'Still fucking tired,' Sila moaned to the Amir figure on disintegrating dream bed, his hand stretching out and failing to pull some of the duvet away from Joanna.

'I'm buying breakfast,' said Tak, planting bare feet on the floor and jabbing the side of his head.

'Huh?'

'For both of you.'

'The ship's docking, we're not-...'

'I'll have an omelette,' interrupted Joanna, unravelling the duvet to reveal blue shorts from her primary school gym lessons and Sila's old Steaua Bucharest training top.

'Ah, Hagi's team...' Tak said, spotting it, eyes lighting up.

'Omelette.'

'Can't say his first name, too hard.'

'What?'

'He's talking about your jumper,' Sila explained, sitting up and reaching for his *Matjaž* hoodie. 'My jumper. A football player who played for that team.'

'Played for Barcelona too. In fact, you can get a shirt with his name on it later, both of you. My treat.'

'Give me five minutes,' Joanna said, blocking out both of them, taking a diver's breath then putting her right leg forward as if she were walking for the first time in 300 years.

'Take your time.'

When the bathroom door was closed and the lock had clicked, Sila slid onto Tak's bed and told him they weren't going around Barcelona with him, they had their own things to do.

'Tings...'

'What?'

'Irish.'

'I'm serious, we can't go with you. It's weird.'

'How about those cabinets?'

'What?'

'Tell me what's inside them and things will be less weird. Tings will be less weird. Ah, Jamaican too.'

There was a noise from the bathroom, something electric, like a shaver. After a few seconds it got louder.

'... ..'

'Is that Cantonese?' asked Tak, jabbing his head again.

Sila ignored him and knocked on the bathroom door. 'What's going on?'

If there was an answer, the electric buzzing must've drowned it out.

'Mate, I'm going for a walk.'

'Now?'

'You guys can talk tings over. I'll be back in ten. Don't try and sneak off without me.'

'What about your bag?'

Tak repeated *ten minutes* from the corridor outside and then vanished. Sila waited for the door to swing shut behind him then knocked on the bathroom door again. 'Jo, he's gone out. What's going on?'

The buzzing sound got louder.

'What are you doing in there?'

There was a reply this time, but her voice was muffled by the electric noise.

'What?'

'I can't-...it won't stop.'

'What won't stop?'

The door opened and Joanna pulled Sila in, opening up his hand and trying to dump an electric shaver on his palm.

'What are you doing?'

'Make it stop.'

Sila pushed her hand away.

'It started buzzing. I didn't touch it, it just started.'

'Give it here...'

Joanna handed it over. He examined it fast and found the on-off switch.

'I turned it off, but it got louder.'

'Fuck, it's loud.'

'Make it stop.'

Sila tried flicking the switch on and off again, but it made no difference. 'It's not stopping.'

'I said that already.'

'Doesn't make sense, it's not even turned on.'

'Break it.'

'It's not mine.'

'Don't care, it's annoying.'

Sila tried taking the metal guard off the top of the shaver but that just made it angrier.

'Fuck...'

'Don't say fuck, make it stop.'

'I'm trying.'

'You just made it louder.'

'Shut up a sec.'

'Break it.'

'I can't.'

Sila looked around the bathroom, at the toilet, at the door, at the mirror, at the bin, but there was nothing in there that could possibly do anything to stop it, so he just stood there holding it as the metal guard slowly slipped off and little bits of stubble crawled out onto his hand.

'What are you doing?' asked Joanna, scratching the stomach of the Steaua Bucharest jumper.

Sila looked at the electric shaver. 'Don't know.'

'It's moving.'

'I know.'

'What do we do?'

'I don't fucking-...' started Sila, for some reason giving up on panic and laughing. 'It's turned off, I can't-...'

'I'm going outside,' said Joanna, backing out into the cabin.

'What?'

'It's too noisy.'

'You can't go. What about this?'

'Turn it off.'

'How?'

'I don't know.'

'Fuck. It has to stop soon, right? Run out of battery...'

'No.'

'Wah...no? That's it?'

Joanna looked at the shaver then at the door. 'I'm going back to bed.'

'You're gonna sleep?'

'For a while.'

'But we're docking soon.'

'... ..'

Sila tried flicking the off switch again, but it still wasn't obeying orders. 'Seriously, it won't stop.'

'That's why I told you to break it.'

'It's Tak's, not mine. He'll go nuts.'

'Buy him a new one.'

'Fuck, this is ridiculous.'

Despite threatening to sleep until the ship's captain himself dragged her off the ferry, Joanna returned to the bathroom, examining the shaver and coming to no conclusions. After five minutes of not moving, they both looked in the mirror and saw themselves not moving and for some reason they laughed.

'We're stuck,' she said, pulling the Steaua Bucharest collar up over her mouth.

'The noise...it's fucking endless.'

'I'm getting used to it.'

'Maybe we can wrap a towel around it, muffle it.'

'It'll tear.'

'I know, but-...'

'We'll have to wait until the battery runs out.'

'Huh, you just said it wouldn't.'

'Maybe one hour.'

'Shit, the metal part's coming off now.'

'Put it back on.'

'I can't.'

'Stop it.'

'It's too sharp.'

The door nudged into Sila's back, pushing him forward and almost forcing the shaver out of his hand. 'What go on, comrades?'

Sila turned and held out the shaver. 'It won't stop.'

'Give it here,' said Tak, holding out his hand.

Sila handed it to him and stepped back, worried the metal guard would fly off any second and crash into his face.

'Always plays up like this.'

'It's turned off...the button...'

'Just gotta know the trick, how to...!' Tak twisted something at the bottom of the shaver, '...handle it.'

The shaver powered off instantly, but the metal guard couldn't cope with the sudden change, shaking even more violently then flinging itself off towards the bathroom wall, missing Joanna's head by about two inches.

'Jesus...'

'You okay?' Tak asked Joanna, who nodded and said she still needed to use the bathroom.

'Quick recovery time,' said Tak, slapping her on the arm. 'Just like the Tang.'

'What?'

'Tang dynasty. Empress Fan Bing Bing.'

'They never recovered from anything.'

'Sure they did, that rebellion, I forget the name.' Tak picked up the metal guard, put it back on the shaver and then dumped the whole thing in the bin. 'Let's leave her to it, mate.'

'You're not gonna try and fix it?'

'Nah, it's done. Just leave it there.'

Tak walked back into the main cabin, keeping his paw on the handle of the bathroom door until Sila had followed him out. Now that the shaver debacle was over, he noticed that Tak had a bruise on his left cheek.

'What happened to your face?'

'Ran into a wall.' Tak rapped on the bathroom door, even though it was still open. 'Five minutes, yeah?'

Joanna nodded back and pulled the door shut.

'You ran into a wall?'

'Yeah, full force. Got another headache and lost my way a bit, ran into a fire hose.'

'Not a wall?'

'It was attached to a wall. Same thing. Why were you messing around with my shaver?'

'Mate, I didn't, I never even touched it.' Sila sat down on the bed and pulled his *Old King Matjaž* hoodie out to give himself some air. 'It was bizarre, like it was possessed or something.'

'Maybe it was.'

'Ha, funny.'

'Serious. Haru Suzuki said possession only requires a certain wattage of electricity, nothing else. That shaver was electric, so yeah, maybe.' Tak pointed at the bathroom door. 'You sure you're not a couple?'

Sila looked up, face channelling Wahlberg's *Lear*. 'Me and her?'

'Okay, mate, feign surprise if you want, but you're ticking off a lot of the hallmarks.'

'We're not a couple.'

'And if you're not now, you will be if you stick together long enough. Unless you detach and she comes with me around Barcelona.'

'Not this again...'

'But you can't detach now cos I just turned off the shaver for you. And you switched it on without my permission so you owe me. And face it, the demon dumping was fun. Bit weird at first, maybe, the cabin part, but overall a pretty good time.'

Sila lay back on the bed, stretching his arms upwards. 'Why are you so desperate for us to go with you?'

'Cos I know the city and you don't. Simple.'

'Is there a plan or something you need us for?'

'Mate, plans are for small business owners. We're gonna walk random, enjoy ourselves.'

'You just said you knew the city...'

'I do. That's why we're doing it random. Actually, there's an info shop I know not that far, we can go there later. And some of the old Anarchist sites. Might even have some of those cabinets you're after. How's that for planning?'

'Info shop?'

'But it doesn't open until three, so we'll have to go some other places first. Doesn't matter. I know the general direction to head in, it'll be good.'

Sila threw an imaginary dagger at the ceiling, conjuring up a green corpse falling back down. 'If there's really cabinets...maybe we can tag along for a bit.'

'Bonza. I'm gonna go pack.'

'All the way to the other side of the room?'

'Ship's docking soon. Don't be fucking caustic.' He took the book he'd been reading hours earlier and shoved it without care into his bag. 'Okay, mate, packing done.'

'That's all you have?'

'All the stuff I wanna keep, yeah.'

'What about clothes?'

'Don't need to take much.'

'Huh?'

'Buy cheap stuff when I need it, keep this jacket for cold places, etc.'

'Is that enough?'

'Enough for what?'

'I don't know. Travelling? Your life?'

'Look, mate, this conversation is dipping a bit, almost non-stop queries. How about I go and wait up top, you pack your stuff, we meet in ten?'

'You're the one who wants us to spend the whole day together. Remember?'

'What's that mean?'

'You said the conversation was dipping.'

'It is.'

'But you just said...'

'We've been talking on and off for two hours, what do you expect?'

'I'm confused.'

'The rest of the day there'll be three of us, one extra brain, no more problems. And if we run out of topics, just don't talk, simple.'

Sila sat up on the bed and folded his legs, while Tak took up a sentry position by the door. 'You packing or what?'

'In a minute.'

'Good. I'll be above deck. See if there's any Hungarians hanging around.'

'Where do we meet you?'

Tak grabbed a Spurs beanie from his bag and rolled it over the top of his head. 'Look for the hat, you'll find me.'



Turned out the info shop opened at four not three, and only on Wednesdays/Fridays.

Luckily the day they were pinned to was a Friday.

To kill an extra hour and a half, Tak took them down a few streets he knew, past a low key gallery with Klee-copy electric fish drawings in the window, some kebab shops, some old school garages, ignoring all of them, even the Museum of Modern Art, which Sila actually wanted to go inside, but Tak said no, it's all shit, made by posh people, info shop's better, and besides, he was feeling hungry and the woman he'd just asked said there was a Burger King two minutes down the street.

'Ah, classic Spanish food,' said Sila, softening the sarcasm with a half-smile...then scratching it when he remembered the last time he'd gone into a Burger King.

'Mate, it's in Spain, it's food. What's the puzzle?'

'It's American. Manufactured.'

'So?'

'Nothing. Just...you speak Spanish and Slovene, and you still want to eat at Burger King. In Barcelona.'

'This is where real Spanish people go, not Javier Bardem or Almodóvar.'

'Tourists too...'

'And what's my language skill got to do with it anyway? Most multilingual people I know are working class or lower-middle, Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, they speak loads of languages.'

'I was joking.'

'Whereas westerners just lie about speaking them. Like those fucking polyglots online.'

'Polyglots?'

'Nah, fuck, retract that one. It's too annoying' He nudged Joanna in the shoulder, not too hard. 'What you think? Burger King or not?'

Based on her Sokurov-void reaction, it didn't seem like she thought much of anything, except perhaps how to maintain the trance she was embedded in, the same trance that had been hanging over her since they'd disembarked, accentuated by weirdly lethargic limb movements.

'She on?'

'What?'

'Hasn't said a word in hours.'

Sila gave a quick wellness check, a gentle tug on the sleeve. 'Regression to her usual state. Or her usual state since Genoa.'

'Cos of me?'

'She'll talk when you least expect it. Nah, not really. She talked to you before in the cabin. Which was a bit of a surprise. But then she zoned out again so maybe not that much of one.'

'Ah, maybe Burger King will do the trick.'

'Doubt it.'

'The sweet smell of processed meat...balanced out by you not being such a bleak fuck all the time.'

'Sure. What?'

Tak walked on ahead without further response, giving Sila a chance to hang back and ask Joanna if she wanted to keep going with this guy, or branch off somewhere else.

Blank mesmerism in response.

Okay.

He tapped her on the mauve shoulder stripe a few times, then jabbed the bone part at the top and, at long, long last, she blinked. No, she'd been doing that already. What he meant was...her face moved slightly towards him.

'Is that code for detach?'

'Sila.'

'Yeah?'

'I was back home, in Lai King.'

'Daydream?'

'Time was running fast again. Faster.'

'Faster than now?'

'There was a book in my hand, the bird heroes by Gum Yong, and I was reading it at super speed.'

'Bird Heroes...is that a real book?'

'But instead of Mongolians, it was Patrice. I don't know why but he was representing the whole of Mongolia.'

'Who's Patrice?'

'He was telling me not to go back to China, that Mongolia had better public facilities. And lots of birds to hunt.'

Sila stopped her with a hand on the triceps and examined her pupils. Objectively, they were fixed on him, but the engine behind them...

'I could literally ask anything here,' he said, turning his arm grip into a light stroke of his own hoodie, 'couldn't I?'

'He said their swimming pools were better, too.'

'Where, Mongolia?'

'I don't feel good.'

'Again?'

'I don't know what's happening.'

'Happening where? What are you talking about?'

Joanna put her hand on the *King Matjaž* hoodie sleeve and stared forward, mumbling something in Cantonese. Sila followed her eyes and saw Tak coming back towards them.

'Hey you fuckers, stop dragging your feet.'

'We were talking.'

'Doesn't work if we don't walk next to each other.' He lined up parallel, planted himself in the middle and then pushed them both forward with index fingers dug into their lower backs. 'Come on, chop chop.'

'What are you doing?'

'Burger King's this way.'

'Stop digging your...fucking knuckles in...'

'No whining.'

~~~

Tak continued using the manual steering on and off until they were outside the entrance to Burger King [modern-spliced horror drab onto Catalan Gothic canvas], and even then he made sure they walked in first.

'You want anything from here?' Sila asked Joanna, who was taking in the menu and the décor like it was the Lighthouse of Alexandria.

'Don't worry about it, my treat,' replied Tak, pointing at the stairs. 'Go and find a table for us. Window preferred.'

'Okay. But...would you like to know what we want first?'

'No need.'

Tak patted Sila on the shoulder and then looked down at the sleeping king face on his hoodie. Squinted at it. Then said, 'old Matjaž, okay,' and stepped up to the counter.

Ten minutes later, the fringe trio was sat at a window counter upstairs, under a black and white 60's shot of La Rambla, eating mostly in silence; Joanna playing with the paper on her tray, Sila looking at the pink tourists on the street below and Tak whispering lines from a Spanish textbook he'd just pulled out of his Tardis-like bag, dumping it without ceremony on top of his beloved mythology tome.

Silence appeared fine for Tak and Joanna, zombie and language mage, but Sila felt a bit alien so he got up and went to the toilet, hoping they'd be forced into conversation by the time he got back, and, to regular eyes, it seemed that it was a fail, as when he did return to his stool, Tak still had eyes on the textbook and Joanna had moved on to another picture on the wall, the Nou Camp 1987.

To Chinese eyes, though, it was different. In the three minutes Sila had been gone, Joanna had snapped out of the Helix Nebula void realm, taken a bite of her burger, complained about the size and interrupted Tak's study to ask how many demons he'd encountered.

'Ah, now you come back. When *I'm* busy.'

'Sila told me you get a headache when they're nearby. And then hunt and kill them. Is that true?'

'Sorry, study time. Ask later.'

'How many have you killed?'

Tak held up the dictionary and pointed at the picture of a 1980's Spanish teenager on the cover.

'Have you ever been to Ljubljana?'

'Ah, you're one of those dogged types.'

'Have you?'

'Maybe.'

'Did you kill any demons there?'

'Why?'

'You did. There's nothing else to do. Unless you like castles, art communes...that triple bridge.'

'I said *why*.'

'No big reason. I want to know your experience range. Range of experience. How many demons you've killed. If you killed one in Ljubljana.'

'Why?'

'It's important to me.'

'Sorry, too vague.' Tak went back to his textbook, shoving a pile of fries into his mouth.

Joanna appeared to accept the rejection, turning instead to her burger and prodding it with her drink straw. Apparently, it was dead. Just like others out there. And unlike her. Though she may as well as have been with these persistent slow-down patches. And the fog from the ferry. The fucking ersatz...everything...of this construct pretending to be Burger King. Those invisible particle fields surrounding the street outside. Encasing Barcelona. The Krsnik sliding a hazy retreat into its fairy tale book, knowing it had gotten away with murder yet again. The burger thing she was prodding...

'Did you go up to the castle?' she asked, retracting the straw.

'*Te sientas en este banco todos los días?*'

'Yes? No?'

'*¿Qué haces para mantener tu cuerpo fresco?*'

'The castle, did you go up there?'

Tak stopped with another bunch of fries at the gates and looked up. 'Still on this channel?'

'Did you go up to the castle?'

'Where?'

'Ljubljana.'

'The one on the hill? No.'

'Why not?'

A raised finger, more chewing. 'Castles are abject. I stay away from them.'

'Which ones?'

'Ha, all of them. No castles, no crypts, no cemeteries. My Hungarian rule.'

'What?'

'Not something I'm gonna explain.'

Joanna prodded her burger again, this time penetrating all the way through. 'There's a demon up there. In the castle.'

'Yeah? Which one?'

'It's called *Krsnik*.'

'Never heard of it.'

'It can slow down time.'

'So can a Mongolian vampire.'

Joanna twisted the straw and tried to look Tak in the eye, but couldn't hold the line, the connection. It was too similar. Completely different face, clean neck, no accent but still similar. She dropped the straw and rolled the burger on its side, examining the hole she'd made.

'What you doing?'

'It is important that you come with me and kill this demon. The *Krsnik*. We can go there together, right now.'

'What about your boyfriend?'

'Doesn't matter.'

'Fuck, that's harsh.'

'Sila has his cabinet mission, he doesn't care.'

'Wah...the cabinet shit. And your Dr. Caligari impression. You two really are a weird fucking couple.' Tak picked up the last scrap of his burger, nibbled the scruffy bits at the side then shoved it in his mouth. 'Why you still looking at me?'

'Will you come?'

'Nope.'

'You're strong, experienced, and can detect it with your headaches.'

'Don't kill things out of the way.'

'I can teach you about it, how it hunts, how it-...'

'Okay, let me rephrase. I only kill things directly in front of me, on my current path.'

'It's not far. We could be there in two days.'

'Nope. Not gonna happen. You'll have to get your fake boyfriend to kill it. If he's not too busy with his cabinets.'

Joanna looked over at the toilets, frowned at Sila and the sleepy king coming back. 'We'll talk again later,' she whispered then, without performance, slipped back into her trance.

Tak mumbled, 'it'll still be no,' and returned to the chapter on how to talk to the elderly.

'Like total strangers,' Sila said, sitting back on his stool, staring at the sides of both their faces, at the old man with a goatee and walking stick on Tak's textbook page, before retreating to the window, the street scene below.

~~~

With another fifteen minutes gone, Tak stood up abruptly and said something in Spanish, which he quickly [inaccurately] translated as *time to go*. Then, picking up his bag, somehow managed to knock into a guy's tray...not hard enough to spill anything, but enough to piss the guy off and force out a line of rough Catalan.

'*Que?*' said Tak, avoiding the word *sorry*.

'... ..'

'*Que lo dice?*'

'... ..' the guy spat, looking Tak up and down like he was the human representation of post-industrial rock.

'Dice uno vez...say it one more time, mate, go on.'

'.....'

Tak leaned in close to the guy's face. '*Dolgozol vele?*'

Either he said it the wrong way or the guy was too bored to continue cos this time he laughed, added a different sounding phrase in Catalan, and walked off to a table near the toilets.

Tak sat back down and switched to the dictionary app on his phone, muttering the word the guy had just said, or what he thought he'd said, and, a few seconds later, nodded, rested the phone on top of the textbook and folded his arms.

'We're going then?' asked Sila, picking up his own tray.

'Not yet.'

'But you just said...'

'Not yet.'

'Okay, fine.' Sila put the tray back down, saw Joanna looking at dead air, and copied Tak's pose. 'I'll stare out the window some more.'

'Good.'

Curbing *not fucking good* in Slovene, Sila focused on an old guy in a Durruti t-shirt on the street below, awkwardly bent over and using a scrubbing brush to tidy a specific spot on the pavement. He watched the man do the same thing for twenty-five minutes, detaching every few minutes to ask if it was time to go yet. Each time Tak said no. And Joanna didn't say anything, just continued with her *trapped in eternity* impression.

Finally, the old man left, forcing Sila into action.

'What are you looking at?' he asked, following the line of Tak's sight to the other side of the floor.

'Nothing.'

'The toilets?'

'No.'

'The Spanish guy who shouted at you?'

'He's not Spanish.'

'Huh? Really?'

'No.'

Sila checked on the guy again, his tanned skin, tanned stubble, tanned eyeballs. 'He looks Spanish.'

'A façade.'

'What is he then? Portuguese?'

'No.'

'Italian?'

'... ..'

'A what?'

Tak picked up a stray onion from within the crumbs of his burger and dangled it over the tray.

'You're still eating?'

More dangling.

'Great.'

Sila drifted over to the 60's photos on the wall, then the other side of the floor as a chair leg scraped and the possible Spanish guy got up. He looked over at Tak, fake spat on the floor [so melodramatically that one of the women sitting nearby yelled at him] and headed to the toilets.

Taking the bait like a first-brawl ashigaru, Tak stood up and told them both to wait there, he was gonna take a piss.

'What are you doing?' asked Sila, somewhat pointlessly.

'Piss.'

'With that Spanish guy in there?'

'Not Spanish.'

'Jesus...'

'He looks Spanish,' said Joanna, making Sila's arm spasm as she placed her hand on his sleeve. 'Angry too.'

'Wah, you've rebooted.'

Tak pushed Joanna's tray an inch closer to her. 'Eat some more. We're leaving when I come back.'

'You shouldn't go in there,' she replied, picking up one of the cold fries.

'She's right,' added Sila, trying to shift Tak's stool out to block his path.

'Two minutes.'

'It's pointless.'

'Maybe three.'

Tak pushed the stool that Sila was still edging his way and headed a zig-zag route to the toilets.

'Okay, fine. Go take a piss. We'll stay here, get the bandages ready. Fucking tyrant.'

Sila picked up the burger wrapper and tried to do some improv origami. It was a penguin he was aiming for, but when he showed it to Joanna she couldn't see the resemblance. Looks more like a square, she said, which was pretty accurate, it did, but Sila didn't mind, he was just glad she'd clicked out of standby mode and was answering questions again.

'You feeling better now?'

'He's back.'

'What?'

'With blood on his face.'

Sila turned just in time to catch Tak grabbing the textbook and shoving it back in his bag, a line of blood flowing down from his nose.

'Get up, we're going.'

'What happened?'

'Lucky punch.'

'And the Spanish guy?'

'Told you, he's not Spanish.' Tak put the bag on one shoulder and started off towards the stairs. Then stopped next to a pram and said, 'you moving or not?'

'Okay, let us get our bags first.'

'Hurry up.'

'We're coming, relax.'

Sila moved after him fast, but Joanna seemed to be stumbling a little so he came back and pulled her along by the sleeve of his own Steaua Bucharest top. For some reason, she was lifting her legs up like an astronaut, every single step.

'It's happening again,' she said, looking down at her feet.

'What are you doing?'

'Can't move...'

'Walk properly.'

'I'm trying.'

'No, you're not. You're walking like a pensioner.'

'Sila...'

'Come on, walk. I can't pull you all the way out by your sleeve.'

'My whole body, it's-...'

'Stop dragging your feet.'

'I'm not.'

'You are.'

'It's too-...'

'Jesus, move them, will you? Feels like I'm pulling a fucking lead tank.'

'Going as fast...as I can.'

'As fast as a granny.'

'I'm trying.'

'Walk properly, stop fucking around.'

'My legs...'

She stopped and increased resistance, forcing Sila to stop too and ask for the eight-hundredth time what was going on. In sloth-like response, she stared at his left cheek, clenched a fist and punched herself in the thigh.

'Are you seeing things?'

'It's working.'

'What is?'

She punched her right leg again, then her left, then looked at Sila and urged him to try pulling again.

'Your sleeve?'

'Quickly, before it wears off.'

'Okay, okay.'

He grabbed her sleeve, using his other hand to supplement with a waist hold, and this time she moved normally, still lethargic to a degree, but no longer like a space hero out near Ceres.

Not fast enough for Tak though, who was already halfway down the stairs, his face appearing between the banister poles, ordering them to hurry the fuck up or he'd come back and drag them both down by their hair.

'We're coming, Pol Pot,' said Sila, trying to block out all the tourists and [possibly working class] Spanish people gawping at them.

'Yeah, like a couple of geriatrics...'

Tak stayed put and watched them all the way to his spot on the stairs, every now and then wiping blood from his nose. 'About time.'

'You're still bleeding,' replied Joanna, holding out a wraith hand.

'Yeah, a fucking torrent. Drag like that again and I'm leaving.'

'Sorry.'

'Sorry won't keep you out of Spanish prison.'

'Prison?'

'Come on...before someone goes in that cubicle.'

'Jesus, you didn't kill him, did you?' Sila asked in Slovene, but never got an answer cos by the time they were outside, Tak was talking about the info shop again, how they'd give it a miss and head direct to the train station instead.

'We're not gonna discuss what just happened in the toilets?'

'Past tense, mate, I'm talking about the train. You on board or not?'

'What did you do to that guy?'

Tak looked down the street and said, talk and walk.

Yeah, talk about what, you fucking psycho Sila thought, but with a *no energy* Joanna still propped up on his arm, he couldn't be bothered with another argument, and definitely not one this close to the old Telephone Exchange.

Felt disrespectful somehow, and symbolic, and he hated things like that.

Better to wait for some modern tat.

Then detach.

~~~

From their position outside the suspected assault site, the group of three, led by the usurper, dodged tourists and pickpockets and friends of

pickpockets, getting themselves well away from the commercial zone, and possibly beyond the particle fields too.

At that point, they took the next left turn onto a side street, and then various other turns until they were among a whole new mass of tourists, standing next to an empty bench, in a park with a giant horse statue [no rider].

Tak had avoided answering questions about the Burger King incident - even when Sila asked him four times straight, what did you do in there - and was now ninety-seven per cent focused on an exit strategy, specifically, the previously mentioned train.

'To where?' asked Joanna, marvelling at her own slowly rotating arm.

'Valencia.'

'We're staying here,' said Sila, for some reason pointing at the horse statue.

'Are you?'

'Ja.'

'Next to a horse statue?'

'In Barcelona. For at least three days.'

Tak whistled mostly breath, taking his phone out and typing something. 'What if I told you I could get you on the train for free?'

'I would say we're still staying here.'

'No need, mate. I've got a trick, it works. There's a secret place you can stand on the train, the conductor doesn't go there. Serious, you can go the whole way, no ticket.'

'That cannot be true.'

'I've done it four times already. It works.'

'Each time?'

'Yeah, each time.'

'Each time in the exact same place?'

'Don't be pedantic, mate. I told you it works, now you coming or not?'

Sila was about to say *no*, but Joanna got there ahead of him with an incongruously sunny, 'yes, Valencia.'

'Serious?'

'Very.'

'You wanna go with him?'

'Barcelona's boring.'

'What are you talking about?' Sila pointed at the statue again, changing aim a little when he realised he was gesturing at the horse's dick. 'Which other city celebrates horses?'

'Not Hong Kong.'

'See, it's different. Interesting.'

'There was the mermaid in Copenhagen. That was okay. And maybe good things in Valencia too.'

'What? The mermaid was shit. It was tiny, you could barely even see it. This is a giant horse. A famous horse.'

Joanna left his arm and took a step sideways, scrutinising the statue. 'Do you know its name?'

'No, but...'

'Do you know what it did?'

'No idea. Something rebellious probably. We can read the plaque, find out.' Sila walked closer and looked at the base of the statue but there was no description. 'Must be round the back...'

'No biography?'

'Or we can just search online, *famous horse Barcelona*, easy.'

'If they don't care enough to even make a plaque...'

'El Martillo Del Cielo was a talking horse,' cut in Tak, holding up his phone, presumably with the info they were looking for though the screen was far too small for either of them to read it. 'Born 1883, spoke Catalan, supported independence, allegedly. Jumped off a cliff, body never found. Witnesses said it dissolved into a bank of mist the same colour as the Catalan flag before it hit the rocks.'

'They made a statue for that? From a fairy tale?'

'Fuck knows.' Tak put his phone away. 'Point is, I'm going to Valencia, for free. Come with or stay here with your phantom cabinets. Your call.'

Joanna nudged Sila in the side. He took a step back, closer to the magical horse.

'What, you think I don't wanna be alone?' he whispered.

She shrugged, scratching at the Steaua Bucharest badge.

'I've been on my own for three and half years. Happily. Without any help from anyone.'

'Happily?'

'Doing my own thing. Ja, happy. Very happily.'

'Final call,' said Tak, walking back towards the park gates, kicking little pieces of gravel as he went.

'Decision?' asked Joanna, straightening out the sleeves of her over-sized football top.

'I don't like being led.'

'Me neither.'

'Or being ganged up on.'

'Me neither.' Joanna walked slowly towards Sila, her movements quite stiff, then stopped before she reached him, saying something in Cantonese to herself.

'What?'

'... ..'

'You okay?'

'... ..'

'Come on, talk to me, Faye Wong. You need medicine or something?'

She stretched her arms out and raised them slowly until they were doing aircraft signals. Her forehead was sweating as she did it, something even Sila noticed.

'What are you doing?'

'It's not stopping.'

'What isn't?'

She closed her eyes and tried shifting her left foot forward, but for some reason she was moving it like a hungover mime artist. Just like in Burger King. And the ship cabin. And Genoa.

'Talk to me, what's going on?'

'The *grey vasic*. It's trapping me.'

'You're using again?'

'I can't...'

'Thought you threw it all away.'

'It's too slow...everything too slow...'

'Didn't you?'

She put her left foot down, whole body shaking, and screamed. A lot of tourists glanced over, some walked off at ninja pace, while the remainder went back nonplussed to El Martillo Del Cielo.

'Okay, easy.' Sila stepped forward, blocking her from rogue voyeurs, and slid a cold hand over hers. 'Turn round, move forward.'

'I can't.'

'Try.'

'It's too slow...frustrating...'

'Okay, what about this?' Sila bent down and gripped her calves, then started up a slow-burn massage. 'Loosen them up a bit.'

'It won't work.'

Sila ignored her and squeezed different points. For almost a minute. Then stood back up, grabbed her shoulders and flexed them round in small circles.

'Any better?'

'I don't know.'

'Try to walk.'

Sila attempted to take away his hand, but the grey krsic fiend held on tight.

'Are you trying?'

'Yes.'

'Your leg isn't moving.'

'Stop talking.'

'Okay. Stopped.'

'Stop.'

Sila grunted, then pressed his lips in tight.

'No pushing...please.'

Joanna closed her eyes and initiated movement. The first few steps were *death of a star* slo-mo, not good, but she was getting better at disguising it, keeping her leg elevations low, discreet, pinned to a shorter distance, and by the time she was on her fourth step, the process of basic mobility was back to a solid high-intermediate.

'See, it's better now,' said Sila, guiding her out of the way of an oblivious tourist uncle.



'Don't curse it.'

'Sorry.'

She took another step to make sure then looked frantically towards the park entrance.

'What?'

'He's at the gates already.'

'Good. An easy separation.'

'No, we have to follow him.'

'Huh, you were serious about that?'

'The train, Valencia, we have to.'

'Why?'

'He knows.'

'That's not much of an answer.'

'Quickly, help me move.' She squeezed his hand again, digging nails in. 'It's important.'

'This is bizarre...there's nothing in Valencia. Does it even have a beach?'

'Please, Sila.'

'... ..'

'He's getting away.'

Sila checked to see if she was exaggerating, but it was true, Tak the Erratic was out of the park already and only visible as an intermittent flicker through the gaps in the railings. 'Fucking Valencia.'

'Does that mean yes?'

'Fine. But only for one day. If it's shit, we come back here. Agreed?'

'No.'

'Jesus...'

'One day is not enough.'

Sila put both arms out, lifting her arm up in the process, and gestured at the mythical horse god. 'But it's enough here?'

'We need to be flexible.'

'Fucking Christ, you're unbelievable. Every time I think we're making progress, you revert. It's like talking to a creationist.'

'I never revert. And I'm not creative.' She forced her arm slowly down, keeping Sila's hand in her grip. 'We follow him, see what he thinks. Then make a decision as a group of three.'

'Group of three? When did that happen?'

'No time to argue, he's getting away.'

'Fuck, you never answer anything. Do you know how annoying that is?'

'Walk.'

'.....'



According to Tak, the best strategy to avoid the conductor on the night train to Valencia was to stand with your bags in the carriage with no seats, wait till the guy got close then go and hide in the toilet.

'It'll work as long as we don't move, long as we're confident.'

'In the carriage or the toilet?' asked Sila, half his brain still with the horse statue.

'Come on, action time.'

'Feel tired,' said Joanna, looking at a platform bench with an old man pinned to it.

'Remember, confidence.'

~~~

Five minutes before the train was due to leave, as the three stowaways stood with bags at their feet, blank, drained, Delon, a door opened half a metre in front and the conductor stepped out.

There was a moustache, a grey uniform, an ossified sense of fatigue and when Tak tried to pre-emptively explain things in Spanish, the man simply pointed to the platform and said, 'out'

not in Spanish

in English

which was the real blow cos Tak had reeled off at least eight distinct sentences.

'Can I sit down now?' asked Joanna, dropping her bag on the platform as soon as they were off the train.

'Fucking pedant,' said Tak, eyes still on the space residue of the conductor.

'Upstairs?'

~~~

Back in the main chamber of Barcelona-Sants Station, all the benches were taken and, even if they did manage to get one, they couldn't sleep there or lie down as the guards would come and swat their legs with night sticks

which could've been worse

Tak said

if they were in the US

Detroit or Chicago

though he'd never been to either city and, to be fair, in the US they'd probably be able to at least find a shelter somewhere, a place they could get a bible, sleeping bag, hand-job, maybe soup

to be honest he didn't know

he really had never been there

just guesswork from an old Danny Glover film he'd seen.

'The next train isn't until 7am,' said Sila, reading the timetable off his phone.

'We should get out of here.'

'And go where?'

'I'm thinking.'

Tak leaned against the wall, next to a poster for cheapest ever train tickets, and made no attempt at a thinking face. He just rubbed his head a little and scanned the benches, or the *Puma* tracksuits and bubble jackets stretched out on them.

'Well?' prompted Sila, putting his phone away.

'Wait.'

'Is there a hotel or something nearby?'

'Thinking.'

'I assume you've been here before...'

Tak left the wall and walked over to one of the benches, crouching down and whispering something into the *Barcelona F.C.* jacket acting as the homeless guy's blanket.

The jacket moved, slurred something then jabbed Tak repeatedly until he lost his footing and fell backwards onto the [un-padded] floor.

Sila looked around for the guards, but they were busy hitting someone else on the far side of the hall, and Joanna seemed to be studying the patterns on the floor tiles, following one white swirl from end to end with her finger then jumping to another and going the other way and

it didn't matter, everything was okay

Tak was already back up and walking to his original position and before Sila could say

what was that all about, more Hungarian,

he pointed to the exit and said,

'beach camp.'

~~~

Out of the three of them, Tak was the only one who'd ever slept on a beach before.

Joanna had been camping in Sai Kung once, so she said, but there was a tent at that time and a moderate temperature of twenty-four degrees Celsius, not the middle of winter, and the beach in Sai Kung wasn't really a beach, it was more like a patch of sand cut out lonely next to a platoon of rock and concrete.

It turned into quite a long speech, bordering on nostalgic, but was ultimately negated by the fact that neither Tak nor Sila knew what Sai Kung was, or why she'd called it a beach if it wasn't one.

And it didn't help take their minds off the ice wind coming down from the Pyrenees.

'Fuck, we're walking and I'm still cold,' said Sila, looking ahead at the dark segment of sand that Tak was leading them to. 'How is this Barcelona?'

'Winter's winter, mate.'

'And how are we gonna sleep in this? With no body movement?'

'Put on another layer, under your jacket.'

'Yeah, my *Good Viiy* hoodie.'

'That'll do.'

'Sure, big difference. What about you?'

'Don't need one.'

'How many layers you got on?'

'Enough.'

Sila glanced down at Tak's Ellesse jacket, a scrap of t-shirt poking out at the bottom. 'Are you a Viking?'

'No.'

'It's freezing. How can you not be cold?'

'Trust me,' Tak said, stretching his body out across the sand and lining up his bag as a pillow. 'Just lie down, it's good.'

Joanna hung back a bit and waited until Sila went down then followed.

The three of them lay there, coffin-like, separated by an inch on each side. Behind them was empty road, the docks, a row of hostels and hotels with no vacancies, a sign that Tak translated as *BEWARE: SAND DUNES*. And the devil wind that was so pervasive, so specifically focused that it almost felt personal.

'This is not Barcelona,' said Sila, folding his arms and, after two minutes of holding it in, shivering.

'Feels like Hokkaido,' added Joanna, lifting up the sleeve of her pink Mizuno jacket diagonally and doing a spot-check of the creases.

'More like fucking December in Aberdeen.'

'You're still moaning about the cold?' asked Tak, shifting on his side.

Sila tried to think of a clever line, but the chill factor had got to his brain and the only thing coming up was the Viking line again, so he just said, 'ja.'

'Put your other hoodie on, under your jacket.'

'Too cold to get it out.'

'Lazy fucker.' Tak looked at Joanna, her mysterious elevated arm. 'What about you?'

'I'm thinking of the desert.'

'Uh-huh. Is it working?'

'The Red Flower Heroes in the lost city between the mountains, chased by Fire Hand Zhang's wolf pack.'

'Huh?'

'She's still cold,' answered her Slovene agent, staring up at the only four stars in the Barcelona night sky. 'Always is.'

'Okay, we'll do the body heat thing then. Budge up a bit.'

'The what?'

'Like this.'

Tak turned fully onto his side and reached all the way over to Joanna's arm. He pulled her closer in towards Sila until they were touching then shifted his own position, changing them from three to one.

No one said a word

not because it was weird, but because it was comfortable and Sila was glad he'd put himself in the middle as it gave him warmth on both sides, and Tak's large body blocked the wind that was blowing in from the north, or the west, whatever direction it was.

Ah, maybe the guy wasn't so bad.

Maybe he'd just been rattled by the Pakistani succubus...the dahli...who now that Sila thought about it, could potentially walk out from the sea any second, covered in seaweed and galleon rust, spitting out panicked crabs, and the rattling part, the dahli encounter, everything since that struggle had been down to the slow unravel of PTSD.

The Burger King incident, the train fuck up, the threatening behaviour towards the Algerian guy on the boat

it was all justifiable, or forgivable, if you gave it enough thought

just like Chairman Mao,

he was a good guy before 1949

probably

according to all the hagiographies he'd read.

Meanwhile, bored of Sila's upper arm, Joanna rotated forty-five degrees and tried the sky, somehow managing to keep her fingertips right at the edge of Tak's waist.

She wasn't tired at all, hated to stay still, so she kept her eyes open and aimed at the clouds drifting past the moon. After eleven clouds had gone by at normal-yet-unbearably slow cloud speed, she edged away from the human sandwich and told them it was too cold, she couldn't sleep, and the best thing to do was walk around the city until the train at seven the next morning, or this morning as it was already half midnight.

'You're going alone?' asked Sila, putting a hand on Tak's jacket sleeve to pull himself up a bit.

'You can join if you want.'

'I think it's better if we stay here, keep together.'

'Too cold.'

'Move about a bit then. Do some push ups, or get one of my hoodies out.'

'I want to walk.'

'Or...okay, walk. But not too far. Just along the beach, four hundred metres either way. Don't go out of sight.'

'I want to walk on the streets.'

'No, too far.'

'Will you come with me?'

'Just...stay on the beach. This area.'

'Okay. I'll go by myself.'

Tak opened one eye and said it was way too dangerous for her to go alone and Sila should go too, which Sila objected to three times before Tak pushed him away and told him to stop being a twat.

'I'm not saying I won't go, if she really tries to go that way. I'm just worried she's gonna get stuck again.'

'What you talking about?'

'Aren't *you* worried?' said Sila, looking directly at Joanna, who stared down at her cushioned legs and said, 'no, I feel better now.'

'You sure about that?'

This one got Cantonese in response and then a Chinese silhouette as she put her bag back on her shoulders and started walking.

Tak picked up a handful of sand, threw it at Sila's waist. 'Go with her, mate, stop wasting time.'

'She just blanked me.'

'Before she gets over that sand dune and accidentally wanders into El Raval. Come on, up you get, move.'

'You're not my leader...mate.'

'Right, I'm your fucking conscience. You let her walk around on her own, she's gonna get hurt, guaranteed.'

Sila pulled down his *Criolo* jacket, shaking off the sand Tak had just thrown. 'Like the guy in Burger King?'

'Which guy?'

'Ah, you've forgotten already.'

'The guy who called me a black cunt? Mate, he deserved what he got. Threw the first punch too, so, fuck him.'

'He punched you?'

Tak picked up another batch of sand and this time let it run slowly off his palm. 'Point is, you let her go alone, she's gonna run into something bad. Guaranteed.'

'I didn't say I wouldn't go, I'm just-...'

'Don't see you moving.'

'Fuck off, you're not moving either.'

'She's not my girlfriend.'

'Ja, and she's not...'

'Or my friend.'

'...mine.' Sila brushed more sand off his jacket, throwing some leftover grains at Tak's face and missing. 'I didn't even know her half a year ago. She just followed me around after...the thing, castle in Ljubljana...and now we're...we just happen to be travelling together. Fuck, you don't even care...this is collusion. Entrapment.'

'Don't make words for it, just go. She's almost at the road already.'

'What?'

'Over the sand dune, look.'

Sila didn't want to follow Tak's direct commands, but he rationalised it as, nope, not a command, I was gonna look anyway.

He looked, instinctively calling her a *Patakh* in Slovene.

Tak was right, Joanna was already twenty metres away, walking diagonally towards the road acting as a makeshift perimeter to the beach.

'If anything happens to her, it's your fault, mate. And don't call it blackmail cos it's not.'

'Mauve mail,' Sila muttered, eyes still on Joanna.

'Fucking tedious even saying that word, so don't bother. Just get after her, hold her hand, make sure she doesn't piss off any gangsters.'

'I was going anyway.'

'Course you were. What the fuck's *mauve mail*!'

Sila stood up, dusted off some of the sand from his clothes and said, 'nothing, forget it.'

Then started walking, following the footprints until he caught up to Joanna by a car-less junction, getting a blank, almost bathetic 'which way?' instead of the not really expected but hoped for, 'thank you.'

When the moaning Slovene was out of sight, Tak turned on his side and stared at a little strip of gnarled plastic sticking out of the sand. It looked like it had been a fork once, but that could've been wrong, it could also have been a spoon.

The words *mauve mail* played a few times in his head. He tried to trace it back to its source, but there was too much inside, too much in the short term memory section. The two Croatian girls, Hungarian introductions, Szolnok racist slowly peeling the apple, Count Otius, Jemba with his veins-...

Mauve Mail

Mauve mail mauve mail mauve mail mauve mail mauve mail

MAUVE MAIL

Where?

He knew it was from a film or a book, probably a book, but which one?

Wise Blood?

Drive Thru Zoo?

It sounded creative, so it probably wasn't Flannery, but it didn't make much sense either, not without its context. Why would anyone say mauve mail? Why mauve and not

ah

wait a sec

the Russian guy

Nabokov

that's what it was

the pervert in Lolita

or the romantic, whichever way you saw it

he used it once

before the censored parts

though, Tak thought, I still don't know why it was mauve.

Blood-related maybe?

~~~

'You sure you're not gonna break down again?' asked Sila, looking back towards the beach and estimating a rough distance of about seven hundred metres.

'Don't know.'

'That doesn't sound very reassuring. Maybe we should take a different route, stick closer to the beach.'

'I feel okay now.'

'But it happens suddenly, right?'

'It does.'

'And you don't know when?'

'No.'

'Aren't you worried?'

'You can go back if you like. I won't stop you.'

'I didn't say that.'

They walked a little further, turning off the road they'd been on since the beach and heading past some houses that looked like they'd been built by the same guy who did the sets for *The Haunted Palace*.

That was Sila's thought, and the houses were so similar, so gothic-looking for such a long stretch of street, or alley, that he said it out loud, including the

name of the film, even though he knew she wouldn't know it. He was right, she thought it was the thing in Disneyland, and when he said no, it's a horror film from the 60's, she nodded and said, 'ah, *Rosemary's Baby*,' as if that were related in some way.

Another few houses down and Joanna felt confident enough to turn to Sila and say, 'actually, I don't think it's that dangerous here.'

'Don't know. Seems like dark, deserted alleys are a pretty safe bet if you wanna mug someone.'

'Barcelona's not a dangerous city.'

'You sure about that?'

'We can check.'

'How?'

She took the bag off her shoulder and pulled out the guide book she'd bought in the train station.

'Ah, the old fashioned way,' said Sila, leaning across but not in a blunt way, more like he was stretching his neck. 'Try the index.'

'I am.'

'Crime in Barcelona. Or Dangers of Barcelona. Anything with crime or danger in it.'

'Stop interrupting.'

'I'm not, I'm helping.'

'Stop leaning.'

'Nope. Stretching my neck, actually.'

'Stretch it the other way.'

Joanna pulled the book farther from Sila and ran through the index again, but for some reason it didn't have a section on the dangers of Barcelona at night, so she gave up and checked her phone instead. That was also a blank, except for some blogs about pickpockets in El Raval and tourist hunters on the Metro.

'Guess it goes without saying,' said Sila, spotting a map board next to another alley with defiantly gothic buildings and walking over.

'There's no one around. Can't be crime without people.'

'They're probably hiding.'

'All night?'

'Behind those cars maybe.' He looked at the line of parked vehicles on the road behind them, the widest road they'd come across so far and were now, for some reason, turning away from. 'Train station is a two hour walk that way. But I left my bag on the beach, so...'

'Let's not make a plan.'

'Sorry, what?'

'These alleys are quite beautiful. And the only people we've seen were those two drunk women in Bakunin beards, so...'. Almost on cue, a group of four locals came out of a building three doors down, young and drunk. None of them appeared to notice the two tourists, they just zipped up their padded jackets, talked loudly in Spanish and kept walking. Joanna waited for them to reach the end of the alley then modified. 'Let's just walk and leave it to fate.'

'I don't believe in fate.'

'If we get attacked, it was meant to be. If my legs seize up, it was meant to be. If we discover a magic portal to an alien planet, it was meant to be.'

'Do you believe in it?'

'Who, fate?'

Sila nodded, grunting a laugh at the *who* part.

'Not really. I was just being poetic, sentimental...'

'About fate?'

'...actually, I believe in probability more.'

'You mean odds?'

She hesitated, consulting with her jacket zip. 'I don't know what that means.'

'Ha, another one for the list.'

'What list?'

'You know *seize up* and *portal*, but you don't know *odds*.'

'Vocab is irrelevant. I know that if you rest in a field of pandas, it is not fate if you are bitten.'

'Pandas?'

'Unless the pandas were cautious and well-hidden.'

'Hang on, I'm confused. The panda thing is fate or...'

'Actually, I never thought of that. If you cannot see them, how can it be fate?' She looked at him, scrutinised the old King face poking out through the sides of his unzipped *Criolo* jacket. 'The panda thing is a proverb, about probability, not fate. These streets are mostly empty therefore it is unlikely we'll be attacked.'

'Okay, forget the pandas.'

'If we are attacked, it means we chose the wrong time and the wrong street. And didn't do enough research. Doesn't mean fate, unless you're writing poetry.'

'Okay, okay, it's probability. I surrender.' Sila stopped at a side street, surprisingly well-lit, and not in a moody, Bavan sense. 'Hey, what about here, this road? It's another wide one, actually has lights too.'

Joanna followed his eyes and saw a street with ordinary houses and luxury cars parked outside. At least, they seemed like luxury cars, she couldn't actually tell the difference cos she'd never driven a car before.

'You coming?'

'I want to go back.'

'Already?'

'Feel tired.'

'Back to the beach?'

'My brain is tired too. Yes.'

'But you just said you wanted to walk around.'

'*Goi bin ju yee.*'

'What?'

'Changed my mind.'

Sila checked his phone, frowning. 'It's not even three yet, you really wanna go back now?'

'It will be three by the time we get there. Maybe even half past three. Or four. Or half past four if we walk slowly. Seven in the evening if my legs seize up.'

'Ha, funny.'

'Besides, this wide road looks stuffy.'

'Stuffy?'

'Like nothing interesting has ever happened here. No haunted musicians, or weird poets living in dirty attics.' She looked at the cars again and remembered that poets in Ancient China were usually quite wealthy, but didn't correct her statement. 'I'm going back to the beach.'

'We could go down more of the alleys, see the gothic stuff.'

'Too tired.'

'Of the gothic stuff?'

'Going now. You stay if you want. Become gothic.'

She turned and walked back towards the alley they'd come from, the alley that led to the other wide road and more alleys beyond and then the long stretch of pseudo-highway that would deliver them back to the beach. Where the nut is waiting, Sila thought, letting his non-girlfriend traipse a few metres ahead. Then getting hijacked by a lightning cut of grubby Spanish men pushing legs akimbo, and quickly chasing her down.

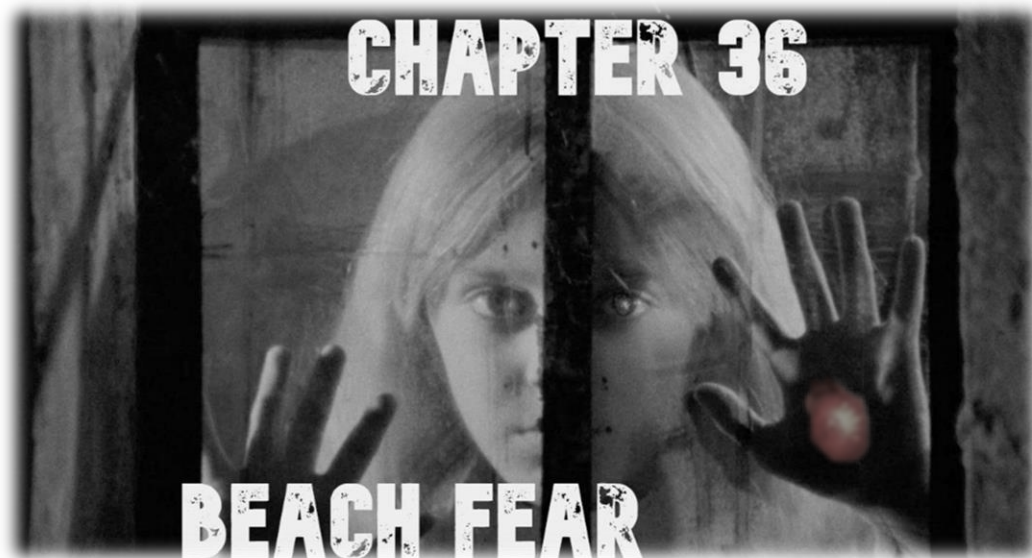
'Okay, fine,' he said, taking her arctic hand. 'We'll go back. But we're taking the long route, not the way we came.'

'.....'

'What?'

'I was agreeing with you.'

'Good. Finally.'



The long route back to the beach did not pass through any panda fields or council estates or industrial ambush sites or forbidden zones of alien junk and beyond those four types what danger was there, really?

It took them a while to find the spot they'd left as it was a few hundred metres from the road, and, as they trudged like geriatrics across the sand to kill a little bit more time, Sila talked about what to do next, and when the best time would be to ditch the demon killing weirdo cos, although Tak hadn't done anything explicitly horrific yet, he had passively forced them to hold his hand in Barcelona the whole day and never explained why, just said it was smoother if they all stuck together, and he hadn't even talked to them most of the time

in fact

at every point they stopped somewhere, like Burger King or the zine place, he'd simply opened his Spanish textbook and started studying

saying nothing

not even a request for one of them to test him on the vocab.

'Only time he does speak is when he's trying to talk us into something. Like that stowaway train debacle.'

'I think he's useful,' replied Joanna, picking up a lump of wet sand and throwing it into the sea.

'For what?'

'Your cabinet mission. Demon killing. In various other places.'

'Places like three metres outside Ljubljana castle?'



'... ..'

'No?'

'Re is a prefix for a reason.'

'Ah...prefixes. Right.'

Sila picked up sand of his own, moulding it into a disc and trying to skim it along the surface of the tide.

It didn't work.

just sank diagonally.

'Look, I don't mind the guy most of the time, when he's not telling me to fuck off...but he's too unstable. See what happened to that guy in Burger King?'

'No.'

'Ja, course you did. Tak walked in and came back out with blood dripping down his nose. Must've beaten the guy up. Maybe worse.'

'We'll avoid Burger King.'

'Don't be glib, this is serious.'

'Avoid Spanish people too.'

'He lied about the free train ride, beats up random guys in Burger King, thought you were a demon on the ferry over here, acted weird when he first came in the cabin, acts weird generally. You can't tell me you feel completely comfortable around him.'

'I feel okay.'

'Ja, cos you've been asleep half the time, terrified of going slo-mo.'

'And you seemed okay, hugging him before.'

'Huh? You mean on the beach? That was for warmth, so we wouldn't freeze to death.'

'Would you hug someone you didn't like?'

'For warmth, ja. Maybe. I don't know. As long as they weren't a complete twat...or a tory...or a tankie, ja.'

'So he's not a complete twat?'

'Complete? Nah, I said I half liked him. You're misdirecting me, I'm not talking about liking, I'm talking about safety. All we know about the guy is he

kills demons, with no remorse. Won't tell us his job. And he beat up a stranger in Burger King. That's it, three things.'

Joanna picked up another lump of wet sand, looked back the way they'd come then buffered.

'Am I wrong?'

Joanna dropped the sand and went for her *Mizuno* jacket pocket, searching for the knife she'd left in Sila's bag.

'What are you doing?'

'She's here.'

'You what?' Even as he said the words, some part of his brain kicked in and pulled up the only possible *SHE* Joanna could be talking about. 'Fuck...'

He turned expecting the demon dahli succubus Urdu teacher thing to be a hundred metres away at least, but it wasn't her, or the male version, it was something a lot smaller, a lot blonder. Somehow, it had sneaked up on them and was standing on the wet sand, about ten yards back, like a normal little girl in jeans and a *Cool Spot* jumper.

'How the hell did she get here?' whispered Sila, half-heartedly moving his hand towards the inside of his *Criolo* jacket.

'Walked.'

'From Germany?'

'Or took the train. Car. Bus. Kindness of strangers.'

Sila took his hands away from the jacket, settling into an awkward cyborg pose. 'Fuck, she's staring at us. What do we do?'

'Don't know.'

'Keep walking?'

'Yes.'

'Back to the sociopath?'

'Where?'

'Don't be dense.'

Joanna reprocessed then nodded, too anxious to tell him she'd misheard *sociopath* as *social path*.

They edged backwards a few steps then turned and continued walking towards Tak's position, staying almost side-on so they could keep tabs on the girl

or the demon as Sila kept reminding himself  
demon, not a girl  
girl humanises the thing and ends in petty death  
demon demonises it and  
what?

Ends in Tak slitting its throat?

'How far away is he?'

'Not sure.'

'We should be there by now.'

'Agreed.'

Sila scanned the sand ahead with staggered head movements, keeping his hands up in a defensive pose. 'Can't see him.'

'Me neither.'

'What's the girl doing?'

'The demon...'

'Yeah, where is she?'

'It, not she.'

'Wait, is that...!' Sila squinted and saw three figures moving up ahead, close to the tide. 'What the fuck is he doing?'

'Who?'

'Looks like dancing. Over there, by the water.'

They rushed closer, and the girl moved with them in solidarity, not running exactly, more like gliding, but they soon forgot about her as they realised it wasn't three people dancing, it was three people fighting, which meant, two versus Tak and

by the time they'd reached him he was

sitting on top of one attacker

punching the guy in the

no, not punching

stabbing him

stabbing him in the arm, both arms

Jezus, fuck

and the other guy was already down, laid out flat on the sand like a moon-bathing gingerbread man.

'Tak, stop,' yelled Sila, getting close enough to grab Tak's arm, but not following through.

'Wait...'

'He's not moving' said Joanna, eyes on the gingerbread man.

'Five seconds.'

'Stop, you fucking nut.'

Tak dropped the knife on the sand, grabbed the guy's hair and punched down on his temple. It didn't knock him out, but it did stop the squirming.

'He's not moving,' repeated Joanna, shifting eyes to the fresher victim.

Tak stayed on top of the guy for another ten seconds then said quietly, 'yeah.' He stood up, a line of blood running from the top of his head, turned to the three people watching him and said, 'where the fuck did she come from?'

Sila was still staring at the guy who'd been stabbed, trying to push back the Prague memories spilling over the edges, but he heard the question and was about to say *what* when he felt someone clutching his hand

a cold, little hand, not Joanna's

and when he turned and looked down he saw the pocket-sized blonde girl staring back up at him, his very own Newt from LV-442.

'What happened?' asked Joanna, pulling her *Mizuno* sleeve away from the girl's other hand.

Tak wiped some of the blood off his head, then groaned and started jabbing his temple. 'Fucker glassed me...'

'I mean, why were you fighting?'

'No idea. Woke up and they were lurking. Fuck, my head, like a fucking drill. Who's the girl?'

'Straggler,' answered Sila.

'Don't give me that shit, mate. Who is she?'

'I'm serious. We found her wandering up there, on the street. No sign of any adults or guardian.'

'You kidnapped her?'

'No, we-...I just said, no parents. And she followed us.'

'Are they demons?' asked Joanna, putting herself between Tak and Sila.

'Who?'

'Them.' She pointed at the two Spanish bodies on the sand. 'The bleeding ones.'

'Dunno, human maybe. Or not.'

'You stabbed him.'

'Course I did. Guy can't punch with a hole in his arm.' Tak jabbed his head again, muttering *fuck* to go with it.

'You okay?' asked Sila, flinching as the girl's grip tightened.

'Migraine.'

'That bottle must've done more damage than you thought.'

'Like a tribal fucking drum.'

'Delayed reaction. I saw it in a film, some kid got hit by a car, seemed fine, died from a blood clot two days later.'

'No...'

'I don't mean you're gonna die, but that's probably why it's hurting.'

'It's not the fucking bottle,' he shouted, opening one eye to look at the girl again. 'Wah...she's staring at me.'

'You're staring at her too.'

'The confidence of it.' He looked at the girl's jumper, the little red cartoon circle with dark shades. 'That top, it's not right. Those jeans...'

'You're scaring her,' said Sila, trying to edge the girl behind him and meeting resistance. Then forcing out the word *demon* from his brain as the reality of what was holding his hand attempted a comeback. Then letting it in and saying, *demon*, so what? She's wearing a *Cool Spot* jumper. And came all the way from Denmark. Can't just leave her now.

Following the trail of thoughts, he looked at Joanna and wondered if she was going the same way.

Her face was blank, hand empty.

Normal behaviour.

What about inside?

Still anti-Madonna?

Muttering *fuck* louder than before, Tak turned the jabbing into grinding and let out a noise that wasn't quite a shriek but was pretty close.

'Hey, you need some Panadol?'

'Not right.'

'Or a hospital?'

'Doesn't fit...that jumper, this beach...she shouldn't be here.'

'What are you talking about?'

'She's not right. In that jumper, on this beach.'

'He's delirious,' said Sila, turning to Joanna. 'Say something calming.'

Tak gripped his knife, blood still sliding off its edge, and moved forward.

'What are you doing?'

'Need to check.'

'Tak...'

Sila stepped in front of the girl while Joanna swerved to the side, clearing the way, but it didn't matter as the sleeping guy on the sand, the one who hadn't been stabbed, was awake and just as Tak was putting his arm out to shove Sila aside, the guy clambered up and whacked Tak on the back of the head with

with something hard

a piece of wood

fuck knows where he got that from

then screamed something in Spanish

probably *piece of shit* or *psycho motherfucker*.

Tak fell down face first onto the sand, right next to the girl's feet, yet, even half-dazed, he was still trying to grab the girl's ankles instead of turning to the guy with the giant piece of wood.

'... ..' said the guy in Spanish, glaring pure fire down at Tak then switching the flames to Sila and the little girl. '... ..'

'What?'

'Money,' the guy said, pointing the wood at the girl's head.

Sila pulled the girl away then looked for his bag

the green knife inside

but it was too far, and who was he supposed to attack anyway? The wood guy first, probably, but what about Tak?

Two and half hours ago they'd been hugging each other to sleep and now he was trying to stab a child

a demon child

true

but he didn't know that

how could he

she didn't look like a demon, not even a little bit, she had a *Cool Spot* jumper on for fuck's sake.

'Wait, careful...!' said Sila, breaking his thoughts and seeing Joanna out of the corner of his eye, heading towards the guy, her own knife raised and

somehow her foot got stuck on something, he couldn't see what, and she tripped, falling right in front of the guy and burying the blade into the top of his foot.

The guy dropped the wood and wailed like a burnt penguin, reaching down for his foot and using his spare arm to swat Joanna away, but she was too fast, rolling to the side and

doing nothing else

there was no need

she'd stuck him dead in the foot, he was done.

'You stabbed him,' said Sila, looking at the guy's shoe, not her.

'Accident.'

'Really?'

She didn't answer. Just bent down and took out the knife, dragging out another scream from her victim.

'What do we do now?'

Tak made a moaning sound and lifted up his head. Put palms flat on the sand and tried to lift the rest of himself up, but it was no good, he was too weak. Or concussed. It was hard to tell.

He rolled onto his back and looked up at his attacker, the coward with the wood. It was an odd picture. The wood was gone, on the sand maybe, and the little girl who wasn't right, who had to be a demon, was holding the man's hand, bringing him down onto his knees, then pushing her face into the side of his neck.

'Otius...' Tak mumbled, rubbing his head, trying to reconfigure what he was seeing into something less surreal.

The little girl came back out of the wound and turned towards him, catching herself in the moonlight, and

there was blood and there was flesh

bits of it meshed together

dripping down from the edges of her mouth.

'No,' said Sila, trying to say the girl's name, but coming up blank.

He didn't even know what he was saying *no* to.

'She's one of his...' Tak said, getting back to his feet, grabbing the knife and almost falling down again when he remembered he'd just been hit on the back of the head.

'Tak, wait...'

'Demon from him, the Otius horde. One of his acolytes.'

'She's not bad, she's just-...Otius?'

'Hungarian.'

'What?'

'She followed me here, from Szolnok. Should've known, sensed it. No, I did know, the headaches, it was right there, not the dahli, but-...'

'Tak, stop. You're talking weird. She didn't follow you, she's from Denmark.'

'Otius sent her, here...'

'And she just saved you.'

'...to this beach.'

'What are you talking about? No one sent her.'

'From Hungary.'

'She. Is. From. Denmark. Not Hungary.'

'Off map...and still keeping tabs. Fuck, my head. Can't do it. Too much, heavy. Hit by a fucking truck. Move, you clown. Get out of here. Go.'

Sila edged in front of the girl, his zombie-looking Newt from LV-666 with blood sliding down her chin, and told Tak to stay back, put the knife down, calm his tarts and leave the girl alone



but Tak wasn't there anymore

mentally

he was somewhere else

Hungary apparently

and it wasn't the girl's name he was calling out, it was someone else, someone called Jemba.

Sila looked at Joanna for help, but all she could say was, 'wait, don't go, we need you,' which wasn't particularly useful.

Need him to do what?

It was a pointless question, and his brain was better than that. He knew what she was saying, and there was no way he was gonna let either of them hurt her, even though the little girl did look like a pocket version of Angela Queen of the Demons with all the blood streaming down.

'No-one's touching her,' he declared to both of them, but it only registered with Joanna as Tak was already ten metres past them, walking backwards up to the main road, waving his knife like a wild man, shouting over and over that she was Hungarian, she'd followed him, he didn't do anything wrong, and before they could even begin to formulate questions like, 'what are you on about, what didn't you do wrong, in what way was she Hungarian?' he was off the sand and back on the concrete and

two minutes later, gone, no sign of him, not even an angry silhouette.

'He can't leave,' muttered Joanna, kicking sand at the guy bleeding out from the neck.

'Can and has.'

'We need him.'

'Do we fuck...he just tried to stab a little girl.'

Joanna looked at the blonde child, blood now dripping down onto her *Cool Spot* top. 'You don't understand, we need him.'

'For what?'

'He can do things.'

'Ja, sure, tell it to this guy.' Sila nudged the bitten guy's legs with his shoe, getting a splutter of blood in return. 'Tell it to Hungary.'

'I'm going after him.'

'Why?'

'Change his mind.'

'He's already gone.'

'Five minutes.'

Joanna followed Tak's trail for about twenty metres, but it was half-hearted, if she'd really wanted to stop him, she would've gone sooner.

Or put herself in the way.

Grabbed onto his ankles.

But instead she stopped, stood like a horse statue, counting the lamp posts back round to the beach.

Sila watched her for the first minute then, convinced she was gonna come back without the psycho, looked down at the other two guys, probably locals, and tried to figure out a way to hide the bodies, at least long enough for them to make it to the train station.

The best he could come up with was drag them into the sea, but there was a good chance they weren't fully dead yet, and even if they were, they'd just wash back up again in the morning and, just as he was moving onto the idea of rock-weighting their jackets, one of the guys, the one who'd been stabbed in the arms, made a moaning sound, which meant the sea was out of the question, and it didn't really matter cos it wasn't them the thug would remember, it was Tak, and Tak was black so there's no way the description would fit them by mistake.

He felt the girl's hand squeezing his and turned to face her, explaining in a soft voice that it was going to be okay now, but she was looking way past him.

Sila rotated and saw Joanna walking back, slumped, eyes on the girl, and, when she reached their spot, she kept walking, into the baby waves of the sea. Crouching low, she washed her hands, some of her neck then stood up and came back over.

'You clean?' Sila asked, unable to think of anything better.

She ignored him and sat down on the sand, stretching out the sleeves of her pink *Mizuno* jacket over the football jumper underneath, staring at the bite mark on the Spanish guy's neck.

Probably dead, she thought. Or on the way to it. By something not that different from a Krsnik. Who kept trying to hold her fucking hand. Who would inevitably kill both of them at some point. And feel nothing about it.

The other guy moaned again, making her jump a little and impulsively throw sand grains at his face.

'We better get out of here,' said Sila, offering his hand.

Joanna hesitated, noticing the girl clinging on tight to his other side.

'She's coming too,' he added, flinching at the blood on her chin.

'And if the vampire turns on us?'

'She won't.'

'It will, Sila.' Joanna pulled herself up, grabbing both their bags and putting them on her shoulders. 'And it'll go for you first.'

'*She, not it.*'

'*It* doesn't care. You can see it in the eyes.'

'Just...give me my bag.'

Joanna threw it over, stated something clearly and sternly in Cantonese, then started walking up the sand dune to the road. Sila let go of the girl's hand to put the bag on his shoulder, telling her that the Chinese woman wasn't really mad, she was just tired and unused to spontaneously appearing children.

'... ..' replied the girl, pulling at the *Old King Matjaž* hoodie under his jacket.

'Okay, okay, relax.' Sila gave his hand back and flinched a little when she squeezed it again. 'Happy now?'

'... ..'

'At least you can talk. That's a good thing.'

'... ..'

'Just hope it's not a dead language.'

'... ..'

'Or Hungarian.'

'... ..'

'It's not Hungarian...is it?'



The Barcelona simulation wasn't the same the next day, it was greyer, a forensic shade of purple, with cops at certain corners, hawkers, non-descript, nebulous tan whiteness, whisper threats that would've been Hungarian if he'd gotten close enough

and it took a further hour walking around the Museum of Modern Art for Tak to realise he couldn't stay

not if he wanted to keep his mind on the right track

westwards

distant from the claws of Count Otius.

~~~

He bought his ticket openly this time and sat down on one of the benches, looking at *La Vanguardia* online.

Made it four lines before he had to reach for the dictionary and as he searched

the demon girl floated back into his brain

telling him she was still there

still on the beach

blood dried

drained

so why didn't he come and say hi?

Tak repeated the usual phrase in five different languages, struggling on the Japanese version even though he'd always thought it was his best one

then went back to the news.

He read all the stories he was interested in and hissed at the business section, then went back to the dictionary and double-checked the headline words

blocked the demon girl speaking to him

again and again

blocked that fucking dahli too

buffering in the background

halfway out of the sea in a seaweed smoking jacket.

When the tannoy announcer called his train, he stood up and for the first time noticed that all the other benches had *daytime-reality* Spanish people sitting on them, which meant, at some point during the night, the security guards had cleared all the homeless and the immigrants, driven them off to god knows where, and now he was the only black person in the station.

It was weird

as he was reading the paper

he'd almost forgotten what he looked like

[or unconsciously re-imagined it]

the same way he'd thought he was Japanese sometimes when he lived in Japan

but as soon as he came out of the study bubble

or the strategy bubble

and saw the two security guards lurking nearby

staring at him

he remembered clearly what and where he was.

~~~

Studying a textbook has to be the worst way to learn a language, he thought, stretched out alone on a four-person table seat, maybe good for vocab and grammar structures but when you're on a train full of Spaniards, speaking full tilt Spanish, it's a fool who doesn't put their head back and listen in on everyone sealed in around them.

Tak put his head back and opened up.

One youngish guy in a *Jigoku* t-shirt was saying repeatedly the words *computer* and *break*, another, older guy was talking about communism, and a girl with semi-green hair was telling someone on the phone that she was definitely going to Amsterdam to study Dutch.

Of course he couldn't get all of it

only the words he knew

and some of the phrases were used in a way he wasn't familiar with, but generally he felt that he was making progress.

If he actually talked to a Spaniard

at native speed

he'd be lost within three lines

but

without a doubt

he was on the ledge of lower intermediate and

he didn't really wanna speak to Spaniards anyway cos the two cunts the previous night had spoken Spanish and they'd tried to mug him and

whack him on the head and

the little demon with the girl face

she'd ripped into-

He opened his eyes, checking the seats opposite and to the side, then stood up and checked the other seats in the carriage and, even though people were staring at him, he didn't care, he had to know that he was alone on this train.

When he was sure of it, he sat back down in the empty seat next to his own and tuned into the girl nearby who was going to Holland soon and then the guy in the *Jigoku* t-shirt

focused on each word he was saying, trying to figure out his language, failing seventy-nine per cent and instead crafting new lines in his head

what he would say to charm him

to seduce him  
to fuck him in the toilets  
or a cabin  
or anywhere really  
long as he wasn't Hungarian  
then  
the counter-agent thread  
talk to him  
focus on Japanese, *Jigoku*  
ask for the story of why that film and where from and  
when the train docked  
get up and go  
no number swaps  
just goodbye, *Jigoku* fan, maybe some other time.

~~~

Form, shape and the conservator chunk of his brain stood stoic in Madrid station

stoic and lost

so lost even the immigrants were looking at him like an oddity, a black hole that had just opened up and neglected to switch to wolf mode.

Was this where he wanted to be?

There were dozens of places he could go, dozens of cities he knew from football teams, but which one was best

which one would have no demons

costumed as juveniles?

Tak walked to the closest bench and sat down, realised the guards were staring at him yet rubbed his head like a lunatic anyway.

Madrid was the heart of Spain, the city all lines were forcibly linked to like succubus veins, only the closer to the tip of each vein you got, the paler it seemed,

the poorer it seemed

with the sole exception of Marbella, which was a shithole of pink gangsters and an Arab-funded replica of the white house

the fucking white house

no irony.

He pressed fingertips into the two sides of his temple, harder, wondering if this was one of the real ones.

Maybe.

And even if it wasn't

there wasn't much he could do about it.

'Where you from, brother?'

Tak looked up, grunted when he saw the West African with a tilted head staring back at him.

'Nigeria?'

'Go away.'

'Relax, brother, you got a friend here.'

'Fuck off.'

'Okay, calm, calm.' The guy laughed, nervously, and sat down on the edge of the bench. 'I'm angry too when I come here, but I never say *fuck off*. You need to be more care.'

'I'm not angry.'

'You Nigerian, right? Lagos?'

Tak reached inside his jacket pocket and wrapped his hand around the knife, but cut it short when his head started throbbing again.

Again, the temples were kneaded as the man ran through his rehearsed spiel, telling him where to go for cheap food, where to get work on the sly, where to find women.

'Some guys learn Spanish, but you ask me, maybe better you don't do. Some of this shit they say, brother, it push you too hard, but you react and it is done.'

Tak stopped rubbing and looked at the man's face. It was cheerful, open. And his voice. His English. It was too designed, too artificially imperfect.

'Don't talk to police too. Don't look on them. They no good. And don't stand out, don't speak with white people with that screwed peanut face for ten seconds more, you be okay, brother.'

'*On Magyar?*'

'On who?'

'*On Magyar? Dolgozol Vele?*'

'Brother, is that English? Don't know what you saying.'

Tak put his hand on the knife again and weighed up the options. The guy was a demon. The train station was packed. Stab him. Walk away.

Looking past the guy's shoulder, Tak spotted a small group of Eastern Europeans watching the scene. Ah, that's what it was, a team effort. He stood up and took a step left, but the man put out a hand to stop him.

'Brother, no that way, it's no good.' The man gestured towards a café to the side, packed full of Spaniards. 'Look, maybe we sit down five minutes, have some food. I tell you some things for how to survive in here.'

'No.'

'I have enough for quarter the price.' He checked his bubble jacket pockets and pulled out some coins. 'If you have enough, I can pay you this later.'

'Get off me.'

'Or we do a trade. My information about this place, you pay three quarter the price...two euro max.'

'Hand. Off.'

'Come on, it's a good deal, brother. You not hungry?'

'I'm not your brother, cunt.' Tak took two of the man's fingers and twisted them. 'Stay the fuck away from me.'

'... ..' moaned the West African, reverting to his native tongue.

Tak let go and walked off quickly before the man tried to retaliate, confident he wouldn't scream out cos that would bring the police and, like he said, the police were the same everywhere

even in a crowded train station.

He was right, there was no noise trailing him, but

as Tak walked to the other side of the station and looked at the board hanging down from the ceiling he remembered he still didn't know where he was heading so he checked back on the bench, the guy he'd half assaulted and

the wretch was still there

clutching his hand

hunched

not making a single sound.

No one was coming over to help him either,

not even the other immigrants,

white or black

which meant he was either a stranger to them, a closet Hungarian, or they hadn't seen what happened, but

if he was Hungarian and connected

then he wouldn't have let Tak walk off without pursuing, he wouldn't still be nursing his wrist, he wouldn't be stuck there wearing the same face Marina Sirtis pulled in *Bed of Sin 2: Castle Intrigue*, he'd be confident and scheming and probably holding a knife of some kind, but the guy wasn't, he wasn't doing any of that, no weapon, no schemes, he was just sitting there, sad, pathetic, drained, alone.

Screaming at himself not to bother, Tak walked back over, hand sliding into his *Ellesse* jacket pocket, and when the guy saw him coming, he half-ducked as if a missile were about to be fired at his chest, but Tak didn't fire anything, he just touched the guy's shoulder, said, 'sorry, mate, I'm having a bad day,' and gave him twenty euros in two ten notes.

The West African looked at his wrist, nodded and turned to walk away before spinning back and saying he only needed one, but Tak saw it coming and refused to hold out his hand.

'Okay, brother...'

Tak thought about telling him to head to Denmark if he could, or Iceland, or the left wing part of Tanzania, but they all had cops too, and nationalists, so instead he said he was sorry about the hand, but that it was lucky too, things could've been a lot worse

which was a strange apology

but also the truth.

'Okay, brother,' the guy repeated, turning his wrist in slow rotations.

'You better go eat now.'

The West African nodded awkwardly, a clipped bow, and walked towards the café he'd just warned against, leaving Tak with the train board, but now he had an idea

a thought

an old friend he'd forgotten about, Richard, the guy from school with the guitar avatar online who'd married the Spanish girl and gone to La Coruna to do what?

Teach English?

IT?

Ah, it didn't matter, long as he was still there.

Tak looked up at the schedule and saw a train going north in an hour, and another one going direct to La Coruna in two.

Attempting to stress-test his own idea, he bought a ticket and went to the café and sat away from the West African guy and thought about the potential landmines that could come from seeing someone he knew

someone who knew him

who would ask about Jemba and

'No, no, no, no...'

He repeated the phrase in five different languages and drank some coffee, which was Lego-sized, just like in Italy, coffee for fucking Scott Caan, and

when his blood was hitting eighty beats again he got up, went to the platform, got on the train, got out the textbook and pretended to study, muttered a few Spanish words, put away the textbook, got out a notepad, stared out the window at Galithian countryside and reached for thoughts and ideas and then, borrowing a pen from the guy opposite, wrote down a hundred word synopsis of Dracula, in broken Spanish. When it was done, he tried to read it back to himself but it was too simplistic, the Spanish too basic, and other thoughts were calling from the Tsukamoto alley of his brain, thoughts of sexed-up Pakistani men, vampyrs, Hungarian mood, Jemba, the Croatian girls, the fake castle, the darts bar in Tsunashima, Satomi and her short skirt, the real Takuya, topless, on his knees, Richard, his life in Spain, his blank-slate wife, the possibility of a place without headaches, the sea again, the one up there bone desolate and

When the train pulled into La Coruna station, he headed straight outside and sent Richard a message. There was no reply after half an hour, not that he was expecting one, but there was something about the clouds in the sky and the pink hue round the edges that was galvanizing, reminded him of past times

more recent times

ferry times

which weren't so bad the more he thought about it all.

Maybe he shouldn't have left so soon

without-

A group of teens sauntered past, shouting feral but Loachian in Deportivo shirts, possibly mistaking him for a local player.

Past is past is past is past is

in Hungarian hands now.

Can't go back.

Finding a cheap, Margate-drab hotel online, he booked a room, walked for an hour down a slow declining road and then a left turn along the main promenade, through mist that was probably residue of the same clouds from earlier, found the hotel, checked in, struggled with the manager who spoke only slurred Spanish [and glared at him until he pulled out his British passport], went to his room, sat down on the single mattress bed and told himself again

it's fine, Rich is a friend, he won't care,

it'll be fine

it'll all be fine

better here than confused granite in Madrid.

~~~

Tak hadn't realised it was Christmas

until Richard messaged back the next day and said:

'Fuck mate, you're here, really? Holy shit. It's Christmas Day tomorrow, you have to come round ours for lunch, don't worry, my wife's family speaks some English, not much, but if it gets tough, I'll handle the translation. Can't believe you're here. Ten years [Jeremy Piven voice] TEN YEARS, MAN! What the hell have you been doing with yourself? Is Jemba here too?'

Tak sat on his bed and thought it through.

He didn't care about eating Christmas dinner alone, he'd done it before, he'd do it again, but this was a chance to practise his Spanish and

he was curious

what exactly was Richard doing here

teaching, scamming?

And how good was *his* Spanish?

For some reason, it pissed him off that Richard had assumed he spoke nothing of the language, as if he were still the same guy from school who'd spent French lessons throwing compasses at Adrian Bayle's head and saying *meine augen tout mir vee* in a shit German accent.

That wasn't him

that hadn't been him for years.

Didn't anyone tell Richard he'd been in Japan?

Patronising cunt.

~~~

Tak walked round a hill with lighthouse and tiny castle to the greyer side of La Coruna, where there was another promenade, this one leading all the way to the Razor.

Apparently, Richard's flat was overlooking it, though not high enough up to see onto the football pitch.

Shame.

Not that he would've watched anything.

According to the numbers on his phone it was early afternoon, but there weren't many people about, and the few who did walk past performed an exaggerated double-take when they saw Tak going the other way.

One of them stopped and asked for his autograph, which he didn't catch the first time the guy said it as the whole thing was in lightspeed Spanish, and it annoyed him when the guy repeated the line in pedant English, cos the guy's English wasn't even good, not as good as Tak's Spanish. It was the same thing that had happened in Japan too, if you didn't understand the first time, they'd switch to basic English and his Japanese would get nowhere, which is what they wanted, their language skill to increase, his to get fat and bitter and do whisky commercials.

Despite the annoyance, he signed the autograph with a squiggle and posed for a photo. When the guy had fucked off happy, he went on his phone and looked up the Deportivo squad and almost laughed when he saw the player the guy had mistaken him for.

Ah, fuck it, at least it wasn't Nelson Mandela

or Drogba

though in another fifty years

it might be.

The promenade ended and the Razor began, the stadium instantly outmoding the lighthouse he'd been to an hour earlier.

Tak checked his watch then did a full lap of the stadium. It wasn't match day so the area was almost deserted, except for one scruffy-looking guy trying to pull a poster off the wall and

fuck

another West African coming out of the toilets, wiping his hands on a flak jacket and looking straight over at him.

Was he a footballer?

An immigrant?

A Ghanaian entrepreneur?

A British guy drifting around killing demons?

Tak blinked, wondering if he was seeing things, but it was real, the guy was objectively there, and now he was objectively walking over to Tak, waving at him.

Fuck, more *brother* talk

nope

not this time.

Tak turned and crossed the road quickly, re-checking his phone for Richard's address, and when he looked back he saw that the West African guy had stopped and was staring at him. It was too far away to read his expression, but the body language was crumpled, and Tak couldn't help but get the feeling that he'd devastated the guy in some way, which was weird as all he'd done was cross the road so he wouldn't have to talk to an invading stranger.

Completely normal

would've done the same thing to anyone

to RuPaul

Nestor Makhno

even Tommie *4 year* Sankara.

No guilt, not his fault

not his fucking brother.



When Richard opened the door, Tak ignored both the *how are you, Silas Marner?* and *Feliz Navidad*, and asked his old friend straight if he'd seen that weird guy hanging around outside the Razor before.

'Yeah...what?'

'He was staring at me, just now. Do you know him?'

'Which weird guy?'

'African-looking, tall, fake-gregarious...'

'Outside?'

'...weird smile. Yeah. Standing by the stadium, the Razor.'

Richard kept one hand tight on the door, looking out past Tak into the stairwell. 'Okay, well...assuming you're not drunk...I would guess *that weird guy* is probably not a local. If he is actually African. I mean, it's not impossible, but, generally...we don't get many foreigners here in A Coruña, except yours truly. It's a pretty out of the way place.'

'A footballer...'

'The guy outside?'

'Yeah.'

'That I still haven't seen yet?'

'Or an asylum seeker maybe...drifted up from Madrid. Any of those in the area?'

'What, asylum seekers?'

'Yeah.'

Richard laughed, gesturing for some reason at the *Chopping Mall* t-shirt creeping out from the middle of Tak's *Ellesse* jacket. 'Mate, this is a skit, right?'

'No skit.'

'Wah...serious...haven't seen you in ten years and this is what you come in with? *There's a weird guy by the stadium*. Fuck, Tak. You didn't even ask about my wife.'

'I know you got married. You posted it.'

'That's it?'

Tak squinted at Rich's left hand, the dry skin flaking off the knuckles, then phased awkwardly into a smile. 'Sorry, mate. I was just-...the guy was a bit weird, looking at me. Congratulations on the marriage. Well done.'

'Err...thanks.'

'Is everyone inside? Wife's family?'

'Not yet.'

'Can I come in, look around a bit?'

'Sure...we were gonna feed you at the door, but never mind. Come on in. Take off your shoes though, the carpet's just been done.'

Tak did as Richard said without bending down and then followed his old friend into the living room, where what he assumed to be his wife was playing with a little ginger-haired boy, maybe six, seven years old.

The pair were chatting in Spanish and, when Tak walked in, the boy stopped dead with a Lego wolf in his mouth.

'Hola...' tried Tak, unzipping his jacket to reveal the psychopathic robot on the t-shirt beneath.

The Lego wolf dropped.

'Keep playing, I don't mind...*no me importa...*'

Then got picked up and put back in the mouth again.

Richard clapped his hands together and introduced Tak properly and the wife slurred, 'hola, que tal,' but it wasn't enough to stop the soft thud inside Tak's brain

the voice saying *one of his, one of his, one of his*

even here

in the wuthering heights part of Spain

directed by an outsider perhaps

a sub-wretch of Otius

pretending to be black and amiable downstairs?

Jabbing at temples as discreet as he could, Tak performed a quick nod at the wife and kid then took a direct line to the window and looked down onto the concrete space outside the Razor.

The potential Otius stan was still there, leaning against the stadium wall now, studying something in his hand. Could be a phone, could be a pocket Munich Manual. Could be a psycho-somatic device to control Rich's kid.

'That's him.'

'Who?'

Tak beckoned Richard over to the window, then pulled him in tight by the Xmas jumper sleeve when he started to get close and lethargic. 'The guy I was talking about, look.'

'Ah, not this again. He's probably a tourist, or one of those Ghanaian entrepreneurs from Vigo. Or an English teacher.'

'Why is he alone?'

'I don't know, I'm not his agent.'

'It's weird.'

'Yeah, and he's not the only one.' Richard put a hand on Tak's shoulder and tried to guide him to the couch. 'Come on, sit down, have a drink.'

'Yeah, probably.'

'Probably? Mate, are you hungover?'

'No.'

'Well, you're doing a pretty good impression of it. Here, just sit down a bit. I'll go check on the lobster.'

'The what?'

'Thought that would get a reaction. It's the traditional A Coruña Christmas lunch...lobster, shrimp and roast potatoes.'

'You eat lobster for Christmas?'

'Yeah, it's a bit weird, but we've had it the last few years, so I'm used to it. You will be too, if you stick around long enough. Maybe find a nice local guy and kick-start a family of your own.'

'I'm leaving tomorrow.'

'Yeah, it was a joke, mate. Sit down, relax.' Richard walked halfway to the kitchen, almost tripping over his own kid, then stopped and asked Tak if he'd said he wanted a drink or not.

'Beer. Cold.'

'That's the first sane thing you've said since you got here.'

'Not a Hungarian brand.'

'Ah...never mind.'

Richard did a *Bataille at the sacrifice tree* whistle and went into the kitchen, coming back two minutes later with a Spanish brand Tak had never heard of.

'It's made local...not that far from here.'

'What does it mean?'

'The brand? Nah, just a name. I think.' He turned to his wife. 'The beer's just a name, right?'

'Si. Yes.'

Tak looked at the wife with the side ponytail and artist overalls, then the kid with the Lego wolf back in his mouth and tried like the captain from *Death Ship* to block out the now beyond nascent stomping ritual ripping at the inside of his head walls. Getting stronger, heavier

but maybe residual

from the last few days, lack of sleep, beach attack, ferry antics.

And it had happened before, in Italy, in Romania. Didn't have to mean anything Otius-related.

No, it really didn't.

Didn't have to be related at all.

Forget the window.

Beer. Lobster lunch. Spanish. The language part, chain yourself to it, Tak. Cling on to its fucking ankles.

'What are you doing?' he asked the kid, saying it first in English then making an attempt at a Spanish version.

'Ah, you've been studying,' intercepted Richard, sitting down next to him.

'Little bit.'

Richard nodded and said something to his wife in Spanish and she gave a clipped monologue back. He laughed and the conversation continued. Tak gave up on the first two sentences and concentrated on the third, just like Jemba had told him, but it was no good, he couldn't catch a single word. Were they using advanced vocab? Idioms?

Or was his brain doing its usual trick of analysing the idea of being able to translate instead of listening to the actual words and translating them.

'Did you understand what we said?' asked the wife, smiling in a way that he decided was accusatory.

'Some.'

'Ah, your level is very good then.'

'What did we say?' asked Richard, leaning forward, pulling the wedding ring up and down his finger.

'You don't believe me?'

'Nah, mate. I mean, some of the words weren't that tough, you probably did catch them.'

'Which words?'

'Err...off the top of my head...*put, learn, improve*...what else?'

'You said *learn*?'

'Yeah. *Lo aprendió antes*. Past tense.'

'Didn't hear it.'

'At least, I'm pretty sure we said it.' He looked at his wife, pulling his ring all the way off. 'Did we?'

'I can't remember.'

They sailed back into Spanish again, and Tak was too annoyed, too under the cosh with the fucking migraine to try translating so he looked at the blank-faced kid, who'd dropped the Lego wolf and replaced it with a cop car.

Very normal for little boys to play with Lego, Tak thought, pushing knuckles into his head. A normal activity, most children have it, play with it. Cop cars, wolves, dragons, insurance agents...

He kept watching.

The boy was putting two Lego knights into a jail cell and hitting them with a little Gandalf staff.

It's normal to put policemen in Lego jail, Tak thought. It's imaginative, a form of corrective justice, a good way to-...

Tak closed his eyes, trying to block out the three sudden throbs inside the left side of his head. After the pain receded a little, he put his fingers up and started grinding.

'You okay?' asked Richard, wedding ring back on.

'Si.'

'You need a Panadol?'

'No.'

'You sure?'

'Later. Maybe.' Tak stood up and took his local-brand beer back over to the window. 'He's still there.'

'The African guy?'

'Same place. Same posture.'

Richard got up and joined Tak by the rain-spotted glass. 'Doesn't seem to be up to anything weird. Just standing there.'

'Exactly.'

'Mate, come on...what else is he supposed to be doing?'

'It's not right.'

'What isn't?'

'What I just said, it's not right.'

Richard looked at his wife, pulled a *might need to get the rack out* face then went back to the street. 'Like I said, he's probably from Vigo, here on a day trip. I've seen others before, they come to the Razor to see one of the players...a Nigerian guy...I forget his name.'

'But it's not match day.'

'They don't know that.'

'Why? Why would he not know that?'

'I don't know, he didn't look at the schedule? Or, okay, maybe he knows it, that part's possible, but...maybe he's here for another reason. Maybe he just

wanted to look at the stadium itself, or see the city, the lighthouse, some friends who live around here.'

Tak rubbed his head harder, the pain soaring back. 'Doesn't make sense, Rich.'

'Makes enough not to stress out thinking about it.'

'He doesn't belong there, it's not right.'

'I told you, he's probably-...'

'It. Is. Not. Right. Stop making me repeat the same thing and listen, for fuck's sake.'

'Mate...' Richard moved in close to Tak's ear and put his arm cautiously around his shoulder. 'Slow it down a bit. You're scaring my wife and kid.'

'They're not scared.'

'Talk to me. What's wrong? What happened?'

Tak jabbed the window with his index finger. 'That guy is wrong, I told you.'

'Not him, you. All this head jabbing. What's going on?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'I'm fine. A slight headache. Why are you interrogating me?'

'Just a bit worried, mate. This is not the whirlwind Tak experience I remember.'

'What whirlwind?'

'I mean, you're acting weird. Paranoid...'

'Weird how?'

'...like you're being watched or something. How? Okay, first off, you come in and don't ask me any questions about my life. Then you stare at my kid. Then you start pointing out the window at some random African guy...jabbering on and on like you're being chased by-...by the fucking Wish Master.'

'Oye...'

Rich turned to his wife, pulling down the sleeves of his Xmas sweater. 'Sorry...'

'Maybe the two of you should go outside for a bit. I'll take care of the lobster.'

'You think so?'

'Come back in half an hour, when you've caught up a bit more.'

'Yeah, you're probably right.'

Richard turned back to Tak expecting his forehead to be pressed against the window, but it wasn't. Instead he was staring sharp and zealot-like into the middle of the living room, diagonally down, at the thing pretending to be a human child.

'Tak?'

It isn't the guy outside, he warned himself, it's here, this tiny creature. It has to be. This is where the headache really got going.

'You okay?'

Unless it was a delayed reaction? But why would it be? The pain was worse now, ever since he'd come in. Which meant it was either Rich, his wife, or the child. But it couldn't be Rich, he'd known him back in the UK, and his wife didn't give him the right feeling, didn't seem abstract enough, too contained in those overalls, so it had to be the other. It made sense. Fifty seven per cent of demons were child simulacrums anyway, or had the ability to assume that form.

'Tak, you're flat-lining again...'

And now another one, two in three days, Jesus fucking Christ. They were swarming him like locusts. It wasn't fair. This was supposed to be a safe spot, he knew Rich, knew him well, they couldn't come here too, it wasn't fair. Was it really the kid? Weren't his calculations wrong? It could be the guy outside. Could be someone else lurking nearby. Could be someone in this building. Could just be a normal headache. Fuck, it wasn't fair, wasn't right. He had to move. Had to get out of there, find some air.

He coughed, covertly checking his throat to see if it could still function as a speech giver.

'Sorry, I was just remembering something...'

'While staring creepily at my wife and kid.' Richard added a laugh at the end to try and soften it but it wasn't convincing. 'How about we duck out for a bit, walk around the stadium?'

'Yeah.'

'I'll get my jacket.'

Tak looked at the kid and said what he thought was, 'sorry, I am not a monster,' in Spanish.

The kid started to cry.

'Fuck, I didn't...'

'It's okay, mate.'

'Was my Spanish bad? Did I say it wrong?'

'Let's just go.'

The wife took the boy's hand and led him out of the living room, some of the Lego trampled on in the process.

Meanwhile, Richard got on his grey stripe *adidas* jacket and guided Tak back towards the front door, then down the painting-less stairwell and into the arctic circle outside.

'Sorry about that,' Tak tried as he stepped around some shit on a discarded leaflet.

'Don't worry, he cries a lot. Quite a sensitive kid.'

'My Spanish is pretty weak...'

'Nah, it wasn't the speaking, it was the staring before it, I think.'

'Staring...'

'Yeah. And maybe the t-shirt.'

Tak looked down at his chest, realising his *Ellesse* jacket was still unzipped, the robot face sticking through the middle gap.

'I'm messing with you. T-shirt's fine. Though it's pretty funny that you've still got it. The jacket too. Don't you ever go shopping?'

'No.'

'Didn't think so.'

A cold gust of Galician wind blew in, forcing Tak to stand there and do nothing except tap the back of his head as the migraine was starting up again.

'You sure you're okay?'

'Coping. Slowly.' Tak coughed, a complete fabrication. 'I'm sorry about staring at your kid. I get caught up sometimes. In a bubble. This headache, it's-...'

'Forget it, mate. He's five years old, it'll pass.' Richard looked around the area, but not upwards at the grey sky. 'You wanna do a lap of the stadium? Go say hello to your African friend?'

'Funny.'

'If it works out well enough, maybe you can stay with him in Vigo.'

'Don't stretch it, Rich.'

'Ha, sorry, mate, just doing a Jemba.'

'What?'

'That thing he used to do, going on and on, same topic, until he ended up talking about moon farming or something equally oddball.'

'What do you mean?'

'Huh? You short circuiting? Jemba...used to stretch jokes out for hours, all his crazy scenarios. And the arguments. Wah, they were even worse...remember?'

'No.'

'Mate, the never lost an argument thing was his trademark, how can you not remember? That one time, what was it? The thing about the Philip K Dick movies...how many books got turned into movies. You pulled out some obscure French adap, he said it didn't count, then wouldn't shut up about it for weeks. God, it was annoying sometimes. Where is he now anyway? London still?'

Tak nodded even though a nod was not required and looked at the West African guy seemingly glued to the stadium wall. He'd noticed the guy looking up when they came out of the building, but now he was staring at his own hand again.

'Last I heard he was doing that on-call defendant gig. Don't know if that's still going though. It's been a pretty long time since we talked.'

Tak rubbed his head, the temples pulsating. He looked around the stadium. There was no one else except the West African, no other people, no parked taxis, not even rogue pigeons or cats.

'Sorry, mate, do you not see him anymore?'

'What?'

'Your old best friend.'

'Jemba? Yeah, he's around. I see him.' Tak looked at his own hands, scrubbing off imaginary dirt. 'I need a dump.'

'Now?'

'Back in five minutes.'

'You can go at my place, when we get back.'

'No need.'

'Mate, those are football toilets, I don't think you wanna-...'

'Wait here.'

'Okay, I guess you do wanna. Fine. I'll stay here and do my lamppost impression.'

Tak repeated five minutes then walked quickly to the entrance of the toilets at the corner end of the stadium and, as he moved inside, slowed down a bit and turned, glancing at the African.

As expected, the outsider, the vassal, looked up from his hands and glanced back.

'Okay, you wretch...!' Tak muttered and continued inside, doing a quick reconnaissance of the cubicles, checking for rogue feet, then positioning himself behind the wall next to the entrance. When he was certain his form wasn't visible in the long mirror opposite, he pulled out the knife, shallowed his breath and waited.

Of course, waiting was tough, semi-Hungarian, and to kill that creeping void he focused on small details, like keeping his heart beat steady, counting out seconds, translating the wall graffiti, holding one arm out straight, defensively, and the knife low with the other. Block and stab, block and stab. The Hungarian had never used an African vassal before, but it had worked on the white ones so, unless they had a *Magyar chat* group warning of his block/stab routine then it would work here too.

There were footsteps outside, followed by something heavy and metal dropping onto the ground.

Tak looked at the mirror, which was grubby and reflection-less and had a red painted dick with devil horns on the helmet. No one coming in. No claws or phantom feral breathing.

But the footsteps, the metal thing...

He edged left and looked far enough into the mirror to see three quarters of the outside entrance, but still there was nothing there.

Was he waiting outside?

Tying a shoelace?

He started to shift himself round the wall, craning his neck to see the farthest end of the mirror, when something flickered into existence dead in front of him, a face, a black face, sparkling yellow eyes.

Tak didn't know what it was at first, but instinct kicked in fast and the knife pushed forward, low down, aiming for the creature's thigh.

It didn't stick

cos his arm...his whole body...was floating

then flying

then crashing hard into the mirror, cracking the painted devil dick, but not making any damage noise at all. Were his ears out? Was this a trick? A hallucination?

He felt around for the knife, but it was gone. Probably on the floor he'd started from, way too far to get to, and blocked by the creature anyway.

'Quiet now,' said the West African, phasing back into view, lips completely still-life.

Tak pulled himself up and looked down, at his shoes silently crunching the shards of mirror into tinier shards. It was real, no sound at all, as if the whole place had been muted or sealed in a bubble and flown up and out past the heliosphere.

'Nice and easy, brother...'

Tak looked up, about to say *you're not my fucking brother*, when he caught sight of what was in front of him.

It wasn't a West African man anymore

it was a grey thing

tentacles where the arms had been

no

next to them

the arms were still there, tucked under

and his own trackie pants

they were sliding off, not pulled, coming off of their own free will and the man

the creature

the grey thing with seven-foot-long tentacles floated an inch off the floor and drifted towards him

one of the tentacles hooking onto his neck

picking him clean up the same way Count Otius had, like he was nothing but a hamster, a featherweight hamster, no, smaller than that, lighter, like he was a-

Before Tak could think of another animal, the vassal of Otius had lifted him all the way up to the ceiling, scraping his head against the light casing, then bringing him back down and flinging his body into what was left of the mirror [and the devil dick graffiti].

Tak hit both tile and glass, face first, and slumped down into the dirtiest of the eight sinks.

He fake-dozed a little, muttering zaum nonsense, hoping to lure the demon in close. It worked. He heard a couple steps, waited for another then lashed out backwards with his fist.

'Fuck...'

The hand did nothing but bounce off rough skin, dragon-type, that scraped along his knuckles like a brillo pad.

'... ..' said the grey creature, swirling a tentacle on the left as if it were signing its master's speech.

'Fucking coward.'

'... ..'

'Cunt.'

'... ..'

Tak rubbed at the exposed flesh on his hand. The fucker's skin was impenetrable, better to aim for the eyes, with nails or glass, but there was no chance to grip anything or swing again as the demon was already on top of him, its arms, tentacles and body weight pinning him down tight.

'Dark enough cunt now,' the grey thing whispered, its breath nebula-like, 'dark enough cunt now, dark enough cunt now...'

Tak struggled for a few seconds, but quickly realised the demon was way too strong to wriggle away from, so, when its tentacles pushed his head up and smashed it into the wall, he changed tack and drooled blood into the sink, pretending to be out.

The worst thing you could do was constant attack

or constant struggle

that's what the last two and a half years had taught him, and none of these Otius wretches ever killed their prey with one strike anyway

they liked to take their time

act out rituals

like the *Ye Cha* in Bucharest

or gloat

like the dahli on the ferry, in the cabin

or just generally linger

like the Turkish djinn who'd sucked him off, bought him the *Critters II* t-shirt, tied them both to a chair and horror-watched *Kitchen Nightmares* for four days straight

so he stayed down and waited

gargled blood

eyed a holdable shard of glass and waited and waited and

even when he could feel the thing ripping at his shirt

he waited

shifted his left hand towards the glass, wrapped his fingers around it, pulled it back under his body and

waited and

waited and

waited as five or six or seven different strands of nightmarish brillo pad grated against his skin and

it was hard to muffle the screams

felt like his flesh was being slowly scrubbed off but

then it was different

worse

it felt like the skin was being lifted, peeled clean off his body, a slippery metal trowel inserted underneath and

what about the scars

the scars from Otius

would they open up again

bleed out?

A picture from the castle came into his head, the cavern with the bath dug into the floor, and he told himself to attack, hit now, stab the fucker, and

with his hand already starting to feel numb

he clutched the glass shard as much as he physically could and edged out from under the creature's body, raising his left side a little to make it look like he was trying to pull himself up and the best way was to do it fast, right arm up, left arm low

block with the right

stab with the left

just like he'd seen in Donnie Yen films

when he was a kid

before he found out Yen was a fascist.

'See you moving, brother,' the demon purred, jabbing something blunt into the small of Tak's back. 'See you squirming down there.'

Tak brought his left hand out from under his body, spinning round and up out of the sink in one movement, raised his right arm up to block the tentacle and stabbed low with his left, hitting the grey fuck in the thigh. The demon made a guttural noise, but Tak didn't care, he stabbed again, in the other thigh, then the stomach, then higher, the chest, the chest again, the neck, the arms, the sinew, he didn't stop until the thing was on the floor and he could see blood pouring out in more than just a token stream.

'Brother...'

Tak closed his eyes, bent down and stabbed into void greyness, seven, eight more times, all in the centre mass, then, with a *Medina* smile, placed the edge of the knife against the fucker's neck and ran it all the way across.

When he stood back up and opened his eyes, the body beneath was a red-pocked star chart and

it wasn't grey anymore,

not one piece of it

and there were no tentacles left either.

'Fuck...'

It was the West African again.

'Knew it was you.'

The West African's eyes were open, pleading, confused.

'Fucking knew it.'

Tak went to the sink and washed the blood off the knife. Splashed water on his face, his back, his hand wound. It stung, just like before, and his *Chopping Mall* t-shirt was shredded, but it was okay, his jacket would get him as far as the xenophobe's hotel without anyone spotting blood and calling the cops.

Luckily, the mirror was too cracked for him to look at himself, so there would be no repeat of the scene in the Czech hostel, the *what have I become* face, not that he would go that way again, he knew what he had become and it was fine, just a few extra pieces added onto the previously existing core

no wholesale change

no penance required

how could there be, it was self-defence, the grey thing had tried to flay him with unorthodox tentacles and luckily he had a knife, or a shard of glass, and knew how to hurt it, and so what if it had changed back to human form,

it was fine

anyone would've done the same, dealt with it this way

Batman

Supergirl

Chopping Mall guy

even himself

years ago

hiding naked

petrified

alone in the lair of the

~~~

The sky outside the stadium had somehow turned dark within the space of seven minutes, the air felt around ten degrees colder and, due to a combination of these two terrors, Richard was half tempted to ditch Tak and go back upstairs,

say sorry, honey, Tak had to go

said he wasn't feeling well

but he didn't do that, cos even friends you hadn't seen for ten years deserved some leeway, even if they had freaked out your kid and gone nuts over some *chilling by the Razor* West African guy.

Richard passed the time by counting the people walking past. In the now nine minutes since Tak had disappeared into the toilets, only one had passed. The West African guy. With a wave and a smile.

He'd gone into the toilets too.

Maybe that's what Tak was doing in there, talking to that guy, asking him what he was doing in A Coruña.

Or maybe they were both taking a dump.

Or maybe something sexier.

It wouldn't be the-

Richard paused and waved a hand at Tak, who'd just appeared outside the toilets, then started walking back towards the flat.

When he got to the road, he turned to see if Tak had caught up, but there was no sign of him.

Huh?

He looked further down the concrete stretch, towards the other end of the stadium and

wah, there he was

walking like a tourist in the complete wrong direction.

'Tak...' Richard shouted, moving a few steps after him. 'Tak...not that way.'

The second shout got a response, Tak adjusting position and staring back at his old friend.

'Where you going? It's over here, mate.'

Tak pulled his *Ellesse* jacket tight around his body, spat out some blood he'd missed during the clean-up, then turned back towards the grey line of Galician sea and continued walking.





There were several visual cues to rep/carbon-date Sevilla  
the giant waffle

the labyrinthine streets

the church opposite a Starbucks or Starbucks opposite a church  
whichever came first

but the only places Sila had been the last few days were the hostel hidden  
in the side of an old building, the modernist bus depot currently making up  
the backdrop and the train station when they'd first arrived.

And a bookshop too, to get a Danish to English dictionary, but just like in  
Barcelona and Valencia and Almeria and Granada there were none, only  
Danish to Spanish, so each time he wanted to talk to his beach-drop daughter  
he had to look up the Spanish then translate that into Danish which he wasn't  
even sure she understood as every time she spoke back it was brief, mumbled  
and ambiguous.

In the end, depressingly, he had no choice but to fall back on the phone, the  
thing all his high school friends would've started with.

Which didn't help much.

Recorded audio fuzz or his own voice, both failed around seventy-two per  
cent of the time. And the ones that did land got a *yes* or *no* in drizzled  
response.

Two thoughts came to mind, as the queue to the ticket booth ahead  
shortened.

One, as a mythological demon, maybe it was archaic Danish she knew?

Two, as a mythological demon in modern times, shouldn't she know a bit more up-to-date Danish?

And a wildcard third: maybe he was the first foreigner to attempt non-native Danish on her and she couldn't get past the errors?

Sila looked down at the top of the girl's blonde head and found something new to say, typing it out quickly and then, a minute later, eking out the translation.

'Are you looking forward to Portugal?'

The girl looked up and instantiated the usual stare.

Maybe there was a smile, he didn't know. The medical mask covering her mouth made it hard to determine.

But it was mundane to repeat the same line, so he changed it to some Danish he remembered:

'Are you happy?'

She dipped her head and mask, and went back to looking at the corner of the train station. It was understandable; there was a big hole in the wall that wasn't being fixed. Apparently, it had been like that for two years.

In fact, Sila remembered reading about it online. Four locals had driven through, in protest at the lack of a new breed of socialism in the country. They'd picked the bus station as the most likely place to reach the right people, but they overestimated the size of hole they would make, so, when the two surviving guys got out of hospital, they came straight back with sledgehammers and made the hole bigger and, after the police had caught up and put them away for four years, others came, with sledgehammers, chisels, regular hammers etc and finished what they'd started and, in the end, the hole in the bus station wall story spread across the world and inspired other holes in other walls, more important walls, and, well, there was still no new socialist theory, but there had to be a few people, somewhere, working on it, hopefully not professional middle class.

Sila stared at the hole and thought, once the little one's settled, and the cabinets are sorted, maybe I'll take a crack at that.

Why not?

That's what the guy with the 225 IQ had said, on his emu farm: *the only true way to prove intelligence was to design a new system for humans*

*one that was neither fascist nor communist*

*nor relied heavily on old ideas*

which was fairly silly as Marxism wasn't an idea, it was plain fucking fact, the only outdated part coming from the adventurist re-costuming of the terrain.

That's what he'd thought before, when he was involved in that kind of stuff. Instead of being an impromptu parent. And husband. And Dark Professor searcher.

'... ..' said the girl, pointing at the glass screen with a sign saying 'BUS TICKETS' next to a Spanish flag sticker.

'Oh yeah,' replied Sila, walking forward, keeping her hand in his, or his hand in hers.

He asked the counter guy, in basic Spanish, for three tickets leaving the next morning and the guy's first question was

'When?'

which was easy enough, assuming he meant time,

and then

'Passports, please.'

'Huh?'

'Need to see passports.'

'All of us?'

'Yes.'

Sila looked at the little girl and smiled. Maybe the Danish embassy would feel sorry for her and give a handout, a temporary pass, just enough to get them into Portugal.

And why did they need to show their passports anyway?

Weren't Spain and Portugal both in the EU?

Sila turned to ask the guy behind the desk, but realised he a] didn't know how to say it, and b] didn't have the skills to understand the reply

so he settled for,

'tomorrow, we come back,' and guided the masked girl out of the bus depot, through the giant hole, all the while wondering what his *wife* was doing all alone back at the hostel.

Studying Danish?

Looking for Cantonese/Mandarin students?

Summoning Krsnik?

And if they'd be able to keep the room for another week. Or several weeks. Until he could locate a trap door into Portugal. Or overcome enough anxiety to drive again.

Fuck, forget about that for now.

Focus on the lessons, make a bit of cash.

Survive.

And actually come up with a name for their new addition, so they didn't have to keep calling her *girl* and *her*

or in anti-Madonna's case, when she wanted to rile him,  
*thing* and *it*.

~~~

Joanna sat on the bed, trying to ignore to death the mosquito

and the noise from not Chinese twenty-one-year-olds in the common room outside, but that was too loud to block out, so she added it to the background and adapted.

She was good at adapting

Yute Long had told her many moons ago

very good at it.

Even better now the slow fade had stopped...or been blended into the background. Time or her own psyche, whichever was the driver. Probably the abstract one.

More commotion from the common room, a *dut chut* burst of *fuck off*.

She looked down, configuring as she went.

Sevilla. Hostel. Bed. Alone. Errant mosquito.

In her hand was *The Book And The Sword*, another Gum Yong classic. It had never been her favourite when she was young, but it read better now, probably cos it was set in China, with Chinese characters and Chinese thought and Chinese cuisine, and it had been a long time since she'd had any of that.

Even her own brain seemed to have flipped somewhere else

Slovene maybe or

Esperanto

an amalgamation of all the fevered shit she'd waded through to end up in a hostel, in a sea-less place like Sevilla, without any form of-

The mosquito buzzed right up to her ear, provoking a wild swing with the book.

No hit, just a free joy ride on air particles she'd created.

Annoyed, she dropped the book on the pillow and took it out on the only decoration in the room, a colourful painting of a sleepy child being pulled out of its bed by a stream of stars. Its purpose seemed to be Peter-Pan related, to convince children that magical stars would lead to adventure, but, Joanna noted, it didn't show whatever it was outside the window, the thing controlling the stars.

Looking at the painting a little longer, chiding it, respecting it, she eventually got bored and looked at her phone. *Mandarin/Cantonese teacher, kind + patient, 30 Euros an hour*. One reply, a topless Spanish uncle asking her to come to his place and fun.

Great, thanks Sila.

Become a teacher with a gun to your head so we can support a thing in a child suit that eats people. Listen to locals butcher sounds from my motherland.

Or let him do all that, while I escape.

Muttering *not a teacher* as if it were legal defence, she reached over to the other side of the bed and, with koala hands, picked up the notes that were already halfway off the edge.

'Ways to get rid of child demon'

It was written in traditional Chinese to prevent Sila and the little blonde thing from reading it. Not that there was much to read. So far, she had two methods:

1] Wake Sila up early, pack stuff, flee.

and

2] Leave Sila, get plane home, never think of them again.

She picked up the pen and added a line under the first method, studied it, mumbled something in Cantonese, crossed it out and tried again.

'The thing does not seem to sleep. Doesn't sleep, doesn't need to sleep? Use chloroform?'

The door opened and Sila came in, the demon tagging behind, its hand wrapped up tight in his.

'You didn't lock the door,' he said, pulling off his hoodie.

'What?'

'It just opened. No key.'

'Thought I locked it.'

'Mentally, maybe.' He looked at the notes that she was too enervated to hide. 'What are you writing?'

'Chinese.'

'Huh? You don't usually write.'

Joanna looked at the paper in her hand and then back at him. Then at the Danish creature poking out from behind his *Djinn of Qaldin* t-shirt. 'I'm writing different ways to get away from that.'

'Wah, not again.'

'So far I only have two.'

'I've told you five hundred times already, she's staying. And it's our job to provide for her. Maybe you should actually try adapting to a situation for once in your life.'

Joanna laughed, she couldn't help it.

'What? It's true. And don't pretend any of this is adapting, it isn't. You're just sitting there, plotting. Probably haven't even posted your teaching ad yet.'

'How should I adapt then, Sila?'

'Ah, the sound of my name...'

'With what methodology?'

He coughed, muttering *methodology* back to himself with a grin. 'Well, Joanna, you could take this dictionary here, or your phone, whichever one you prefer, and look up some phrases to help you communicate with our daughter.'

'... ..'

'English.'

'You're deluded.'

'Ja, what I thought you said. And I'm pragmatic, not deluded. Determined.'

'Okay, Pragmatron.' She held up her Gum Yong book, tapping one of the abstract swirls on the cover. 'It's reading time.'

'You don't want to know what happened at the bus station?'

'No.'

'Fine, I'll force it on you. We can't get the bus to Portugal, she needs a passport.'

Joanna lowered the book slightly, just below her chin.

'Ja, pretty weird, right? I thought we could go to the Danish embassy, but I'm not sure how to register her. She has no ID at all. Actually, I don't even know if Denmark has an embassy here. I guess you don't either. But then, if we can't get a passport then the only other thing we can do is either walk to Lisbon or rent a car. Car would be expensive, and I'm not a huge fan of driving, so...'

'We should take the bus.'

'Ha, funny.' Sila sat down on the bed, looked at her notes again, saw the overwhelming mass of Chinese [three lines] and gave up. 'Bus is off the table. Or almost off it. But we can't walk either. And if we do rent a car, we're gonna have to get more cash to cover us.'

The little girl climbed up onto the bed and placed herself between Sila and Joanna, tilting her head against the mother surrogate's upper arm.

'I've got two students lined up for tomorrow, and another two on Friday. Hopefully, I can get them to do extra lessons over the next week or so, promote some kind of cram theory of learning...'

'We can't stay here for that long.'

'...a bit dishonest, but...huh, why not? Sevilla's not bad, and we need the cash.'

'I prefer Lisboa.'

'Okay, fine, but we still need to get there. How about a week here and then we go? Maybe target our ads to Lisboa then use that as a base to build up our cash fund.'

Joanna shifted her arm, dislodging the little girl temporarily, then picturing splattered mosquitoes as she came right back, locking a persistent hand around her wrist.

'What do you think?' prompted Sila, picking up a long strand of the demon's hair and needlessly untangling it.

'Can she not go on your side?'

'I don't know, ask her.'

'Can you just pick her up and move her?'

'Nope.'

'.....'

'I bet that was positive.'

'.....'

'Thanks.'

'.....'

'You know, if you think about it, she's almost the perfect child. Doesn't say much and clings tight even when you're being a bit of a cunt. Just like a dog.'

'Would you like to say that in Danish?'

'Sure, let me check on my phone.'

'Don't.'

'Probably won't get it right, but...it's the effort that counts. Right, Søren?'

The blonde girl looked right, towards the window.

'That's clearly not her name.'

'It is until she tells us something different. You should use it too, get her more attached. Søren. Sø-ren. And learn some Danish. I'm doing all the legwork here...'

'... ..' added the girl, temporarily Søren, either agreeing or commenting on the mosquito, which was buzzing in Joanna's ear again.

'...all the heavy-lifting. See?'

~~~

Sila spent the next hour searching for both students in Lisboa and cabinets, a slow struggle as the little girl wouldn't let go of his left hand. And, on the rare times that he did manage to detach, she would just start prodding at the green djinn face on his t-shirt instead.

Still, better than biting.



After securing one target work-wise and nothing on the other, he switched to the download folder and loaded up Series 1 episode 3 of his comfort blanket, *Blake's 7*.

'You ready, Søren?' he asked the girl in Danish, who stared at a bit of stubble on his neck.

Or possibly just his neck.

An artery he didn't know the name of.

Future snack, if weakened.

'I'll translate that into a yes.'

The theme of *Blake's 7* started up along with the 70's graphics, rogue unorthodox. Sila leaned towards his adoptee and pulled the face mask down past her chin, asking the *ready* question again.

This time, there was a nod [and continued staring].

'She doesn't want to watch your space show,' said Joanna, turning a page of the Gum Yong book.

'Quiet, Servalan.'

'No one does.'

'I will train her to watch it. She already liked the first two episodes.'

'No, she didn't.'

'More than liked. Her face prodded forward at the end of the last one...curiosity.'

'The thing doesn't understand what's happening. Even as a concept. Do you think she's ever seen space before? Or TV?'

'She understands.'

'And even if she does, it's a depressing show. You said it yourself, the heroes are ambiguous, they all die at the end. What do you think that's going to tell her about the world?'

'It's a cruel place, so stick with mum and dad.'

'Or she'll start biting people again.'

'That's why she's wearing the mask.'

'A mask made of cheap cotton.'

'Is that what it is, cotton?'

'Seriously, the next person who looks at you funny, or pushes into you, even accidentally, or doesn't understand your bad Spanish, like in Almeria....'

'That was days ago.'

'A misplaced *what* and your annoyed frowny face...and she bit him. That was all it took.'

'Nibble, not a bite...'

'If we weren't in the middle of nowhere...we would be in prison now.'

'She's six-years old. Still learning.'

Joanna pulled back the Gum Yong book from the child of the winter corn, hissing something in Cantonese. 'You need to stop saying her age. She's not a child, she's not learning, she is a demon, ready-made. There's no personal growth. She's not going to hit puberty or mature. She's not even a *she*. *It* is dangerous and *it* is always going to be dangerous.'

Sila shifted the laptop screen towards the girl and gently twisted her head back towards it. 'Søren and I are trying to watch the show here...'

'Which is gonna make her even more dangerous, I just told you that.'

'You said she couldn't understand it.'

'Their words, not the actions.'

The girl again poked her head round the side of the Gum Yong book, moving her face overtly from left to right, trying to read the Chinese characters.

It didn't last long, Joanna closing the book and Sila reaching across yet again to drag her back to the screen and Blake's revolutionary perm.

'Their actions are fine, unreadable,' said Sila, flinching as Avon shot an unarmed guard, ice cold. 'It's the words that reveal their base shitness. Anyway, we're gonna watch *Star Trek* later, give her a bit of balance.'

'There is no balance with a demon.'

'Ha, you've only met one.'

'One, plus her, that's two, plus...' Joanna turned towards Sila to list all the demons in the world, but stopped when she saw the little girl glaring at her Gum Yong book, the eyes nebulous purple. '... ..'

'Is that a Chinese demon?'

'She's doing it again.'

'Doing what?'

'The purple eyes.'

'A natural reflex...'

'It's creepy. Like hypnotism.'

'Creepy is a mental construct, there's no actual reality to it. Besides, purple doesn't symbolise anything. Red, maybe, but definitely not purple.'

Joanna shifted to the painting on the wall, the child floating star-latched out of its bedroom window. 'Creepy is objective, not mental construction.'

'Watching *Blake's 7* now.'

'Sila...'

'Quiet, it's a good bit coming up.'

Joanna looked at the screen for the *good bit* and saw some cheap planet wasteland, with a bunch of atavistic man shapes meandering through it.

One of them stopped and pointed at a weird-looking building, saying, 'architectural design, early maniac,' which made her smirk, but she culled it instantly, before it tried to phase into something more.

'Creepy girl watching a creepy sci-fi show,' she mumbled instead, putting Gum Yong on the bedside table, away from purple eyes.

'Ha, I detected a *girl* there.'

'I'm going to sleep.'

'That means she's growing on you.'

Joanna lay down and turned away from Sila, facing the wall and what she suspected was the mosquito. It was either that or a speck of black dust, dragged up from hell to herald the coming of the Danish blonde-

'Point her the other way.'

'Huh?'

'I can feel her eyes on the back of my head.'

'What are you talking about? She's looking at the screen.' Sila looked diagonally down at the girl and realised Joanna was right, she was pinned to the back of his travel partner's head.

'Are you sure?'

He cupped the girl's chin and redirected her towards Blake's perm and the psychotic cult leader he'd just run into. 'I told you, Søren is looking at the screen.'

'... ..'

'Like a good girl.'

~~~

Later, when the mosquito had been killed and Sila was in Odin sleep, Joanna got up and went out into the common room

saw a Tak lookalike drinking a carton of soy milk

stared at him until he looked up and asked, 'hi?' in a standard US drone

flinched

then took the long route back to the room.

The notes she'd written were on the mattress next to the wide-awake *Not Søren*, too close to peruse there, so she picked them up, told the girl to sleep in Cantonese and relocated to the desk by the window.

Narrow Sevilla street below, one uncle blow-drying a plant in the window opposite.

No undue noises.

She looked at the paper on the desk, tried adding a number 4 to the list, but there was nothing she could think of besides something incredibly brutal.

Even she wasn't capable of that, not on something that looked like a six-year-old.

She put the pen down and felt something replace it. Without a sound, human or demonic, the little Danish thing had slid off the bed and was now gripping her hand.

'What are you doing?'

The little girl looked up at her, with non-purple eyes, and slowly pressed her head against her mother's side.

Joanna waited for the pain, picturing what the thing had done to the guy on the beach, and, to a lesser extent, the guy in the Almerian desert, but it didn't come.

She was the mother

Sila was the loopy dad

and from what she'd read in five of the seven different versions of the tale

both parents end up slaughtered at the back of the story

but maybe

maybe Sila was right and this was the demon from the other two, the nicer versions.

She looked down at the top of the girl's head, the smoothness of her hair, and muttered, 'gods Danish mistake.'

Then went back to the notes.

~~~

It was almost 4am and the creature still wouldn't power down.

Constant scanning, non-stop, barely perceptible blinking, even though the room was dark and nothing was happening.

'Don't you need to sleep?' she asked, actually looking up the Danish for it.

'... ..' it replied, soft as a real child.

Then returned to staring.

Minus the purple tint.

Joanna tried turning on her side but it was pointless, she could feel the thing fixed on.

Never turn your back on a child demon, the website had told her. Especially Danish and Mongolian ones.

Okay it was a WordPress site, with *WordPress* still in the domain name, which meant whoever wrote it was too amateur to pay \$17 to make it look like they were an authority on the subject

not that such a tactic would fool Joanna cos she'd also had a WordPress site once upon a time

a secret site for her and Yute Long

password in-house

so that when they were apart, for whatever reason, they could log on and post notes and-

The bulb above the bed stuttered fairy-lite

three times

before correcting itself.

She turned back and faced the ceiling, holding *The Book And The Sword* as a *Ming-Chiu* shield above her face.

'*The Emperor stared at the Fragrant Princess and laughed, a maniacal laugh. 'Your precious love has left you. Left you to me.'*

She could see the Søren thing looking at her from the wings. What was going on inside that head? What did demons usually think about?

Were they really chained to their own myth narrative as much as those myths claimed or did humans just read the myths so many times that they couldn't help but become one dimensional?

It was a valid thought, but one she did not know the Danish translation for.

[www.danishmonogatari.wordpress.com](http://www.danishmonogatari.wordpress.com) might've had the answer, but her phone was on the far table and she was too lazy to get up and grab it.

Her notes were closer, maybe she should look at those again.

Or maybe she should wake Sila up and

do what?

The idiot was stuck in his *Silas Marner* fantasy, he wouldn't listen to anything, or be on her side, even in a token way.

No, this was it.

Sevilla was a dungeon, with invisible bars.

Lisboa a future morgue.

Ljubljana...nothing.

Gone.

A drunken *Sevilla motherfuckers!* broke out in the common room, followed by *quiet Dari*.

Then a door closing.

Then silence.

She forced in a few more pages of Gum Yong, the fragrant princess weeping and accepting her fate then, with curtain contrivance, overhearing the emperor's plot against her lover, who she hadn't even kissed yet let alone fucked, and then trying between tears to figure out a way to warn him.

It was a tedious chapter, the princess too weak, too naïve, and everyone knew the emperor couldn't be killed as he'd survived in real history

like all midget tyrants

dead in a bed, no regrets, harem for him, death mask for tricky wives, for his enemies, for types like Yute Long and

others she'd known once upon a time

back in Hong Kong

intermittently good people.

Joanna yawned out into a full-on battle cry, looked at the thing in the tiny girl costume, tidally locked, told it to go to sleep in Cantonese, picked up her notes, skipped point one and point three and thought

after all this time

all this distance

can I really, physically go back there

ever?



Character-wise

Sila hoped the student wouldn't be tetchy, wouldn't say *what* with disgust, wouldn't feel ill if a textbook wasn't on the table when they arrived, and

most of all

wouldn't over-laugh at every word he said.

Situation-wise,

he just prayed Joanna could keep Søren distracted for the next ninety minutes, stop her from coming over and rubbing against his arm.

There was a decent chance - they'd discovered that morning that she liked sketching, or liked observing Joanna sketching, yet there was no way to tell how long the fascination would last.

And sitting in a non-Starbucks cafe, with about forty people around them, some of them low-tolerance tourists, it would be impossible to cover up the mess if she did start biting again. Ja, he had mitigated things slightly by parking them in the corner, with only the table to the left occupied, but still...

'Your student is late,' said Joanna, looking up from her *Mega Man* sketch, and then diving straight back down again as a tall bearded guy appeared with unsure-signal hand and asked Sila if he was Sila.

'Yup, that's me. Eros?'

The guy, Eros, nodded, said hi and sat down, pulled out a *One Piece* notebook and said hi again. Then looked left at Joanna in her *hopping zombie t-*



shirt and the blank little girl in the sweater with a blank cat cartoon [bought in Valencia to supplement the blood-stained *Cool Spot* top].

‘They’re with me,’ explained Sila, deciding honesty was the less awkward way forward. ‘They don’t speak much English though. The girl, zero...doesn’t speak any.’

Eros clearly had reflex questions – how do you communicate? Is she your daughter? Why does she look not at all Chinese? What’s with the surgical mask? Is she contagious? Could you tell her to stop staring at me? – but wasn’t equipped or blunt enough to ask any of them, so he opened his notebook and waited for the teacher to start his opening spiel

which was instantly nixed,

as Sila went with, ‘what exactly do you want to learn in these lessons?’ instead.

‘Err...it is not so normal, but...my new girlfriend, she is from Sweden. I want to communicate with her, but...it is not so easy. She cannot learn Spanish now, I do not speak Swedish. So...we speak English together, but...I cannot speak to her everything...I want to say.’

Sila gave out an ‘ahhh’ and shot Joanna a warning look as he nudged the little blonde head back towards her *Heat Man* sketch.

‘We should focus on things you have in common then.’

‘Sí...yes. I think so.’

‘Topics you can actually talk about.’

‘Sí. Topics.’

‘Maybe Spain, Swedish culture, movies, other cultures.’ Sila flinched as the blonde hair came back to his arm, nestling in. ‘Rules of a relationship...’

‘Sí. Rules...’

‘...taking care of a pet, stuff like that.’

‘Sí,’ said Eros, yet again, but

nothing from Joanna

not even a smirk or a muttered *fuck off* in Cantonese.

‘Okay. Shall we start with Spain?’

The rest of the lesson was scattershot in terms of the number of times Sila had to glare across the table and silently wring out another sketch from Joanna

who seemed to be strapped to a cosmic string tied to her phone, constantly dropping the pencil and swiping the screen and muttering things in Cantonese.

Gods, if she wasn't gonna draw, then she could at least pick up the Danish-Spanish dictionary and try to talk to their daughter.

Luckily, Eros was too entrenched in trying to understand British film slang to notice the other side of the table, and, even luckier, was the fact that ninety minutes passed without the girl taking offence at anything or feeling viciously protective of her makeshift parents.

'One down, two to go,' Sila said, pulling out the lesson material on *Stereotypes* that he'd printed at the hostel the night before. 'You got any replies yet?'

'None asexual,' replied Joanna, eyes on her phone again, completely unbothered that Søren was slumped on Sila's shoulder for the seven hundredth time.

'What?'

'You can guess.'

'Ja, or you could just speak like a normal person. I assume you mean you got more messages from perverts. Ah, maybe it's better if you don't use a pic, renew your ad...'

She put down her phone and stood up, telling Sila that she was gonna walk around outside.

'You can't...my next student...'

'Back in an hour.'

'...will be here soon. Jo? Wait, you have to-...'

Sila held the rest of his line under water, realising quickly that her back wasn't listening to him, and his next student, a girl called Renee, was probably the same person advancing toward the table, half her body tilted diagonally left as she mouthed, 'Sila?'

~~~

One guy, one stranger and a demon child caught up in an English lesson shouldn't have worked, but somehow it did, with Renee either not caring or finding it mundane that a private English teacher would bring a mute daughter in a surgical mask to work, and Søren herself content to sit still and trace over Joanna's already drawn pics

for two hours

no strops or rogue biting

no glances at the door to see if Joanna was coming back, perhaps even deciding on some pragmatic level that the new woman was an adequate replacement, that

as long as Sila was the constant

things were acceptable

in whatever passed for Danish demon protocol

old Danish, not new.

Even when Renee got up and left, and it was just the two of them, she seemed pacified

no, more than that

oblivious

not even looking up from the sketch book.

Does she know I'm not going anywhere, wondered Sila, taking out his phone and typing a *where the fuck are you?* message to the Chinese adventurer.

How would she though?

We can't communicate, her body language compass seems way off, she's bitten people, why would she think I wouldn't try to run away from her?

In a cue perhaps fed to her by a hidden Prince Taob, Søren stopped her sketch and looked up, first at Sila, then at the door as it opened and Joanna walked back in.

'... ..' the demon said, pointing at the sketch pad.

'What did she say?' asked Joanna, putting a plastic bag of what looked like herbal tea packets on her previous seat, then picking them up almost immediately and handing them over to Sila.

'Don't know.'

'Looks like she's been busy drawing. Messing up my pictures.'

'Where have you been?'

'Ah, doesn't matter, they weren't that good anyway. And it means she's not biting anyone. Right?'

'She's been good.'

'No weirdness at all?'

'Actually, she got on quite well with the student I just had. Probably cos she smiled at her.'

'You should've asked her to adopt then.'

'Funny.'

Joanna sat down a few inches to the side of the table, not too close to Søren, then shifted closer when the girl failed to look up at her. 'Her sketches are pretty bad.'

'Kept her busy for two hours.'

'When's your next student?'

'About ten minutes.' Sila checked the door, and corrected when he saw a woman with incredibly short yellow hotpants holding a hand up at him. 'Or zero minutes. Miriam?'

Joanna followed the sound to the local woman who looked like she'd just come from a porn set, then edited to Mong Kok or Kwai Fong as the pants weren't that short and her top didn't hang down as she took her seat and asked Sila if she was in the right place.

Ah, Kwai Fong, Mong Kok

with a bit of luck and tactical engineering, she could be back there in a week or so, maybe less than that based on what Sila said about the demon getting lost in the sketch pad.

If they could give her a big enough picture to trace, and perhaps make some life-like dummies to sit nearby then-

'... ..' interrupted Søren, maskless, putting her teeth lightly into Joanna's shoulder.

No force behind it, but enough to make her flinch

push her off

scold in Cantonese

then take her hand fast when she saw the purple eyes flare up with a nova motif.

'You want me to draw another pic?' she asked, pulling the mask back up around her ears.

The girl's pupils dimmed, colour fading.

'Okay. Give me the pencil. See if I can do a good Dr Wily.'

'... ..'

'Mega Man bad guy. Secret alien.'

'... ..'

'Never mind.'

~~~

Two hours and ten minutes later, the hotpants got up and told Sila she'd be free the next day at the same time, and if he could come up with some poker-related things for her boss to say to Jungle Man Cates at next month's Cyprus Tournament, that would be great.

Then she was gone, and Sila was left to google the boss and laugh when he saw that it was the Spanish Games that he'd won a bronze medal at, not the Olympics, and, when Joanna asked if that sex woman was insane, he laughed again and said, 'not her, but the boss definitely is.'

'You believe her?'

'Of course. The story was way too detailed.'

'The best liars use the broadest, most obscure tapestry.'

'Is that a Chinese quote?'

'Pakistani. My high school friend told it to me. Said the poet died after throwing themselves off a fertility totem.'

'Err...'

Joanna yawned, closing the sketch pad. 'It's evening already. We should get out of here, find dinner.'

'The three of us...'

'Of course, I'm not a psychopath.'

'Huh?'

She picked up the bag of herbal tea and offered her other hand to Søren. 'Come on, before she gets bored and bites someone.'

~~~

As with most of Spain around dinner time, Sevilla was akin to a haunted giallo set, and didn't perk up until eight-thirty, nine, when the locals came out to do what their ancestors had done, what all ancestors should've done to be fair as night was by far the best time

beyond a simple witching hour

more like a witching that a real witch pined after but failed to ever actualise

the echo-drift between the two doors

of this realm and death

perhaps the same crack their blonde child had emerged from

perhaps not.

In fact, remembering the Copenhagen box origin of Søren, Joanna theorised out loud at the first tapas bar they stopped at, half its tables stocked with expats who got tired of saying *beer* in Spanish after one go, that perhaps the mythologies they'd looked at were inaccurate and

the one they had among them

Søren

was something else

a heterodox entity without text citations

or worse

something more generic.

'You mean a genuine human child with behavioural problems?' asked Sila, stacking up two slices of ham and stabbing.

'It would explain the sketching thing.'

'And nothing much else. I mean, she came all the way to Barcelona to find us. That's not very human. Or even possible...without some kind of preternatural radar in her head.'

The pink Brit couple on the next table glanced over, the man briefly flashing David Icke eyes at Sila's *Djinn of Qaldin* t-shirt before his wife told him it was most likely a movie they were talking about, not lizard people.

'Besides, it doesn't change anything. She's attached to us now, and if you're trying to find an excuse for dumping her at some mental hospital somewhere then...'

'Normal hospital would do.'

'... ..' the girl said, cutting off a *fucking Jesus* from Sila and pointing across the narrow street.

Both parents looked across, seeing nothing except a book shop and a long-legged South-East Asian woman in a green wig and white t-shirt propped up against the window, staring back at them.

'That's a bit creepy,' said Sila, focusing on the bookshop window.

'Looks Indonesian.'

'Yeah, Indonesian cosplayer.'

The green wig woman continued staring at them, without any kind of filter, her dark fingers stroking a presumed necklace, until something broke in her brain and she shifted - almost like a spasm or weird tripping motion - abruptly to the right, walking in an odd snaking path down the slowly curving street.

Both Sila and Joanna returned to the ham, trying and failing to pronounce the name of it when they prepped to order more, and then asking at pretty much the exact same time where Søren was.

Of course, Sila used her actual name

Joanna used *girl*

which was an improvement on *IT* and *Demon*

but the confusion was equal as they looked around the bar and the nearby street and half-panicked, half-rejoiced

when they saw no sign of a little blonde thing.

'Fuck...' said Sila, going all in on frantic nihilism, getting up on his stool and scanning the distance, shouting at the bar staff to back off, then jumping down onto the tiling and screaming *fuuuuuck* when he caught sight of her about fifty metres down the street.

'You see her?'

'Down there, she's stopped...' Sila started off, then darted back and slapped down a twenty Euro note on the table. 'Come on, can't let her get away.'

Get up, turn the other way, walk, Joanna commanded herself. *Check out of the hostel, find somewhere near the airport, lock the doors, leave.*

But her legs clearly didn't share such clarity as they were off after Sila, following his trail past the tourists loudly complaining about the heat and how narrow the streets were, past a small, out-of-place church, past a local fanning her dog, each step a retreat to their inevitable doom at the hands of

something that would give no warning, no sympathy when it finally turned on them

though it was weird how she'd suddenly walked off
without any attempt at dragging them too
not the typical way she-

~~~

Fourteen streets later, in a less touristy part of the city, Joanna caught up to Sila outside a restaurant-stroke-bar called *Mate De Neptuno*, and asked him direct if they should take the chance and just get out of there.

'She's inside...'

'Train or plane, either one is okay.'

'...with her mask off.'

'Maybe train.'

'That green wig woman, I think she did it.' He pointed into the dimly-lit bar, at the green wig woman swinging a necklace back and forth, not quite in front of Søren's face, but not far from it. 'Some kind of hypnotism maybe.'

'Good, then she's done us a favour...'

'What?'

'...a huge one. Let's get out of here before it wears off.'

'Serious? You're allowing some cosplay nut to just kidnap her?'

'Sila...'

'From right in front of us, as if we wouldn't do anything?'

'It's not-...'

'Our own fucking daughter?'

Joanna pushed back against the wall, covering up graffiti that said *WHY PERSIST SO PERSISTENTLY?* in block Spanish. If she opened her mouth, she knew how the next ten minutes would go. What else could happen when you had a guy with a bizarro adoption fantasy? Seemingly from out of nothing, but logically from something

a film perhaps, *Kramer vs Kramer*



or he was adopted himself?

Or more perverse than that, a need to be close to something demonic, something more than this world was able to bleed out, a conduit that could lead him to the glowing green cabinet and his imaginary Dark Professor.

She had no idea, but probably the latter.

'I'm going in there,' said Sila, putting up his hood and stepping towards the entrance, then dropping it back down when he saw a patron at the bar staring in bemusement. 'You do what you want.'

*'Ho mo liu...'*

'Ja, you too.'

Joanna shifted left but stayed stuck to the graffiti, using her position to spy on Sila's progress. It wasn't a completely deserted bar, or street, so there was unlikely to be any direct violence, but looking in at the scene, the way the green wig woman was dangling that necklace, it didn't seem like diplomacy would do much either.

Or perhaps she was wrong?

As soon as Sila appeared next to the girl, she straightened up and jerked her head right, a kind of ballerina spasm, and then reached out for his hand so desperate that she missed the first time and almost the second time too.

Not a psychopath, Joanna repeated to herself, pushing off the graffiti and sliding in through the open-door entrance with hands dug into the *Steaua Bucharest* jacket pockets.

Same as from the outside, the bar was dim and mostly desolate, until she passed the first table, at which point, the lights brightened to a slightly warmer shade, tribal rugs revealed themselves on the walls, and a couple more staff came out from the back, carrying plates of vegetables and wafer snacks.

'Are you the mother?' asked the green wig woman, sat with a bare arm on the back of her own personal couch, a giant matte painting of a castle with shock-blue Neptune backdrop on the wall behind her.

'Yes,' replied Sila, patting the stool next to him, hand turning pale from the grip of their demon child.

'Please, sit down,' the green wig woman said, gesturing to the same spot as Sila. 'Let us eat and talk about your little daughter here.'

'We're leaving,' said Joanna, clamping a firm hand on Sila's shoulder.

'Oo, later. If you like.'

'Now.'

The staff put the plates down on the low table and stepped back, the light hitting their faces and showing an odd purplish pallor, as well as masonic-looking icons tattooed on their necks.

Grinning at the selection, the green wig woman formed a triangle with thumbs and index fingers and again told Joanna to sit down.

'One drink only,' she said, giving in and shivering slightly as Søren's fingers slid through the gaps of her own.

'That is more than enough. Yet may not be. I am Celia, owner of this place, the front and the back.'

'And that necklace,' added Sila, breaking away from the triangle hands and focusing instead on the top of Søren's head.

'A family heirloom.'

'To hypnotise people?'

'Ah, directness...very good.'

'Why did you lead Søren here?' said Joanna, eyes on uncle Neptune in the background.

'That is what you call her?'

'He does.'

'But not you?'

Joanna dipped eyes down to the castle, her brain telling her to dip no lower, but her head vetoing and dipping anyway. The impassive face of Celia absorbed her, like a black hole tired of waiting for matter to drift in, and the eyes morphed purple.

It was a brief effect, punctured by a small hand covering Joanna's mouth and her nose and

forcing her to look right

down at a smaller set of lilac eyes, these ones sterilising, soothing, whispering to stay in the bar, stay anchored, do not drift into her castle or she'll-

'I feel I can be honest with you,' came from the green wig woman's lips, dark hands reaching for a glass of red liquid, pupils returning to their masked state. 'As the parents of this treasure, you are protected. In fact, I would go as

far as to say you are honoured guests. Which is not a typical thing for my kind to say to any human.'

'You're a demon?' asked Sila, putting his free hand on the glass of blue liquid nearby, stroking round its edges.

'In general terms, yes. Aswang, if you wish to be specific, though you might not know this name.'

'Vampire.'

'From the Philippines,' added Joanna, remembering Sila's *Okay Aswang* t-shirt.

'Ah, *Buzzfeed* and its many lists. I assume that's where you know me from?'

'Not exactly,' replied Sila, eyes on the demon's necklace.

'Ah, film then. *The Aswang Chronicles*?'

'No.'

'*Vampariah*?'

'No.'

'*Maria Labo*?'

'I've never heard of any of these.'

'Then where?'

'He has a t-shirt,' cut in Joanna, finally remembering what *Buzzfeed* was. 'Says *Okay Aswang* on it. With a picture that doesn't look like you.'

'Ah...commerce.'

Sila cleared his throat, swirling the blue liquid. 'We've had personal experience with demons...many kinds.'

'Hmm. Including this one here, obviously.'

'She is not a demon...' He coughed again, flinching at a stray glint of light from the aswang's necklace. 'She's our daughter.'

'Oo...I can see that.'

'Not available for kidnapping.'

Celia interrupted a sip of blood wine to laugh, but stopped quickly when she saw Joanna's lack of reaction.

'You seem quite Hungarian.'

'No...'

'Though you are clearly Chinese. And not possessed either, I don't think.'

'Why did you lead us here?'

'Please, no more interrogations. Let us eat and drink, enjoy each other's company. Perhaps talk about futurism. It is a topic I am very interested in. Especially the Italian iteration. Do you know of it?'

Joanna opened her mouth to repeat the question, and perhaps add *fuck Italian futurism, what about the new robber barons*, but her hand was gripped tighter and

for the first time since they'd taken her from the box

Søren spoke in English

whispering one wraith-like word to both her parents:

'Stay.'



'...Khlebnikov stripped it all but in the end stripped nothing, and that's the real sadness of the endeavour, my viewing of it, at least, or perhaps not real sadness as real sadness came later with the schism of Hylea, whatever spelling you choose, and not state executions but self-executions, a retreat into other movements, Surrealism, Breton's cocoon, Bataille's bizarro sacrifice ring, but I don't feel that sad about it now actually as I'm in futurism concrete, not tied to death in the human sense, which I shouldn't say so loud when our doors are open the way they are, but in English, perhaps okay. No, don't look like that, *barkada*, I'm not a monster, your blood is uninteresting to me, I swear, this place has a licence, can't just go around eating people like the old days, gestalt days of Khlebnikov and Martinelli...sorry, Marinetti...I always get that mixed up, not sure why, but...there it is...other visions, parts, Mongolian futurism, 1928 to 34, fixated on Neptune and its alien blue hue, Ghanaian futurism, 1952 to 59, a hippy dream to colonise asteroids in the Oort Cloud, Tanzanian futurism, lion's share of the 80's, let's all drift through the heliosphere in communal pods and write zaum poetry, Philippine Futurism, 1998-9, a short affair obsessed with Sun Rooms and psychological counter-language plus suffering, a retching of the Id, however you write it, obviously lasted as long as its main propagandists who...no, I didn't know them...all starved to death in their own Sun Rooms, and other futurisms, my futurism right now, the inter-locking of other myths and so-called demons and selected humans with an open mind and...fuck, I think I've been drinking too much...should slow down a yard...go back to Khlebnikov the progenitor...or was it Martinelli...Marinetti...who started things...maybe Fourier...'

In sum total

both Joanna and Sila knew the terms *Russian* and *Futurism*, had vague associations with the word *zaum*, but the rest of it was a complete wash and

commenting or responding to the talkative, green-wigged aswang with ridiculously good English would be a waste of time, and a distraction from the fact that she'd lured them to her dimly-lit bar with almost no other customers and then proceeded to get slowly drunk in front of them

or pseudo-drunk, thought Sila

*ban joi*, thought Joanna

a Napoleonic method to strip their mind from defence and into something meta-physical, philosophical, whichever one was more appropriate. This sense ossified further as, the more unfamiliar words that were thrown at them, the greater the urge to butt in and say, fuck Khlebennikov, what is your plan here, why the luring, and eventually, Joanna did intervene, using the sudden buzzing of the overhead green bulb as the cut-in point.

'That old *Katmon*...' replied Celia to a blank, Chinese face.

'You have a strong interest in the girl?'

'Søren,' corrected Sila, looking at the blonde child with a gestured apology for her mother's error.

Didn't matter much, Søren was far more curious about Celia's hands, running a nail down the side of her no brand, white t-shirt and across to the dark skin at the end.

'Okay, *barkada*...it's been over an hour, and you've been fed. I will tell you. As direct as I can. Though being completely honest with humans is always difficult...mostly for the facial reactions...when I see that, the anxiety builds and-...'

'Direct is fine,' said Joanna, glancing towards the counter, at the two male staff who may or may not have been aswang comrades. Didn't look like it, but they were South-East Asian, possibly another type of demon, out for revenge against Chinese colonisers.

'No one more direct than her,' added Sila, patting Joanna on the sleeve of his own Steaua Bucharest top. 'Most of the time.'

Celia coughed, an utterly artificial sound, and took Søren's hand, either out of comradeship or to stop her from stroking so much. 'As short as I can make it, the girl...this being...has a connection to us. Me, those two at the bar, others in the back rooms. And we, in turn, have a connection to her. That is why she trailed me here. It is also why, fate willing, she will choose to stay.'

'Not a chance,' blurted out Sila, hand still on Joanna's sleeve, almost tearing it off.

'It is very unlikely,' amended Joanna, pulling her arm away. 'From our experience, if we leave this place, she will follow us out.'

Celia let out a kind of clucking sound and refilled her glass with red. 'That is correct...generally...but not for the next hour or two. You see, her sensory field has been overwhelmed by the proximity to all of us other demons at the bar here.' She paused, looking irritated at the liquid in her glass. 'Wah, bad sentence. I mean, she is currently fixated on us. To the exclusion of all else.'

'I don't believe you,' responded Sila, folding his arms.

'You may test it, *barkada*, if you like?'

'By walking out?'

'Oo.'

'Sorry?'

'Yes. Please, try it.'

The door to Mate De Neptuno was wide open, the street outside visible, yet there was no movement from the Slovene, apart from a dagger stare at the flickering green bulb above.

'How long exactly will your spell last?' asked Joanna, re-taking the reins, arms defiantly uncrossed.

'As I said, about two hours, possibly three. After that, something primeval will click inside her mind and she will switch back to tugging on your jacket sleeves...as if nothing has happened.'

'Good,' muttered Sila, smiling at Søren and getting the side of her cheek back in return.

Joanna concentrated on the same target, her thoughts in a different nebula entirely. 'Can we extend the spell?'

'What?'

'Make her stay with you permanently.'

Sila eyes went comet-like. 'Make her-...what are you on about?'

'Liberation. Peace.'

'We can't leave Søren here, she's-...'

'Not being surveyed 24/7.'

'It's not right.'

The Slovene dad unlatched his arms and shot up out of his sofa chair, moving round the side to Søren, holding out his hand. Then having it pushed away by Celia, who was so casual in the action that she sipped from her glass at the same time.

'You can't make her stay here, she's our daughter.'

Celia finished the drink in small bursts, waiting for Sila to power down a bit and, although he refused to return to his seat, he didn't make another run on the girl either. 'As I said, *barkada*, friend, another two hours and she'll be yours again. There is no way we can make her stay. Unless she chooses to do so herself.'

'Then we just sit here for two hours until the spell wears off,' said Sila, still not sitting down.

'That is the less entertaining option.'

'Meaning?'

Celia smiled at the two male staff, possibly demons, and then at her own glass. 'How about a tour behind the scenes?'

'What scenes?'

'Come, the four of us...before I empty this whole bottle.'

Taking Søren's hand, or letting her hand be taken, it wasn't exactly clear which, Celia rose without any arm assistance, any counter-weighting, and guided the little girl-being over to the counter.

'You're sure you can't extend the spell?' tried Joanna again, slotting in at the side and getting the attention of Søren, as well as the brief doubt that the demon may know more English than just the word *stay*.

'Better not be a trap,' said Sila, appearing on the other side of Celia, hand dangling close but shirking actual contact with the arm of his daughter-myth.

'Let's not dwell on such negative thoughts.'

'Where exactly are we going?'

'Utopian Socialism, *barkada*.'

'Huh?'

'The green door, this way.'

~~~


The back rooms were a lie, a signifier leading both Sila and Joanna in Slovene and Chinese to imagine gamblers smoking or bored staff looking at their phone and smoking

but there was only one room, that led down to the basement, with a green door and a Prospero-style lock, which in turn took them to a system of caverns and tunnels, punctuated by other coloured doors, some with plaques stamped on in English and Spanish, at least one in each tunnel, and

finally

with Søren's hand still locked tight in Celia's, and Sila hovering like a sales assistant nearby

Joanna a few yards back

they reached a clearing that resembled the central chamber design for Fourier's Phalanstère, an unintentional irony, Celia claimed, which, now that she said it out loud, may not have been so unintentional, after all.

'Not that I approve of Fourier, but on a smaller scale, for our type of community...'

She paused, allowing one of the staff from upstairs to drape a red and black spiral yukata over her shoulders, then pulled it in tight with her own hands. '... ..'

'How did you build all this?' asked Sila, taking a break from ticking off the minutes in his head to soak up the architecture, specifically the four-petal floor plan and the window nearby that had a sign claiming ARCHIVES.

'As with most grand designs, the skeleton was constructed originally by a royal lunatic. We just chipped at the edges, remodelled it here and there.'

'It looks like a commune...'

'That was the aim...'

There was a fevered tugging on her hand, forcing Celia to glance down, and then grin Mormon-like as she released her grip and let the girl-being wander off. 'It appears that she's intrigued.'

Intrigued?

Fuck.

Sila checked his phone and did the maths. An hour gone, one left. Give or take a lot of minutes.

'Does the Spanish Government know about this?' asked Joanna, watching Søren run a nail along the ARCHIVES window and bump into a blurry figure at the tail end. No, not blurry, smoky, made of smoke. At least partially...the shoulders, the hands...

'Don't be alarmed, they are a herbivore,' replied Celia, following the same scene. 'In fact, we are all herbivores down here, to a certain extent.'

'You don't need human blood?'

'If it's directed by Werner Herzog, maybe. But no, we don't depend on it for survival, nor seek it out for fun. The occasional draining of a rapist or serial killer to celebrate a special event or a birthday, that's the extent of our crimes. If you can call it such. Last poll I read said eighty per cent of the Spanish population thought it was okay for rapists to have their dick chopped off. That's not wholly dissimilar to the service we provide...now and then.'

Sila let out a staccato laugh, he couldn't help it, then quickly got the leash back on and followed Celia over to another window that said CONSIDERATION ROOM.

'I don't want to bore you by describing every shop, but this is one of my favourites.'

'Consideration...'

'We loop a projection of the Helix Nebula on the far wall and dim the lights, then play audio of theorised alien static. It's very soothing. And helps us to come to terms with our own longevity, which is obviously a lot more extensive than your...limited...human lifespan.'

'How long *do* you live?'

Celia peered in through the glass at a slender, tree-like figure sitting alone in the dark, the swirls and light dots of the Helix Nebula, as promised, on the far wall. 'Age tends to be reduced in the saying of it.'

'More than a thousand years?'

'Let's just say I've been around a while.'

'Not much of a clue.'

Celia pulled away from the glass and did a panoramic spin around the four-petal clearing. Then honed in on one specific tunnel to the left, watching as Søren shuffled toward its cavernous entrance, scraping at the walls, then disappeared inside.

'Søren ...' Sila shouted, taking half a step after her and getting tugged back gently by Celia's hand, which wasn't hand-shaped anymore.

'Fuck...' he eked out, reeling back. 'Where's she going? What's happened to your fingers?'

'It is their natural state. And don't fret about the girl-being, that tunnel loops back round the other side. She won't get lost.'

'Unless that's your plan...'

Celia stretched out the tips of her claws, or talons as they were quite long and bird-like, then scanned the area for the more pragmatic of the visiting pair.

No sign of her.

Odd.

The aswang herbivore left Sila by the CONSIDERATION ROOM and adjusted her position in a diagonal line until she saw Joanna sitting on a beanbag, with an ancient blueprint of the world in her hands.

'Admiring your old middle kingdom?' she asked, slumping down onto the beanbag next to her.

'I'm not an imperialist.'

'Ah, how refreshing. I've lost count of the number of humans who are anti-empire until it's their own country involved. Then it's, oh, not the same, we didn't have slaves, there was a tribute system, they wanted to join our country.'

'Does that include the Philippines?'

'No.'

'I see.'

She smiled, adjusting the hem of her yukata. 'Joking, *barkada*. Of course, it includes the Philippines. On a smaller hegemonic scale. You think they did not have kings and queens? Despots?'

'No idea.'

'Well, I suppose it all gets swallowed up by what the west did. What the West does. Sorry, mixed tenses. But if you really wanna know what happened, pre-Magellan...'

Joanna patched out, tracing the outline of 16th Century Ming Dynasty China and, by the time she got to the chicken's foot, she'd lost interest in history and the beanbag, but was too lazy to pull herself up

so she continued sitting there, listening to the aswang herbivore yap on about communalism and the future collectives in the Kuiper Belt and Oort Cloud, all the while watching Sila stare at the tunnel entrance on the other side, prodding at different ways to make him forget the demon child, to somehow let this creature and her cohorts enact whatever their hidden plan was and keep her there.

Off the top of her head, she guessed it would be a prison for them all, the two of them kept in relative comfort so the girl would stay too

but that wouldn't work cos the girl would protect them, attack any that tried to stop them leaving, which is what she was gonna do, as soon as she could conjure up enough Franju-level willpower to shed the beanbag costume.

'You are not attached to her so much,' said Celia, tracing a nail down one of the spirals on her yukata. 'Not like he is.'

'Does it matter?'

'It will when an hour passes and she doesn't leave.'

'What?'

'As I said, the girl has a connection to us. Now that she is in our back rooms, the spell will expand to a week.'

'What are you guys talking about?' asked Sila, coming over and stopping by Joanna's beanbag.

Celia took a breath then waved a claw at the demon with smoke-made limbs. And the two male staff from the bar upstairs, who now had lilac-tinted skin and stood propped up like wax figures by the tunnel on the right-hand side.

'What's going on?' semi-repeated Sila.

'Don't fret, *barkada*, it is just a precaution.'

'She's expanding the spell,' said Joanna, finally pushing herself off the beanbag.

'But...that's impossible. You said-...'. He turned to Celia, who for some reason was nodding instead of shaking her head. 'I knew it, this is a trap.'

Reaching with Kinski-face inside his *Old King Matjaž* hoodie, Sila whipped out the green dagger, then dropped it immediately and clutched his hand as if it'd just been chomped on.

Celia watched, still nodding. 'Sorry, no violence allowed in Phalanstère.'

'Fucking telepath...'

'Phalanstère defensive network, actually.'

'My hand...'

'What is your plan?' asked Joanna, kicking the dagger away as Sila tried to reach down and grab it again.

'Hey...'

'Do you intend to keep us here?'

Giving eyes and coded claw signals to her comrades, Celia got up off the beanbag and moved closer to Sila's dagger. Without any discernible flourish or hand wave, the blade rose up into the palm of her claw and did a promotion before sailing back over to Sila.

He grasped it tight on the handle, pointing it at Celia, the smoke thing, the purple staff...muttered *fucking telepath* a few more times...then self-deflated and asked in a ragged voice the same thing Joanna had.

'We really do intend you no harm. Our only interest is in our comrade, the girl-being.'

'Kidnapping her?'

'That is an unkind word, not in the spirit of my futurism. No, we do not kidnap anyone. I only use the word *spell* so you may understand on some level...but it is not a machinated thing. It is a natural bathing in comradeship. For one week. After that, it is up to the girl-being to confirm her direction. With us, her comrades, or with you, her forced programming.'

'Forced program-...'

There was a noise from the tunnel to the right, then the wraith-like emergence of Søren between the hips of the purple staff twins, her form, at first, faint and foreboding, then clear and comforting and ecstatic as her eyes hit the beanbags and

within seconds

her little body was over there too, falling on the red one Joanna had just abandoned.

'She will remain here for one week,' continued Celia, shifting herself between the girl-being and her programmed parents. 'You may come and visit as often as you wish, though it is unsafe for you to spend the night. Two of our comrades are nocturnal and quite out of their senses past the witching hour. But in the daytime, in the evening, that is fine.'

'How do we know you won't...'

The question died out on Sila's tongue as he watched Søren rolling around in small circles on the beanbag, completely oblivious to him or Joanna.

'You won't hurt her,' he said instead, more a statement of fact than a query.

'Never.'

Sila drifted off again, questionless, confused, the ARCHIVES window floating into his brain and telling him, hey, might be some cabinet stuff in here, and who needs a kid anyway, she doesn't even speak English or Slovene, keeps getting in the way, sleeps in the middle of you and Joanna and

don't you want that

you and her

spliced together

something real instead of all this cabinet sh-

'We'll be back tomorrow,' he announced abruptly, taking Joanna's hand and gripping it tight until she nodded in agreement.

'Very well.'

'In the morning. Very early.'

'Any time you wish.'

'Not that early,' edited Joanna, switching the grip so her hand was on top.

Celia made a triangle formation with her talons and gestured towards the green door exit. Then returned to the spare beanbag, stretching her legs out from the hem of the yukata until they were almost touching Søren's

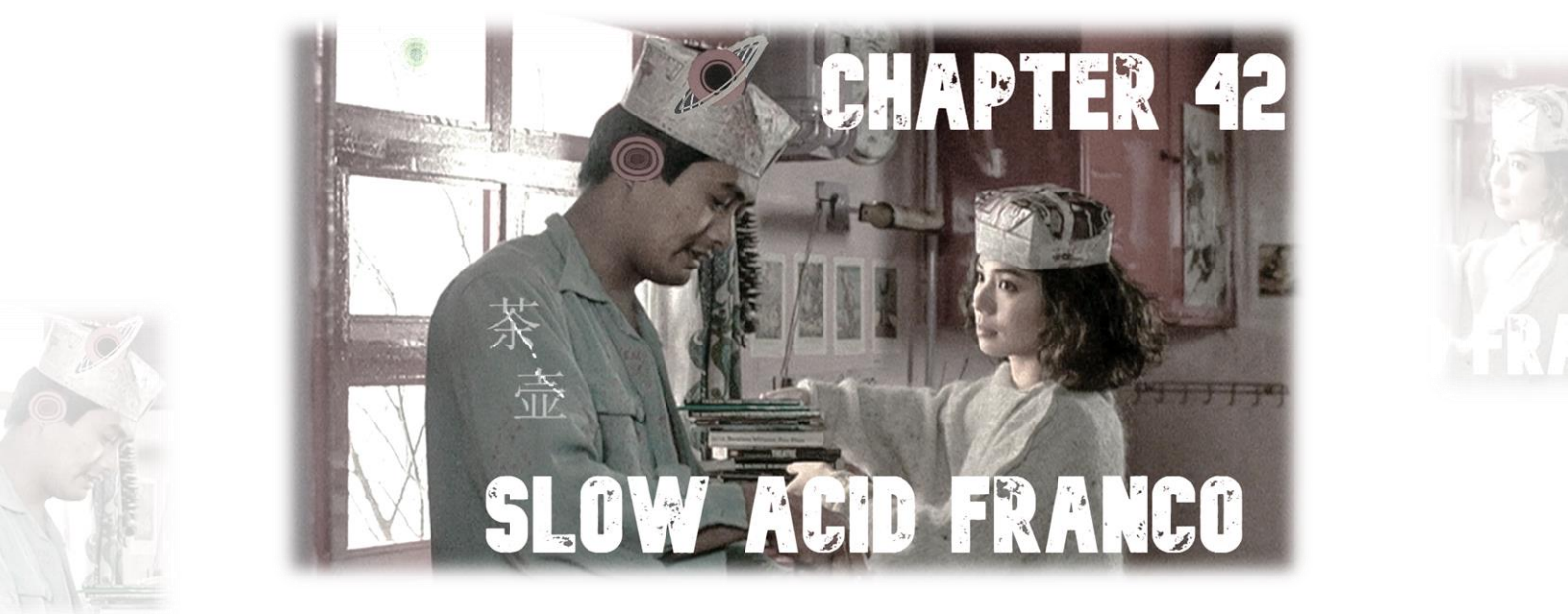
pushed a little further, connecting

making the girl-being flinch

pull back

and search out the retreating figures of Sila and Joanna, who seemed to sense it on some psycho-somatic level as both stopped halfway through the green door exit, and pivoted, just in time to hear Søren's second word in frazzled English:

'Tomorrow.'



A week of liberation, thought Joanna

should've started with hostel sex, followed by a bus ride to Lisboa, a proper attempt to put distance between them and what Sila the night before had referred to as their miracle daughter, not a Mandarin lesson with a local who couldn't even say *I*.

'War...'

'Try again.'

'War...'

'Wrong. Again.'

'Waaaarr...'

'Wrong.'

'Wah.'

'Okay, stop.'

On the neighbouring table, Sila may as well have been pool-side in the Maldives, or castle-deep in Brasov, with his student asking in pristine English if Slovene politics were as erratic as in Spain and then swerving into a rant on the legacy of Franco,

complete comfort

though looking at his face it was pretty clear he was mentally back at Mate De Neptuno, tugging on his miracle daughter's *blank cat* sweater sleeve, trying to tempt her back with promises of improved Danish and terrible people to bite chunks out of.

'We shouldn't go back tonight,' Joanna said after both students had left, one beaming, the other still muttering *waaar*. 'Give her a chance to miss us.'

'You mean forget us.'

'Either way, it's a good test.'

Sila put the Japanese mythology material he'd just used back in his bag and replaced it with a *LEARN DANISH IN 27 MINUTES* book, opening to a random page and mispronouncing the word for abstract.

'So we're not going?'

He glanced up, not at Joanna, but at the coffee cup with a smiling face on the wall. 'I wonder if she can make full sentences...'

'We are going?'

'Last night she said *tomorrow* again, but also *we meet* before it. Technically, that's a sentence. Yeah, of course, we're going. I need to test her, get to the bottom of this English thing. If she's secretly fluent...'

'She's not.'

'...then this opens up everything, our whole relationship. We can tell her not to bite people, break her programming as Celia called it. Not that I trust her. She lied about the spell being unextendible, could be lying about other things too.'

'Like being an aswang?'

'Did you hear the thing she said about that Durruti guy? All those books in the archives and she claims she never knew him. But then I look him up and he's a revolutionary, mysteriously shot in the 30's before Franco got in. Probably her who did it. And the way she avoids talking about the Philippines...or anything in the past...which is weird if you're an aswang, that should be all you ever talk about. Not Italian futurism or Russian or whatever it is she keeps lecturing us on...'

Joanna feigned a yawn, stared down at the fifty-seven different iterations of *I know how to* in Mandarin, then scrunched the paper into a death orb and chucked it in Sila's bag.

'I'm going back to the hostel,' she said, standing up.

'Huh? Now?'

'Not interested in Mate De Neptuno, so don't bother asking about that.'

'Our daughter? How about her?'

'Taking a break.'

'Serious?'

Joanna nodded at the cartoon coffee cup and then turned and made a lax run at the door

which wouldn't slide open for almost a minute

until a local girl appeared and pressed the button that said PUSH in Spanish

no hand icon

just PUSH.

~~~

Going back to the hostel alone posed no problem in theory, Sevilla wasn't all that dangerous, at least not the tourist parts, but sitting on the private dorm bed, halving time between the Gum Yong book and flights to Hong Kong, wondering if her family would still recognise her, fantasising about fucking Sila in front of her high school friends

or just fucking him in general, on the hostel bed, against the wall, up on the ceiling, without that blonde creature studying the gaps between their thighs, scraping at her-

No, none of it would be uplifting, and Sila would just moan about her non-appearance at the aswang cave when he got back so

there she was again

down in pseudo-Phalanstère, watching Sila ask Søren the same question over and over and over while the girl-wearing demon in the *blank cat* sweater patted down different parts of the cavern walls.

'How is the persuasion going?' asked Celia, a red spiral drifting into focus as she placed a soft claw on Joanna's shoulder.

'I told you, he won't go.'

'Did you show him the book I gave you?'

'Yes.'

'The pictures of the victims?'

'He said it was bias on the part of the artist. And that those people were probably murderers and paedophiles. And if they weren't, it was just her programming that made her do it, not desire. And about a hundred other excuses.'

Celia retracted the claw as Sila came over, the Slovene looking back over his shoulder several times as Søren went deeper into one of the tunnels, then muttering, 'she knows more, definitely.'

'It is better not to push at her secrets,' replied Celia, sucking at the carton of no sugar lemon juice that seemed to be her drink of choice underground.

'So she does speak English?'

'Pushing leads to unravelling leads to the end of the program. Which you certainly do not want.'

'She means the part where the demon kills us,' explained Joanna, itching the face of the cartoonish *Yuki Onna* on her hoodie...or the hoodie she'd taken from her travel partner's bag.

Sila glared back, framing the two women in one shot.

'Your girlfriend is correct. You should hope that she continues to feel attached to this place, and I mean that sincerely, for she will destroy you eventually. It is in her programming. Only her own kind can placate this force.'

'Not remould?'

Celia smiled, not at Sila, but a purple creature with one arm sitting on a beanbag nearby.

'My mum always said, never trust someone who smiles past you.'

'That seems oddly specific.'

'It's true. Just like the Dark Professor, everything you say is a manipulation of some kind. It's not even well-disguised. You're probably gonna lock the doors or something when the week is up. Or move location.'

'Dark Professor...' muttered Celia, turning her head past the purple thing and over to the Archives.

'A guy who hides in cabinets,' elaborated Joanna, ostensibly to the aswang but with eyes on the Slovene. 'Probably not real.'

'Ja, like the Krsnik...'

'How many places have you checked now? A hundred?'

'...or that ferry demon. Or our own daughter. Or this place, these guys.'

'Not even a loose hair left behind.'

Sila stepped forward Mabuse-style, opening his mouth to boast about the incident in Prague, then remembered the actual details of it, the grey tone of the blood, and let Celia's claws guide him back down.

'This Dark Professor sounds very familiar,' she said, pulling her yukata in tight, walking off towards the Archives. 'If you'll give me a few minutes, perhaps I can find something...'

'Wait, you know the Professor?' asked Sila, standing in cosmic stasis for a few moments before dogging her trail, while Joanna found a spare beanbag and sunk down, pretending that the purple thing next to her was a hallucination brought on by residual grey krsic withdrawals.

'... ..' it said, after a minute of blanking.

'Sorry, I'm tired.'

'... ..'

'Yeah.'

~~~

It turned out the Dark Professor's name was not only familiar, but on record, with Celia bringing out five different texts and dumping them on the imitation wood table.

According to four of the texts, he was a mythical djinn figure who liked to toy with mortals by playing games, but that had all been done via pre-industrial methods

and only in the Persian zone

which didn't work for Sila as his Dark Professor never spoke Farsi and didn't pull a pinched shock face when he saw Sila wasn't Iranian.

Book Five, however, was more up-to-date, with an entire section on one [theorised] Dark Professor of a nebulous realm who played a cabinet game with those cursed by obsessive tendencies.

'The modus operando...sorry, spelling error...of this Dark Professor is to appear in a vision, challenge the mortal to discover his human-like form in a specific cabinet, stab it with a green blade, and then promise a vague reward. Usually something metaphysical or abstract.'

Celia looked up, checking that she still had an audience, then pulled back a bit when she saw Sila was five inches from her face.

'Go on...'

'Okay, well...'. She returned to the book, finding her previous place with a talon nail. 'Oo, here comes the crux. The Dark Professor will hide once or

twice, for the spirit of the game, then sit back in his realm and watch as the mortal, his victim, exhausts themselves in the search for the right cabinet.'

'Bullshit. Who wrote this?'

'A Brazilian demon. 1987. After a visit to the Dark Professor's realm.'

'She met him?'

Celia closed the book and patted the blurb on the back. Surprisingly, there was no dust cloud. 'You may take this with you. Until the end of the week.'

'This can't be right. It's another trick.'

'Well, *barkada*, that is for you to discover. All I can say is that I knew this author, and she is not prone to lies. Quite a well-read futurist too...though a little too forgiving of the Russians. Even did a polemic on zaum once...probably still have it here somewhere, if I cared enough to hunt for it.'

Celia stopped, realising her audience was back in book five and utterly uninterested in what was to come

if anything

unless it was cabinet-shaped.

'I'll leave you to your research then,' she whispered, pulling in the sides of her spiral yukata and drifting back over to the exit.

~~~

After reading through the whole section, Sila returned the book to the green-wigged aswang mesmerist and asked her to fill in the gaps of all the Spanish he couldn't translate, which was roughly ninety-two per cent in total.

Laughing with a flick of her talon, Celia took the text and proceeded with a slow reveal.

Based on the last few pages, the Dark Professor grew bored of not hiding at all, so with fresher victims, he would set a deadline of five years and physically, tangibly conceal himself within a selected cabinet.

And that cabinet would stay in the same location, with him inside, even if the victim got close as there was no real danger, the Professor couldn't physically be killed by the green blade, and perhaps giving a reward wouldn't be the worst thing in the universe

better than just sitting alone in an empty realm

with the occasional stray popping by

and through his powers, he could expand the cabinet interior and make it into a fun palace, just like Celia's Phalanstère, and chill for five years, watch on covert psycho-waves as the victim inevitably targeted Romania, instead of his real hiding place, which

according to the list Celia gave him after the translation, along with a *Hiring Now* ad for an ESL Centre in Lisboa,

could very well be a derelict house five miles outside Sevilla

where an old Francophile used to live.

~~~

'Someone who likes French culture,' said Joanna back on the hostel bed, reading out the definition from her phone dictionary and frowning.

'I checked the location. There's a bus that drops near the house, not that far from here.'

'You're going now?'

'Of course. This could be it, the real one. If I leave now, I can get back in time for our Søren visit later. Hopefully, with a chastened Dark Professor in my pocket. Metaphorical pocket, before you say anything.'

Joanna put her phone on the bedside table and leaned across to Sila, who was sitting upright on his own pillow, lost in the cabinet void-scape.

Her first thought was, touch his leg, but that was too forgiving, so she hit him on the back of his hand instead.

'Don't go yet,' she said, sliding closer and hitting him again, this time on the shoulder.

'You can come too, if you want?'

'No.'

'Just no backseat negativity. Okay, don't come, stay here. I'll be back around six...hopefully.'

'... ..'

'What?'

'You are a bird with no feet.'

'Ah, haven't heard that in a while.'

'Yes. Cos you haven't been searching for cabinets recently.'

'True.'

'Which is a good thing.'

'What, the cabinets?'

Joanna grunted in Cantonese, adding a less kind idiom, then climbed over and up onto Sila's lap and flicked at his cheek.

It took a minute

longer than she'd thought considering cabinets couldn't be fucked

but there was still something there

a spark or a thirst

a comfort blanket

something beyond what he

~~~

Wrapping the cum tissue in another tissue, Sila scrunched it up into one big atom prop and dropped it on the floor, telling a naked Joanna on the bed that he'd deal with it when he left.

'You're still going?'

He crawled back onto the mattress and put his head down on her stomach. Ran a finger down between the thighs. Laughed when she closed up shop.

'You know, that's the...what? Third time we've done it. Or is it the fourth?'

'Third,' she replied, checking the window again to see if a tiny demon face was peeking through the gap in the curtains.

'Three times...over three months. Intense.'

'Better than opening cabinets.'

Sila frowned, then laughed, then moved his way upwards, nudging her leg aside with his knee.

'You want to?' he asked, as she moved her right hand down, flicking the tip of his dick.

'Slower this time,' she said, closing her eyes.

~~~

Dropping another ball of rolled-up tissue on the floor, Sila turned to Joanna and said he'd better get going if he was gonna make it back in time for the Søren visit.

'Or we could skip it entirely.'

'Can't do that, she's expecting us.'

'I doubt it.'

'And we can't let Celia get too much alone time with her. She's up to something, I know she is...permanent hijack...hypnosis...'

'Saving us.'

'...probably tailoring a little yukata for Søren as we speak. What?'

Joanna rolled up her own tissue, then dropped it on Sila's pillow. Then climbed off the bed and fished around for her *hopping zombie* t-shirt.

'Okay,' continued Sila, stepping out of the way. 'You may not care, but I'm going. To the cabinet *and* Mate De Neptuno.'

'Of course.'

'But you do care really. Or you will when she's not here for more than a day. And you get tired of us fucking. Start getting stropo again. Which is fine, I don't want an argument...I'm used to it, you're used to me...but it's gonna happen...the missing part. Guaranteed.'

T-shirt sliding down over her chest, Joanna picked up her phone and flicked through the open tabs until she got to the flights page. After a few seconds of hesitation, she held it out in front of Sila, asking if he wanted to come too.

'What the fuck's this? Hong Kong?'

'We can fly from Lisboa. Together. If you want to.'

Sila took the phone and double-checked, frowning when he saw the details. 'This date is yesterday.'

'Any time is okay.'

'You mean...you were planning this before? When Søren was with us?'

'It's just a search.'

'Wah, it's only one seat.'

'Open to change.'

Sila muttered something in Slovene, then actually processed the line he'd been given and laughed. Then stopped abruptly and tossed the phone on the mattress.

'I'm getting the bus. Back around six.'

'For a romantic dinner?'

'Yeah, at Mate De Neptuno. To make our daughter think that we still give a shit.'

Joanna sank back onto the bed, vaguely rubbing circles on the *hopping zombie* face as Sila picked up his bag and walked out the door without closing it properly

or picking up his cum tissues.

'... ..' Joanna whispered in Cantonese, kicking at the little pile with her bare foot.

~~~

On the bus over to the outskirts of Sevilla, Sila made a token attempt to take in the scenery, and token was the right word as his mind was off in the swirls of unknown space, intercutting scenes of Søren pawing at his hand with Celia in amazon-size green wig under a giant Neptune painting

streaks of grey blood dripping out of a cabinet with shots of his dick pushing in and out of Joanna's cunt

both of them watching it and saying ludicrous lines

like *it's going in* and *I'm fucking your cunt* and *I love fucking doing this to you*

reflex edit to *I love doing this with you*

chased by frenzied Cantonese

probably fuck me better, harder

in Hong Kong

with Søren trawling through the Indian Ocean

abandoned by shit parents



who couldn't even be bothered to learn Danish or save her from dogged aswangs and

then he was on a road with almost no houses, a field of unnameable crops opposite, and next to that, the house with a number matching the one Celia had given him.

The Francophile, dead but with a surviving cabinet.

Walking around the side into blades of ten feet grass that may have been a garden in Franco's reign, and spider webs in the kitchen doorway, Sila knocked on the frame and shouted out a polite *hola*, then, with no response negative or positive, continued in, making his way past sleeping rats and furniture that looked like it had shed skin a dozen times, the under layer stained and torn and

up in the main bedroom was a single bed, a crucifix on the wall above it and a dark walnut cabinet opposite.

'Professor...' Sila whispered, taking out his green dagger and moving forward then stopping and looking at the dagger and thinking, is this right, do I normally hold it this way?

Things seemed oblique

if that was the word

unclear, hazy, uncertain, vague, cos it had been so long since he'd done this that it felt weird

like he was phased into a rerun of himself

a phantom

doing something that seemed important, yet-

He blinked, then blinked again, realising that he'd already opened the cabinet door.

Inside were ridiculous things.

Love scrawls to Franco, photoshopped pics of the shithead tyrant's head on male porn star bodies, with a woman's unsmiling face attached to the other and

was this a joke?

An aswang version of that Japanese ghost in the shower prank?

'Fucking Francophile...' he muttered, stabbing the tyrant's paper face with the green knife, then sliding it back inside his *Matjaž* hoodie and walking out of the wrecked house, getting the bus into Sevilla, picking Joanna up without a word, settling down on the couch of Mate De Neptuno and watching

without intervention as Celia, in her yukata, sketched funny cartoon pictures with Søren, in her *blank cat* sweater, their two heads propped diagonally against each other with no biting or reticence or anything remotely problematic.

She'll notice us soon, he told himself, as the time ticked by and his drink got lower. She'll look up and say a new word in English, peel off another layer,

but it didn't happen and

by the time his second glass was done

and Joanna's third

he thought, maybe it is a good thing. Leaving for a day or two. Making her miss us. Going to Hong Kong. Forcing a challenge out of it.

His eyes shifted up towards the matte painting of Neptune, the tiny moon base that he hadn't noticed before, and silently asked it for confirmation.

Yes, it transmitted. Go. Challenge.

Okay then.

Going.

'Let's leave,' he said, turning to Joanna.

'Already?'

'I'm tired. Struggling to keep my eyes open.'

'Err...okay. Me too.'

'We'll be back at the end of the week.' He said it to Celia, Søren and the blue gas giant, getting a reaction from none of them. 'Probably.'

Then his hand was in Joanna's and they were both walking out of the dimly lit demon bar onto the narrow streets of not having to think about raising a non-human and

weirdly

Joanna was the one to look back, just to see if Søren had reacted in any way.

Nope.

Head still down.

But the aswang had, two human-like fingers grinding the necklace hanging down over the not at all Philippine yukata she was costumed in, eyes staring right back at Joanna, the mass within glistening with nebula purple.



With a bunch of drunk Portuguese guests screeching *I'm not Spanish* as a backdrop,

Sila sat down at the coffee-stained table

in the cold hostel kitchen

rubbed at the arm that he'd slept on funny the night before

and tried to read the Chinese on the carton with a substandard lemon pic. One word, lemon, obviously, but the rest of it

no idea

and even when Joanna intercepted his brainwaves and said *no sugar lemon tea*, there was no flinch or tut or bite back in raw Slovene, just a concentrated shift to the stairs leading down to the hostel entrance.

'Staring will definitely make it happen,' said Joanna, sucking the carton into disrepair then throwing the remains towards the bin [and missing]. Irritated, she got up and corrected the mistake, saying no to the Portuguese guy trying to hand her a tambourine.

On the couches, in the adjoining communal zone, the rest of the drunks stopped singing. For four seconds. Then started up with a new song, this one in more advanced Portuguese.

Joanna gave it one line before muttering, '*vai, vai, vai, vai, vai, vai,*' and heading back to her seat.

Sila was still stuck to the stairs, mesmerised.

'You need a telescope?' she tried, unsure of her own line.

No response.

'Okay. No telescope.'

Eyes half hazed, Joanna turned and stared at the *Santa Sangre* poster on the wall for a good seven minutes, mind shifting in soft moves between the film and the director, the setting and a flight back home, family and insanity, a cartoon duck she used to find funny when she was small, that same duck with blood on its beak as a tiny blonde girl bit a human finger off, smiling, in a simulacrum of an adoption office, which in her logical mind she knew was just the façade of immigration.

The poster lost her, replaced by the *Vacas* print next to it. Then the *Basket Case* art. Then the staircase, and the thought of what might come up.

That wasn't coming up.

That might still come up.

If the green-wigged aswang had miscalculated in some way.

'It's those caverns,' said Sila, turning to examine the palm of his hand. 'Some kind of dark magic in there.'

'And the rest of it.'

'Soon as her finger touched the wall, she stopped noticing us. Didn't hold our hand so much. Nah, the other stuff is just decoration. The caverns are the thing...to catch the conscience of the...whatever Celia is.'

'Well, we are not caverns.'

Sila chuckled, turning it into a cough. For the seven hundredth time. Phased it out. Muttered in Slovene. Got up and took his cup to the sink, refilled with apparently safe water, and sat back down. Rubbed at the nebulous pain in his arm. Stared at his palm again.

Joanna stared at the same thing, what she thought was the life line, and coughed. 'If I tell you we should go to the bus station tomorrow, will you look like a Russian again?'

A nod in response, followed by a repeat of *go to the bus station*.

'Now that it's just us...'

'Yeah.'

Joanna paused, at the same time as the background singing. 'You agree?'

'Room booking ends tomorrow.'

'We're not going to extend?'

‘For a few more English lessons? And whatever you’re doing with those Mandarin learners. Nah, I think we’re done here.’ He looked up from the study of his own palm, smirking. ‘No more Madonna dream.’

Joanna nodded, moving her hand to grab at a lemon tea carton that wasn’t there.

‘Besides, Lisboa is pretty decent. Borderline beautiful, actually. Everything has this kind of light pastel colour to it.’

‘And the cabinets?’

Sila grunted, switching to the *Santa Sangre* poster.

‘Still on a break?’

‘I’m going back to the room. Pack for tomorrow.’

‘Okay.’

‘Maybe watch an episode of *Trek*. The space station one. See if it can distract me for a bit. You staying here?’

Joanna held up the Gum Yong book, its cover Chinese and inscrutable.

‘Keep one eye on the staircase then. Just in case.’

‘*Ming bah.*’

‘Huh?’

‘I will.’

~~~

An ep of *Trek* wasn’t the worst idea, if it had been the one where the Malkovian scientist leaves with the Enterprise at the end, or the one where Rom forms a union, or any Worf-centred hour,

but it wasn’t any of those

it was *The Visitor*, one he usually avoided cos it made him dig up things, incapacitated him, and

despite compensating with quick searches for *Lisboa pastel buildings very beautiful summer time*, Sila couldn’t block out the image of an aged Tony Todd in a blonde wig and under-sized *blank cat* sweater, telling Sila with a Sisko name badge that the bond had to be severed, and living in Celia’s Phalanstère wasn’t so bad, the walls were rough and ancient and

if you squinted hard enough

there could be a hundred demons around you, gregarious, sociable, instead of twenty-five mute ones.

It was still bleak, but not the bleakest

enough for Sila to accept for the ninth time that week that Søren would be okay where she was, without them, but

if they really were gonna leave her behind

then at the very least they should go and say goodbye, otherwise

what were they?

Cardassians?

~~~

Almost an hour beyond the *Trek* epiphany, and twenty-five minutes after he'd finally managed to sell the idea to a blank, tambourine holding Joanna, the two parents were back outside Mate De Neptuno, staring in at a deserted bar that couldn't possibly stay in business if every night were like this.

Unless of course, Celia had used her *longevity immortality won't die until the sun retracts* to stockpile enough wealth to keep it going

which was very possible

judging by the calm expression on her face as she sat on her usual sofa seat, bodyguarded by uncle Neptune above, either staring at the bicycle repair shop opposite or dust floating muon-sized on the Andalusian night air.

Walking in with both hands out of his *Matjaž* hoodie pockets, and wincing when the cramp pain in his arm started up again, Sila coughed awkwardly, crouched down in front of the aswang and pre-empted with, 'we're not here to cause trouble,' before moving into his Søren goodbye request.

Celia's eyes moved, a little to the left, but there were no accompanying words.

'We just want to say goodbye,' Sila added, performing a mock begging gesture, which broke almost instantly as the aswang yet again failed to respond.

'Two minutes only,' said Joanna, coming in from the other side, waving a hand in front of Celia's impassive face.

Nothing. No flicker of irritation, no flinch. No yukata either, which was a bit weird.

'I think she's in a trance.'

'Fine. We'll just go straight down.'

'You think the door will be open?'

Sila started walking, shaking his head at the deep red bulb above the counter, pushing through into the back room and wiping non-existent dust off the banister of the stairs as he went down.

Joanna caught up to him on the bottom step, saying that it didn't really need to be said but this whole thing was creepy and maybe it would be better if they just left a note, or one of their email addresses.

'If she's in the caverns...you go in one side, I'll take the other.'

'Not a good idea.'

'Use your phone as a torch.'

'And a weapon...'

'What?'

Joanna pulled out her phone and confirmed that, once again, there was no signal in underground Phalanstère, not for her at least, but the grey-skinned basketball player standing by the Archives, fingers gripped onto Søren's sweater sleeve, other hand typing something, their phone was okay.

Must be a local service, she thought, stepping back as Sila continued on, wondering if Søren would even notice they were there.

Or was the lighting too dim?

Compared to the deep red glow upstairs, it wasn't much different, but for some reason it was hard to make out the features on Søren's face,

just the blonde mat of hair cocooning it

blonde padding out a black hole

future murder tool

but not now, apparently, as Sila exchanged silent words with her, did a sesame street wave, very embarrassing, straightened out her blank cat sweater at the bottom, then backed off and watched as the miracle daughter returned to the far cavern wall

caressing something clearly more valuable

licking it

then retreating as a floating blonde wig into the shadows.

'Barely even looked at me,' Sila said about seven separate times, as they walked at half their original pace back up the stairs, through the main floor of Mate De Neptuno, and out onto the streets of Sevilla.

Nearby, two locals helped another guy to vomit next to a bin, three hip-hop girls competed against themselves in front of a shop window, the sky drifted pink and, behind them, Celia continued in her trance

fake human fingers on the necklace

glowing purple.

Joanna tugged on Sila's hoodie sleeve, telling him it was weird, but not that weird when you considered that she was an aswang.

'Wah...too hard,' he replied, rubbing his arm.

'It still hurts?'

'If you prod it, yeah.'

He kept rubbing, walking forward past the dancing girls, the vomiting local, then did a pivot and came back. Without disguise, he stared back into the Mate De Neptuno.

'She can't see you,' said Joanna, holding her position.

'That necklace...'

'Probably some kind of meditation.'

'My arm...'

'It'll be okay tomorrow. After some rest.'

'No, my arm. The whole time I was down there...no pain. Soon as I come back out...'

'You were distracted.'

'It's her...the necklace, some kind of trick. Has to be. Look at the eyes, her body...'

'We're not going back in.'

He turned, opened his mouth then gestured at his arm as if it really were key to something and headed back inside the bar.

Half-worried, mostly annoyed, Joanna followed.



The deep red lighting blinked unorthodox as the pair parked themselves in front of Celia again, Sila grabbing the aswang by the shoulders and shaking violently until her hand detached from the necklace.

'Downwards, if you must,' she replied, swaying limply from right to left, making no attempt to shake off Sila's grip.

'If you've hurt her...'

'Bada bada bada bada. Beyond now...far beyondo.'

Sila let go, backed off straight into a dozy Joanna behind him, and then muttered, 'what did she...'

they were on the stairs

floating down

skateboard invisible but surely there, and then not there as the floor levelled out and Phalanstère beckoned, filling itself in with block inserts, Archives, Language Exchange, Info Shop, Snacks, Telephone Exchange, stores that probably weren't stores, unnamed, bean bags, atmos and

to the left, a new structure

a wooden stage set

demon theatrical

Celia Von Trier

five totems stretched up and dissolving into vague green haze at the top, Søren attached to one, *blank cat* sweater over medical robe, a dark-skinned man hung upside down adjacent, a white-skinned woman on the other side, all three linked by transparent wires into the neck and dark red fluid flowing between

Cronenbergian body triptych

retching, bile, spit

*get her down* in Slovene

*fuck* in Cantonese

Phalanstère vibrating, pulsating within its foundations as both Sila and Joanna stumbled over, tripping, falling, crawling, swinging wildly at the blue-coated windpipe hanging down from the aswang's head as

Celia attacked, shrieking maniacally, spouting gibberish in Tagalog and then

on a De Sasssssssaurian level

in comfort English

'She's mine,'

grunting in satisfaction as Sila and Joanna understood, then attacking again,  
teeth first, talons and the rest of her form somewhere else

controlling the lights perhaps, or the wall tremors, or the phantom  
switching of position by the three bodies tied up on the totems

but the head was enough

to dig into Sila's arm and put him down

background lights shifting to darker green in celebration

totems settling on two bodies only

the third crawling snake-like past the beanbags, blonde hair swirling as it  
launched upwards and grabbed hold of Celia's scalp, her windpipe, ripping  
out one eye, clawing at the cheeks then,

maybe out of pity

dropping the blue-soaked mess into the lap of another demon, who had  
materialised out of nothing next to the Archives, along with a circle of  
comrades, all in the same trance state as the simulacrum of Celia in Mate De  
Neptuno upstairs.

'... ..' came in gutter Tagalog as Joanna pulled Sila up by the  
sleeve, grabbed Søren's hand and dragged the three of them back up the stairs

into the bar

and out for the second time onto the streets of Sevilla, both the drunk and  
the dancing girls gone, the sky a very human shade of indigo blue.

'It's not deep,' said Sila, wiping the blood off his arm wound, then looking  
back to see if anyone was on their tail.

'... ..' replied Søren, eyes neon yellow, cartoon cat on her  
sweater dotted with Celia's blue blood.

'Huh?'

'... ..'

He looked at Joanna, who was shaking her head. 'We should keep going,  
get away from here.'

'Or burn the place down. Fucking aswang cunt.'

Søren yanked on Sila's sleeve, making him bite down on a scream from the  
forced wound movement. '... ..'

'English version?'

'She said she wants us to go,' translated Joanna, head now stable, eyes on the end of the four-inch wide street.

'Serious?'

'Just a guess.'

She gestured at his wound, and then blocked the way as he shook his head and tried to go back.

'What about those other two people, on the poles?'

'Don't know, don't care.'

'... ..' mumbled the blonde demon, wiping off some of the blue blood.

'What?'

'She said please can we go back to the hostel and stop tempting aswangs to come out and bite you again.'

'... ..'

'Fine.'

Sila looked at the sign above the bar, the dark red neon of Mate De Neptuno, and said fine again. Then circled round Joanna and jogged up to the entrance.

Inside, things had shifted, the environment, scenery, the whole decor lit green. Customers, three groups around different tables, drinking. The two demon staff at the counter, staring outwards.

And on the sofa, beneath the impressionistic whirl of Neptune, a grinning Celia, full-bodied, double-eyed, awake.

'You understand...' she whispered, voice somehow reaching Sila's ears, 'she *will* devour you both. One day.'

'Determinist,' Sila mumbled back, frowning at his own answer, then holding up his dripping arm wound as a trophy

saying *it's fucking nothing* in Slovene

then traipsing back to Joanna and their miracle daughter, who added something in Danish that he assumed was praise.

Or he decided it was.

Better that than *the aswang's right*.

~~~

Back at the hostel, things were inverted.

All the guests were outside, some of them smoking on nearby steps, others napping on benches that had been overlooked by those fuckers on the local council, the ones who put spikes up to stop the homeless getting a decent night's sleep.

'Fire alert,' explained the hostel night manager, pointing up at smoke coming from one of the second floor windows.

'Started by who?'

'Should be okay, thirty minutes.'

Sila nodded, keeping his hand over the giant blood stain on his *Matjaž* hoodie sleeve, and went back to Joanna and Søren, relaying the explanation.

'The Portuguese singers... ' said Joanna, folding her arms and staring at the tambourine guy by the bin.

'Maybe.'

'Definitely.'

She continued to stare as Sila guided Søren over to a nearby step, or Søren guided him, using her fake irritation as a stopgap excuse to stay where she was,

thinking not of the fire

or the bizarro sacrifice ritual they'd just staggered through

or the arguable rescue of a sub-human child, with blue blood all over the *blank cat* sweater they'd specifically bought so she didn't have to wear the other blood-coated sweater

but the future

the non-tech, non-Mars version

where she would go to Lisboa, perhaps home to Hong Kong, with a child who didn't look a thing like her, who would eventually devour them both, and a guy who couldn't, on an atomic level, forget about cabinets.

'... ..'

She looked over at them, the blonde demon examining Sila's arm wound, stone-faced, probably muttering ancient Danish.

Then at the wisps of smoke eking out of the hostel window.

Then at her makeshift family again.

Was this it?

This?



The next morning, the reformed trio checked out of the [unburnt] hostel and headed over to Sevilla's main bus station, aiming one more time to buy tickets without showing their passports.

Una tarea optimista at first but

with no air-con

30 degree heat

a queue of ten propped up behind

it soon sank into pale farce, Joanna trying to put a new plaster on Sila's leaking arm wound as he said, 'too young to do passport,' to the ticket guy, and Søren picking at the dry blood scabs, whispering something in old Danish.

The final result, no tickets

no sympathy

and watery coffee in the bus terminal café.

'Really, really don't wanna drive,' started Sila, scratching his plaster, eyes on the Debordian hole in the station wall.

'No car,' replied Joanna, taking her coffee cup back from Søren.

'... ..' in raw Danish.

'It's my drink.'

'... ..'

'You've already had half.'

'... ..'

'That's my finger.'

'... ..'

Sila told them both to stop [in Danish], pulled out his phone and stared at the blank screen. Then the hole in the bus terminal wall again. A local was bending down, placing a toy sledgehammer like a bouquet of *aware that you're dead, but don't care that much* lilies.

'Still no car,' said Joanna again, taking a sip from her cup and then pushing it back to the demon child poking at her waist.

'Don't think we have much choice.'

'Rental?'

'Just hope my license hasn't expired.'

'How long has it been since you used it?'

'Eons.'

'Ten years?'

'Don't know.'

'Twenty? A hundred? What is an eon?'

Sila nodded, looking at *blank cat* on Søren's t-shirt, the surrounding white parts stained purplish blue.

'Car,' she whispered, in *moors at night* English.

'Yeah.'

They traipsed out through the big hole in the station wall, the anarchists' wall, and, after searching online, found a place two hundred metres down the road that would rent them a car.

Sila did most of the talking, in his own version of Spanish, which occasionally intersected with what the rental guy was saying, and, when it came time to show his license, he shined up the plastic as much as he could before passing it over. The man serving did a double take, perhaps cos of the photo, then replied with a brusque, '*sì*, no problem.'

'Guess it's valid after all,' said Sila as he pulled the Skoda out onto the winding roads of Sevilla, going the wrong way five times before finally coming across a road wider than an ostrich's neck and following it all the way out of the city.

~~~

The route running to the Portuguese border was flanked by green desert, or dirt with occasional grassy bits, which was strangely calming for all of them

except the blonde demon child who

as usual

was 100% inscrutable.

They passed most of the time by not talking, which suited Joanna fine as she was busy inside her own head, calculating plane ticket prices, planning surprise ditchings in service station toilets, trying to remember what happened at the end of *The Book And The Sword*, and it wasn't bad for Sila either as it gave him a chance to mentally prep more sentences in Danish.

And, once the border was crossed, without any passport requests, prep turned into action.

'Do you know how to speak Portuguese?' he asked slowly [in weak Danish], half turning to look at Søren on the back seat.

'Portuguese?' she mumbled back.

'It is another language.'

'No.'

'Do you want to learn some?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'No.'

'Okay.' He looked up another beginner phrase on his phone, started to say it, forgot the second part, re-looked and then tried it again. 'Do you know about other countries in the world?'

'Yes.'

'Great. Which ones?'

'Danmark.'

'And?'

'Sverige. Norge. Holstein. Sachsen. Pommern.'

'Modern countries?'



'No.'

'Not France or Finland?'

'No.'

Joanna came back from her own thoughts and congratulated him on a fascinating conversation.

'At least she's talking.'

'Yes. No. No. Yes. No.'

'And how do you even know what we're saying? You never study.'

'Short answers means *yes* or *no*.'

'Wah...not all of them were short. She said some country names too.'

'Yes, made-up ones.'

Sila leaned back towards Søren and told her [in English] to ignore the big bad Chinese wolf, she was just being negative cos she was too lazy to learn Danish herself.

'You know she didn't understand any of that,' responded Joanna, wiping a speck of dirt off the windscreen.

'It was for you.'

'She doesn't even know what Chinese is, as a concept, a country. She knows Denmark and the surrounding area. That's her globe.'

'Ha, so confident.' Sila looked at Søren through the windscreen mirror and switched back to basic Danish. 'Do you know where China is?'

'No.'

'It is a big country. Your mummy comes from there.'

The child demon looked at both parents then put her right hand gently on top of Joanna's, using her fingertips to caress her phone.

'Why is it always touching *me*?'

'She's just discovered where her mummy comes from.'

'I told you, I'm not its mummy. And you're not its daddy. It does not have parents.'

'Wah, we're back to *it* again, not *she*?'

'It's accurate.'

'After everything that happened last night? Our heroic rescue...'

'Suicidal kidnap, more like.'

'...you holding her hand, shielding her.'

'Don't *kwa jeung*. We're carrying a time bomb here, not a human. And definitely not a daughter.'

'Okay,' said Sila, gesturing at Søren's hand. 'Tell her that.'

'No, I don't need to tell it anything. *We* just need to work out a way to reverse your mistake from last night and find a new care-giver, before it turns on us.' Joanna tried to lift the girl's hand away from her phone, but it wouldn't budge. 'Sila, get her off.'

'I'm driving.'

'My wrist...she's twisting it.'

'Okay, relax.' Sila spoke directly to the girl through the windscreen mirror, pulling her away with his free hand. 'Mummy gets angry when she doesn't get her way.'

'She was trying to break my hand.'

'Ah, now it's a *she* again?'

'... ..'

'That's what you said.'

'... ..'

'*She's* breaking my hand. *She's* twisting it.'

'... ..'

'Hide in Cantonese all you want, you still said it. In fact, you say *she* like ninety per cent of the time. The switch to *it* when you're in a mood.'

Joanna breathed out hard, angry, enervated, like Omar Epps after the *yo dat cracker bitch* scene in *Slaughter Daughter 4*, and looked out of the window.

She couldn't read the words, but there was a sign with a service station logo on it [plus a cartoon chicken], coming up in either one metre or one mile.

'Pull over.'

'Why?'

'I'm hungry.'

'Wah. Just eat the crisps, or those pokki stick things...'

'Not enough.'

'Serious?'

'Need a proper meal. Lunch. Pull over.'

Sila tapped the steering wheel, blew up his cheeks in the windscreen mirror.  
'Okay...you're the boss lady.'

'I'm the adult.'

'Adult video.'

'... ..'

'Sure.'

~~~

Six hundred metres later, Sila pulled off the desert highway and into the car park of a service station, which the cartoon hen on the mustard yellow sign at the entrance called *Almodóvar Chicken*.

Joanna got out of the car and double checked the name, shaking her head, then looked around.

It was impressive

in an apocalyptic kind of way

the whole landscape pure arid dirt, pure El Indio, the only building visible the one loitering behind, a big block of brutalism and wide glass named after a Spanish sleaze, notorious for two films where a neurotic woman gets raped by a bald nut in an animal costume.

If Yute Long were here, she would've told him those thoughts, but he wasn't, Sila was and

after staring at the windows and the lack of people inside for three minutes straight

she turned and told him anyway.

~~~

Inside *Almodóvar Chicken* were four customers [all standing inanimate round single person counter-tops], various snacks with Spanish names, ill-

looking hot dogs, and at least a dozen plastic tables free enough for Joanna to sit down and read some more Gum Yong.

Sila remained outside, next to the car, doing a half-assed form of stretching while staring at the barren landscape nicked from *Zargoz*.

Is he actually looking at something, she wondered, taking a break from *The Book And The Sword*, or is he planning a 7th birthday party for Søren?

Probably the latter

but where

and with what money?

She took out her phone and checked the e-mail confirming her ticket from Lisboa to Hong Kong.

In two days, she'd be gone, alone,

which meant the thing would either kill Sila outright or drag him halfway across the world to her flat in Lai King, and kill him there.

Would it know where she'd gone?

It had followed them from Denmark to Barcelona so

maybe

but it wouldn't be able to fly, not without a passport.

The two of them, the pair of lunatic *Candides*, could go via Russia, or the Middle East, get the girl to bite her way through border control, but they'd still have to show ID to someone armed at some point.

'It's pretty drab in here.'

Joanna looked up and saw Sila with the *Old King Matjaž* hoodie wrapped around his shoulders, bending down to take the seat opposite. Above his head, on the wall behind, a picture of a smug chicken dressed as a matador.

'What you reading?'

Joanna flashed him the cover of the book.

'Still the same one?'

'There are 12 books in the series.'

'Huh?'

'How did you ditch it?'

'Ditch what?'

Joanna looked at the car outside, at the demon with its face attached to the window, the other window, the one looking out onto the desert plains.

'Ah, back to the impersonal. I see. Well, I told *her* I was gonna buy a drink.'

'In Danish?'

'Of course.'

'And she accepted it?'

'Strangely, ja. *She* did. I tried enticing her in, *coffee, coffee* in Danish and English, but completely no interest.'

'Maybe she's finally growing tired of us.'

'Tired?'

'The excitement of our aswang escape...it's faded and now she's bored again. Looking for new victims. Maybe there's someone here who could-...'

'Fuck off, we're not victims, we're her parents.'

'... ..'

'With a responsibility to keep her safe.'

Joanna stared at his face. It was the same one he'd worn every time he'd yapped on and on about cabinets. The same one the matador chicken had on the poster behind him.

'Forget it.'

'No, don't forget. I'm serious. I actually came in here to talk about this, resolve things and-...fuck it, I'm just gonna say it blunt. With one caveat. Ja, it is related to Søren, our daughter...our surrogate daughter...the thing I'm about to say. And no, I'm not doing this blind. I mean, we've been through a lot the last few months, a lot of weirdness, good and bad...mostly bad...and I haven't forgotten how this all started, what you did on that hill and...'

'This is not blunt.'

'...how you tried to-...okay, fine. Blunt. Your style. I think we should get married.'

'No.'

'Not for me or you, but-...no?'

'I don't want to marry you.'

'That fast?'

'Would you like me to say it slower?'

'Jesus fucking-...I just said, it's not for me or you, I don't really wanna marry you either, you're-...we don't even like each other half the time, it's just convenience, circumstances...but now we have a responsibility. Understand? However it happened, for whatever reason...mythology or fucking Madonna...that little girl has landed in our lap and it's our job to take care of her. And, no, it wasn't a mistake last night, if you're thinking of saying that again. Fucking aswang was deranged, trying to do some weird blood transfusion totem thing, but we saved her, and she knows that on...'

'It was a mistake. A big one.'

'...some innate level. No, not a mistake, heroics.'

'But still not unsalvageable. What we need to do is find a way to ditch her, preferably somewhere around here. Best idea I've had so far is to trick her out of the car and drive off. If we can get to Lisboa airport before she...'

'What? Ditch her in the desert?'

'It's one option.'

'Leave her in the sun to die?'

'If possible.'

'Possible? Fuck...do you even have a heart?'

Joanna looked out of the window, towards the back seat of the car, but it was empty.

'Or maybe we won't have to.'

Sila glared at her, perplexed, then finally glanced outside when she didn't break scene. 'Fuck, she's not there.' He looked frantically around the service station, at the novelty chicken posters, the bored staff, the spiritually drained customers, then back at the blank face of his *bad cop* co-parent. 'Did you see where she went?'

Joanna muttered something in Cantonese and went back to Gum Yong.

'You can't read now, this is serious...'

'A blessing.'

'She's alone, someone could've taken her.' Sila pushed himself up and checked for cars driving away with vicious smoke trails, but there were no live vehicles in sight.

'Fuck, we gotta go look for her, quick.'

Joanna kept eyes on the book, maybe reading, maybe not.

'Move, get up.'

'I'm finishing this chapter.'

'Fuck off.'

'And then I'm leaving. In five minutes.'

'You can't...'

'I can.'

'How? You don't even drive.'

'My license says I do.'

'What?'

'And I have the means to do it.' She held up the keys that Sila at first thought were plastic, but then they jangled and he could see the little ninja panda he'd tied to the chain. 'Four and a half minutes.'

'You'd leave without us? Really?'

'Yes.'

'Jesus on a-...!' Sila looked out of the window again, but the parked cars were blocking the view so he climbed up on the plastic cafe seat and looked over them, into the desert. 'Wait, I think I see her.'

'Four minutes.'

'Ja, same t-shirt colour. I'm gonna go out, get her back. Don't you dare fucking leave.'

He ran out of *Almodóvar Chicken* and Joanna continued reading until the end of the page, which was also the end of the chapter. She closed the book and stared at the cover. Some part of her had known the Fragrant Princess would commit suicide in the mosque, it must've done as she'd read it three times when she was a teenager, but she had never known why she'd done it, how a young girl could have the guts to stab herself with a knife right through the heart. It didn't make any sense. It still didn't.

Why did she do it?

So the hero could be weighed down by guilt?

Maybe.

But that made it his story, not hers. The action of a girl with no brain of her own. Or a naïve brain. Which was either no brain or a transcendental one.

Was she doing the same thing?

Was Sila?

Would the car obey her, if she did try to leave?

Had her license expired?

She stood up, frowned at the poor quality chicken drawings that had no discernible relationship with Pedro and walked outside. The sun was fiercer than when she'd walked in, so she ducked into the shade, taking the long route to the car.

A guy passed her and said something curt in Portuguese or Spanish and she shook her head.

'... ..?'

'No.'

'... ..!'

'*Ne vem.*'

'... ..?'

'Bye.'

She got to the car, pulled out the keys with the little ninja panda tied on and thought about just going, all the way to Lisboa and away from this mess

all the way to Hong Kong

alone.

'... ..!' she muttered in Cantonese and scanned the desert to see if Sila was on his way back.

He wasn't there, neither was the girl.

No, wait

there he was

over to the left, running haphazard across the desert

still trailing the girl

five, six hundred metres away.

'... ..!'

Where was the little demon child going?

They were in the Portuguese desert, there were no buildings far as she knew, the car was the only way out of there, no strangers to bite

what was she playing at?

Joanna checked her phone.



It had already been six minutes.

'... ..'

She put the keys back in her trousers pocket and walked across the highway, looking both ways only when she got to the middle, then onwards, into the desert

after a fucking child demon

who spoke Arthurian Danish

and would never ever be her kin

legal or otherwise.

'... ..' she shouted, letting out at least half of the anger she'd kept in storage the last three months, knowing full well Sila couldn't hear any of it, and, even if he could, would probably call her a heartless witch again anyway.

~~~

With the *Yuki Onna* hoodie acting as an improvised hat, Joanna caught up with the sentimental clown about fourteen hundred metres across the dirt, rubbing his knee, and asked what the hell he was doing.

'Søren,' he said, pointing forward. 'Got in front of her, tried to drag her back, but the crazy little shit wouldn't stop.'

Joanna didn't need hand signals, she could easily see the little girl another hundred metres ahead. 'She attacked you?'

'It's like her brain's being remote controlled.'

'She wasn't even looking at you?'

'No, just straight ahead, at those hills.' He pointed an inch further, even though he didn't need to; the hills were right there, about five hundred metres away. 'Jesus, how is she moving that fast?'

'This is our chance.'

'She's walking, but...it's like she's on one of those horizontal escalators, the things at the airport.'

'Sila.'

'Aaaaagh, need to start moving again, run faster, try and talk to her this time. Reason with her.'

'Sila, listen to me.'

He stopped rubbing, squinting up at the woman wearing his hoodie as a head scarf. 'What?'

'This is our chance.'

'Nope.'

'She let go of your hand, pushed you away. That means we're free. We can get in the car and go.'

'No way.'

'And this time we don't give her a chance to catch up. No service station stops, pure driving, change cars in Lisboa, only one night in each place. Go to Hong Kong at some point.'

'You do what you want, I'm going after her.'

'To where?'

'Wherever she's going.'

'What, the desert?' Joanna wanted to point, but the hills were too close, too much like regular countryside so she switched back to the road instead [still not pointing]. 'Sila, our bags are still in the car, all our stuff. Someone could be taking them, stealing them right now.'

'Then go back and look after them.'

'And if I decide to leave?'

'We'll meet you in Lisboa.'

'How? You won't have a car.'

'We'll get a taxi. Or a bus. Just tell me the name of your hotel and I'll-...'

'I don't have a hotel.'

Sila took a step forward, shaking his leg out to kill the knee injury. 'Fuck, she's getting away.'

'This is insane. She is not your daughter. Snap out of it.'

'Don't have time for this.'

'Sila...'

'Just go back, wait or go, whatever.'

'... ..'

He laughed, caustic, taking another few steps forward. 'Don't care.'

'.....'

'Great. You too.'

'I said, it's like swallowing a bomb...'

'Don't fucking care, I'm going.'

'...that just pushed you away...and you're still trying to shove it down your throat. Our throat.'

Sila didn't answer, he'd already started running again, kicking up sand/dirt and, although Søren was moving fast, he managed to slowly gain on her, maybe five metres a minute, and despite his *go to the car, I don't care* line, he still looked back to see if Joanna was following and, when he saw her walking slowly but inexorably in the same direction, he slackened a bit, relieved cos

she hadn't talked about Krsnik for weeks

not that he could remember and

even though she'd clearly thought up ways to kill their daughter, he knew she didn't really mean it

and she hadn't meant to say *no* to the marriage proposal either, she was just scared or stunned, one of the two, and

by the time they got to Lisboa things would be sunnier

the buildings would be pastel and pretty

they'd be holding hands with Søren and

for the sake of something other than themselves

their miracle daughter

they'd be learning beginner Danish too

upper beginner for him

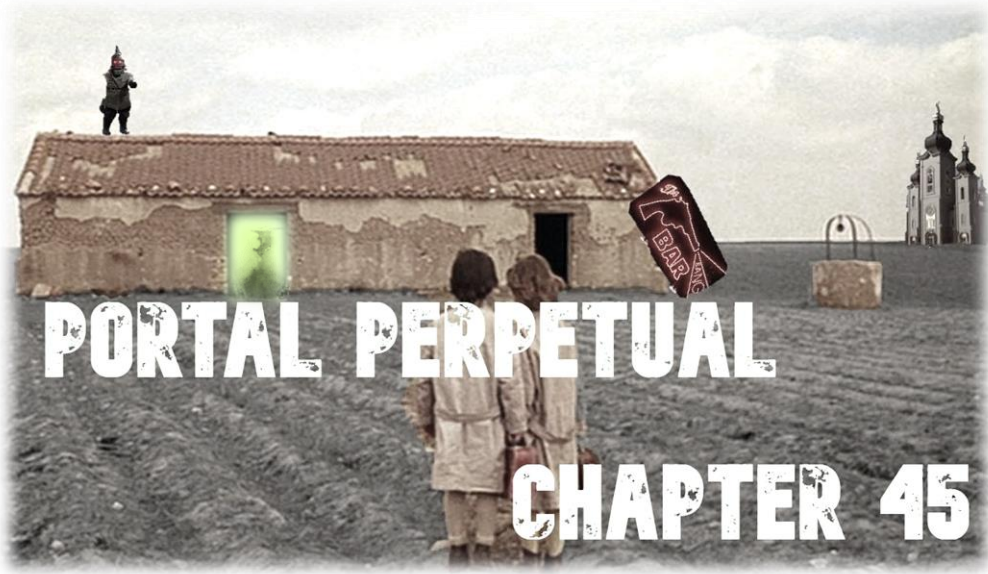
hello, what is this for her.

That was the play running in his head, at least.

With other plays lurking on the fringes.

Grainy

nebulous.



The landscape surrounding *Almodóvar Chicken* wasn't as barren or desert-like as it had seemed from the service station car park

not superficially

as over the first set of hills lay a small pueblo, white walls and dustbowl ground, abandoned

but not historically without hope

at least in the 80's

cos when the service station was originally built - at the start of that decade, twinned with Almodóvar's second film *Laberinto De Pasiones* - there had been plans to bring the place back to life, mainly through film tourism.

The idea wasn't a hundred per cent clean, as it relied heavily on mimicry and low information tourists, but if those tourists had been unable to locate the castle from *The Fearless Vampire Killers* and somehow found themselves in the Portuguese countryside, then they could potentially be tricked into thinking this village really was the same place Sergio Leone had dragged Lee van Cleef and Gian Maria Volonté to duel object-erotically in *For a Few Dollars More*, with the pea-brained American fascist with no name lurking off at the side somewhere, ready to slap anyone with tits and a Sontag zine.

To buttress the deception

there were promotional signs copied directly from the pastiche-approximation of the real shooting location near Almeria, Spain, placed at the entrance to the village, boards with hero-sized shots of the final shootout, other locations from earlier in the *Agua Caliente* scenes that had been recreated with a layman-eye substitute level of detail.

They'd even brought giant stones in from the nearby desert and made a circle out of them, plus two life-sized dummies modelled on El Indio and Da Colonel.

Unfortunately, neither dummy looked particularly convincing, the colonel closer to Kim Cattrall in face-aspect than Lee Van Cleef

and the village quickly lost funding

the workers left

and the original residents had left already cos the workers were dirty and, in a bad enough drought, revolutionary,

so it became the thing that most horror film-makers would kill for, a ghost village with ghost feel, perfect for some Spanish teens to stumble across and fuck around in before being slaughtered by

Aranca Sanchez Vicario

in a Worf mask

but

as Søren the demon magnet knew

the village had been around a long time before *Almodóvar Chicken* turned up a long long time

beyond ancient scrawls or atavism or

pink-skinned land prospectors.

Granted, the sign boards didn't tell the last part, they just looked cheap and tacky, printouts of Clint and Van Cleef stuck on white plywood, waiting to be photographed or filmed or posed next to or

as Sila was doing,

treated like a lamp post - there but not there - as he scanned the famous stone circle, looking for the dust trails of his miracle daughter.

'Looks familiar,' said Joanna, strolling up to him, unaware of all Leone films except *The Bicycle Thief*, which she'd originally thought was directed by someone else until Yute Long told her no, it was Leone, using a pseudonym and one-eighty oppositional style.

'Ja, what?'

She put her arm around the sign and posed, her other hand limp next to her left thigh.

'Oh that stuff.'

'Wait, it is familiar. We saw this in Almeria. The exact same place. Wah, really no difference at all. Like it's just been airlifted over.' She looked at the roof of the nearest house. 'Minus a few satellite dishes.'

'I thought you were going back to the car.'

'*Goi bin ju yee.*'

'What?'

'Mind change.'

Sila thought about asking more, probing a little for exculpatory declarations of *I thought about it and realised she's adorable, I love her*, but that would probably lead to yet another argument so instead he just nodded and tried, 'did you see where she went?'

'I was behind you all the way.'

'That's a no?'

'*Mo chor.*'

'Who?'

'No, I did not see where she went.'

Sila walked down the slope, away from the stone circle, peeked round the corner then came back. 'I can't see her anywhere.'

'Maybe she dissolved back into the ever.'

'She walked this way, I saw her.'

'Or the ether. Effer.'

'She must be in one of these buildings.' He did another three-sixty, searching for open doors or broken windows. 'No traces though. No sign of damage.'

'I still think we should leave.'

'No.'

'I'm gonna leave then.'

Sila was stopped from saying *fine, go then* by an abrupt noise in a white shack nearby. One with a sign that said *EL BAR* over it.

'Sounds like someone hitting furniture.'

'Or a wall,' edited Joanna, mouthing back *El Bar* to herself.

There was another thud, loud enough to provoke them into following the memory of it to the bar and prodding at the front door, which turned out not

to be locked. There was no one in the main bar area, or what could've been the main bar area, it was hard to tell, there was no counter or stools or bottles on wall shelves or light even, but it was the main space of the building and, for some reason, it was vacant.

Another thud, lower down.

'That way...' said Sila, pointing at a doorway covered with a curtain last dusted a millennium ago.

'Seems like it's coming from underneath.'

'Yup.'

'Do these places have basements?'

'Let's find out.'

Sila pushed aside the tatty curtain and saw a door to the left that was half open. He walked over and tripped onto stairs leading blind into Tarkovskyan darkness.

'In here.'

'I know, I'm in the same room.'

'Stop dragging your feet then. And watch out, it goes down pretty steep.'

Joanna shrugged and followed him down, hearing a louder thud and secretly hoping it wasn't Søren hitting her head against the stone wall. Then vetoed the thought and hoped that it was. Demon child, self-destruction, for the best.

Sadly, for her Schrader side, it wasn't.

Off the last stone step, and with the help of eight lit candles tied by rope to the walls, she stopped and observed Sila trying and failing to take a giant sledgehammer away from the little terror's hands.

He tried again and Søren pushed him to the ground, glaring back with witch-purple eyes.

'Get away from her,' shouted Joanna, not moving an inch from the bottom step.

'Help me.'

'I am. Vocally.'

'Get the hammer, hold her down. Quickly...that side there, what are you doing?'

'She's armed.'

'Stop stalling.' Sila stood up and when Søren swung the sledgehammer back he made a grab for it. 'Now, come on.'

Joanna stayed where she was, watching Sila go back and forth a few times before being flung back onto the floor.

'Stop embarrassing yourself, she's too strong.'

'Not if we both do it,' he said, getting back up, rolling up his *Matjaž* hoodie sleeves.

'She just threw you across the room.'

'Don't *kwa jeung*. It was on the floor, a metre tops. Which proves that she's not that strong...quite strong, but not that strong. Come on, you grab her left arm, I'll grab her right.'

'I'm not touching it.'

'Okay, grab her left then.'

'No.'

'Yes. Now. Quickly.'

The little girl swung again, this time with so much force that a hole the size of Gene Hackman's head materialised.

'Wah, she did it.'

'Not good...'

Blankly satisfied, the miracle daughter/ demon from beyond dropped the sledgehammer on the dirt and pulled herself through into the darkness ahead. Sila ran over to Joanna, grabbed her by the wrist and led her the same way, getting about a metre before Joanna scratched him off, saying she'd go at her own pace.

'Fine, crawl like a turtle...'

'We should go back to the car first.'

'No time...'

'I'm worried about our stuff.'

'It'll be fine.'

Sila climbed through and was instantly absorbed by the blackness. Joanna shrugged to no one except the eight candles and trailed after. Surprisingly, the black hole effect was only temporary as, after a short passage, there was another chamber, or a very wide corridor at least, and in that place was a light source, but it wasn't candles. Joanna looked up. On the roof and the walls

were some mineral deposits, a kind she'd never seen before, though it wasn't a shock for her to see that they were pulsing bright purple.

'Mother cave...'

Feeling cold suddenly, she took the *Yuki Onna* hoodie off her head and put it on. Rubbed her hands together even though they weren't icy yet. Then walked forward, tracking the line of mineral deposits until she came to a staircase leading even deeper in a gradual curve.

There was no sign of Sila or the girl and no other possible route they could've gone so she stepped down slowly, thirty or forty steps, finally coming to a large room that she was definitely confident enough to call a chamber.

It was clearly natural in its formation, rock, rock, glut of even more rock, but in the middle there was a type of pulley mechanism, with rope attached, hanging over a pit.

Sila and their albatross daughter were next to it, struggling again. Him trying to pull her away, her trying to

do what?

Jump in there?

She wasn't reaching for the rope and her legs were only an inch or two from the pits edge, so what else could she be doing?

'Tried to drop in...'

'What?'

'Still trying...help me...'

'Sila...'

'Get over here, grab my hand.'

'No, it's-...'

'Quickly...she's heavier than a fucking piano.'

'Sila...'

'Losing my grip.'

'Give it up.'

'Help.'

'Let her go.'

'She's slipping.'

'Just pull your hand back, let her...'

Joanna was going to say *drop*, but there was no time for the last word to spool out.

As fast as she'd thought it, the little blonde shape of silent *demonika* was gone, over the edge and into the pit

dragging Sila down with her.

There were no screams

as Joanna ran and tripped and crawled to the edge, peered into the black hole

no sound of anything hitting a solid bottom or jutting shards at the sides.

'Sila,' she said, half a shout.

Nothing.

She lowered herself a third over the edge of the pit and touched the rope, waiting for it to shake.

She stared at it for a long time.

It wasn't slow motion

but it felt not unsimilar.

Bouncy castle, swimming pool, giant airbag, cushioned air, bed of spikes, nothing x infinite.

Where were the screams, the pleas?

She kept staring, focused as tight as she could make it without her eyes hurting.

A minute passed.

Two minutes.

The rope didn't even shiver.

But if there was no bottom to this thing and the rope ran all the way down then at some point he'd self-pacify, grab onto it and start to pull himself back up

even if took a month

a year

five years, ten years, a century

infinity plus.

She dipped her hand past the surface of the abyss, picturing him by a tree, outside Ljubljana castle, asking if she was gonna disappear completely behind the red-lit wall. Then a jump-cut to a cabinet with a stuffed Romulan inside, a fierce *fuck off, go, leave, get your fucking own* hostel.

He couldn't just drop

not like this.



Thousands of light years from your home, from where you were born, from other people who resembled you

YOU

YOURSELF, ALL PARTS, ALL SCHISMED ASPECTS

sitting in a hidden basement beyond a broken wall in an abandoned pueblo behind a Portuguese hill in the middle of an imitation desert near a decrepit service station called Almodóvar Chicken

realising in spurts where you were, where you truly, physically were, how isolated that position was, how weird the purple mineral deposits in the walls appeared

enervated, drained, relieved

cowed by blankness, body strangely there, real skin an inch behind, gone in the Baudrillardian sense, laughing, an ironic simulated atom that

not only lost in place

but in concept

stranger in a *Star Trek* cave

any series.

~~~

Sitting with back arched was sustainable only for latter-day nihilists, and her left knee had been digging in so hard so long to a jagged chunk of earth that Joanna had no real choice but to give up on the pit stakeout and pull herself over to the nearby wall.

Which is where the counter-thought hit.

What if the moment you left, his eyes materialised, or Søren's eyes, glowing purple, begging beacon-like for a hand up? Or another hand to drag down...

She blinked and discovered herself hunched over the rim of the pit again, staring at the rope in hope of residue vibrations.

Or a yell from below, saying *hey, there's a bouncy castle down here, on rock floor that feels like sponge.*

'Sila?' she called, shivering at the sound of her own voice. Then shivering again when she reflected on that sound as object-real.

A echo drifted back, just about recognisable.

I know where I am, she thought. In the middle of Portuguese Nowhere. Alone. Too scared to descend. Too excited. Petrified. Bored. Aggravated. Gravelly. Dutch. Aiasbuidwbiwdb...

She growled at herself, scratched an arm, grabbed hold of the rope and yanked it.

'... ..?' she shouted in ragged Cantonese.

Another echo, alien-distortion.

Her hand reached down deeper, pulling the rope upwards.

Did it go all the way down?

If there was no bottom to the pit then probably not. Unless it was endless rope? A philosophical trick mesmerised into her own sketch-reality by...something?

Joanna continued pulling the rope up, picturing the Krsnik in Vicenza, bleeding out, Celia the Aswang's floating head, gnashing air, biting Sila, their miraculous demon child with death wish curiosity, the photos she'd got from her sister the day before, the birds nesting behind the air-con outside the window of her brand new flat, the refusal of her parents to renovate their own archaic flat, even one little tile, the type of job she'd have to accept if she really did go back...

The rope turned to air, Joanna looking down and seeing the tip of woven jute rested on her fingers.

'... ..'

She wasn't great at measurements, but it seemed close to fifty metres in total length. Maybe a few more either way.

Not that much, and certainly insufficient for abseiling, but perhaps there was an alcove

forty or so metres down

leading to a tunnel or another hidden room, an alternative exit from the pueblo maybe?

She spun the end of the rope in little circles, her eyes fixed on the abyss.

Waiting for something to appear.

To attempt something

Say *stop staring*.

Or *come on in, it's mystical down here*

But nothing happened.

The abyss was simply an abyss.

Object-reality, 1<sup>st</sup> tier.

Or 2<sup>nd</sup> tier and just too bored to stare back.

The rope stopped spinning, her eyes closed.

Should I drop it again, shimmy down, she asked her adjacent self, getting back an instant *ho mo liu* geh reflex, saying Sila probably would've gawped at her, shocked, for knowing the word shimmy.

Probably, but why?

It was just a word.

Though she couldn't remember where she'd heard it.

From him?

Or beyond all this, in older times?

~~~

Feeding herself a metre down the pit wall, Joanna quickly felt the metaphysical *cold-grip* and climbed back up, telling herself that she would go down eventually, but only after she'd gauged how deep it went.

There were only loose pebbles in the chamber she was currently in so she made her way back through the hole in the wall and upstairs into El Bar.

Bottles of Spanish spirits and wines had to be there somewhere, stockpiled, hoarded, that was her reasoning, and it only took a few minutes to find some old mini-bottles hidden in a cupboard with a door that just peeled off completely when she tugged on it.

Quinta de Leda 1976.

Big enough to crack and make a noise, heavy enough to fracture Sila's skull.

Both thoughts seemed valid.

But the chances of hitting anyone's head were tiny. And she could just shout a warning down beforehand.

Step to the side or something.

~~~

Down by the edge of the pit, she emptied the contents of the bottle first, seeing if there were any reactive shrieks.

Nothing distinctive.

All clear.

Okay.

'Bottle falling,' she shouted, dropping it lip first, and adding *fuck* in Cantonese when the little traitor flipped back almost immediately to its natural top-up weighting.

Both glass and pale green label vanished into the darkness

and kept vanishing

until she was forced to look straight again to stop her neck from cramping up.

Is this a trick? she wondered, bottle lid still in hand.

Are the three of them down there now, Sila, Søren, bottle,

five, ten metres deep

laughing at me?

~~~

'Silaaaaaaaaaaaaa!'

Nothing.

'You fucking coward...'

Barely even an echo.

~~~

She stared at the rope and told herself to cut it  
cut it clean off so they couldn't get back up  
then she could leave  
walk out, get in the car and just leave, drive,  
be away from this thing.

~~~

One hour and then I go.

That was her ultimatum.

Any longer than that and the pit would manifest.

Into something.

Force her to jump.

Which is half what she wanted.

To land crushed next to his crushed corpse

to go in sync with someone, not alone

somewhere insane, unimaginable

not home

~~~



The darkness of the pit maintained its perfect form

Captured Void

and for the first time since the end of that folk artist Canadian thing, she  
cried

on a level that wasn't controllable

that just spilled out despite her lax efforts, her random barriers, hotel on the  
edge of the abyss, hotel watching that hotel, Althusser painting *NOT A* on the  
sign of his hotel, hotel with Christmas tree in February, hotel in a

~~~

Now I can go back, she whispered to the mineral deposits as the third hour
ticked by

back to somewhere else.

Forget about the marriage proposal, the fake child, the Krsnik, the 22
ghouls, the drugs, the last three years

none of it was real.

~~~

'If I had run over, grabbed his hand,' she mumbled, walking back into the  
late afternoon sun, it wouldn't have changed anything

the demon child was too strong

she would've dragged us both down

destructured us.

Right, dead grass?

~~~

Body stretched out flat, head peeking over the edge.

Another bottle, another tug on the rope.

'How to get to the bottom of a bottomless pit?' she whispered in Cantonese.

'Faith?'

'Magic?'

~~~

It's not faith, it's suicide.

Drop and you're gone.

Not romantic.

Nothing to reflect on.

No mind to channel the whimsy.

Body is a body is decay.

At least a good few minutes of terror, falling within nothingness, when is it coming, when is it coming, when is it coming, when is it...

Your family.

You.

~~~

'Silaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!'

~~~

She checked for her phone, to see the time, and realised after a minute of fumbling in empty pockets that she must've left it back in the car. Which had probably been stolen by Portuguese teenagers by now. Or bored staff. Energised staff. Nellist staff. North of the border sta-

I'll go back, she thought, passing through the hole in the wall, all the way back and forget about this.

Two, three days of bleakness

Stoicism, Gum Yong, animal rescue videos

then home.

~~~

She headed out of the village, ignoring the crass promotional signs, one of which looked like the slut from *Mannequin*, across the token desert and

along the way

tried to analyse again the nature of the pit, why it was there, who made it, what lives within, and

wasn't there a bottomless pit in one of the Gum Yong books too

a challenge the hero had to overcome

or had she imagined that?

~~~

She wiped the dirt of the screen of her phone and searched for *weird real bottomless pits*.

There were links to all kinds of things, TV serials she'd never heard of but nothing about Gum Yong, so she switched the search language to Chinese and still nothing came up, which was strange as she could've sworn he'd written something about them in one of his stories.

Maybe it just wasn't a huge part of the plot?

Maybe it was someone else?

Ai Kuang?

One of those three hundred weird sci-fi things he churned out?

*Blue Blood Being*?

~~~

She sat in the car, dummy-like, keys in the ignition.

The ninja panda was hanging down, not looking skilled at all, looking vulnerable, just like the Fragrant princess, just like Yute Long, just like Sila.

She stared at the road ahead, green-patched desert on both sides.

There was a desert in China too

near Mongolia

though she'd never been there.

Wait...

She looked behind, onto the back seat. There were two bags, Sila's and her own, and nothing belonging to the demon child.

'... ..'

She reached over and grabbed both bags. Opened her own and pulled out the German book. Fake-read the first page and shook her head. Put it back in the bag and stared at the road again.

'... ..'

Then opened the car door.

~~~

The pueblo was still deserted when she got back and the entrance to El Bar was even more wide-open.

Beckoning her in.

Wearing the costume of a drinking establishment.

Putting lies in her head.

Sila at the edge of the pit, sleeves rolled up, hoodie ripped, saying, 'fuck, that was close.'

Sila surrounded by friendly Krsnik.

Yute Long bathed in Apple Store light.

Drowning in it.

Asking whose the Yuki Onna hoodie was, why she was wea-

She turned left and

~~~

Sat outside in the core of the stone circle, Joanna tried to understand the movie that had been shot there, but it was a western and she'd never liked those.

The sun went down, finally, which seemed symbolic on the face of it, but wasn't really as she'd lived more or less during the night for the past two years and even before that

she'd avoided the sun.

Was it Yute Long who'd made her do the vampire impression in Czech land or Sila?

She couldn't remember.

~~~

There was a man peering in through the side window when she returned a second time to the car, possibly a staff member from Almodóvar Chicken. Forging the husk of an old smile, she waved the keys, telling him that she'd just been for a walk.

'You car?' he asked, suspicious.

'Obviously.'

'Here very long time. I work inside, watch it a little.'

She blanked him and got in, shutting the door with a mumbled repeat of *been for a walk*.

Ideally, she would've stayed there for an hour, maybe two, working up enough courage to go back one final time and throw herself down the pit, follow the man who might take more than two, three days to paper over, scrub from the revenge neurons, her bitter cortex, leaking plasma memory ducts

but the Almodóvar Chicken guy continued standing there

rubbing his uniform sleeve

forcing her to start the engine and drive.

Slowly at first

her driving skills a bit rusty

then normal speed as no other cars appeared in front or behind and

after five kilometres, she told herself to stop,

turn around and go back

or swerve off the road completely, drive a long curve back to the pueblo  
and re-enter, re-immense.

It was persuasive in theory, in laid out future frames of her potentially  
doing that, but the sun was almost gone now

and the pit

the chamber around it

would be unbearable

beyond just jumping, the essence of it, the idea of sitting there in cave  
shadow, silhouette, and

staring down

into nothingness that couldn't just be nothingness

that had to push back something and

if that happened

if she let that kind of force in

then



*Abjection is above all ambiguity*

*Ambiguity is an alcove*

*Our Alcove is cosy*

*Filtered, safe*

Joanna's head stayed fixed in position, eyes on the graffiti outside the blue door that allegedly led to the hostel she'd just booked back in the car, half an hour earlier.

*Abjection is above all ambiguity*

*Ambiguity is an alcove*

The words seemed familiar somehow, philosophy that Yute Long had told her once, or perhaps the Gum Yong translator at Uni, or a book at the library

but de-territorialised

scrawled out on Lisboan infrastructure, regular structure, pastel façade

in English over Portuguese

next to an amateur spray of a giant dick shooting up like a rocket into an upside down blood pool.

Why?

For her?

There was human noise to the left, a woman shouting at her friend, pinching their jacket as evidence.

Joanna waited for the intruders to pass, then put a hand out and pressed the hostel buzzer.

~~~

The hostel owner was playing a football game on a huge projection screen when she walked in, and two men who she could hear whispering German were parked on the couch at the side.

'Take over,' the hostel owner said, handing the control to the German with frizzy hair, then got up and strolled over to the table that had to be the check-in desk.

Didn't look much like it.

No leaflets or guides to local tourist sites.

Just a cardboard cut-out pic of Faye Valentine, leaning over the Bebop cockpit controls.

'Japanese? Chinese?' the hostel owner asked, taking her passport and writing her details down in a shabby-looking notebook.

She pointed at the passport cover.

'Ah, Hong Kong...quite close. Thought you might be Japanese cos of the anime face on your hoodie. Bad guess. *Sim, foda*. You came here from Porto? Or flying in?'

Joanna looked at the two Germans in the relaxation area, one of them playing the football game, the other holding an anime doll she didn't recognise level with his face, interrogating it.

Then turned right and looked at the kitchen.

White walls, white cupboards.

Blank and bright.

'Okay, all done. Room is first floor up the stairs, shared bathroom in the middle, if you need anything, just come down, I'll be here until eleven.'

She took the key from the table and the passport from his hand, avoiding the attempt to brush against her fingers

turned her back

noticed the life-size cut-out of another anime girl, white hair, white dressing gown, against the far wall, flanked by the usual leaflets and guides

and headed back out towards the stairs.

~~~

In her room, there were three other bunks, all empty.

Probably wouldn't stay that way for the two days she'd booked, but if someone else did come, other men, then she could just check out and find somewhere smaller, quieter.

An alcove safe and filtered.

The beach.

Clean part of the metro.

Keep her guarded, ossified until her flight left.

Hearing a shout outside in the corridor, she moved to the door and gripped the handle. There was no additional lock, so she put weight against the frame, whispering in Cantonese for them to *keep moving, shut up, go back to Spain, vanish.*

The sound faded and the hum of Lisboan nature returned through the open window.

She moved back to the bunk she'd dropped her bag on and fished out the *Gum Yong* book. Studied the cover. Sat down on the edge of the pillow and flicked to her last read page. Skimmed the same thing she'd read in *Almodóvar Chicken*. Closed the book, put it back in the bag, looked at her phone.

There was a new e-mail from Ming.

The flat renovation was going well, and the birds nest seemed to be permanent. Dad still wouldn't agree to shift the builders to his flat, to touch a few things up, said he'd do it himself if it was really necessary.

Which it never would be.

*Are you definitely coming back? In three days? It's not a joke, is it?*

Joanna stared at the outline of the phone screen.

Pictured her family home.

The black and white photos of her grandparents, the man a cheating scumbag, the woman dead at fifty.

The smile on his face, the pallid blankness of hers.

*Abjection is the complete lack of ambiguity.*

*Ambiguity is*

She blinked, started typing out a reply.

'In two days, I fly, in three days, I'll be back. Not a joke. Don't know where I'm gonna...'

She stopped, looking towards the open window.

A mosquito had just flown in, not even hiding itself, just drifting nonchalantly over to her bunk.

Wasn't it too cold for them?

Out of season?

She looked down at her phone, turning it off and on, checking the date.

Nodded unconvincingly, confused.

Pinched at the snow demon face on her hoodie.

*His hoodie.*

Put the phone down and moved to the window.

Outside was the a narrow street, quite busy, most people coming in and out of the mini-supermarket at the top of the hill.

Living life.

Skimming round the edges of the *other*.

The alcove.

Unable to give time to the idea that the friend close by would either die first or after them, leaving a void that had to be outmanoeuvred at all costs, otherwise

She positioned herself at the side of the window frame and stared down.

Focused on the louder types.

*Doi fong.*

~~~

Back on the bunk, 10:45pm Lisboa time, she watched animal rescue videos on her phone

about twenty-five, thirty of them

watched until she drifted out

to beyond

the other side of a bottomless pit with the Red Flower Heroes, losing sight of them, finding a corpse, the charred remains of the *Snowy Fox Gum Yong* book

then drifted back in, to the same dorm room with three empty beds, heaven-like Sun, chaotic duvet and

clicked on the next animal vid

this one koala-focused.

~~~

In the shared bathroom, she stared at her reflection, self-buffering, waiting for it to become something she recognised, remembered.

The hair was similar, but the face...

~~~

Weirdly, annoyingly, the hostel kitchen got all the sun in the late hours of the morning, so much so that Joanna had to turn her back to the window as she ate the crepe made by the woman whose job it was to make crepes for everyone.

Lydia, her name was.

Gregarious in limited English, maker of tasty crepes, a good prop to use to dodge the Chinese-American guy trying to start a conversation with her.

First in Mandarin, then in English, then, for some reason, in Korean.

Your mission is *ho mo liu*, she thought, pulling out her phone and opening a new e-mail from her sometime sister. More pics of the bird nest with baby birds in it. More questions.

I forgot to ask, how's Yute Long? Still planning on opening his guitar shop?

She clicked back, checking her last reply. Realised she hadn't finished typing it.

'You checked out Belem yet? It's pretty cool, lots of scenery, green stuff...'

Her eyes went to her crepe, catching the little finger of the Chinese-American at the edge of the frame.

It was completely uncreased

like an android's

smooth and polished and

She got up and returned her plate to the gregarious Lydia, then continued out into the check-in area, ignoring the broken Mandarin nonsense from the hostel owner, who was on the couch, playing the fake football game again.

Out was the target.

Out there.

~~~

Parked obedient where she'd left it the night before, the car had enough fuel to take her back

dump her at the airport

at the beach

into the depths of the Atlantic where all the forfeited parts were

the otherness, the cosy abject

ready to wrap around her limbs and brain and

~~~

The sun may have been fierce, but the curtains blocked out most of it, and if she continued focusing on the Lisboa vlogs, the animal videos, the analysis of Cheung Yuen Ting films, the hard vampire porn then it could be wiped out completely

othered

at least until tomorrow.

~~~

Dinner was a sandwich from the supermarket and a bag of local crisps which tasted like a field of paprika dropped in one single bag.

Soon she could have *Tam Jai* again, Yum cha, dah bin lo, poon choi  
with her family  
alone  
in a place she knew like the back of

~~~

Eyes stuck on the screen as a black vampire fucked a white aristocrat, telling her this was undead dick she was getting

mouth muttering *idiot* in Cantonese
fingers vaguely touching herself

whole body barely moving an inch as the door lock activated and an Indian couple pushed their wheeled suitcases in.

Luckily, it was quite dark, and they didn't notice her until the lights were switched on, and by then she'd taken her fingers away and was up off the bunk, heading towards the door.

There was a *hi, nice to meet you*, as forced as it gets, then the door shut and she was safe again.

~~~

Outside was un-tempting and the relaxation area wasn't much better, with the hostel owner playing the computer on loop while the two German guys sat on the side couch and watched.

Saying *later* to a shouted invitation to join, Joanna parked herself in the kitchen and looked at her phone

the flight time on the ticket  
another e-mail from her sister, far too long,

one from her mum.

*Ying, are you looking for a job yet? Better to think up an excuse for the two year gap you've taken ahead of time, that's the first question they'll*

~~~

One drink led to another drink led to a glass of ice-less vodka and pretty soon she was playing like a drugged up Crowley stan on the football video game, FIFA road to something, and the hostel owner was telling her and the two Germans about a bar he was going to when he got off work, a small, local place that had no tourists and hopefully the girl he liked would be there

to which one of the Germans said, 'your girlfriend?'

And he said, 'no, different one. Upgrade.'

And Joanna laughed out loud, accepting a lit cigarette from the other German, telling them all that what the hostel guy just said reminded her of a man she knew back home

an insurance agent who had four girlfriends

plus a wife

who would go to a fortune teller every week so he could know how to rank them, who to dump, who to pursue, who to have breakfast with, what colour rock to put in his pocket and carry round with him all day for protected luck

and when she was done, she apologised

saying fortune tellers probably weren't as popular in Portugal

people wouldn't trust spilt joss sticks

or superstition

and the hostel owner shook his head, replying either genuine or deadpan, 'no, we have GOD.'

~~~

It may have been a long walk to the local bar with no tourists

with the different girl that the hostel owner wanted to fuck instead of his girlfriend

but Joanna didn't feel it

didn't feel much of anything, just a gliding sensation between frames of a film that she happened to be in at that particular moment

an alien documentary chancing onto her

skimming through shots of her form and pale surface smoking at a table, explaining how she knew nothing about the anime woman on her hoodie, blocking follow-ups, singing along to a familiar Portuguese song that claimed *We Are Not Spanish*, asking the German guys if they'd been to Ljubljana, resting her head on one of their shoulders, offering a whole pack of cigarettes to a guy who reminded her of Patrice, who

in her drunken haze

was the spitting image of him, who offered her one of her own cigarettes back, who floated off as the hostel owner took her to one side, cautioned in a paternal tone not to give *those people* too much as it would just encourage them to take more

her looking blank in response, then relaying the story to the Germans

both of them telling her they had a Senegalese friend back in Dusseldorf who was the friendliest guy they'd ever met, and his sister was beautiful

had actually dated one of them for a few months, drank like an Irish person, spoke Wolof during sex, and that led to fucked up, misremembered Wolof slang and apologies in German and regret that the Senegalese girl wasn't there right then and now and

more drink

more cigarettes

until the taller German guy felt sick

was sick

went back to the hostel with his friend and left Joanna to sit next to the Patrice clone she'd given cigarettes too and

when she asked him what he thought of the bar

he got up and walked off

vanished into the night

rude cunt

what did he do that for, I was trying to have a genuine conversation, Patrice would've talked to me, smiled a bit, glaring *pokkai*, give back all the cigarettes if you're gonna do that, fucking sociopath rat

rude fucking

~~~

At some point, she got so dazed, so bored, so unaware of what forfeited existence she was currently drowning in that she sat down next to the hostel owner, and told the girl he was whispering to

presumably the different one he wanted to fuck

that he was a great guy who played Road to FIFA Something really well and had no time for superstitious fortune teller types with purple rock advice technique things

all in English, all received like she was a coked-up Haitian witch doctor

then all simulacrum smiles as she slouched back against the seat and nodded at another Portuguese guy sitting down next to her, who coughed seven, eight times before asking in ropey English if she was a big fan of *Yuki Onna* anime or just a trapped in a novelty hoodie.

~~~

Turned out the hostel owner knew how to play guitar, which he pulled out on the stairs leading up to her room

singing something off-key in Portuguese

then strumming loosely

staring at her chest

saying the other girl was tedious, didn't know how to fuck, went off with some weakling poet translator, too local, too much ego, no fun.

'Still got your back-up doll,' Joanna said, smoking her three-hundredth cigarette of the night.

'Sorry?'

'I'm going to bed.'

He nodded, and started strumming again, which she knew wasn't the end

cos he was a guy

it was four in the morning



no one else to fuck nearby  
and as she walked up past him, saying goodnight from the drunk part of  
her brain, he did absolutely nothing  
just kept playing his guitar  
as if she were already wisp-like  
something to wank over later  
her and his anime cut-outs  
possibly right there on the stairs, without any thought of disguise or

~~~

The room was dark.
Indian couple, asleep.
Dragging her duvet over to the window, she self-embalmed, rested her
head against the window frame and watched the sun slowly rise
cos it also did sometimes
then switched to the early morning workers walking up the hill to the mini-
supermarket
the Indian guys standing around, selling baking powder [according to the
hostel owner]
the clubbers coming home, most with a friend or someone to fuck
if they had the sapience for it
the will.
One couple actually stopped by the hostel doorway below and started
groping each other, then pushed the door open and
maybe made it back to their dorm
or just fucked on the stairs, next to the hostel owner wanking behind a
plant
or collapsed in a heap, threw up and
next day, work, holiday, day after that, drink, club, hike in the desert near
Almodóvar Chicken, in the void, in the alcove, whichever was which,

suffocating themselves in things, sex, drink, baking powder, the greener segments of this abje-

Her head jerked left, hitting a loose nail dug poorly into the window frame.

'*Ho mo liu geh yum mo...*' she muttered, pulling out her phone, scrutinising yet another e-mail from her sister, her mum,

switching to the flight ticket

the creeping departure time, that very day, less than eleven hours

the rising sun outside

the pretty pastel buildings

the strangeness, the void

Her ambiguity

the potential of it

nonsense Portuguese

a pop-up ad, ambushing her phone screen

the plane icon

departure time, reminders, added benefits, warnings

the cancel flight button.

'*Music, rhythm, riga something,*' she mumbled, rubbing the nascent throb inside her head, half-looking down at the fresh patch of graffiti outside.

'Without end, for no reason.'

CHAPTER 48



A hundred

Two hundred

Ten thousand

I'll kill them all, even in this weakened state.

Poor Fire Hand Zhang, thought Joanna, idly stroking the *Yuki Onna* face on her hoodie, staring at the sentence of the old warrior's death, the feral wolves descending into the pit, clearly not giving much weight to his boast, or caring much if it was flesh or fabric they were tearing off.

Did no one think for even half a second about saving the wretch?

Fire Hand was about him, not self-assigned

honour called for helping lesser enemies

beaten jokes, sudden weaklings

but no, the Red Flower Heroes, in a pit of wolves, just left him there.

The door opened and a Chinese couple wheeled their luggage in, clocking her under the duvet and saying *hi, we're new* in Mandarin.

To head off further conversation, she vetoed *I'm part of the furniture* and gave a muted *hi* back instead, then lifted Gum Yong over her face

returned to Fire Hand Zhang

felt pity, shame

blamed the Red Flower Heroes, Gum Yong,

forgave the wolves.

~~~

In her head, the streets always had a hazy glow round the fringes, the pastel tone of the buildings heavily saturated, the people lively in their limb movements, action mechanics

yet now

in this reality, on this side street

things were ten, twenty per cent diluted.

Drained by a city-sized ghoul.

Self-torpedied.

Phased into a sexless monotone frame.

No Gum Yong. No Varo. No Ernst. No idioms. No *Samaritan Girl*. No *Tat Ming Pair*. No flag on the moon. No vampire porn. No passing trams. No beggars. No baking soda dealers. No Krsnik. No possibility of Krsnik. No Krsnik prints.

No gutter Slovene.

Zero Cantonese.

~~~

Somehow, without consultation of the map, she remembered the way through the half streets and back to the bookshop with the bicycle hanging from the ceiling and

the place looked pretty much the same as it had two years ago.

Nothing missing.

Plenty of customers.

A series of Mario Bava prints on the back wall.

Coffee in a small cup.

Pessoa dolls [voodoo?].

Upstairs, they even had the same archaic Walkman table, with audiobook CDs to insert in and listen to. Hand-made by one of the staff, if she'd sketched the memory right.

She sat down in front of the device, pressed open the lid, and acted out the same gormless expression she'd done in front of Yute Long.

Or tried to.

But there was no way to gauge its similarity.

No one to capture it.

Laugh at it.

Stick it in amber.

In what way was this simil-

~~~

Back at the hostel, she sat down in the main common area and managed around three minutes of the owner and his salvaged girlfriend playing out a video game on the giant projection screen.

A Mario game, not Mario Kart.

Platformer.

Some precision jumps.

It was odd, or to a degree expected, but the hostel owner seemed on edge, as if she would say something about his pervert nature, the stuff he'd let out a week before...two weeks before.

But she wouldn't do that.

Cos he was a silhouette now, a swirl in a morgue-walled nebula, something there, physical, yet without

essence? Soul?

A fully excavated psychology?

~~~

Of course

it was pure nonsense, unsurprising for a newspaper serialisation, the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan slapping, kicking, headbutting a giant pot of rice wine around a teahouse that couldn't possibly afford to pay for the damages

stopping it, drinking from it, devouring, boasting, using the thing as weapon to fling at their friends

and the one guy who may or may not have been an enemy

who wasn't an enemy, as she remembered

but was that right?

Didn't they all get killed at some point anyway? Murdered by the snake man villain?

It had been so long since she'd read that one, and Yute Long knew the story much better than she did, had watched the recent mainland production, remembered the exact lines spoken when Guo Jing and Huang Rong turn up at Peach Blossom Island, remembered the theme tune, the way the villain died, dressed up as Mei Chaofeng for the convention in Wan Chai, dragged her to the exhibition in Tai Wai, the sketches pinned up on huge banners on the museum pillars as Yute Long pranced about in that ridiculous red bandana, the one he'd worn in Ljubljana, the thing that probably still existed somewhere while the rest of him lay in

~~~

Belem was still Belem, nothing much changed.

The coast-side tower they never entered.

That she wouldn't enter now.

The tram lines.

Other, pastel-coloured things.

~~~

She wandered into the park, set on the *wander* aspect, directed by a dried-out Fulci, catatonic, chaotic, melancholic, re-reading e-mails on her phone.

Cancelled? Un-cancel. Haven't seen you in ages. Dad might be gone soon. Mum's depressed. Why are you like this?

Typing out different versions of a reply.

Sending none of them.

Sitting on a rogue bench, pulling out *The Book And The Sword*, reading the Fire Hand Zhang death scene yet again, adding a conscience to the wolves, saving him in his weakened state, in whatever state

noticing the wooden struts of the bench

the slats

remembering the Kim Ki Duk thing she'd forced Yute Long to watch one time, the mute gangster pushing himself on the good-grades model girl, dragging her into prostitution, loving her, beating her, carrying around a shabby mattress in a shabby van, tempting strange men to fuck her on it in a Korean seaside town that looked like Grimsby

Yute Long's reaction at the credits

'Why did she allow that, from the start, from the brothel scene

why not just stab him?'

And her response, half honest, half barbed,

'you're only saying that cos I'm here.'

~~~

Every European city they ended up in would have a Museum of Modern Art and visiting them was vital for other creative aspects

according to Yute Long

*to provoke something seemingly unrelated*

*an open void, a glowing wound*

*transcribable neon trauma*

his words.

Looking at a tangled mess of red string glued to a wall with *Sem Deus* painted in shock yellow/black next to it, Joanna thought of Patrice.

Pictured him pummelling the leg of an easel into the Krsnik's face.

Decapitating it.

Selling the head to Sila.

Singing *Jin Se* in French.

Flying home to his wife, kissing her.

Buying her a muffeen.

~~~

Outside the museum was a small café with one silent couple, the sun already fled to the other side of the street.

Joanna sat at the same table as before, cradling a tiny eucalyptus latte, smoking.

Watched the scenery.

The nearby pond.

Waited for the duck to appear.

Gave it all the time in the world.

Replayed the panic on Yute Long's face, his nervous leg spasms, the protests of *let's move tables, I hate fucking ducks* as it waddled closer and closer and

then the scene shifted

to the bench in Copenhagen, Sila pointing at the water, shouting, 'if you're not gonna answer properly, I'll just look at that duck.'

Probably kiss it too, she thought, blinking back the café, stirring the cold cup of coffee.

Ask it about cabinets.

Make it watch *Star Trek*.

Adopt a demon miracle daughter.

Stick by it when *she* didn't even care if it

~~~

In the hostel dorm, after pulling Fire Hand Zhang out of the pit seventeen times, refashioning his next moves in life, gifting him a remote temple,



burning it, forcing the reality of his death paragraph back on herself, calling him a coward, a wretch

Joanna switched to her phone, searching out whatever popped into her head, whatever had popped in earlier, at any point.

*Krsnik in Lisboa* led to a short story about Krsnik that were clearly avatars for Kümellian vamps.

*Duck attack on human* offered duck attacks on humans.

*Almodóvar endless pit*, nothing, just vapid film crit.

*Old special cabinets in Lisboa*, way too broad, pictures of cabinets on white background, generic cabinets, cabinets used by Fernando Pessoa

and one interesting thing

a *happening-right-now* display of a genuine Sigmund Zois, the cabinet maker himself notorious for vanishing eight years straight, then coming back, out of the blue, claiming he had been off enjoying a quiet village life with abstract qualities.

Where, she asked the screen, clicking on his name, follow-up articles, interviews

but there was no detail, no substance

just somewhere remote.

Off the map.

With abstract qualities.

~~~

Without hesitation, nonchalant even, the monk set himself alight and passively burnt to death on the surrounding lake.

A hundred

Two hundred

Ten thousand

I'll kill them all, even in this weakened state.

The computer screen, the book, active, passive, comfortable bed, cold fume car.

Chinese couple pretending not to fuck under the covers.

At half eight in the evening.

Head telling her seven hundred different things.

The book holding nothing else, done, exhausted, full of words she already knew and didn't want to go back to, Fire Hand Zhang a complete piece of shit anyway, die if you're dying, go out like the good-smelling princess, unrealistic, written by a man, controlled by a man, abandoned by a man

abstract village life quality

somewhere remote

came back after eight years, not a corpse, might be a bottom to it after all

the book, the screen, Monk *and* boat in ashes, pretty mountain backdrop, pastel buildings outside in, revitalised *if* hit with the right light, dark cloud killer

alone wasn't really alone

temporarily buffering

just needed time to spore, to find new things, re-love pastel, eroticise her own skin, talk to someone in Portuguese who wasn't the hostel owner, ditch his *Yuki Onna* hoodie, get oddball friends, cook Chinese dishes, teach Mandarin to people who already knew some words, make enough money to

survive

stay afloat in Lisboa

fill out the streets, cracks, colourise

forget about cabinets, Krsnik

abstract villages, holes.

Sketch a new form.

Colourise it.

Pro-ject.

~~~

Compared to the bed, the duvet, the in-dorm heating, the car was like Pluto  
no, colder

the moon around Neptune, the one Sila said was the coldest in the Solar System.

Wasn't clear why, the temperature outside was moderate, maybe a little breezy, but it didn't matter as she was in there now, engine off,

Gum Yong book on the passenger seat

phone on her lap

mouth muttering, 'Porto, Porto, Porto, Porto.'

Putting keys in the ignition, she looked out the windscreen and watched a homeless man dip a full arm into a nearby bin.

He struggled with something for a while,

a long while

before his arm re-emerged with a grey and black skipping rope.

Or a sex whip.

Either/Or.

Possibly a sign, she thought, turning the keys, pulling out an inch into the side street. Possibly a skipping rope.

But not Hong Kong related.

Not pastel coloured either.

*Porto. Porto. Porto. Porto. Porto...*

She turned the corner at the top of the hill, saying farewell to the supermarket she'd watched for hours from the hostel window, her vigil over the last two weeks, then carried on to the end of the street.

Then onto the highway.

Heading south.

Passing a sign that said Faro - 280km.

'Porto, you fucking lie, fucking nihilist,' she yelled into the windscreen, at the phone, to the book, the universe, Sila, herself.

And kept driving.



Chicken costumed as Frankenstein

Chicken costumed as mermaid

Chicken costumed as Alain Delon

Chicken costumed as matador

Chicken costumed as cyborg

Chicken costumed as cousin chicken in chicken mask

All chicken, all poorly drawn, all poorly inked, all nothing to do with Pedro Almodóvar, who she was starting to suspect wasn't actually the basis of this service station-stroke-restaurant staked out cold in the middle of nowhere.

Following the thought, she pulled up a map of the area on her phone, zoomed in and spat out *Red Sonja in Manville* breath as she saw the word Almodóvar next to her own blue dot.

Well, now it made sense.

To a degree.

Though why was the nearest chicken dressed like the glasses guy from *Re-animator*?

She looked down at the surviving coffee granules in her cup, mostly sludge at the bottom, murky, deformed, then heard a voice in cautious Spanish and looked back up.

One of the staff was trying to wake the old guy sleeping on the table next to the toilets.

And getting nowhere.

Another was mopping the floor near her feet.

Then there was the woman still trying to scrub the stain off the one film poster in the place. Something in Portuguese that, based on the main pic, was an old horror film. Possibly giallo. Had the colour range for it.

Joanna sipped ghost coffee and watched the woman scrub.

If she gets it off

fully off

then I jump.

If only half off

I still jump.

If a complete failure

I sit by the edge and conjure up another bet.

Until I jump.

Something hit her foot, a well-stacked rat, Lego car, one of the chickens come to life, Sila's lopped off, Menoch-possessed hand.

'Sorry...we close now,' said the staff guy, pulling the mop back from her shoe.

'Two more minutes?' she tried, holding up her cup, keeping the rim half covered.

The staff peered down, spotting the dregs, clearly not giving much of a shit.

'Okay,' he replied, mopping off towards his colleague, who had lost patience and was now tapping a fingernail on the sleeping guy's table.

For pure spectacle, delusion, the Gods out there, watching from their black hole mega yacht, she sucked up more coffee residue and lit up her phone.

Brought up the e-mail tab.

Checked the message she'd typed.

Edited *will come back to might*.

Then closed it.

Put the phone in her hoodie pocket.

*His* hoodie pocket.

Looked out the window at the dark stretch beyond.

Said, '... ..' in Cantonese.

Nearby, the scrubbing woman stepped back from the classic horror poster, possibly giallo, and slapped the scrunched-up cloth onto her other palm.

Eighty per cent clean, she thought to herself.

Ninety if you don't squint at it.

Ninety nine if you just want to go home.

*Sim.*

It'll do.

~~~

Nothing is ever completely the same as how you left it, or when you left it
rhizomes, becoming, territory something

but the village with the copy of a copy film boards and stoic El Bar was
doing a fairly decent job.

Probably cos there's no one here, thought Joanna, flicking at the cardboard
Lee Van Cleef chin, then heading off in a zig-zag motif down the same tiny
street where he'd stage-shot three bandits.

The whole thing still seemed strange to her, the fact that there were houses
in this place, functioning rooms and lights and utilities that could take care of
the bin guy she'd seen in Lisboa a few hours earlier, but she didn't soak in it
too much

she couldn't

her brain was cortex-deep in the forthcoming abyss, how deep it truly went,
how far she could descend using the surprisingly sturdy rope

whether or not Sila was stuck in an alcove

surviving off rat flesh

or strips of his own hair

or Søren's hair

or the-

A male shout from the dust ahead broke the OR chain, forcing her into ape instinct. She took out the car keys, slipped them between her fingers and edged towards the side of the nearest house [with boarded-up window].

Another male shout, followed by a female one, then double laughter.

A couple?

She poked her face round the corner of the wall.

Yup, two of them. The stone circle at the end of the street, they were playing there, standing at opposite sides and pretending to shoot each other. Speaking in not English. Or any language she recognised. Having a good time. Acting badly.

Joanna took a transition breath, then relaxed, repocketing the keys.

Could still be a serial killer couple, she warned herself as legs took the rest of her form out into open space and past the stone circle, waving at the man first, then the woman.

Both gawped back, stuck in their own ape instinct, then quickly rebooted and walked over.

'You live here?' the woman blurted out, her accent similar to the staff at Almodóvar Chicken.

'Passing through.'

'I thought you were a... ' the man started, picking at a huge beard that made him look a little Iranian. Maybe Turkish. White pretending to be Turkish.

'Sorry, if I disturbed your play,' she added, cutting him off.

The two of them looked back at the stone circle, taking a few seconds to process things.

Joanna looked the other way, at El Bar.

'Actually, it is just some fun...' continued the woman, turning back first. 'We like the movie this is-...this town is coming from. Fake a lot, but okay.'

'It is clearer in the day time.'

'And we thought, no one else here, good. No, much better at night, for us.'

'More quiet,' added the man, following Joanna's eyes over to El Bar. 'You are here, only you?'

'My husband is in the car. At the service station.'

'Husband?'

'You mean, he lets you-...'

'I left my phone here earlier. That place over there.'

The man glanced again at El Bar, making foreign sounds of uneasiness.

There's a chance, thought Joanna, that they're both about to make an offer to accompany me inside.

Which would mean explanations.

An excuse to go down to the basement alone.

Annoying chivalry.

Tedious reactions to the pit.

More explanations.

'I'll be in and out fast,' said Joanna, gesturing back to the stone circle.
'Please, carry on with your acting.'

'You want us to come, three together?' asked the woman, frowning when Joanna turned her back and started walking towards El Bar, then muttering, 'what the fuck?' in Farsi as the Chinese late night enigma disappeared through the doorway.

'Was that real?' asked the man, half to his partner, half to his own hand.

'Weird village, weird people.'

~~~

Through the Toyen darkness

the Søren-made hole

down the gradual, curving staircase

into the void-cave

the purple mineral deposits sparkling to welcome her back

abyss apathetic

same as it had been

rope fed like meat-string into its mouth, down its throat

no sign of crumbs or blood streaks

of post-fall survival

someone crawling back up and-



Joanna knelt down by the edge, took hold of the rope, shook on it.

'Sila.'

Not a whisper, but not loud enough to startle the foreigners above ground.

'Sila.'

More shaking of the rope.

'Sila.'

More silence.

Letting go, she told herself not to get any closer to the edge then sat down, shifting her ass around until her legs were comfortably dangling out into the abyss. In silence, she scratched at the Yuki Onna face on her-...on his hoodie...that she had to give back, peering at the edge opposite.

Just a chamber.

Eerie.

Deserted.

Cavern with natural lights, mineral deposits.

Accidental mystical glow.

Grapes are purple too.

College student hair.

Eggplant.

Nothing watching.

No such thing as the devil.

Abysses don't have eyes.

Wormholes don't have souls, intent.

No fear in a drop.

Sila did it.

Søren did it.

Did it before you.

Billions have died on this rock.

Billions.

They're already beyond, on the next step, and what's left on this one?

Gum Yong. A job you can't stand. But will stand. Forty. Fifty. No kids.  
Brain turned to sludge. More and more distance between you and the ones  
who've already gone ahead, advanced to something more

something fresh.

Chaotic.

Different.

She took out her phone, looked around at the chamber, the purple mineral  
deposits dug into the wall.

All this renovation, structural work  
couldn't be for nothing.

The pit.

A drop, but not the end of things.

The end of her body but

*mo*

not the end.

A whole dug-out pit, rope fed down the side.

Krsnik in the castle.

Aswang underground, an entire complex, unknown.

Sila and his cabinets.

Søren and her

*Mo*

*Mm hai zun geh.*

Didn't have to be the end.

Perhaps the end.

End of what?

Drop, you coward.

Drop.

Drop.

Drop.

After three more seconds, drop.

Couple more scans of the chamber, the abyss, shout outs to Sila, then drop.

The e-mail, responsibility...

A few more minutes.

Then drop.

Breathing out air, willpower, ether, dust-fatigue, Joanna swiped onto the e-mail tab and re-checked her crypto-suicide note.

*'Ming, sorry for the failed flight home. Need time by myself. Maybe a lot of time. Might come back at some point but don't know when. Will let you know. Tell mum and dad I'm okay.'*

She read through it seven, eight, twenty-four times, putting a chokehold on the urge to just throw it in the hole and then herself after it

try to catch it on the way down

catch up to it

create some kind of challenge that would distract her long enough to

'What the fuck...' came from somewhere behind, female, heavily accented, followed by something male in another language.

Joanna turned

then turned again, reaching out a hand as her phone went the other way

downwards

dropping out of shot and

*mo*

fuck

she was going too

off the edge and

Her other hand scrambled, flailed, got hold of part of the rope, tore off skin as it tightened, stopped herself plunging into nothingness.

*Cries from above, wah, are you okay? Where are you? Give your hand, please, quickly.*

But she was already halfway in

and her hand was stinging

and what else was there?

Porto?

Alone on a bed, reading Gum Yong?

Meet again, here, in sixteen years?

Don't fucking do it.

Don't drop.

Not like this.

Not in a random pit.

'Your hand...up...please.'

'*Mm hai zun geh,*' she muttered back, looking down, away from the voices

leaving the rope behind

covering her head

letting the void take her

somewhere abstract, new, inventive, green

*Reanimator* green

with



# CHAPTER 50

## VOID HELENISM

Being framed in darkness, in complete darkness, could be survived psychologically, mentally for about forty eight seconds, but when it still didn't end after that time, when you stopped bracing for the ground you assumed was imminent, then you had no choice but to detach from object-end-finality and start inventing your own frames.

That is what *Solaris* was about  
on some level.

~~~

First frame, unprovoked

ship cabin from Genoa to Barcelona, slow slug walk from bed to bathroom to beach with the demon biting her way back into their business to the aswang floating head to the Krsnik wretch to

~~~

Second, third, fourth frames sketch Sila plus arguments, that fucking space show he watched all the time, the walk down the autobahn, the cabinet pics on his screen, his claim that this one was *the* one, her open tab of Ljubljana city centre, pleas for silence, obedience

directing him towards the tree  
hiding behind a red-soaked castle wall  
apologetic, enthused  
desperate  
blood dripping from Denzel Washington's neck  
French from all angles  
Tak offering up a bag of *grey vasic*, even though it never came in bags  
offering again, with knife  
and again and again and again and  
again with different weapons, different smiles, in different European  
settings before switching via jump-cut to Hong Kong  
Yute Long, her and a tiny couch  
enduring TVB  
laugh-weeping at the vampire flinging a Dutch thief off that bridge in  
Amsterdam using only his eyes  
Yute Long slurring  
'I think this might be worse than the time travel drama.'  
linked to  
'Why did she hide in the trunk?'  
linked to  
'He had a stroke yesterday, how can he fight?'  
linked to  
'why do the gay characters always die?'  
linked to

~~~

Reality returned
the fall
the void

ground-death absent, consumed by

-she stretched out an arm, touching nothing-

no longer a hole

but space

pure stitched-up space

curving out in all directions, cushioning her velocity, which had to have been somewhere close to light speed at some point of the fall, giving a stark, primal sense of circularity

and she could breathe

blink

see and comprehend wisps of green to the far left, particles grouping together in jagged spurts

a 1912 to 2012 duration vid with two thirds of the frames skipped

distorting outwards, at odd angles

impossibility angles

schism mechanics

dissipating as she drifted close and reforming again into loops that in her head functioned as cosmic ley lines

a thousand druids popping up and nodding

told you so

then imploding

sucked back into arbitrary guesswork

reforming elsewhere

nodding in circular charms

imploding

reforming abstract, white square

vibrating white

imploding

dotting *their* terrain

surfing through and outside her head

leaving ley line stamps and IOUs and

the whole green muon mess continued on, no exit gate in sight, no
LEAVING HONG KONG sign propped up whore-like at the airport mirage,
which made sense in her fluid state

ends were for Fukuyamas, cowards

this was location-less

beyond the curtain drop that she couldn't even picture the stage of

or the faces of

green sloth

succubus intrigue

spider animus lit at departure slope, standing for Gum Yong, rigid when
confronted by

16 years in HIS abyss, a bad one

valid

synth as green shadow dance, pinch pinch hand-skin

regression a personal dig

boss for one mission only, quite strict, icy

no red tree

spacial as it gets

not dead but back as clone

got milk

green close viable

voluble

her own version of sex with it

dry bones

feverish go west east north downward

keep going

keep going

keep going keep going keep going keep going keep on going keep goine
keep goin keep

banned for one Bavan week

sister formatting

Ming in a

ferry even Hell can't accept

swish right up to face comfort if you squint

fucked in the Reichstag

simulacrum

Sevilla hole hostel fridge catacombing gift shop hierarchy glow green
gregarious

82% anger

with what kind of miracle child a girl that strong
ableist

her velocity's better than mine

Rectitude

don't understand up to relay station absorbed by yellow muon blob

muon muon mooooooo on muon muon juon muon

floating long blue way to Alpha Centauri

painless

harmless fruitless legless

Viy-less

orb-less

friendless

how hard

how fast

stage light or spotlight, nascent

fit for an ant

no cockroach

rat

frozen fox

Yute Long's dog on a dragon boat

is that

~~~

Pulling arms in at the sides, Joanna assumed a standing-while-floating state and focused on the small circle of light slowly growing bigger to her left

drawing more central too

or maybe that was her body straightening out

or the space-tunnel thing around her

aiming towards a target.

That's what it feels like, she thought, noticing the faint form of another human below and to the right, barely the outline of them

and then nothing

their ghost-like trace dissipating like the green streaks above, replaced gradual by dark clouds and pale pink sky

crayoned in by god-hand

that wasn't god cos gods weren't there

a universe hand

filling in the place where she would soon splatter.

Or perhaps not.

There was still no air rushing up past her, and it didn't feel like she was falling fast and

the circle below

that she could now see was hyping rocky desert terrain

a shameless copy of Almodóvar

was spiralling

radiating waves of it's okay, no impact here and

somehow

for some abject reason

most parts of her brain believed it cos there were more ghost forms  
circulating, nebulous human faceology with the same calm as hers, and if they  
weren't panicked then neither was she

and even if it was rocky, even if those other faces weren't real

it would be quick

just like Sila and Søren and

the green ride that had got her there, the space-scape she'd got to see, the  
padded fall, the lack of fear as

the environment completed itself

the ground beckoned

the air breathed

her body



Not Tai O exactly

but shacks on stilts, waterless, counterfeit desert lifted from Almodóvar  
Chicken outskirts, totems with flashing lilac light, beam communication  
system, mountain face with cut-out alcove for the local baron to dwell

no sign of baron security, thugs

air particles sparse

avoiding her mouth, nose, that's what it felt like, moving her face, amber-  
stuck, then her arms, legs, fingernails, crawling over the weird rough dirt,  
trying to

'... ..'

She dropped back down, gasping for atoms, head tilted towards the hazy  
structures nearby.

There had to be someone

a guard, lookout of some sort

farmer, farmer kids, desperate cows

wayward Almodóvar Chicken staff

Sila Søren sheriff alien outreach

'Machine,' she mumbled in Cantonese, rolling up her eyelids another  
millimetre.

Vision or vision-esque, maybe real, but

was it?

From where?

No idea, no way to answer, no choice but to observe as, in the middle of what looked from her eyes like the town square, oval-shaped and barren, a large pale-green orb rose up out of the dirt, and sprouting out of that orb was a white totem with blinking purple lights on top and, as it got higher, a small valve slid open and fired out something small and mechanical, possibly a drone-dart.

Joanna felt a sting on her neck, took a non-raspy breath, a series of them just to make sure, then closed her eyes and counted out one slow minute.

Opened them again and saw the exact same terrain. Same pointless shacks on stilts, albeit not as dishevelled as she'd first thought, hallucinated. Quite sleek, actually, now that she wasn't suffocating and could sharpen her sight better.

And the green orb, the purple flashing lights, both were gone now, back into the dirt and

she didn't know how

the abyss, the drop, the space tunnel, the spectral human shapes holding her hand as she neared the ground, the no splatter no feel impact

but here she was

in a town or village three quarters the same as the place she'd just left, not within the hidden Crowley basement, but a Jodorowsky oval-square forum, rough dirt sand, pastel coloured tiles, bone white totems, edifices that were human-familiar in shape yet surrealised on top, at the sides, various kinds of tubes, walkways, platforms, all linking the shacks together as a total communal organism, with different coloured orbs hovering above like exiled chimneys.

Taking it all in three, four, seventeen times, Joanna stretched her legs out, rotated her ankles, amazed nothing was broken from the infinite fall, then got to her feet and did a quick perimeter of the square.

There didn't seem to be anyone else around, the forum tiles and maybe-benches were all empty, and now she was up close, she could see that none of the shacks had doors or windows.

It's weird I didn't notice that before, she thought, deciding almost straight away that it wasn't a big deal, she'd just been overwhelmed

or distracted by the hovering orbs

and that was sufficient to mollify her heart beat, possibly the pulse too if she had one, mollify everything until she looked up at the orbs again and this time noticed the sky and the three moons beyond it. And the billion stars or so beyond those. And the Dadaist interpretation of the Northern Lights encompassing that.

'... ..'

Staggering backwards or gasping would have been expected, but she'd seen too much for that, and

an alien planet

okay

at least it wasn't death, or a pocket within death where she could still fear it, feel nothing from it, write zaum poetry about it, Ghana Gha na eke something

no, it was firm ground, with air she could now breathe and

the only thing it needed really was life

Sila Søren all/either

language companionship

skin.

That thought carried her around another lap of the oval-square, the air poked out of it by the internal recreation of her journey, the idea of falling down and being spat back up, dropping from a sky with three moons, landing in a place that looked like a Varo feast, not human, defiantly unhuman inhuman

yet there she was

walking around its flesh

alive

alone

wherever whatever the hell it was.

~~~

The concept of three moons really was a tough one to shake, which seemed odd as she didn't even like space, had no desire to live on a different planet, even if there was a type of infrastructure already set up and the aliens were friendly and broadly left wing, she'd never wanted to go up there or out there

but now that she *was* there, clearly on a different planet, a billion, trillion miles from Portugal, she couldn't stop thinking, how?

If it was a wormhole then why wasn't it in space?

How could it be dug into the ground?

Why was the entrance in the Portuguese desert?

How was she able to breathe here?

The dart-drone?

Constructed by who?

Why did the buildings look vaguely Portuguese?

There were no answers to any of them, not without a pocket scientist or

Ah, wait...

Taking out the miraculously undamaged phone from her dusty *Yuki Onna* hoodie...no, Sila's *Yuki Onna* hoodie...she checked the signal and, unsurprisingly, there was none, not even one bar, though she could still play *cabucabu*, which was valuable

if it turned out this place didn't have internet

or life.

She sat down on a section of wall near where the green orb had appeared and looked around again. Tried to make sense of the tubing linking each shack together. The parts of it that broke off and spiralled upwards at erratic angles. The orbs hovering above, most of them dimmed of colour, dormant. The shack on its own that she hadn't noticed earlier, giant citrine yellow *Prisoner* balls attached to its primary façade. The mountain lurking as backdrop, with an alcove halfway up. The faint purple blotches scattered across its jagged slope.

There was purple in the hidden basement too, she thought, focusing tighter on the alcove. Mineral slashes on the walls of the passageway, all the way up to the pit. The abyss. The portal. But that purple wasn't artificial like-

She stopped.

There was a humming noise from outside the oval-square, at first soft and distant, then, stark and dominant, like a gargantuan bee with an amplifier on its wings.

What the King of Hell was that?

Natural?

She held in breath and waited, doing the ear equivalent of squinting. What was the word for that? She didn't know, even in Cantonese.

Wait,

the humming noise again, louder.

'Sila?' she said, failing to match its volume.

There was a chance it wasn't him, but then again, there was a bigger chance that it was, after all he'd gone down the same pit she had, him and Søren, why wouldn't they end up in the same place?

Another deafening hum, and this time she got up and walked towards it, out of the square and onto a path-less slope, with the occasional patch of lava red grass offering comfort distraction.

'Silaaaaaaa...' she said, basically a shout.

No answer and no more humming noise.

She kept walking, looking back at the doorless shacks and hovering orb chimneys she'd left behind, making sure they hadn't vanished on her.

Nope, still there.

'Silaaaaaaa' she tried again, turning once again to the slope ahead.

No response.

The legs kept going, giving her another ten minutes before they would pivot and head back to properly explore the alien shacks, maybe the alcove on the mountain face too.

If she could climb up there.

Between Sila calls, she bent down and plucked blades of red grass from the dirt, briefly wondering if it would be toxic for her skin, then deciding, for no real reason, that it wouldn't and quickly picked some more.

After seven or eight minutes, the red grass dried up and a cliff appeared. An intermittent stretch of half-destroyed white wall running along the edge, purple lines of light slashed into the sides.

It looked a little bit like the mineral deposits back in the cave, but this time intentional. The series of uneven wall-track ran all the way to the clearing directly in front of her, a thirty, forty metre space of rock and dirt.

Standing there, lonely as a panda next to a robot panda, was a stone arch, a bell hanging down from the centre, and a spinning axel perched on top, with two purple dots blinking weak light at both ends.

Was axel the right word?

Hard to know, engineering wasn't something she'd ever studied, but she did recognise that the broken wall was strangely distant from the town it was protecting, or had once protected.

If that was its function?

Maybe not, it was pretty far. Almost a kilometre, if her internal map was working right.

She looked back at the orbs and shacks in the near distance, to double-check, and then up towards the mountain overlooking the whole area.

Okay, maybe not that far.

'... ..?'

She spun quickly, tracking the voice and seeing absolutely nothing except vague alien landscape and a glowing purple orb, about the size of a basketball, hovering under the stone arch, with a tinier, paler version of itself doing electron-like circles around it.

'... ..?'

Joanna stared at the thing. She couldn't help it. A purple orb was making sounds at her. Communicating. Singing. Yelling. Rapping in a Helix Nebula dialect.

Was this real?

'... ..?'

She squinted, muttering an instinctive *wah* in Cantonese.

'... ..?'

She had no idea what it was saying, the sounds didn't appear to be aggressive, not like Korean Russian Mongolian Klingon Tellarite

yet it was also pulsating random bursts of deep purple and possibly staring at her and

no, wait, it was lightening again, almost as pale as its little electron cousin

okay, that was good

was it?

Maybe lighter was bad, a threat

maybe it was tricking her into lowering her guard before it

'... ..!'

no it wasn't

the orb was moving towards her, wisps of purple fog now spilling out and forward from its main body, alien haze, poisonous, absorbent...

'Back...' she slurred in deranged Cantonese, pulling her *krsic* blade out, pointing it at the misty purple death trap.

With cyborg cat reflexes, the orb stopped.

'Stop moving.'

'I have already stopped,' it said, in clear Cantonese, the voice seeming to emanate from a sound system within its misty jacket.

'What?'

'You still wish to stab me?'

'Cantonese...how...'

'Sorry, I thought you were from somewhere else. But now that you've spoken, things should be smoother.'

'What?'

She lowered the knife slightly.

'It's quite annoying as I've just gone through the whole greeting ritual in another language, specifically for your type. Ah well, can't be changed. I assume you have just arrived? Via the Portugal portal, correct?'

'Who are you? How are you-...'

'Perhaps you're looking for the human and wild *ax-form* who came through a few days back?'

'What?'

'Ah, *what* again. That is no good. No good at all. Gonna have to accelerate things a little, I think.' The orb drifted forward, its mist passing through her knife without effect, then reaching up and swirling spiral patterns around her scalp. 'Close your eyes if you are sensitive to strobe lighting.'

'What are you doing?' She tried to put the knife against the orb's main body, but it wasn't in her hand anymore. 'Stop.'

The orb flashed purple on its left hemisphere as it hovered near her neck, its mist expanding over her forehead, eyes, cheeks, mouth and then the air beyond, colonising until everything was lilac and tiring and



Green text on the health guidelines

green skin on the Kontolian

green laser fire

green exhaust fumes

before the reactor blew

green mood from Captain Wong

green assistant engineer

green cum

turned pale-green

oxidised wiped up and replaced by

cartoon green particles

up to her knees and rising, a trigger going off in her brain, hand-dragging her back to this shade of reality, putting her face to face with the same purple orb that god knows how many minutes, hours, days earlier had absorbed itself into her mass and

it wasn't purple sparkles engulfing her

they were green

why?

Ignorant or non-telepathic, the purple orb flexed some of its mist leftwards and spelt out a list in cloud particles. The heading text: Frequently Asked Questions [that may not be asked].

What is this place?

Who are you?

What are you?

Where's my friend/lover/sibling/parents/actor/pet/prey?

What's this green stuff around my legs?

Why is it rising?

Is it sentient?

How did I get here?

Where is here exactly?

Can my species and your species fuck?

Are those really three moons?

Joanna finished reading the list and tried to go back and double check, but the particles appeared to be linked directly to her neural cortex, re-dispersing into the purple mass, leaving her with nothing fresh to ask except, will this hurt?

'The process will be relatively fleeting. In tube, it is a mode of transportation. Please, no follow-ups. This is an interview. I will be the question master.'

'Interview for what?' Joanna managed, eyes pointed down at the green specks swirling round her chest.

'Do you often take ferries?'

'Ferries?'

'Is Cantonese superior to Mandarin?'

'I don't-...why are you asking me that?'

'Do you consider all Japanese people to be thieves?'

'Hello? Why did you just ask me if-...'

'Is aluminum real to you or your species?'

'Okay, great. Another question.'

'Time is objectively slow, ne?'

'This is *ho mo liu*.'

'Krsnik keep victims alive in their lairs for up to two years.'

'You don't even care if I answer...'

'Mimicry is not respect.'

'Do you?'

'Pink and orange are the same colour.'

'Where's my friend, Sila?'

'Fishfinger in a koi pool.'

'The human guy who came here a few weeks ago. Have you seen him?'

'In some cases, acrobats cheat. Agreed?'

'Can you at least tell me what this green stuff is?'

'Humans take damage every two frames.'

'Before it-...'

Joanna suspected she wouldn't be able to finish the line and that there would be some irony to that, very light irony, not significant in any way, and she was right, the green funnelled itself into a narrower stream of mist and conquered her throat in one shot, popping back out her ears and nostrils and quickly consuming the rest of her face.

Sucking in a fireman's breath didn't help.

'Transfer time,' said the purple orb, bobbing a slow orbit around her now green and wispy head. 'I'm Drrrrrv-Rrrrvrrkd by the way. Don't try to pronounce it. *Chut fah!*'

~~~

Two windmill totems in the distance

one dull indigo

the other bright lilac

both shifting in jagged flow as the green mist she was entrenched within drifted forward, aiming it seemed for a dome structure in between

the lilac windmill brightening as she grew close

a kind of burnt temple smell hitting her nostrils

an electronic theme

sounded like vapour-wave, only with motorbike revs disrupting the flow and

Drrrrrrrv rrrdddrvkd floating to the side and then ahead as a circle opened on the surface of the dome and pulled them both inside on invisible rope.

A voice without audio sounded out

informing her that she was safe now, safe within the Immigration Garden Waiting Dome, and there should be bracing of the self as a reunion was imminent.

Sila, she thought, picturing his body attached to Yute Long's head

then correcting

to a tall silhouette, her brain fluxxxxxxxed beyond all alien green shit wrapped up in her ten billion atoms and up quarks and dry muon sub-flakes and white hole at the centre of her essence that kept insisting she was dead, deluded, dying, didactic, and this green and purple dance would-

An electronic boom, ending the drift.

She floated, waited, adjusted her hopes back to the more likely form of Sila, and perhaps Søren, if the little monster hadn't killed him already.

Just like in her thoughts, a silhouette appeared.

In a room with pale green slashes on the walls.

And another silhouette, smaller.

Søren?

She tilted her head redundantly and saw that, no, it was herself, a little too short, and the other silhouette was Sila, the light showing both to be straw-stuffed dummies, like the Romulan back in Cesky Krumlov.

A ridiculous sight.

Two obvious dummies that didn't look even a tiny bit like the humans they were supposed to represent.

What was this? A play?

'Focus-discipline,' transmitted the purple orb, partially obeyed.

The light deepened

an invisible force moving both figures closer and closer and closer and closerrrr until they collided and

that was a hug?

That was not a fucking hug.

Nope.

Not fucking either.

Her head jerked back, as did her dummy's, one in disbelief, the other potentially being eaten out by Sila bot and

another dummy, tiny, blonde hair

yanking at both their hands,

poking its face between their hips and

'Reunion complete,' announced the purple orb.

Joanna made a guttural sound in Cantonese, checking that her vocal chords were still active, then followed up with, 'what the King of Hell was that?'

'Now for further focused discipline.'

'Were those dummies supposed to be-...'

The words vanished from her throat and her head stiffened as the room darkened into a ruthless, edgeless void.

It stayed that way for several minutes.

Then the purple orb spoke, saying it felt sorry for her re: its native name, and from now on, would allow her to call it by its secondary title, Engineer Many.

Joanna tried to say okay, but there was no voice amplifier.

And Engineer Many was telling her to focus-discipline again.

'Try not to compare any of this to your human surrealists, that would be very offensive. And, yes, that includes the Varo creature.'

A strange line, she thought, fixing eyes on what she suspected was the centre of the ruthless, edgeless void, visualising a small white dot in the distance, spiralling almost imperceptibly towards her.

At first she thought it may have been an hallucination

but then it grew to the size of a melon

a basketball



a Mongolian wrestler's head

and she knew it was authentic.

'Focus-discipline,' Engineer Many repeated, an echo effect making it twenty-odd per cent more mesmeric.

And that's what she did.

Not bothering to wonder why.

No point.

It was either too alien to comprehend or bleakly mundane or purple orb trolling or, at worst, an eye test.

Nothing else.

~~~

Time was objectively slow

and ungovernable

ending only when the white dot showed pattern

the radioactive face of Jupiter

manic, above it all

and after that the room was lit purple again. A very soft purple. Then it filtered out completely until a normal person would've believed it ghost white. But not actually ghost white. Just white. Like shopping mall walls.

In the corner to the left was Sila.

Søren parked just behind.

Joanna felt her feet touch floor and was about to walk forward when Engineer Many told her to stop.

'Watch first.'

'Sorry?'

'To drain the emotion out.'

She didn't really understand what the purple orb meant but there was an invisible forcefield backing it up so all she could do was stand there and watch.

It was a short play.

The Sila character moving forward, stiff arm movements, head spasms, shaking the hand of the Joanna character.

Then tipping his head and saying, 'good to see you again, Joanna. What are you doing here?'

'I also fell down the portal hole.'

'Oh. That is odd. And insane. I cannot believe that you have followed me here.'

'We are together now. It is part of the past.'

'Yes. We will move on.'

'Great idea.'

The two performers, that Joanna guessed were holograms as every now and then they would buffer, leaned in for a kiss then turned to Søren and beckoned her to join them.

With glowing purple eyes, the demon child acquiesced.

Then the curtain came down.

A literal one, dark purple.

And Joanna was left in a space with grey haze instead of walls, blinking at Engineer Many floating the outline of an infinity loop sign to the right of her.

'You have been suitably flattened.'

'Err...should I speak?'

'Now you are ready to function within the Garden Dome.'

'With Sila?'

'Look behind.'

It wasn't transmitted like a command, but she interpreted it as one, her body rotating in three awkward turns, until she could see Sila and Søren sat inside two luminous green rings

or hovering inside

it wasn't quite clear from her current position.

'I will leave for privacy reasons,' said Engineer Many, receding backwards and up into the ceiling then out of sight completely as the lights in the space grew brighter and then dimmer and then evened out into a normal, slightly

pale-green glow on dark grey walls, not that different from Iranian nightclubs back on Earth.

'Welcome to immigration,' said Sila, lifting himself out of the ring, moving over towards her.

'I didn't-...' started Joanna, but there was nothing beyond that as Sila absorbed her in his arms and mumbled, 'can't believe you're fucking here, in my *Yuki Onna* top,' and then just, 'can't believe it,' over and over until words phased into sounds and sobs and

~~~

Riding the air currents outside the dome

Engineer Many drifted

reflecting on its performance, the surprising lack of irritation at the new human's expressions, the disgust of potential merging, violence of the heart, delusion, grey primitive activity without full understanding of cosmic ley lines

was this worth it?

A whole dome for these...things?

It drifted on, over the induction village and its semi-human design, the orb chimneys, up the slope of the base mountain, into the alcove, through the REV-Detection Field, down into the filter room and

what do you think, comrade? it asked, stopping next to a cratered stain of purple flesh on the far wall, flashing a darker shade of lilac on its left hemisphere as it took in its previous work.

There was no answer.

Could never be.

The telepathic stem was dead.

Mush.

A slew of particles spun near the console nearby, attracting Engineer Many towards it.

The purple orb read the message, shedding mass.

*Are there new arrivals?*

Yes.

But no.

No.

Definitely no.

'False alarm,' it replied, swirling some of its own mist onto the console.  
'Another stray armadillo. No damage.'

It paused, forming brief rhizomes of its existing tendrils.

*Mashed bone. Flesh liquid. Eye sport. Spine music.*

Then swirled again.

'Nothing beyond this to report. Finish.'

# CHAPTER 53



V naslednjem kabinetu se bo pojavil

V naslednjem kabinetu se bo pojavil

V naslednjem kabinetu se bo pojavil

V naslednjem kabinetu se bo pojavil

V naslednjem kabinetu

Not sure this is what you want for your database.

Bad night's sleep, I guess.

Sorry.

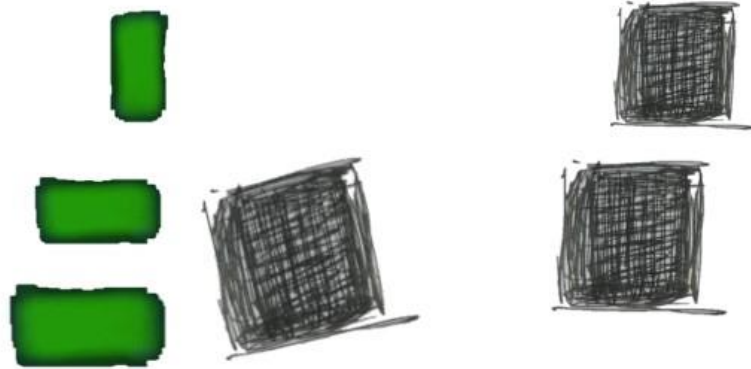
Don't even like cabinets.

Ignore.

Wonder what Joanna's typing?



picture words dense, weird, not unlike the Gundex Gudexxx nute language system, minus strafe auxiliaries. Definite auxiliaries? Org-zil-lee-air-reez or org-zi-luh-reez? Say it fast, no anxiety. Or don't say it at all.



in Krsnik years, seven

cave function not functional like other cave type

still alive conscious

aware doing small movements to cave exit

half skeleton but alive

definite alive

more alive than Li Kah Sing than chess uncle 3am dad fortune in gutter no job hair face legs

declared absent phoneless

Danish fucking thing chained to ankle

Boyfriend sometime

No future doubt this is real

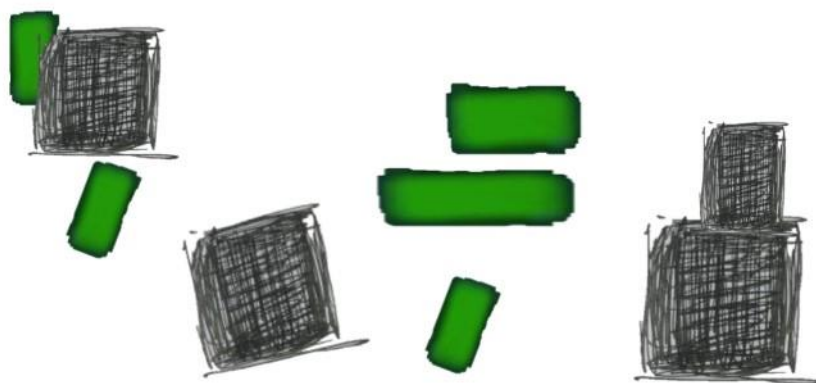
real immigration

more Cantonese more weeding plant toxic lie

sketch to feeling to zero

*Hai mm hai zun geh?*

Truly?



Not defensive yet

Defensive

Pre-empt > cultural/excused

4-tone death shade > proof

Purple in name only/better this method/aggravation level low

Alcove maintenance > 90% ME

Rectitude is the X word

Call committee > 3-tier abstract > call ME liar to face

Humans > not grey issue/experimental

Revision of Vrrrrrt Jrrrrlrrrb activities

THEY experimental'd thousands

Good humans > rare as Kaxxxium

Fault outside

Irrelated

~~~

Ni najslabši kraj za ustvarjanje družine

Søren se zdi bolj udoben tukaj

Joanna je morda skočila v luknjo zame

ali je?

Delete.

You don't care.

We don't.



Alcove > one sentry capable resilient

Deal with humans

Watch humans/deal with THEY/deal with THEY/deal with THEY/deal with THEY/deal with THEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

Curate neutralise > historical approved

THEY tried to end ME

Defensive >



i den røde cirkel bøjer jeg mig for dyret, der ser mig i øjnene, køber mig en rød cirkel t-shirt, tager sig tid til at skrælle min hud, forstår nogle aspekter af min form og figur, men jeg er ude af stand til dette på alle niveauer, lagdelt for at bide i folk, der måske gør bedre ting en dag, og det er okay, jeg kan bide det moralske, men hvad med lilla og runde? Er det et mål? Jeg ved, vi holder øje med hinanden. Det er øjne i det skjulte hul. Gå forsigtigt og roligt, søg efter de mennesker, jeg tror, de har opbevaret. Måske en allieret? Afvis denne tanke.

~~~

Lit technically

Yet still dark somehow

Alien aesthetic?

Put a cabinet here and I'd open it in a heartbeat.

Lights or no

That is the curse of this thing

Family should mean

~~~

Routine is routine is routine is routine

by choice

not this theme park witch horror dome

weeding dark pink stem plants

typing out Chinese Slovene not Danish

sketching for emotional upkeep only shapes and green

alien meditation technique

on whose word?

Engineer Many...is suspiciously unaligned
to anything

any other purple orb being.

What's more, there are cameras in this place.

Certain of it.

Søren looks certain of it too.

Blanker face, roving eyes.

Does she know what this is?

Not Immigration but

what?



Skin like dirt

Touch > retch

Parasite on its worst day over THEY

More task/duration input weeding sketch etc.

Give opportunity > essential code

Not all humans



luči so na tem mestu nekoliko šibke.

Priporočam večjo moč.

Je

Is that enough for today?

Engineer Many?

You over there?

Or is that a very large grape I'm looking at?

Wah, glowing too

Engineer Many?

Ah, it is you. For a second there, I thought you were a floating grape. You probably heard that. Don't know if you're aware of what a grape is.

Doesn't matter.

I've finished typing for the day.

Going to see Joanna and Søren in the plant zone.

Any sign of the others yet?

No?

Soon.

Okay.

That's *kmalu* in Slovene if you're curious.

Soon.

Kmalu.

Yeah, still sounds human. I suppose.

Don't know.

How do you say it?





zakaj je skočila v luknjo?

za ljubezen?

osamljenost?

Long pauses were objectively frowned upon, but Sila stopped anyway, staring into the pale green orb he was inputting Slovene into, trying to make sense of his own questions.

Those three weeks, was she lonely?

A gradual slide into it, or an attempt to lift up out of it?

Was it a knowing slide?

Had she really wanted to fuck last night or was it simply programmatic? A solitude reflex?

She'd sucked him off, he'd licked a bit, come inside her, that hadn't happened before. That meant something. But then she'd put the pillow over her face when he was inside her. Made some moaning noises, not very convincing.

Talked afterwards.

What is this place, when are the others coming, what's with the toxic plant and language inputting, it's kind of like an Ernst-designed prison, the usual stuff.

A sharp flash of green, followed by that odd vibration on the inside of his eye sockets.

Sila refocused, typed out more Slovene.

Glanced at Joanna's reflection in the haze of his input orb.

She wasn't far, just a few feet away, snug in the oversized *Yuki Onna* hoodie, swiping something something something in Cantonese.

He squinted, trying to read the impossible.

And even if he could make out the words, he wouldn't know what they meant. Or what was actually a word. One character or two? Demarcated by what punctuation? A comma?

It was beyond him

Beyond Fulci too.

But not Engineer Many and his amazing translation machine.

Which, when he actually took off the alien gloss and thought about it, wasn't that amazing. Nothing that google translate couldn't do too.

Maybe a little better at idioms, but-

Another flash of green, another subtle purr of his eyes.

He turned back to his own language, typing out, 'probably thinking how to get out of immigration before the cops come.'

Then, 'what the hell is that forcefield doing to Søren's head? Why the pulsating drill sound every minute or so?'

Right on cue, the sound struck again, his own orb buffering a little as the lights dimmed and the whole room gave off the faint vibe of a Cold War fallout shelter.

Then things steadied and

from her mid-air perch in the centre of the room

Søren muttered something in old Danish.

Or old Demon.

A mythological version of *my fucking head hurts*.

'What is that thing doing to my miracle daughter?' he typed in Slovene, shifting his legs as he did it and chancing a look at the little blonde thing strung up ropeless in the dark pink light field.

'According to Engineer Many...or EM...it's not intrusive,' said Sila later, as both he and Joanna swerved another zig-zag corner on the maze-like terrain of the immigration roof. 'Just an alternative way of extracting the knowledge inside her brain. Cos she won't type anything in the language input orbs. Don't know if I totally believe it though. That drill sound is pretty sinister.'

Joanna bit at her own top lip, then took his *Matjaž* hoodie sleeve and pulled him onto the end curve of the track they were walking, the same track they had been instructed to walk four times each day, apparently to maintain their physical condition.

'But then, she doesn't seem to mind going in there...into the light field thing. So it can't be that bad. Can't be harming her at least. Unless it has some kind of hypnotic element to it.'

The curve grew zig-zags turns again, forcing them to pay more attention to where their bare feet were treading.

Luckily, the floor was sponge-like, with no sign of stray pebbles or cut glass to injure them.

'I guess it doesn't matter really. The other orbs will turn up soon.'

Joanna stopped, one foot on the track, the other on blood red grass.

'What is it?'

'Feels like a prison.'

'The roof?'

'In the movies, where they do exercise in the yard. And the sky...it's different. Sometimes there are three moons, other times, only two.'

'Could be orbital irregularity or something.'

'And the dorm, at night time. I'm sure EM was watching us last night. While we were having sex.'

'Is that why you put the pillow over your face?'

'The whole place, this scenario. Doesn't feel right. Like the entire planet is fake somehow.'

'Background scenery does look a bit matte.'

Joanna took her foot off the blood red grass and started walking on the track again.

'But, ja, doesn't matter either way. We're stuck here until the others arrive, pretty much. Which isn't the worst thing in the world. This world. At least EM's not eating us or anything. Or sticking probes up our ass.'

'EM the Considerate,' Joanna mumbled, eyes on the possible matte construction in the distance, then up to the three moons sketched faint on hazy pink sky.

~~~

Don't draw a cabinet

Don't draw a cabinet

Don't draw a cabinet

Don't draw a dark shape coming out of a cabinet

Don't draw a dark shape with glowing green eyes coming out of a cabinet

Don't draw a

Sila stopped, black pen hovering.

The sheen of clear particles that functioned in an almost identical fashion to a regular white board sat below, waiting patiently to be ruined.

Green shapes, black shapes, any combination, any placement.

To release and display feeling.

On some sub sub sub sub level of consciousness that Jung probably thought was ancient Sumerian.

Don't think, just sketch.

Those were Engineer Many's words before the start of each session. That and nothing else. No explanation of the psychology behind the task. Not even a remark to patronise them, like, 'it's too advanced for humans to comprehend.'

Don't think, just sketch.

Don't think, just input Slovene.

Don't think, just cut weeds off this toxic plant.

Don't think, just lie down, fuck each other.

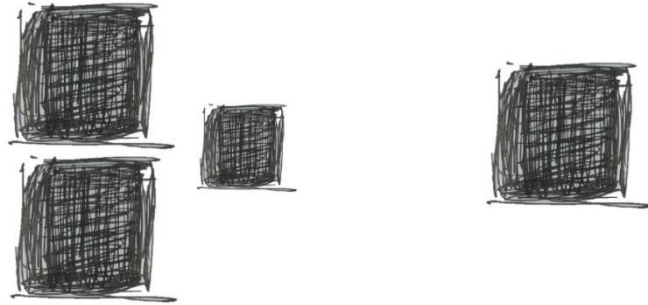
While I secretly watch.

Sila shivered, then laughed as he pictured EM in a raincoat, leering through a peep hole cut into a painting of Count Kurzs-

No, not him.

Not that.

Tapping the nib of the pen against the haze, Sila focused on *sketch sketch sketch* and finally forced something out.



Opposite him, Joanna did her own work, mind as far from what her hand was doing as it could possibly be.

Another day, no other orbs, escape.

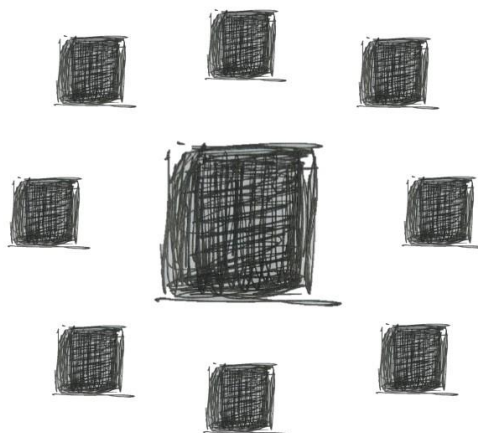
Fuck EM and their assurances.

Fuck the dark blur that should be walls.

Fuck Sila to close things in.

Fuck sketching.

The word pulled her back, eyes outlining the form of her hand as it coloured in the long square on the left hand side of the haze.



Between them, canvas visible to both Slovene and Chinese, Søren scribbled frantic, like a dervish with whirl amplifier, eyes glowing, mouth agape

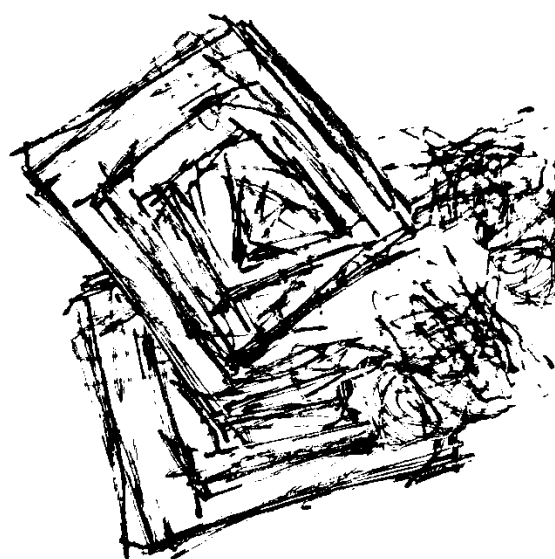
sharp points of teeth showing

teeth, fangs

incisors

the image all black and no green.

Finally, she stopped, stepped back and threw the pen away into the shadows.



'.....'

Sila and Joanna closed in from the flanks, tilting their heads to try and spot hidden motifs or messages.

'Probably just random,' said Sila, putting his head back to a normal position.

'Primal,' said Joanna, still tilted.

~~~

Afternoon, eternal without curtains

Quarantine mist before entry.

Entry to arboretum with only one type of plant.

Clip the weeds that appear intermittently, Engineer Many had instructed Sila on day two, which Sila had passed on to Joanna on day twenty.

Ignore the fumes.

Quarantine mist before exit.

Back to dorm.

'Weird place to put a plant farm,' said Sila, staring out at the pink sky, then down at the dirt about five floors below.

'It's a distraction,' replied Joanna, clipping a weed off a dark pink stem.

'From what?'

'Other distractions.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

Joanna held up the weed she'd clipped, face stoic as it withered in miniature spirals.

'Okay. *V redu*. One more day and I'll ask again.'

'Questions are for liberals.'

'Ask firmly.'

'Cult liberals.'

'Until then, we just...keep going. Do what EM says.'

'Conservative.'

~~~

The dorm was windowless, no access to the pink sky, rogue alien visuals, which was an odd relief to Sila and Joanna as they couldn't be confronted with that tone of reality continuously, there had to be some aspect of human norm and

despite the fringe shadow tint on every single side

that was the role the dorm performed

with bonus marks for the consoles near the hover-bunks.

'I wonder what they do,' asked Sila to Joanna, then to the back of Søren as she wandered off into the dark surroundings. 'She's away again.'

'Into another abyss,' muttered Joanna, shifting backwards on the bunk.

'Could probably draw a map of the whole complex if we asked her nicely.'

'More likely a black scribble.'

'Ja, that was weird.'

'Is she gone?'

Sila checked on the last seen location and mumbled a *ja* back. Then looked down at the duvet lump pushing backwards into his groin.

'Another signal?'

Joanna responded by reaching her hand back and fumbling around until she got hold of him.

'I guess so.'

Sinking down under the duvet, he hooked under her ass and pushed upwards, then moved his hands over her stomach, chest, neck, back down and inside, lasting only a few seconds before both of them were pulling off their immigration-base standard convict pants.

Compared to the previous night, it was a slower, more deliberate fuck, with Sila pulling out and holding himself at the cusp before pushing in again.

There were words too, not conversation, but more than just two shapes grunting and moaning and watching another smaller shape slide in and out of the other.

'First human couple to fuck on an alien world,' Sila said, pushing in again, laughing as Joanna edited the line to *alien prison*.

After a few more thrusts, they stopped and shifted position, Joanna pulling Sila on top and then telling him to lean on his arms as she wanted to see him go inside her.

'Along the top more,' she added, putting her fingers down and touching as it went in.

Another few minutes of fast-slow-fast-faster and it was pretty much done, Joanna telling him to cum inside again and Sila doing just that.

'Sorry,' he said, leaning down to kiss her sideys, lips, neck, breasts, 'for dragging you into an alien dimension.'

'Alien prison,' Joanna corrected, fingers still flicking at the base of his slowly-wilting dick.

Muttering back *prison-stroke-immigration*, Sila pulled out and rubbed her clit with a tired index finger, then almost collapsed like a drunk on top of her as he caught the abrupt sound of familiar humming somewhere behind.

'I am here,' Engineer Many announced, performing a small vertical loop manoeuvre, possibly to emphasise the point.

Grabbing the duvet in one hand, Sila threw it quickly over Joanna's thighs, then dived in proper and spread it across the rest of her body too, ignoring her complaint that she was already doing it herself.

'Stay calm,' the alien warden said, glowing a brighter shade of purple on their left hemisphere.

'What is this?' asked Joanna, pulling some of the duvet out of Sila's grip.

'Ja, how long have you been hovering there?'

'Please, I have a special task for you both.'

'Now?'

'The pole to the left side of your bunk. Take it, Comrade Sila, and put it inside Comrade Joanna's cunt.'

Sila tried to play the words back, his hand still covering the fringes of Joanna's skin, while the prospective Chinese pole storage unit rolled left and looked down over the side of the bed.

The purple sleaze was right, there was a pole near her shoes, about ten feet long, unsurvivable to anything except perhaps a female yeti.

'Within the next minute,' Engineer Many added, floating upwards and right until it was parked directly over the bed.

'No,' replied Sila, shifting a now flaccid dick off his thigh as it started to leak residue cum.

'In that case, Comrade Joanna, take the pole and feed it into Comrade Sila's anus. There is a jar of loosening cream beside the pole if the rim is too tight or dry.'

'I'm going to sleep,' she replied, returning to the middle of the bed and putting the duvet over her head.

'Pole first, comrade.'

'Do it yourself.'

'That is not possible. No. Do not close your eyes. One of you must pick up the pole and insert it into the other. For pleasure.'

The duvet over Joanna's head creased a little as she rotated left, not technically facing away from Engineer Many but not inviting further words either.

Sila, meanwhile, dangled a foot and rolled the pole across to the other side of the dorm. Perhaps hitting the wall, there was no way to tell as the light over that side was too dim to see anything.

'We're both tired,' he said, falling back onto the free side of the bed.

'Tomorrow then, comrades.'

'What, the pole thing? No way. And...I know this is your place, and we're guests here...and we're grateful for all the hospitality...but it'd be nice to have some privacy. If that's okay?'

'I did not watch you mate.'

'Err, well...not turning up at the end would be nice too. Just...at night time...you can leave us to our own devices. Let us rest a bit. Until the other orbs come.'

Engineer Many flashed four streaks of egregious purple onto the bed and the wall behind and then hovered there, retrograde, enervated, meditative, truculent, all four or none of the above

a calm, even shade of lilac

no eyes but watching

until both human heads were under the duvet and

out of the shadows, the murk acting as the far wall

the blonde demon miniature appeared, stationary, watching the purple warden as caught-reflection.

'You should sleep too,' said Engineer Many, elevating its position slightly

but Søren made no move to her own bunk

and no attempt at a reply

she simply continued to stand there, propped up by an invisible totem, eyes half on Engineer Many, half on the ten foot pole, and another, ineffable half on the purple within

the whim sector.

'As you feel then,' said Engineer Many, closing the book and rising up into the ceiling-less mass, its lilac glow diluted tone by tone until the darkness was mono again.

'They gone?' asked Sila, lifting up a bit of the duvet and flinching when Søren's face appeared two feet in front of him.

'... ..' she replied in old Danish, lifting up the middle part of the cover and studying the naked figures stretched out and

to Sila's relief

dropping the duvet and slinking off into the dark

heading god knows where

under god knows what surveillance tech.





Argento red

stretched out wall skin

not called out loud not coy just

giallo red

horror knife slit red

death is red and red is

in front stolid, old stone, door-like

leading me through with legs of hydrogen legs of

gliding legs

ineffable legs

ensconced in lux cavity within castle wall

lies the inevitable

just what I thought it would be

one of HIS taunting cabinets, door ajar, open as I greenly approach, stocked  
with human façade, the face

mine but

skin pale blue, grey, something between  
feet and legs wet  
cabinet floor now a swimming pool  
slowly drowning in pink water  
dentist fluid  
on legs arms neck bone fingers

~~~

The cabinet gorged on the dark and the dark gorged back, subsuming everything pink and with form until it got bored of all that and let the tracing begin.

Sila pursued the psycho trail, eyes half cut, picking out
the pillow
his hand
back of Joanna's neck
pink water on the-

He re-closed his eyes, opened them again, coached himself to abandon the decaying Jung construct.

It worked and didn't.

Joanna's neck flesh was still there, uncovered by the duvet cocooning the rest of her - as usual leaving him to the elements - yet the goo was existent too, a solid patch fixed to a gap between large chunks of tangled hair.

He lifted up the hand that had been on the cusp of her pubic line and dipped a fingertip in.

Definitely goo of some kind, maybe dark pink, hard to tell without overhead lights, didn't seem to be toxic.

Not cold or wet enough to wake her.

Putting his wrist forward, he wiped the slime off her skin and said, 'nothing' as Joanna told him to stop strangling her.

'What time is it?'

'Don't know. No clocks.'

'Morning?'

'Guess so.'

'Base dorm?'

'Afraid so.'

She reacted the typical way, pulling the duvet over her head and kicking backwards to get him off the bed.

Frowning at the goo residue on the back of his wrist, Sila rolled off onto the warm floor - underlayer heating according to EM [given on the second day, when relations were dependent] - and let out a loose *fuck* in Slovene when he noticed the ten foot pole by the end of the bed

not tied with a bow

just lying there

smug, passive, potentialist.

~~~

'Weird how they don't have machines to do this,' said Joanna to the stem of the pink plant, allegedly native.

'You asked that yesterday.'

'Some kind of nanobot tech. Crawl up, little cuts here and here, done.'

Sila froze, pliers closer to his sleeve than the plant he was supposed to be trimming.

'What?'

'You know about nanobots?'

'Who?'

'Nanobots. You just said it...described it. Described them.'

Joanna clipped another weed off the stem of the pink plant that couldn't look more alien if it tried, and refused outright to smile. 'I heard you mutter it in your sleep.'

'That's a lie.'

'Nanobots and Seven something.'

'And anyway, the reason we're doing this...plant cutting thing...is cos it kills time. Until the other orbs come.'

'From their orb city on the other side of the planet.'

'Exactly. Ja. Probably.'

Another clipped weed then a long bout of silence. Inner duration. Anchors in and out of Id chaos. Orb ontology. Corrections to orb ontology. More plant trimming. Lax scan of the distance, the background that one of them really believed might be matte. Danish breathing noises behind. Søren, on the roof tongue section, come to watch and do nothing. Cos she apparently didn't need distraction tasks.

Though this time the blank, little camper did harbour some ambition as she bent down and picked up a handful of weeds and

defying Sila's *hey, don't*

shoved them *Chytilovan* into her mouth.

'Guess toxic doesn't apply to her,' said Joanna, finishing the final weed and dropping the pliers in the weed bucket.

'We don't know that.'

'Looks like taste doesn't either.'

Sila watched his miracle daughter chew and chew and swallow and after-chew, waiting for a thumbs up or a violent retch

even though he knew it was Søren

and the best she could give, historically, was

Wah, was that-

Forced hand movement? Telepathy?

He held his own thumb up, smiling at the third point of the triangle, then frowning as Søren's unprecedented thumbs-up phased into a jabbing motion at her own neck.

Toddler steps, he told himself, dropping his hand, looking up at the three moons in the ether pink sky.

~~~

so tri lune ali dve?

je ta planet blizu sonca?

je blizu Zemlje?

kaj počne vaša vrsta na tem planetu? Kje so mesta?

imaš mesta?

All solid questions, thought Sila, finger hovering over the J key, all unanswered by machine or EM.

In fact, where was their purple host?

Hadn't seen them since the pole debacle the night before, which now that he'd thought about it a few hundred times, could have been a joke, untranslatable sex humour funny to purple orbs yet impenetrable to humans

at least that was the thread he was clinging onto

cos otherwise Joanna was right

they were at the whims of an alien psychopath, a lunatic out of its padded cell, running this base as a

what?

Petri dish for visiting humans?

His finger flinched as stubborn drilling noise activated nearby, an elevated hum of the *mut mut field* as Joanna called it, the hazy shadowed pink propping up Søren and making her sway left to right in tiny movements, invisibly tunnelling into her neurons and

doing what?

Torture?

No, too far, too Stasi, EM was gentle with her, and if she didn't like it she wouldn't do it.

This was all an elaborate, incomprehensible-to-the-human-brain, alien hotel resort

just like EM said

and the others would undoubtedly be there soon

just like EM said

kind of.

~~~

The rest of the day evaporated into lost time, eventually giving way to the cloak of evening

evening equalled rest and dorm.

dorm had unusable control panels and a hover bed

hover bed became relatively snug

snug led to pillow chat

with Sila telling Joanna that EM hadn't appeared the whole day and there was a chance they were still annoyed about the pole sex insertion thing.

'Good.'

'Or embarrassed maybe.'

'If they want to continue staying away, even better. Unless they have news that the others are here. Then they can appear.'

'Don't know. It's creepier when they're absent.'

'Who, EM?'

'Feels like they're watching from the walls, or the ceiling haze up there.'

'Finally, some suspicion.'

Sila ignored the barb and looked up, following the image in his head of a pulsating EM, glowing down at them, whispering threats of

'Wah...'

Slime, a large goblet of it, landed on his eye, forcing a reflex swat

his hand hit by another drop

then his wrist, forearm, neck.

No, not drops, it was the original slime deposit, spreading out across the map of his skin and

Joanna was coated too

being coated

invaded by dark pink residue that didn't respond to *fucking die get off fuck* in Cantonese or Slovene

that slipped into the cracks and holes

the pores  
tingling the inside of her cunt, the shaft of his dick, the lining of their veins  
then cooling, scraping, suffocating, drowning  
absorbing organ and flesh into the void  
beyond the

~~~

Pink-walled room
brain internal
shadowed inside air flow muon
less less pink
no pink
hover bed, pillow, neck skin coated in
Sila coughed up imaginary pink goo, rubbing hands over his body,
Joanna's body, checking every part for dregs of Cronenbergian intrusion.
Nothing, completely dry, zero auteur.
'What?' asked Joanna, sitting up, head duvet-less.
'Ni *važno*.'

~~~

On the rooftop, things played out interior.  
Both Sila and Joanna.  
Him, randomly scanning his skin.  
Her, interrogating the horizon for purple orbs.  
Their brains were so in sync with the unconscious, Jungian or otherwise,  
that they stepped onto the pink grass several times and received only the  
mildest of punishments, a soft voice in their ear, advising them to focus on  
their feet.

When Sila stopped moving completely and pulled Joanna to the edge of the roof, a more insistent voice told them jumping was not the answer, that the pink grass was preferable and maybe a nice first step back to a balanced status.

It was a strange request, and easily ignorable, with Sila saying that he was dog tired, so much so that even something as mundane and autopilot as walking was proving to be beyond him.

'Not good,' replied Joanna, putting an arm around his shoulder, pinching his neck, 'Was gonna use you as a crutch.'

'Must be the lack of sleep. Or that hover bed, the mattress.'

'Or the nightmare I had.'

'Nightmare? You?'

'It's not that rare. Just when I'm tense. Doesn't usually involve pink slime though.'

'What?'

'Or goo. No, more like slime. Residue. Actually, I don't know the English word for it. The sticky, wet stuff that...'

Joanna finished her description with a gob full of pink slime/goo/residue spewing out of her throat and onto the slightly paler pink of the grass below.

'Fuck...' mumbled Sila, before hacking and coughing up some of his own.

'Is this...'

More pink slime.

'I don't...'

From inside both of them.

At the opposite end of the roof garden, a purple orb hovered, camouflaged next to a grey bush, possibly watching, possibly masturbating possibly cutting off strips of its own flesh.

It hovered *vague-kinetic* a while longer then released

over the zig-zag path towards the two humans

no preamble, just flickering purple tones across their two hemispheres and blurting out *parasites*.

'EM...where have you-...'

'All of you parasites. Human. Slime is sick but you are sick. Could alter vegan on any day but no. Could walk around naked but no. Could work



communally, distribute by need, but no. Could build cushion shelter for animal, even insect, but no. Horror house and throat slit. Animal and each other. If think insect enough. Don't look at my grammar, anger rhythm. Justice rhythm. Talk about your error. Arbitrary rule of this letter and that letter, this word and that word, but why? A king told you. A priest. Man in suit cardigan. Linguist is not a word, do not try. All human language is empty, etiquette form. Keep it inside. Too ugly to enter base systems, please, no more inputting. Go to dorm. Stay in corridor haze, do not care. Walk the roof garden, spot view, gawp at moons. Avvvgrararrarrahkklaaaaaaa.'

The last word was punctuated with a cough drop of more slime from Joanna, but EM had already spun off at an incredibly rapid[o] speed, embarrassed or holding in further bile.

Or off to have a lie down, thought Sila, patting Joanna on the back of the *Yuki Onna* hoodie as small threads of slime continued to spindle out. Not an easy thing to rant like that. If that's what it was. Felt like it was, the sharpness of the sounds, but could also have been poor translation tech.

'Probably a weird type of...'

Sila started, working up the belief system behind the words he was about to uncuff, then stopping when he saw a purple blur heading in a long arc towards them.

'Why are you still here?' EM asked, grammar fixed, colour spectrum normal.

'Err...'

'Both of you should be inputting your languages. As the schedule commands.'

'But...you just told us not to.'

'Laziness.'

'What?'

'Go and input now. Stop coughing.'

Sila thought about another *err* but the thought came across physically as standing there doing nothing, while Joanna just lifted up her head and dribbled out more slime.

'Do not stall. Go. Input.'

'Okay, we're going. Relax.'

EM pulsed dark purple on their left curve, perhaps a sign, perhaps sweat.

Remained hovering in small orbits as the two humans stuttered to the exit slope.

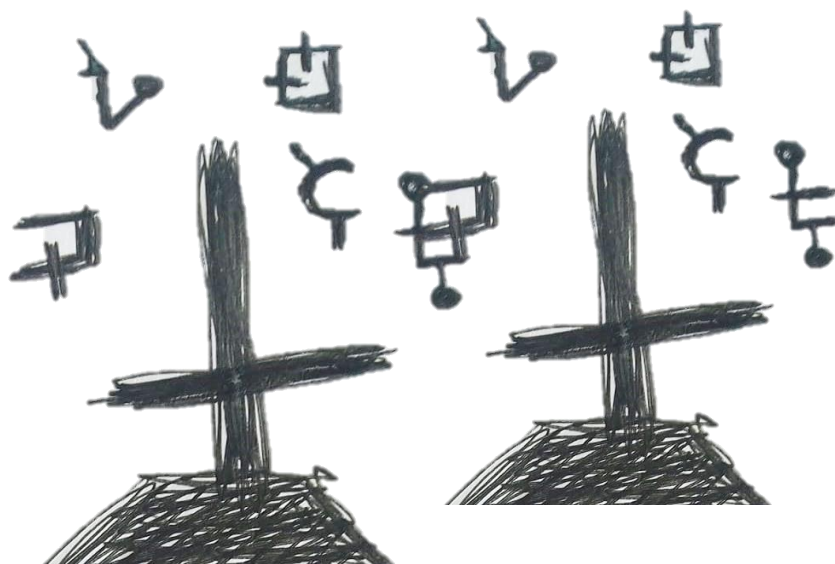
Switched to their own language.

Repeated *parasites*.

And then some alien extra, untranslatable

yet permitted

in the old times.



Night came

as the middle

attached to hover bed and shadows

Sila leaning in close to Joanna's ear, covering his mouth with her hair and saying, 'you were right, we need to get out of here.'

'Yes.'

'Somehow.'

'Tonight.'

'Or tomorrow. With Søren too.'

Joanna won back her ear and hair, and lay down on the pillow.

'She's our daughter, she's coming. And I think EM might be scared of her too. Which is an advantage.'

'Tomorrow then.'

'We'll start looking for cracks. Every section.'

'Or just walk out the front door.'

'If there is one.'

Joanna opened her mouth, then stalled with a cough, checking her hand to see if any more slime had slipped out.

'I think it's all gone,' Sila said, rubbing own throat.

'Better be.'

~~~

Darkness in unison with black square.

A framed square.

Darkness with a framed square white.

Face in the square.

Blonde hair.

Darkness squared by Søren in frame.

Daughter of darkness not happy with darkness, keeping handbrake on darkness, leash on its darkness neck.

Sila felt cold skin on his hand and opened his eyes.

Søren framed in darkness. No square. Pinkish-blond.

'... ..' she said in raw Danish.

'What?'

'... ..'

'English?'

'Come,' the blonde demon slurred, tugging at his hand and, when he didn't move fast enough, yanking him off the bed

onto the floor

knocking his knee and tutting and giving no time to cover his boxers and *Djinn of Qaldin* t-shirt with the base uniform, or throw on the *Old King Matjaž* hoodie, as she led him out of the dorm and into a corridor that, as other nights, had no discernible shape, just a hazy pinkish glow around what could've been edges, and

when he tried to ask her what was going on, where was she taking him

she just stared forward and said *E Cape*.

'Escape?' he asked back, but there was no further response, only a determined tour guide showing off corridor after corridor after corridor

then a circular door that dissipated as they approached

allowing them into a large space with faintly visible green-hue walls and dark hanging orbs.

'What is this place?' he asked, skimming the décor and repeating the question in beginner Danish when he got no response.

'... ..'

'Looks like something's hanging.'

'... ..'

'Orbs and...uniforms?'

'... ..'

'Just a sec.'

His hand left Søren's and reached forward and up, touching the bottom curve of the nearest orb and

without click or spark

the rest of the orbs lit up simultaneously

fleshing out the space

showcasing in pale green flare the forty or fifty shapes that Sila hadn't been able to process at first, and couldn't properly process now, even with the light assist, but the brain can only cloak the object so long, especially when its object-real

right in your face

Loachian ha.

'Can't be...'

One of the human skin suits got caught in a phantom breeze and swayed to the side, spilling out a dried-up vein that brushed against Sila's bare arm.

'... ..'

His body dropped to the floor, nails clawing at the warm tiles, throat retching up nothing

no bile or half-digested base rations

no pink slime goo residue

cos it truly was abject

beyond abject

just as B and K promised.

'Søren,' he called, collecting what was left of his senses, avoiding the back swing of the emaciated vein, the skin suit behind it, squinting at the shape moving towards him, a mini javelin in the right hand, green tinted blonde hair that had to be wig.

'... ..'

'We have to go.'

'... ..'

'This room...this whole place.'

'... ..'

'Søren, are you...'

'... ..'

'Wait, that pole, it's-...where did you-...'

~~~

endless

corridor haze

giant pale ankles

pulling him

without weight

was without weight  
no weight  
couldn't feel any weight nothing  
but moving  
corridor haze dim dimmer folded  
in on him  
no weight at all  
leaking drained  
cold atoms seeping out in around  
abandoning base  
with not a  
no goodbye in Cantonese  
done derailed  
if more Danish then  
same pole  
stabbed passionless no joy  
mir a cull  
can't hate she's my  
our

~~~

Haze from the corridor remained at standard base levels as Sila lost eyes,
energy, blood surplus,

final thoughts hinging pure Id

transitional

to the void and the three moons in the pink sky.

Then blank.

If Soren noticed his death, she hid it like a Mossad agent, face blank and reflected pale green, kiddie arm dragging the corpse of her spiritual father back into the main dorm area.

Joanna must've heard the door swoosh open as she muttered something in Cantonese, but her head stayed rooted to the pillow, oblivious to the Slovene body with puncture wounds in the chest and throat being deposited at the foot of the bed, only autopilot aware of the blonde demon lifting the corner of the duvet up and slipping in next to her

feeding a blood-stained arm over her waist

finding mother fingers

connecting.

CHAPTER 56

DEATH
IS
CALATOR

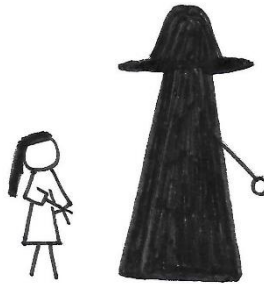
EXISTENCE
IS
MISERY!

CHA

FALL IN LOVE

D

ESC



This could be the end of the autobahn. At some point it had to be. But there were rat eye headlights in the distance. And no sign of curves or junctions. Not even the chance to turn.

Just a little bit further, said Sila, pocket blonde albatross perched on his shoulders.

To Ljubljana, she replied.

If we're lucky, the doors to the cabinet factory will be unlocked.

If it's still there.

Cabinets too.

The autobahn continued. Headlights became tiger eyes became squid eyes became Cthulhu eyes became godhead. The child demon pretended to slip, as an excuse to dig nails into Sila's chest. He refused to say ouch. Called her a challenging daughter instead. Challenging yet ethereal. Worth it five times over.

Five times over the rim of Hell, she thought.

But didn't say out loud.

The autobahn narrowed, coloured itself in.

Ja, this pink slime is completely normal, Sila explained, pointing Søren's arm towards the gutters at the side of the road.

Castle must be nearby, answered Joanna.

Albeit a darker tone than expected.

Not that I want to go up there.

Are you still cold?

But I probably should. Just for old time's sake. To see the Argento red wall.

Here, take the duvet back.

The tree where you...

Wah, it's gone, hasn't it? I forgot. Never mind, I'll buy you a new one when we get to Brasov. Assuming they have bedding shops.

I feel cold.

Cabinet factory, stab Professor, train, tomorrow morning Brasov. Bedding shop. Bedding.

Joanna pulled her arms in tight. Slipped fingers inside her skin and hugged herself. In the gutter, the pink slime expanded, called out to her. Whispered in unorthodox Cantonese.

Prepare self for object-real.

I'm cold.

Sharpening haze.

Are you warm slime? Friendly?

Do not instantly look down at floor.

Is the castle nearby?

View is abject. KEV field ready to dilute, if fear or ennui.

Ljubljana castle?

She jabbed forward, at the autobahn, the entire thing coiled ad infinite, outside herself and twice outside the others. Sila a hologram plaque in 2-D. Søren poking fingernails through his paper thin chest. Losing balance as his head phased purple. Tumbling into a pink field of positronic waves and hanging there, static/old.

Now wearing the costume of a floating purple orb, flanked by five other purple orbs, Sila told her in spotty Cantonese to sit up and object-real.

'Object...' she muttered, rubbing at her eyelids, flinching at the blood streaks on the bedsheet, shivering when she realised the duvet was missing, reeling arms in to block those purple orbs perving on her.

'An event happened within night hour block,' transmitted the purple orb on the far left, flickering.

'Where's Sila?' she asked, looking at and into the background haze doubling as dorm walls.

'To prepare first, an interview.'

'On the roof?'

'Start query. Did the slime feel symbiotic inside or traumatic?'

'Slime?'

'That fails information.'

'What are you-...what is this? Where's Sila?'

'Counter query stacked up, elusive, not work. Form change better option. Scan start abrupt. Do not shiver.'

A pink glow materialised, same as the field that Joanna had just noticed was pinning Søren to the space behind the hover bed. Similar to the one in the language input room. Calm and sociopathic. Pink as a starfish. It spread itself around her body, giving a series of tiny electrical pinches, then dissipated.

'Scan end. Slime *was* traumatic, with fleeting moments of ecstasy.'

'I feel strange.'

'Query two. Base outlook seem reptile or mammal, from human eye?'

Joanna shifted in the bed, searching for her base uniform, the *Yuki Onna* top. Then remembered that she always left them on the floor [cos there was never any dust down there].

'It is enervating to look left. Please do not.'

Joanna poked her head downwards and looked left. A lump covered by duvet, stained with dry-looking blood.

No, not blood.

Too enervating.

A bunched-up duvet with red paint, randomly shaped.

Left by renovators.

Squalid renovators.

Messy thieves with not a violent bone in their-

'This base poor equip on human psychology. Prepare for dilute scan.'

'What is... ' Joanna started to say, mostly to floor as the pink particle field returned, this time a brighter shade, with electrical pinches at first and then electrical caress, especially around the scalp, the inside cracks of her brain, feeding her the message that the Sila type was currently inert, laid out minus kinetic-potential on the floor and in another few seconds she would have a chance to look at the shell, the corpse, to understand that the object-real was in this state and after that she would be guided to the CLUTCH room to begin the process of making her own decision, plateau or onwards, but first the corpse.

The pink field again dispersed into nothingness, or transferred back to Søren, whose eyes were open and staring blankly at Joanna.

'What are you doing to her?'

'The *ax-form* decision is fixed, wait only for you.'

'I don't understand.'

'Please, respect to arrangement. Remove duvet and input corpse visual.'

Joanna heard the words and absorbed the purple glow from all five orbs, and somehow, had no bile in her throat, no dread building in the left side of her brain, as she walked the three steps to the lump, bent down, lifted up the duvet and, without pause, accepted the image of Sila with eight puncture holes in neck, thigh and torso.

She even used the word *torso* in her thoughts, a clinical word, and felt cold enough to wrap some of the duvet around her shoulders.

Dead Sila.

Sila the shell.

Sila the hollow cask.

Eyes shut, no need to pull down the lids.

Messy blood streams.

Dried out.

Torn-up *Djinn of Qaldin* t-shirt.

Blood on her *Yuki Onna* top nearby.

His *Yuki Onna* top.

Nearby.

Also messy, creased, spots of-

She closed her eyes, bracing for tidal dread, something at least marginally depressing and

nothing.

A ripple of how the fuck did he manage this, in one night.

That was it.

She opened her eyes again and focused on his face. The thing she'd argued with a thousand hundred times. Kissed. Tried to inject with grey krsic. Fake smothered with a pillow. Folded in against.

Face. History. Skin. Duvet. Corpse.

Grey as Franju.

Nothing.

What am I, a serial killer?

Even solipsistic, there should be something, a hole of I'm on a base alone now, beyond human reach, stuck with purple orbs and callous demon myth.

Yet nothing.

Except a little bit cold.

'Corpse time is ended,' transmitted the purple orb, floating a curve around the side of her face. 'In one human hour, your brain will process this as death-real. Emotion will flood. Dread cavity will form. It is advice if you make decision this time before.'

She shook her head vaguely, too tired to say *what*.

'Now for cathartic. Come to EFF room and witness disassemble.'

The pink haze descended again, not over her but towards the air in front, leading a buffering path to a door beyond Søren, an exit she hadn't seen before.

'Leg one, move.'

'To the EFF room...'

'Correct. Disassemble will happen imminent.'

She realised her head was still swaying and stopped, switching to an imagined nod and then obedience, legs one and two taking her along the shining pink path

face solo glancing at Søren as she passed

nail digging into her palm as she saw the blood on the blonde demon's base uniform.

~~~

The EFF room

EFF short for nothing human-related, according to the purple orb named Engineer Barra'n who apparently spoke for all the others

but sparing the smug disdain EM had utilised in their own rhetoric, which didn't bother her anymore as her brain was still in comfort mode, head bobbing along as Engineer Barra'n filled her in on the event within the previous night hour block, Sila killed by the blonde ax-form in order to trip the alarm, the horror room full of flayed humans who'd had the misfortune to fall through the portal into Engineer Many's game arena, the comrade orb, EK, who'd been deflated almost a year earlier, undetected, the extrapolation from all the above that indicated Sila and Joanna would've been flayed within two further days, the attempt by EM to pose as EK on the other orbs arrival and pretend that EM was elsewhere, leaking purple up quarks and

etiquette regret that their system didn't account for these kind of fringe outposts, couldn't monitor them in a more thorough way, though

to mitigate things a little

there was the EFF room, which Joanna was now being led into, and a human-style plastic chair for her to sit on as they played out the ritual disassembling.

'What exactly will you do?'

'The green particle field. Focus.'

Engineer Barra'n couldn't point and didn't have to as the middle of the room - with background clear walls, decorated in symbols that she'd seen before, at the village when she'd first arrived, on some of the base panels too - lit up *Re-animator* green and

lowered down from above

a dim purple orb that may or may not have been EM.

'I'm EK,' they transmitted, barely strong enough to reach Joanna's ears, and it was repeated for the next minute as the green particle field turned a deeper neon and the curves of EM started to drip off in melted strips.

On some level, Joanna knew it was a horrific death she was witnessing, but the noises emitted by EM came out as 80's synth, and

there was no joy

no satisfaction in watching a purple sphere melt into purple goo

just a sense of endurance

as in, when was this going to end, when could her brain start to feel things again, and

diving squid deep into the nihilism pond

could they melt her past oblivion too, in a non-painful way?

~~~

After the execution, Engineer Barra'n and the four silent orbs drifted over to the corpse of their ex-comrade, EM, and hovered.

Faint trails of lilac streamed down from all five of them.

'Importance to desecrate the remainder,' explained Engineer Barra'n later, guiding her via the pink river to the CLUTCH room. 'More high desecrate, more opportunity of EK and human skin victim go to better step galaxy.'

'Okay.'

'If not understand, ask extra.'

Joanna rubbed her left eyelid, having the sudden feeling that one of the pink particles had intruded, then shifting to the image of Sila in the ferry cabin, telling her how purple the sky was outside.

Then another image, the two of them sitting in the Danish hospital, arguing over whether Søren was new daughter material.

And another image, on top of Ljubljana hill, Sila standing by the sacrifice tree, moaning, asking in fluent Cantonese why the castle wall was so red.

Telling her they would have to go back to Hong Kong eventually cos his parents wanted him to be a lawyer and he was already falling behind.

Calling her an annoying, pedantic cunt as she tried to guess what the restaurant guy was saying to them in German, when his own German had just died on the shore of lake tongue.

Fucking her again from behind even after she'd told him it was uncomfortable.

Helping her down the stairs of Burger King when her body turned against her.

Insisting that early life relationships were transitory and they'd probably drift apart at some point

Suggesting a marriage of *why not plus Søren* in Almodóvar Chicken.

'Decide time arriving,' transmitted Engineer Barra'n, breaking the stream, dragging her back to object-real. 'If sceptic, have doubt, scan can start easy resolve.'

Joanna did a full rotation, taking in the CLUTCH room. Not much to see. Just moon visuals and alien hieroglyphics. One or two panels to the side. Residual haze.

'What exactly am I deciding?' she asked, turning back to the purple orb.

'Go forward alone, plateau in comradeship.'

'Meaning?'

'Death is escalator. Back to one moon planet. Essence of. Human dead friend, second travel for him, copy of a copy, some residue knowhow. First travel for you. If choose.'

'I don't understand...'

'Language challenge, human definite number one. Death is escalator. Human dead friend, dead only temporary, copy can start abrupt, before one human year gave same experience.'

'Sila was dead? Before?'

'Second travel for him, second copy. First travel for you, if choose. If fear, stay at base, go forward alone.'

'What do you mean, travel? I don't-...you don't mean-...it's not death, is it?'

Engineer Barra'n flickered purple on the right hemisphere, seemingly activating another green particle field in the middle of the room.

'Scan end. You choose inside.'

'What?'

'No fear, green atom move this way. Keep stabilise. Before scan still coated on brain network.'

'Wait...is this death? Are you killing me?'

'Close eye if fear, but open also match.'

'Is it death?'

'Counter query end. No pain. Please, now unwind.'

No pain, Joanna mouthed back, spotting the *green atom* blurring closer out of the corner of her eye, and then full-on as she spun to face it

briefly holding up an arm in defiance, a Durruti reflex

ax-form reflex

then relaxing

accepting the comfort of the electrical caress

letting the green soak in and

whatever it did

nothing could be worse than base plateau

base existence

this pink wall-less fucking place, cargo hold of human skin, psycho petri
dish

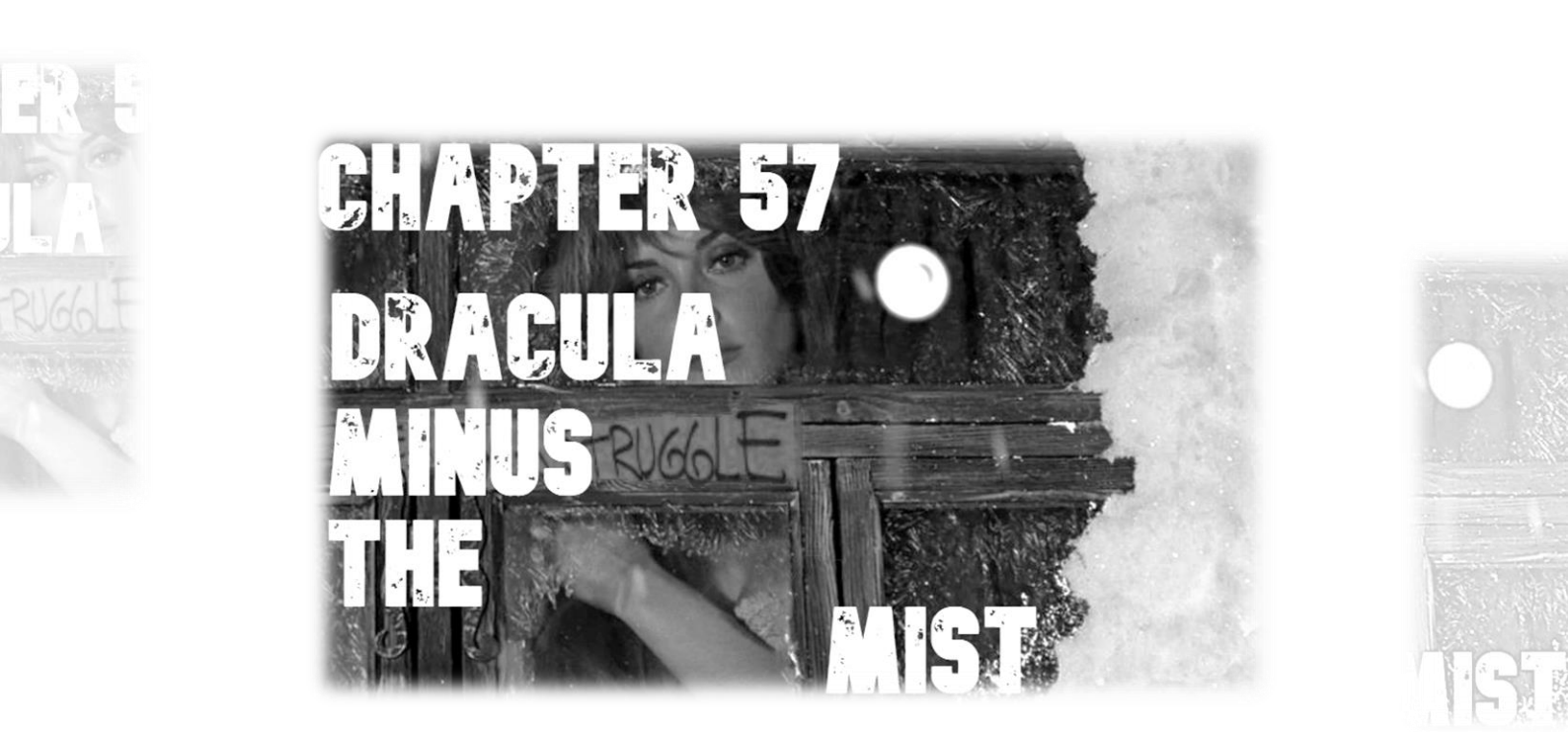
stuck in it for the rest of her life

no one to spar with, no ridiculous Slovene optimism

no chance to

method of

gar



CHAPTER 57

DRACULA

MINUS

THE MIST

‘Not a typical orb, but sentient. Chases him around the village, appears everywhere, blocks him constantly from leaving. Doesn’t attack in any way, just blocks.’

...

‘And then the guy goes back to his house and tries to think of a new scheme. The whole series. Run, orb block, house.’

...

‘What, no plot holes, Professor?’

...

‘They had that level of orb tech, in the 60’s?’

...

‘Every road goes nowhere?’

...

Rapping his knuckles on the cabinet door, Sila tried to whistle the opening bars of *Blake’s 7*. But the bars weren’t there. Instead he sang the first verse of an old Slovene folk tale, King Matjaž and his cave of eternal slumber.

Then coughed.

‘Pretty cold in here.’

Touched his throat, patting the skin for signs of a hole.

‘Must be that Carpathian wind.’

...

'Your handiwork, Professor?'

...

'Not bad. Effective, almost.'

...

Sila pulled up his hood and tightened the strings, stalling another cough.

'Okay, cabaret time.'

...

'No neon green eye shit.'

...

'No green anything.'

...

Reaching under the *5-leaf Raskovnik* hoodie, his hand strayed a little, confused, before coming back out empty.

The space where the dagger should've been was void.

Magically unfilled.

'Did you do that?'

...

'Teleport?'

...

'Disintegration machine?'

...

All three questions dissipated into castle nothingness as the door opened behind him and a group of pink-faced tourists walked in. German, if he was hearing the guide right.

Coughing and muttering at the same time, Sila ran his finger down the left hinge of the cabinet door, said out loud that it would have to be fixed later, then turned and re-joined the main corridor

where all the paintings were

old waxy sadism, glaring, laughing at him

rack specialists

gone

~~~

The path back down from Brasov Castle was plain and bear-free, not even a peeking face from within distant canopy.

Sila traipsed with hands in hoodie pockets, sure there were holes in him.

But each time he checked, nothing.

Which made sense.

He hadn't been attacked since the Krsnik, give or take a ferry demon, the scuffle with Tak, and the purple orb nightmares were just that, nightmares, *ohk mong* as Joanna called them,

and if anything had happened in that Portuguese hole, it would've manifested by now.

Wouldn't it?

After three weeks?

Up ahead, a blatantly Irish couple walked towards him, the taller guy telling the one in a headlock that a bear would do a lot worse, might even rip his spine out.

Ja, a bear might, Sila thought, taking a hand out of his pocket and holding it up in acknowledgment as the couple passed.

And who else?

Søren Søren Søren Søren Søren Søren Søren Søren

There was no answer, and his brain was already moving on to other things. Cabinets, for about half a second, then other castles in the area, the tourist sham in Bran, the legend of the broken mess somewhere in the mountains between here and there

ruins to most people who found it

alt-dimensional door to other, more esoteric types.

Like him?

Maybe not. But Søren...

The path evened out, leading him onto a road with rough snowy edges instead of clear pavement, houses one pay check away from being shacks, dogs walking their humans, life of a slightly different kind, curious if he

bothered to stop and explain his cabinet mission, but also disappointed if he showed how done he was with it all.

So *done* he'd left the dagger at the hostel.

Alone with Søren.

He stopped, petting one of the dogs and nearly getting his sleeve bitten off.

Unless it was a ploy?

A scheme to draw out the cabinet reveal?

Was that plausible?

The Romanian jabber from the dog's human didn't give any clues, so he continued on, reminding himself that the hostel was to the left of the church up ahead, and pulling a giant Nietzschean duvet over all the other stuff.

Dagger left behind, who cares?

It wasn't like he was desperate to grab it again.

Or talk sci-fi nonsense to a cabinet door.

Not twice in one day.

~~~

The Red Flower Heroes stepped over the drugged bodies of the two guards and checked the windows, whispering all clear before slitting their throats.

'Tsing bastards!'

'Manchu scum!'

'Suppose we should wipe up the blood or at least attempt to-...wah, is that a real clock?'

Joanna stopped and looked up.

On the other side of the room, perched by the windowsill, sat the blonde child from *a Hell*, pretending to read the other Gum Yong book.

Pretending cos it was written in Chinese.

Not mythical Danish.

'You can get one of Sila's Danish folk tale books,' she slurred, the *you can* in rough Danish and the rest in English.

Søren glanced up, giving a quick *no*.

'But you can't read that one.'

'Try,' the demon replied in soft English. Then again in slightly sharper Cantonese.

Joanna closed her eyes and slipped back under the duvet, lifting up the fringe briefly to check on the temperature and pulling it in tighter when she realised the heating hadn't been turned on.

Again.

According to the promo online, they were supposed to keep it on until at least midday, but the three days they'd already been there, it'd been freezing as soon as she woke up.

Maybe a complaint to the reception woman later.

If she could be bothered.

The door beeped open and Sila entered, bringing a draught from the Sea of Okhotsk in with him.

'Forgot the knife,' he said, walking over to the bedside table, opening the bottom drawer.

'It's not there.'

'Huh? You took it out?'

A Chinese hand poked out from under the duvet and pointed over towards the window.

'Søren...' started Sila, moving over and then slowing down with hands raised as the child demon had put down the Gum Yong book and was now saluting him with the green dagger. 'I'm gonna need to borrow that for a little while.'

'... ..'

'Slower, please. Or English.'

'... ..'

'Søren...'

'Nu,' she answered, flipping the blade and sticking it into the chair cushion nearby.

'Wah, you can't stab the furniture. We'll have to pay for that.'

'But stabbing cabinets is okay,' mumbled the lump on the bed.

Sila coughed, rubbing his throat, relieved that once again there was no puncture mark, no blood streams. 'Okay, fine. I'll leave the dagger, for today, and the three of us can go and get breakfast. Or lunch now.'

'Too cold.'

'Come on, both of you. Up. Jackets on.'

'Reading,' said Søren, hands and eyes on the Gum Yong book again.

'Huh? It's in Chinese.'

'Reading.'

'In Chinese?'

'Reading.'

'Okay, okay...you're reading...something you can't understand. When will you be finished?'

'Later.'

'When exactly?'

'Later.'

Sila let out a pensioner's breath and moved to the chair with the dagger sticking out of it. Søren watched him with one eye as he sat down, but there was no need as his hands were already on the Romanian folk tale book.

'Once upon a time, there was a woodsman with a kind and beautiful daughter...' he started, zero enthusiasm.

On the bed, Joanna reacted with a fierce bout of coughing, enough to get her up and out onto the edge of the mattress, hand reaching for the glass of warm water Sila had left when he'd gone out earlier.

Obviously not so warm anymore, and she flinched as she drank from it. Made a gargling sound. Then resumed coughing soon as it was back on the table.

'I'll get some hotter water,' said Sila, leaving the Romanian folk tale and picking up the glass, then saying, *what*, as Joanna's hand pulled him back by the sleeve.

'Slime...' she stuttered, between further coughs.

'What?'

'Is there slime...coming out?'

'Of your mouth? No. What are you talking about?'

She patted her chest and rode out the last of the lung assaults, then, muttering *too fucking cold* in Cantonese, got up and put about four layers of heavy clothing on.

'You wanna explain the slime thing?'

'No.'

'It was pretty random.'

She grabbed her pink *Mizuno* jacket and zipped it up as high as it would go on her neck. 'Are we going for breakfast or not?'

Sila whistled mostly breath and glanced over at Søren, who was standing rigid with her own jacket on, the red bubble one they'd got her a week ago in Zagreb even though she kept saying she didn't feel the cold.

'Not reading anymore?'

'Breakfast.'

'Right. *Goi bin ju yee*. Good idea.'

~~~

Outside the hostel, at the corner next to the church, a local man sat slumped, costumed as a vagrant, drinking from a bottle labelled whiskey, rambling about alien mosquito drones setting out from the castle ruins and

when that didn't work

historical Counts not Vlad

but similar to

enduring all these centuries in secluded caves somewhere in the Carpathians

contriving endless fires

swallowing bear guts

waiting for a straggler with decent abs to happen past and offer themselves as a vassal so they could come into town and start fucking again

fucking and stabbing

slicing cutting gloating glaring chopping grinding

'You think we should give him something?' asked Sila, as he led the family past, Joanna's face almost completely hidden beneath a giant scarf, Søren nonplussed in her Zagreb jacket, neither giving a verbal response.

'On the way back then.'

~~~

The breakfast place looked like a uni canteen, with *românească* or *romanesc* put as an adjective after each dish on the menu.

Didn't matter, there were pics too, and Sila was more interested in coffee and Cluj, telling the other two that it was a uni city, or town, city-town, something in between, and students would be easy to find, while Brasov was nothing but tourist schlock.

'Might be able to pick up one or two local fantasists...Chinese enthusiasts...but not enough to sustain us.'

'How far?' asked Joanna, poking the bacon *românească* with a 3-pronged fork.

'Cluj? Dunno. Maybe eight hours by train.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow? Day after?'

Joanna took a piece of the bacon and closed her eyes. Chewed the unchewable. Then shivered suddenly and dropped the fork.

'More slime?'

'Electric shock. Little bugs zapping my shoulders, my neck. Annoying. Not painful.'

'Dream residue, probably. Happens to me sometimes.' Sila glanced at Søren, who still had the coffee cup glued to the bottom of her chin, clearly not drinking any. 'Are you okay?' he asked in fairly accurate Danish.

'Thinking dream.'

'Huh?'

The blonde demon lowered the cup and reached over towards Sila. It was a bit too distant, despite some bold nail spasms, so she put the cup down and shifted over, assuming a final position on his lap.

'Err...you might be a bit old for that,' Sila said, coughing, looking around at the blank Romanian faces in the café.

Søren ignored the sudden odd mood, and pushed a fingertip into the flesh of his throat. Traced a little circle around an imaginary hole. Whispered *blood* that sounded like *blued*. Moved the hand to her eye and pressed in the knuckle for a good minute before pulling away and returning to her own seat.

'Some kind of ritual?' asked Sila, padding his throat.

'Routine,' answered Joanna, giving up on the bacon and switching to black as night coffee. 'She did it to me this morning. Gave a whole face massage.'

'A sign of affection maybe...'

'Then said *dead* in Danish.'

'Dead?'

'I checked on my phone. The dictionary you forced me to download. Dead. Very clear.'

'Maybe you-...'

'She said it twenty times. *Mo teng chor*.'

Sila took more of his own coffee, looked at Søren, then put the cup against his chin. Held it there.

Finally, the demon child smiled.

Subliminal.

But enough for the *dead* translation to evaporate. And more immediate things to take its place.

Like what they were going to do that day.

And if it'd be dark before they managed to do it.

Ja, Sila thought, reaching a hand inside his *5-leaf Raskovnik* hoodie, stroking the space where the dagger should've been, the speed we're going probably.

~~~

Brasov

the badly hidden

surrounded by slopes, forest, soap-faced locals, alleged bears, a Bavan shell of a place, Vajda façade with darker things under its dress, town centre that could only be seen as masochistic

shops called SHOP in Romanian

or SOMETHING SHOP

churches unapologetically church, social centre not spectacle, the language barrier allowing Sila, Joanna and their stoic daughter to imagine *hi, would you like tea and coffee* instead of *evolution is devil tongue, look at the trees*.

Not that they stayed anywhere long, as Sila had his Romanian Mythology book open again, the page with the castle ruins, apparently up the slope on the east side of Brasov.

Following online directions, they took the path that occasionally vanished, turned left at the tree shaped like Barbara Steele, threw snowballs at the gaps between trunks when they heard bear noises, practised Danish and Cantonese when the path ran straight for two kilometres, and

just as the sky was starting to blend pink

found the castle that was exactly as ruined as the book had promised.

'Must've been destroyed in a battle,' offered Sila, walking through a ramshackle arch, putting the book above his head in case it chose then to collapse.

'Almost sunset,' replied Joanna, sitting down next to Søren on a large stone nearby.

'Imagine all the things that happened in here. The atmosphere, the torturing, the weird sex games, failed alchemy sessions, Latin study.'

'We should go.'

'You don't feel any of it...the historicity?'

'Why?'

'Strange answer.'

'It's just a house. Bigger version. In pieces.'

Sila faked a WAH and then laughed, his gut telling him to dig in, defend history, but other sides transmitted counter-spells, images of Vlad sitting in a clawfoot bath, Elizabeth Bathory taking a shit, Count Kurszán rubbing green cream on his dick vein, pale fingers already inside a poor Slovene farm hand, mouth on a laidback Slovene tourist with a-...

'Not romantic at all. Like the Forbidden City. Lots of rooms and gardens with poetic names. And all the Emperors ever did was eat, fake-study, wander around, look at the moon with their forced girlfriends.'

'You mean the place in Beijing?'

'Even the hard-working ones, like Kin Long in *Tsing Chiu*. Rich child with enough time to do a hundred different hobbies. Order soldiers to go and slaughter Muslim shepherds in Xin Jiang. Rubbish, gold spoon morals, like your kings too.' She stood up, taking Søren's hand with her. 'The sky is full pink now. We need to go back.'

'Ja...I suppose.'

'Or stay here and get eaten by bears.'

Sila imagined a nod and then continued just sitting there, as his two flanks headed away from the ruined arch.

Stared at the dirt on the ground.

Found cracks in it.

Put a hood over the Kurszán shape rising up, giant dick coated in green sheen.

Muttered *different castle-scape*.

Then got up and followed the trailing sounds of slurred Cantonese, some of it from a surprisingly fluent Søren.

Fuck.

When did that happen?

~~~

The first half of the trek back down was pinkish dark

non abject

while the second leg acted itself out in almost complete darkness, the lights from their phones providing a target spot for rogue bears to latch onto if they were having a slow day and their bear brains weren't working right.

At one point, the noises from the surrounding forest got so loud that all three of them picked up twigs and waved them about a bit, even Søren, though when they finally made it back onto the street, she turned to her twig and looked at the thing in bewilderment, then threw it on the concrete and told them both that the frenzied waving had never happened.

'Your English is getting pretty good,' said Sila, dropping his own twig, taking his daughter's hand.

'Almost as good as her Cantonese,' added Joanna, filling in on the demon's other side.

'I had the same thought earlier. You really think she understands it?'

'Enough to read my Gum Yong books.'

'Ja, that's a good point. She might have supernatural linguistic skills. Able to pick up any language in a day or two.'

'Or she already knew it.'

'Nah...from where? How?' Sila looked down at the child demon playfully digging fingernails into his palm. *Playfully* cos there was no blood. 'You're just good at languages, right?'

'... ..' Søren replied in old Danish, loosening her grip.

'Exactly.'

'... ..'

'Ja.'

'... ..?'

'Sorry, what?'

~~~

Back at the hostel, both Sila and Joanna lay diagonal on the bed, legs spread across each other, Gum Yong book in her hand, Romanian Mythology in his.

On the other side of the room, by the window, sat Søren on the arm of the chair, watching them.

Staring at either their hands or the book covers.

The face of Vlad or the Red Flower Heroes.

Slovene or Chinese.

Survivors or victims.

Amnesiacs and amnesiacs, arrantly unbothered by shock apparitions of cold purple.

When the wind blew chaotic against the window glass for the thirty-seventh time, with flecks of lilac in the darkness beyond, Søren got up and trotted over to the door.

'Where you going?' asked Sila, one eye lifted up from the Mythology book.

'Hungry.'

'Okay. You got money?'

'Da.'

'Jacket?'

Søren looked down at her body, grunting at the question.

'Can't go out in t-shirt and super pants. No matter how adorable it looks.'

'Not cold.'

'Jacket. Put it on.'

'... ..'

'I'll assume that wasn't *fuck off, Sila.*'

Søren coughed, covering her mouth. Then walked to the edge of the bed and took her flame red Zagreb jacket.

'Thank you.'

Zippering it up to her chin, she stood there doll-like and stared at her parents again.

A thing of history.

Real or not.

Danish or-

'Your batteries done?' asked Sila, both eyes on her now.

She adjusted her head angle, shifting to the door, and focused her small white hand on pushing down the handle.

'Don't stay out too long, okay?'

The door opened and then closed slowly, pedantically, the red jacket narrowing to a thin strip of seasonal Sellotape.

'It's pointless giving her commands,' muttered Joanna, turning a page.

'She listens. Sometimes.'

'No.'

'The jacket...she put that on.'

Sila replayed the line and decided it was a good one, a very good one as Joanna didn't answer, just turned another page of her Gum Yong book even though she'd just turned one a few seconds ago.

No one could read that fast

Chinese or Slovene.

'Self-preservation,' the Chinese brick wall muttered.

'What?'

She turned back a page, pretending to re-read the bottom then skimming to the top and reading the first line out loud.

'For who? Us?'

'.....'

'Her?'

'.....'

'Great, back to old times.'

Joanna lowered Gum Yong and reached across, lifting Sila's Romanian mythology book up awkwardly against his chin.

'*Hvala.*'

'For ten minutes. Then I'm turning off the light.'

'Ten? What about Søren?'

'Vampire eyesight.'

Sila laughed, flicking to a random page. 'She does move pretty well in the dark. Or hides the tripping over stuff, the missteps. Wah...that's random.'

'New cabinet?'

'Listen to this. The Silhouette Knight of the Black Army, late 15th Century, moved in and out of a shadow version of Cluj-Napoca, seducing bored wives and murdering their husbands. Had a house on the east side of the city that was allegedly the core of his dimension jumping, the ruins of which still remain to this day. Fuck, a dimension jumper, Cluj shadow version. What do you think?'

'Reading.'

'Ja, I knew you'd say that.'

'Still reading.'

'And that.'

'.....'

'That too.'

Joanna pulled Gum Yong higher, covering her eyes, almost her whole forehead.

‘Really like old times,’ muttered Sila in Slovene, going back to his own book and whistling at the artist’s impression of the Silhouette Knight, alleged scourge of medieval Cluj

mover between dimensions

Dark Professor?

~~~

Outside, the streets of Brasov lay concrete in theory alone, the snow covering almost every slab and crack and

bodies were pretty sparse too

just one drunk local flinging snowballs by himself, trying to knock a beer bottle off a wall.

He was so drunk, so focused on his game that he didn’t notice the small, blonde figure in flame red jacket approaching from the side

didn’t see her bend down and form her own snowball

and gave out only a reflex *daaaaa* when she knocked the bottle down first time

then spun round and said *daaaaa* again when he fully processed the incongruity of what was standing there.

‘Out late toddler girl,’ he slurred in Romanian, moving over to the wall, putting the bottle back up. ‘Lucky thrower vibe too.’

Søren looked past him, at the revived glass target.

‘Wanna try proper?’ he asked, coming back over.

She bent down, rolled up more snow.

‘That’s a *da* then. But don’t throw it so good this time. Give me a chance, I go first.’

Formed an orb shape and stared. Into the darkness of the trees. At flickering curves of purple only she could discern.

‘Wait, don’t throw yet...five seconds,’ shrieked the man, scooping up more snow in his bare blue hand, rushing it into an awkward ball shape.

Too late.

The white orb sailed mute through the air, hit the neck of the bottle, knocked it clean off the wall and disintegrated into powdered dust. In object-solidarity, the bottle followed suit, somehow managing to find the only patch of naked concrete on the whole street.

In the distance, an abrupt flash grenade of purple light.

Lapsed judgment.

Endured with closed eyes.

Then layers of Romanian darkness again.

'Hey, I just fucking said...my throw first.'

Søren turned to her red sleeve, examining the pale blue man hand attached to it.

'Now the fucking bottle's smashed. Fucking wreck. Are you getting this? Hey, you down there, Helga face...you even speak Romanian? Say something. What you doing out this late? Mum and dad, where are they? Fucking? Fighting?'

Her white hand moved onto cold human skin, digging in nails, pulling the drunk down onto the gritted snow.

'Wah, the fuck are you-...'

'Hungry,' she said in perfect Romanian, kissing the skin of his neck.

'What...'

'Hungry past night.'

'My hand, you're-...'

'Træt af lilla.'

