



Corvus

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by L. Lee Lowe

Chapter 1

Bracing himself against the wind, Zach gets to his feet without a thought for direction or destination. In the white forever of this place, there is no lantern to light the dark and bitter woods of memory. Even the croakers would find little use for such knotted timber.

Do you hear me? he shouts full volume in his mind. Nothing worth felling.

Nothing worth

nothing

He angles into the blowing snow. The cold has as much substance as the snow, thick and clean and impenetrable, almost lush, and it reminds Zach of a dense text encountered for the first time, against which you pit yourself, into which you tunnel for sustenance, at school his first Mandarin characters had been like that, you have to wrest sense from the meaty snowflakes before they melt on your tongue. He opens his mouth and catches one, then another. Tears gather at the corners of his eyes, and he wipes them away quickly-angrily-with gloved fingers lest they freeze his eyes shut-his damned traitorous eyes.

His booted feet are soon clogged with snow, and heavy. With each step they amass another layer, and then another, and though he tries to shake them free, the stuff clings like down, soft and fluffy yet as tenacious as the barbs that filled his roughquilted childhood-_auger, transfuck, mulac, devi, freak._ He bends his head and plods on, breathing painstakingly around the icy knife in his chest. Somewhere there would be shelter. Somewhere there would be food. They wouldn't want to kill him just yet, would they?

The cry slices through the silence. Zach stumbles and falls, the ground flying up to meet him like the breast of a great albatross. Black-vented against the unending white, its wings beat and beat about his head. He raises his arms to shield himself, the birdcall surrounding him like manic laughter.

Where is she, you buzzards?

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‘All right,’ the technician in charge says. ‘Safe zone.’

‘He’s in?’

‘Slick as a lube job.’

‘Mind your language.’ Charles Litchfield runs a hand through his thinning sandy hair and glances round. Senior neuros are cut a good deal of slack, but you can never be too careful.

‘The amount you worry, I’m surprised you haven’t got ulcers yet.’ Andy’s fingers dance like spiders across the console before he raps off a series of instructions to the computer. ‘Anyway, I thought that after the funeral you withdrew your application for transfer.’

Despite occasional lapses into irreverence, Andy is top-notch at his work, and Litchfield always requests-and gets-the younger man in his unit. Laura said he played a wicked bass, too-a weekend hobby that wouldn’t be tolerated in a lesser tech.

‘That doesn’t mean I flout the rules.’

Andy’s eyes never leave the monitors. ‘You blame him, don’t you?’

‘Don’t be daft. He’s been completely exonerated. If anyone is to blame, it’s myself. I should have checked for any long-term sequelae-complications-of the virus.’

Andy says nothing though his eyebrows arch slightly.

‘We all know he’s a risk-taker,’ Litchfield says hurriedly. ‘That’s what makes him so good.’

For a few minutes Andy works on in silence while Litchfield studies the stream of raw data passing across the neural link monitor. A few jagged spikes in alpha2, and the feedforward channel seems sluggish though still well within tolerances.

‘Maybe you should’ve sent Gina or Phil,’ Andy says when he’s finished his adjustments. He stretches, then cracks his knuckles.

Litchfield's eyes go to the tech's fingers. There have been rumours. 'You know perfectly well it had to be Zach.' He raises his voice for the benefit of any watchdogs. 'He's the best we've got for this kind of job.'

'What if he breaks? It's hit him very hard.'

'He'll do. Remember who he is.'

*

'Looking for someone?'

Laura whirled at the sound of Zach's voice. He stepped out of the shadows under the massive beeches, tempering his mockery with a half-smile. Quarter-smile, actually, and still her pulse responded. She wondered if he'd notice. She knew what they said about him, about his sort-everyone did. A trickle of apprehension slid between her shoulder blades, and she glanced quickly in all directions, but there was no one in sight. Zach's eyes darkened, and he took a step backward.

'Right,' he said.

He turned on his heel, his hair swinging like a sluice of black rain across his face, and strode away through the coppery leaves, which crackled underfoot. It had been a dry season. After a second's hesitation Laura followed, catching up with him near the gunnera manicata-in summer a spectacular display like a giant's rhubarb patch, which had so impressed her that she'd once netted it. An exotic foreigner needing lots of space, and protection from their harsh climate.

'Wait, Zach. Please. I don't care what they say.'

He stopped under a ginkgo tree and looked down at her. She was unusually tall, but he was even taller. All of them were, though he more than most.

'And your dad?' he asked.

'He's not going to find out.'

'Suppose he does? Not reporting it could cost him his job. And if you're planning to get a place at university-'

She shrugged.

He stared at her for a moment longer before plucking a single, butterfly-shaped leaf from the branch overhead and offering it to her, a reminder of his preposterous, infuriating, *magnificent* unpredictability. 'Come on, then.' He jerked his head towards the petting zoo, often crowded at the weekend, and the brackish canal district that lay beyond. 'I know a place where they do a decent burger and chips.'

But they both knew he meant where they'd be served.

*

It was a small, cheerful takeaway with a single table and a couple of hard wooden chairs squeezed into the rear, almost hidden by a rack of magazines and the drinks cooler. The dark-skinned woman working behind the counter nodded at Zach without speaking and without pausing in her chopping. Onions, Laura thought, and a heady spice which she couldn't pin down. Nor had she ever seen such upper arms, whose skin from armpit to elbow swayed like flaccid udders as the woman worked.

The square of cardboard folded under the leg of their table didn't quite do its job, so that every time Laura leaned forward, her coke wobbled. A bit like her feelings, which lurched from elation that Zach, who threaded a motorbike through the clusters of kids in the carpark with the same utter indifference with which he tacked in and out of the classroom whenever he could be bothered, that a *flesh-and-blood* Zach, about whom she'd spent most of her waking hours, and not an inconsiderable number of her sleeping ones, daydreaming and dreaming, that *Zach* was actually sitting right here across from her, eating ... to stupefaction and a disbelieving admiration of her own daring ... to dread that she'd be found out. That word would get back to her parents, and worse, to the Insects. She was a good liar, but nobody could lie their way out of this.

Zach picked up a chip with a graceful movement of his fingers, then caught her studying him.

'What?' he asked.

She coloured and couldn't think of a crack response, nor even a suitable one.

‘Think we don’t eat?’

Her colour intensified, and she stared down at her own plate. She’d been hungry when they’d taken their seats and ordered. She prodded a chip with her fork, the way you’d nudge a quiescent bug with a stick or a shoe or a pencil-whatever came to hand-to see if the horrid thing would spring at you, or at least scuttle away.

‘Nice deep yellow, aren’t they?’ Zach asked. ‘Stella uses ground cockroach meal, says it does wonders for the flavour too, better than malt vinegar.’

Laura speared four or five chips rapidly on the tines of her fork and thrust them into her mouth. She chewed ostentatiously, smacking her lips.

‘Delicious,’ she said, with a flash in her eyes. ‘Remind me to ask Stella where I can buy some of that meal for my mum.’

*

This time the complaints began before pudding.

‘Have you talked with him?’ her mum asked.

‘No opportunity.’ Her dad scraped up the last of his mash, pushed his plate aside, and stood, anxious to fetch the serving bowl from the dresser. ‘Anyone else ready for dessert?’

Max shovelled in his peas with a grimace. At thirteen he was always hungry, and there would be no sweet unless he cleaned his plate. Laura knew how he felt. Nobody else’s parents expected them to finish everything. Absolutely archaic. Obsolete. *Superannuated*. She grinned to herself. Though Zach hardly ever pitched up at school, his vocabulary was legendary. The stuff he read ... she’d have to work hard to convince him she had a brain too.

‘What are you waiting for now? I do everything else around here as it is, do you expect me to go to your boss as well?’ her mum asked, her mouth puckering as if she’d bitten into a lemon.

Laura and Max exchanged glances. Once their mum’s voice took on that astringency, even her blackberry fool would curdle.

‘I promised I’d speak to him, and I will. But it’s another six months till the committee meets about reassignment. There’s plenty of time.’

‘Are you being deliberately obtuse? We’ve discussed this before, six months is *nothing*, a promotion needs to be carefully orchestrated. For pity’s sake, you don’t want to be stuck in lab work forever. It’s not good enough, not for someone like you—a doctorate *and* a medical degree, a list of publications a metre long’—at Laura’s frown, Max wisely broke off mouthing the familiar refrain—‘clinical trials that even the Ministry cites, *expertise*. With your experience, you ought to have been made a director, or leastways a division head, ages ago.’

With his back to the table, Laura’s dad began spooning pudding into their bowls.

‘Don’t you ignore me, Charles.’

‘I’m not ignoring you.’

‘If you had any consideration at all, you’d work a bit harder to get on. For me, for the kids.’ Her voice was beginning its familiar climb. ‘It’s your attitude. Look at all those younger men who’ve been promoted over your head. Huang. Chisholm. Even Botha, of all people, though everybody knows it’s only because his father-in-law—’

Laura pushed back her chair.

‘No pudding for me, thanks. I’ve got an essay to start.’

Max shot her a dirty look, but he’d be finished and off with his mates to the pitch before Mum really let loose.

‘Just a minute,’ her mum said. ‘I want to know where you were this afternoon.’

‘School,’ Laura said.

‘Not that late. Not on a Friday.’

Careful not to overdo the wide-eyed innocence, Laura merely shrugged. ‘I stayed to talk with Saunders about the team.’ That ought to mollify her. From the corner of her eye she noticed that Max had stopped scoffing down his pudding for a moment.

‘Mr Saunders, please,’ her dad admonished.

‘*Mr Saunders.*’

‘Watch that tone,’ her mum said. ‘Good. *Very* good. So when are you going to start training again? You can’t expect to take any medals if you don’t work properly. You’ve had far too much time off as it is. Your butterfly’s perfect, backstroke almost as strong, there’s no reason why you can’t be regional champion, and Mr Saunders himself told me that if you’d trim your times just a bit, you’d even have a decent chance for the national schools team. And I still don’t understand why you won’t join a club, because then you’d be-‘

‘I haven’t got the time for a club,’ Laura said.

‘Rubbish. You spend enough time in front of the screen to train for two squads. Now look, I rang their head coach-‘

‘You did what?’

Her mum ignored the interruption. ‘She was very interested, I can tell you. I’ve made an appointment for you to see her on Thursday evening. So make sure you’re home on time, not rushing in when the rest of us have already sat down to supper, like tonight.’

‘There’s no point going to see her if I’m not joining.’

‘Of course you’ll see her. You want to hear what she’s going to suggest, don’t you? There’s an intercity meet already coming up at the end of the month, you need to get back into form, though I’m not really worried about those county qualifying times, but I want her to have a look at your backstroke turns, and she might suggest a new-‘

Usually Laura found it easy to turn on her spam filter, but tonight she remembered what Stella had said after sending Zach off to the cellar for a sack of potatoes-‘You’d better know what you’re doin’, girl’-and she felt her shoulders sag under the weight of all the words that were always being coiled round her neck like an unending chain of mail, admonishing and exhorting and soliciting. Wearily she stood up, muttered something vague under her breath, and carried her dirty plate to the dishwasher.

‘Laura,’ her mother snapped, ‘you’re not listening again.’

Better know what you’re doin’, girl.

‘Laura, come back here. What do you think you’re doing? Laura! *Laura!*’

As Laura left the kitchen, she could hear her mother calling after her, mere anger at first, which would soon crescendo into a paroxysm of rage if Dad didn’t manage to appease her. The whole neighbourhood snickered about Molly Litchfield’s tantrums. Even at school there’d been remarks, that dumbfuck Kathleen Slade, for one. And Courtney, who gave head to every bloke within puking range and, sod’s law, who just happened to be standing nearby when Zach had stopped to hand Laura a book, a library book for fucksake, you’d have thought it was a packet of condoms or a couple of lines wrapped in foil or a terr bomb ...

Laura shut and locked her bedroom door, but the yelling penetrated the solid wood penetrated her skull penetrated. She went to the window and looked out over her dad’s tidy garden, then leaned her forehead against the cool pane. How could he put up with it? Maybe her mum was right after all-weak, she called him. Though sometimes lately, Laura had caught the flicker of a faint red flame in his pupils, extinguished as quickly as a match struck against the wind.

Her mobile rang. She snatched it up, then left it to record a message when she saw *Owen* on the display. He’d want to go out-a film, a club, whatever she chose was always fine with him. And when she said *enough*, he listened-no tongue slobbering in her ear, no sly hand fingering the crotch of her knickers. Though she’d thought about it-who hadn’t?-she wasn’t the sort to go all *syrupy* (Olivia’s newest rizword). He wasn’t ugly or anything. He wasn’t weird, or an outcast, or superclever and sarky with it. Lots of girls liked him. Her mum loved him.

Not Owen, not tonight. A shame that you couldn’t turn feelings on and off like your mobie. She weighed it in her hand, its casing cool and impassive against her skin. She could ring Zach, couldn’t she? The worst he could say would be *no*.

And then she remembered Courtney’s remarks. There was a lot worse than *no*. She knew it wasn’t fair-Owen was *nice*-but she rang him back and arranged to meet him in an hour. They’d go someplace popular, someplace revving on a Friday night-someplace where they’d be good and visible.

Chapter 2

In the 90s physicist Wu Li took a sharp left turn along the ratiocinative superhighway into the metasphere, his theories at once controversial and groundbreaking. The Fulgur Corporation saw their commercial potential early on, and as soon as Zhou and Groening came on board, jettisoned the air-surfing division after the Aconcagua fiasco, poached some of the best minds from research institutes and universities worldwide, including Charles Litchfield, with the lure of putting science-and scientists-rather than profit first, and broadened its core focus from immersive entertainment to include neuroscience and the new metapsychology, then, in a strategic and farsighted move which would ensure its rapid rise to market dominance, augmented cognition. Homo cognoscens. The augers.

Simus, they like to call themselves. Zhou first referred to them as simulacrum, but the tag only really stuck after the Zimbabwean neurogeneticist on the pioneering team told them that his own name *Simu*, short for *Simudzai*, meant *forward* in his native tongue.

The interface prototype was mostly Groening's work, with his engineering skills, though it was Zhou who developed the algorithms from Wu's theorems. None of this would have been possible, however, without the self-replicating viruses which Litchfield's mentor at university, then Litchfield himself, synthesised in order to activate what would, in certain cases, become momentous germline mutations.

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'Get up, lad. You'll freeze to death like this.'

Zach raises his head. His skin and lips are already numb, his nostrils packed with ice crystals. The splint and dressing after they'd broken his nose had not felt much different-a foreign body, one which he'd welcomed as a constant reminder. He'd flushed the painkillers down the clinic loo. And six months later, one of the kids needed an implant for the two front teeth he'd lost; a few weeks afterwards, the second one spent ten days in intensive care; and the third would likely never father a child.

With gloved fists, Zach digs at his eyes like a small child but the lids are iced shut and it frightens him, that feeling of resistance, as if someone has used catgut to stitch away the evidence of his genetic code. The man helps Zach to a sitting position, and crouching before him, places a hand on either side of his head. Without any sign of disgust he blows on first one, then the other eye, again and again, until Zach's sight is restored. The man is a smoker, Zach can smell tobacco on his breath.

'Who are you?' Zach asks, blinking against the brightness. It's stopped snowing, and the tundra glitters in the moonlight. Those who are unfamiliar with the far north imagine months of winter darkness, but ice and snow have a spectral fierceness as beautiful as a dreamscape, as implacable as hatred. His training required a certain amount of reading, which in fascination he soon broadened to include numerous accounts, many first-hand, of expeditions to the high Arctic-of explorers and whalers, of scientists and entrepreneurs, of madmen and dreamers.

'Here they call me Lev.'

Lev draws Zach to his feet, then reaches into a deep flapped pocket and brings out a small flask, which once uncapped, steams and gives off the rich smell of coffee. Lev holds it to Zach's lips.

'Slowly now, don't burn your tongue.'

The coffee is black and very sweet, laced with what may be cardamom in the Saudi style. Though a fine programmer, Mishaal is something of a jokester who leaves his version of a calling card wherever most eccentric; a wink between fellow Janus. A few sips, and heat blossoms in Zach's stomach like a spurt of blood from a reopened wound, and his shivering subsides.

'OK?' Lev asks.

Zach nods.

Lev points towards what, under the circumstances, couldn't possibly be a flock of sheep clustered near an open pond. As Zach peers at the gleam of aquamarine, a snow-covered building comes into focus. A hut or shed of some kind. And yes, now he can see light flickering in a window, lantern-or firelight.

'It's nearer than it looks,' Lev says, 'but we'd best get started. This cold will kill

you faster than a terr bomb.'

'Is Lev a nickname?' Zach asks. 'It's not on my client list.'

'Not exactly. But conserve your energy-the first rule of survival here. We'll talk inside.'

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Inside consists of a narrow anteroom where they shed their boots and outerwear, and through a tightly fitting door, a surprisingly good-sized living room furnished with a long wooden table and benches, two simple sofas, a few chairs, bookshelves. Over the floorboards several brightly-striped carpets are strewn, interspersed with furs-possibly polar bear. A fire is burning in the open fireplace, though the almost uncomfortable temperature suggests another, and primary, source of heat. The second door will lead to a kitchen, bathroom, and some sort of sleeping quarters. Though far from luxurious, this basecamp is less primitive than others Zach has used. As an instructor-not *counsellor*, and absolutely not Fulgur's ridiculous *facilitator*-at least he'll have his own room, no matter how small. He couldn't bear it otherwise, not now.

Personal data about clients is kept to a minimum-'to avoid prejudice', reads the team manual-but Zach is disconcerted when two girls glance up as he enters. They're seated cross-legged before the fire, a jigsaw puzzle half-finished on a large tray between them-5000 pieces, by the look of it. Slender, hollow-cheeked girls without makeup. Sixteen or seventeen, both of them. Laura's age.

Zach turns away for a moment till sure his face expresses the right degree of polite interest. There's no way it could be this easy, and though he's known it all along, the sight of the girls brings blotches of colour to his cheeks. He moves closer to the fire, the heat of which would redden even the darkest skin.

Lev comes into the room, shutting the door behind him, and Zach has his first good look at his rescuer. Cropped dark blonde hair, blue eyes, a small scar at the corner of his mouth, as though he'd been licking off a steak knife and it slipped. A few years older than Zach himself, possibly in his mid-twenties. Not a youth offender, then, so what is he doing here?

The girl with dark curly hair gets to her feet. 'There's some hot soup in the kitchen,' she says. 'You two look as if you need it.' Zach realises that she is in

fact the lad he's been expecting.

'You're Ethan?' Zach asks.

Ethan nods, then indicates his companion. 'And this is Chloe.'

Neither of them seems discomfited by Lev's presence, so Zach decides to say nothing till he works out just who this bloke is. A misstep at the outset could easily destroy Ethan and Chloe's trust in a field instructor-tenuous at best-making cooperation difficult, if not impossible. Zach has never heard of anyone dying during Virtual Wilderness Therapy, but he wouldn't like to put it to the test.

After the meal Zach introduces himself, a nicely offhand set piece, but contrary to Fulgur guidelines, restricts his remarks about the programme itself to the briefest sketch of his immediate plans. They've surely been lectured enough; a few days on the ice sharpens everyone's listening skills. Then he gives each of them a chance to talk. 'Anything you like,' he says, 'questions of course, but anything at all, even how much you detest the cold and the snow and don't want to be here and are bored out of your skull and didn't do anything wrong anyway and plan to throttle me as soon as I'm asleep.'

'Nah,' says Chloe, 'fuck you.'

For a fraction of a second Zach thinks she's swearing at him. He manages to keep his face deadpan when she adds, 'I'm dying to find out if an auger cock's really dead brute. A whopper, a piece of metal, a fucking iron *harpoon*, you're supposed to have between those skinny legs. Ethan doesn't mind sharing for once, do you, babe?'

'Sorry I can't oblige,' Zach says coolly. 'Against the rules.'

'Is that so?' Unperturbed, she smiles and glances round. 'Don't worry, no one will nark. Just like they won't mention how you, our Arctic mentor and *guide*, got lost on his way to our cosy little character-building venue.'

Ethan laughs, while Lev stretches his legs, crosses his ankles, and tilts his chair back at an improbable angle, his eyes glinting with amusement. Zach meets their gaze impassively, each in turn. Manipulative behaviour is one of the first things he's been taught to deal with.

‘Sending Lev out to find me shows a genuine sense of responsibility. It means that you’re ready to move on to the first phase of the outdoor programme. We’ll start tomorrow right after breakfast.’

‘It was a test?’ Chloe asks with some chagrin.

Zach frames his response carefully. ‘You’re in good hands. Fulgur leaves nothing to chance.’

They discuss the chore roster, with none of the usual complaints-perhaps a consequence of Chloe’s come-on. She and Lev carry the dishes into the kitchen to wash up. While sorting through some of the puzzle pieces together, Zach asks Ethan a few casual questions. ‘Any newcomers? Girls passing through?’

Later when Zach is struggling to find a way around his memories towards sleep, Chloe comes to his narrow cot. He knows that he doesn’t want to do this and that he’s going to regret it afterwards, but the need for release, however momentary, translates into an involuntary groan which she misinterprets. Once she touches him, he’s lost. She doesn’t seem to notice that he won’t let her kiss him or stroke his hair, nor does she realise his final cry is one of despair.

Chapter 3

Owen's breath was warm against her neck, and Laura could hardly mistake what was happening as he pressed himself against her. She wanted to laugh at the phrases he was whispering in her ear-did lads ever read girly blogs?-but the music was soaking through her pores and she didn't care to humiliate him openly and there was something rather sweet about his fumbling, not that she wanted to encourage him, but the air was thick and heavy hard to breathe no it was her body that was so light and smoky and insubstantial and she could smell his sandalwood cologne a scent she'd always liked and they were floating on the languid chords hardly moving swaying really and she would stop just now the music would stop he would stop he would he

Laura glanced up to see Zach staring at her with his sardonic grin. Owen disappeared. The club disappeared. There was only Zach, leaning against a wall in his black jeans, his arms crossed and his mouth uptilted. Unlike his eyes.

The music stopped. Laura heard Owen mutter something behind her, but she'd already moved away from him. Heads were turning towards Zach now, and for some reason the band hadn't pitched into another number, which left a silence to fill, a silence which was being stretched and pulled and shaped into a receptacle for their spit, their dirty wads of gum.

'What's he doing here?'

'It's bad enough we've got to put up with his sort at school.'

'Dirty mulac pervert.'

'Somebody better get rid of the freak.'

'My sister told me they can fuck for hours.'

'They ought to be kept in pens.'

'Do you see those eyes?'

'Thinks he can muck around with one of our girls, does he?'

‘Teach him a lesson.’

‘Auger cunt.’

‘I wouldn’t mind, not if he uses a nice thick cocksock.’

Close up, Zach smelled fresh, like newly fallen snow. He didn’t take his eyes off her nor did he smile, but he had a way of listening that she’d never encountered before. He paid attention. Everybody else was busy with their own thoughts/reactions/arguments, or impatient for you to finish so that they could get a chance to centre-stage, or simply in a rush to be somewhere else. But Zach focused on your words as if they were nourishment, or even the oxygen without which his cells would soon starve. Were they all like him?

‘It was just a dance,’ Laura said.

Zach said nothing.

‘Were you looking for me?’

His eyes flicked past her-temperature dropping, the first gusts, visibility impaired, icy track ahead. She turned her head. Owen and some of his mates. Zach uncrossed his arms and stood taller, away from the wall. His legs were incredibly long, she thought. Dark-clad limbs that might bend but not snap in the wind.

‘Is there a problem, Laura?’ Owen asked.

Nice, she thought. It’s *nice* to protect your date.

‘Of course not,’ she said.

Tim and Derek closed ranks.

‘You’d better be going,’ Derek said.

Zach regarded him with the same mild interest he might afford a household pet which had begun to speak, but not quite mastered the intricacies of English grammar.

‘Did you hear what he said, mate?’ Tim added after a short silence.

Zach spoke for the first time. ‘I’m not your mate.’

‘Listen, transfuck, do we have spell it out for you? Like in the toilet?’ Tim said.

Owen raised a hand. ‘This is a private club, Zach,’ he said, his voice conciliatory. ‘There are lots of places where augers can go. Don’t make trouble.’

Laura winced at Owen’s casual use of the word. In school he wouldn’t have got away with it, at least not if there’d been a teacher nearby. And the worst was, he wasn’t being deliberately provocative or nasty. It’s just what they all said.

‘What do you think, Laura?’ Zach was watching her with the same intensity with which he’d listened to her talk about her family.

The narrow path was slippery with ice, a jagged rockface on one side and a steep precipice on the other. Laura shivered, she wasn’t used to such hard climbs.

‘Nothing to do with Laura,’ Owen said.

Zach lifted an eyebrow and waited.

‘I-I guess-‘ Laura dropped her eyes. *Better know what you’re doin’, girl.*

‘Fuck you too,’ Zach said very softly, but not softly enough.

Tim stepped in close, balled his hand, and with a loud ‘fucking auger cunt’ slammed his fist into Zach’s solar plexus. Zach grunted softly and sagged for a moment against the wall, then straightened. His eyes never left Laura’s.

Smiling broadly, Tim directed a vicious punch to Zach’s jaw, which cracked his head round into the plaster. This time he gasped and closed his eyes.

‘No!’ Laura cried, and would have darted forward, but Owen took her arm and shook his head in warning.

Zach licked his lips. Slowly he opened his eyes, slowly he twisted his head back again, his attention entirely focused on Laura. She could see a bubble of blood at the corner of his mouth, which with agonising sluggishness beaded, then trickled

down his chin and hung trembling for a fraction of a second before dripping onto the floor. Laura suddenly understood he would stand there taking it till he collapsed. So long as she witnessed the attack.

‘Enough, Timmy,’ she said. ‘He’s not worth it. Someone will ring the police, and there’ll be a lot of unpleasant questions. Come on, let’s have a drink, these devis leave a foul taste in my mouth. And the band’s about to crank up again.’

She leaned over and kissed Tim on the cheek. ‘Thanks,’ she said.

Then she turned away, her arm hooked through Owen’s, and was gone. Downhill always seemed easier.

Chapter 4

Next morning Ethan is feverish, shaking with chills, and so dizzy when he stumbles into the living room that Zach sends him straight back to bed. Though conditions are meant to be as realistic as possible, Zach is disgruntled by the delay and can't help wondering about this unexpected development, the second in two days. Illness isn't unheard of in Fulgur's little cyber realm, but never during the acclimation phase, which is stressful enough on its own.

In the kitchen he finds a stock of herbal remedies and brews a pot of lemon balm, yarrow, and ginger tea, well sweetened with honey. Ethan drinks only a few sips before knocking the mug aside, rambling on about harpoons of acid blue light and batmen and a shapeshifting ice cave, but soon falls into a doze while Zach mops up. Despite official assurances, Andy has warned him to be on the watch for anomalies, particularly cognitive dysfunction, which might indicate a programming glitch. There's always the backfeed for reporting minor problems, but persistent hallucinations could necessitate a premature shut-down. Any simu who aborts a run without good reason assumes its entire cost. You'd be in debt to Fulgur till too old to notice. There are no aborts.

If it weren't for Laura, Zach would have stuck to his resolve never to do another run again. And once they find out what he's up to, there'll be no other. Let them banish him to custodial duty; he'll scrub their toilets with savage glee. They wouldn't dare to assassinate him outright-not now, not with so much unrest. A martyr's death would suit him just fine.

At breakfast Chloe appears in a cherry-red tracksuit whose thick fleece might as well be diaphanous silk, or nothing at all, the way she turns sleepy eyes and moist pout and an aura of torpid conquest on Zach. He finds himself colouring, at which she laughs complacently. The run is fast becoming a disaster.

Lev rescues him by suggesting Chloe stay indoors with Ethan while the two of them try to bring down a polar bear.

'What for?' Zach asks bluntly.

'We ought to take advantage of the good weather. It's stopped snowing.'

‘You know that’s not what I mean.’

‘Practice. Teamwork and bonding in the face of a tough obstacle. Survival skills.’ Lev says. ‘Isn’t that what you’re here to teach?’ There it is again—that brief glint in Lev’s eyes, like a flash of metal through the trees. The scar makes it difficult to tell whether his half-smile is sardonic, or merely the result of reduced muscular control. ‘Fresh meat.’

‘A full-grown male can weigh as much as 700 kilos, occasionally more.’ Zach falls back on a practical concern. ‘You and I can barely drag a quarter of that between us.’

‘We’ll take whatever we can. Isn’t that what humans always do?’

Chloe is becoming restive. ‘I’m going to have a good wash’—her lower lip is a touch overripe for her smirk to be tasty—‘and check on Ethan while you two machos work out your kill.’ She saunters off in the direction of the bath, then stops on the threshold to say, ‘I forgot, the bath is filled with Earl Grey, I’ll have to use the teapot.’ Lev gives Zach an indulgent shrug as she heads for the kitchen; there’s no accounting for sense of humour.

‘Killing a polar bear takes exceptional skill. How long have you been here anyway?’ Zach asks once they’re alone.

‘Why don’t you wait and see what I can do?’

‘That’s quite a lot to take on faith.’

‘We’re expected to trust you.’

‘Not exactly the same thing, is it?’

‘Have you forgotten that I could have left you in the snowstorm to freeze? Perhaps you ought to remember one of the cardinal principles of wilderness training—_mutual_ trust.’

A test of some sort? Zach meets, measures, matches the daredevil in Lev’s eyes. ‘There are no firearms. So what will you use instead? A magical incantation?’

Lev gives the first laugh Zach has heard from him, a rough snort like an

animal's-a polar bear's chuff. Lev lifts his long jumper, exposing an age-darkened knife sheath on a belt. Zach can see the Puma logo embossed on the leather, and the distinctive staghorn handle that generations of hunters have reached for.

'You must be sudsing,' Zach says. 'Easier to melt a glacier with a hair-dryer.'

'We'll see. Now eat up, we'll need the energy. I meant it, you know, about meat.'

They finish their coffee and bowls of salty porridge to the accompaniment of singing from the kitchen. Chloe has a lovely voice, Zach acknowledges silently, a rich alto just smoky enough to be at home in a dimly lit club. For a moment he imagines an old song, a bitter song, dark as stout and liquid as tears yet with a touch of sweetness, a song pursued by the pleading voice of the clarinet, its subtle and bittersweet disharmonies, but never diluted, never tainted, never contained; siren song.

Without comment Lev carries their dishes to the kitchen. The singing stops, and Zach hears low voices, though only snatches of what's being said. Lev returns with a bottle of dark yellow oil, which once unstopped gives off a strong fishy odour. 'Rub it on your skin,' Lev says. 'Polar bears have an acute sense of smell, even over vast distances.'

'I haven't agreed to this misadventure yet. Ethan shouldn't be left.'

Lev explains that Chloe will apply ice packs to Ethan's groin and armpits if his fever worsens. 'The therapy programme is built upon learning to assume responsibility, isn't it?'

'It's a bit early to expect any changes.'

'Chloe's prickly but not unfeeling. It's not for me to tell you your job, but there's nothing you could do for Ethan at this stage that she can't. And maybe you yourself ought to remember that she's more vulnerable than she pretends.'

Zach accepts the bottle in silence.

Chapter 5

For a week Laura was determined not to watch for Zach. Once she saw his distinctive hair skimming above the rail in the corridor outside the gym, but by the time she elbowed through the mass of kids, he was gone. Another time she was standing with Owen and Olivia in the canteen and could feel someone's eyes on her, but when she glanced round there was nobody of interest.

Owen asked one or two questions, which Laura dealt with effortlessly in her best offhand tone, breezy enough to power a small wind turbine. Olivia wouldn't have been fooled-or dishevelled-for a moment. As follow-up, Laura gave Owen exactly ten minutes in the infamous (and fetid) 'broom room' which was used by everybody for that purpose. Some kids even claimed the teaching staff knew all about it and were prone to retire there themselves on occasion, when they needed to blow steam after a stressy couple of lessons. Lots of the younger girls racketed on about sightings, about possible pairings, but except for a six-week period when she'd done a bit of dozy daydreaming over the new bearded DT head-half the school pitched up at auditions for *Midsummer* that term-she'd never been particularly keen on the secret lives of bees, or narwhals, or teachers.

Lads her age were so pathetic. There must be one token male in her year who didn't walk around with a permanent stiffy, but she'd yet to meet him. At least Owen played within the foul lines. She and Olivia spent a lot of time thrashing it over, but Livs had been going with older lads for ages, she was bound to see it differently. She'd come round Thursday after swimming club, bringing an extra-large packet of Laura's favourite crisps. They turned up the music loud, then louder.

'Pissed at your mum?' Olivia asked.

Laura turned the music up even louder and ate a fistful of crisps, and another.

'Save some for me,' Olivia said.

'Thought you wanted to lose two, three kilos?'

'Damien says he likes my womanly curves.'

‘Your big tits, you mean.’

‘You’re just jealous,’ Olivia said, hefting them in her hands.

They both giggled, nearly spilling a can of diet fizz, then crunched companionably together on the floor cushions-handsewn. They’d known each other since primary, and even Olivia, who’d never liked Laura’s mum, was a bit envious of their tidy house and tins full of home-baking and Tshirts that were always ironed. Her own parents were divorced, and nobody much bothered in either of the flats.

During a brief lull between tracks they could hear Laura’s mum shouting something from the downstairs hallway. ‘Better turn it down,’ Olivia said, ‘not the right time to wind her up, is it?’

‘What do you mean?’

Olivia licked some salt off her lips before answering. ‘You know. The auger.’

‘Don’t call them that!’

‘Hey. This is Olivia, remember.’

‘Just don’t use that word.’

Olivia picked up the remote and adjusted the volume on the system. ‘OK, what’s going on?’

‘*Nothing’s* going on. I just don’t like that Purist crap.’

‘It’s not crap. My dad says-‘

‘Fuck your dad! Since when have you begun to quote him?’

‘Listen girl, you’d better watch it, and not just your mouth neither. I don’t have to tell you what’s going to happen if you start going round with augers.’

‘And I told you that I don’t want to hear that sort of language. It’s narrow-minded and ignorant and *stupid*.’

‘You’re calling me stupid now? You, who can barely pass a course at school?’

Laura rose to her feet, snatching up the unfinished packet of crisps, which she thrust at her best friend. 'Here, take them with you. You might get hungry on the way home.'

They stared at each other for a short while, then Olivia too stood up.

'OK, I'm going,' she said. 'But you're making a big mistake, and we've been mates too long for me not to warn you. Zach's poison. I mean it. Poison. There's girls who'll sleep with augers for the thrill of it, but they always-_always_-end up sorry. If you don't believe me, ask Jackie. Ask her why her sister quit school last year. Ask her where Anne is now. And most of all, ask her which mulac bastard fucked Anne so good that she locked herself in her room one Monday and swallowed enough pills to sort herself for good. Real good.'

Laura shook her head. 'He's not like that.'

'And you're calling *me* stupid?'

*

Although names were listed at most of the vid monitors, Laura recognised none of them and didn't fancy ringing indiscriminately. It was a roughish area near the East Street Canal. A boy in last year's blades, the left one with a broken buckle, had stopped trying to barrel roll on the pavement without falling and was watching her. She would have liked to suggest some basics, like bending his knees more, but he'd probably tell her to piss off. 'Rad skating,' she said. 'Much better than my brother.' In exchange for a packet of sweets he unlocked the front door to the building and directed her to the right flat.

'He's one of those weirdo mulacs,' the boy said. 'What do you want with him anyway?'

Weirdo mulacs. Laura bit the inside of her cheek till she could speak casually. 'I'm supposed to bring him some homework. He's missed a lot of lessons.'

'He probably won't bother to answer.' Thrusting the sweets into a pocket, he clumped down the front steps, his curiosity dampened by the mention of school. The door shut on his loud oath as he landed on his arse. Somebody ought to buy him a helmet, Laura thought. His brains are already scrambled enough.

There was no doorbell. Laura knocked several times, and after a five-minute wait, knocked again. Finally, ready to give up, she heard footsteps. When Zach opened the door, he stared at her without a word. Underneath the faint stubble she could see the angry bruise on his chin, like a slap in her own face. She lifted her hand towards it, but he stepped back and began to shut the door.

‘Wait,’ she said.

He didn’t reopen the door, but he didn’t close it any farther, either. His eyes were dark and unreadable.

‘I’d like to come in,’ she said.

‘No,’ he said, his voice hard with anger, and something else. His hand dropped from the doorjamb, and Laura surprised herself by thrusting her foot over the sill before he could shut her out. They both looked down.

‘Please,’ she said.

He shrugged then and stepped back, still unsmiling.

His flat was very sophisticated for a seventeen-year-old’s: clean white walls, blond worktable and bookshelves, soft yellow leather sofa, computer. There were books everywhere; didn’t he use a reader?

‘Do you live alone?’ she asked.

‘Just tell me what you want.’

Why did it seem so difficult to apologise to him? She’d prepared her script carefully, but he made her feel like a cliché waiting onstage for the curtain to rise. In the end she settled for a simple, ‘I’m sorry.’

He nodded, then pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it onto the couch table. She noticed a small tattoo on his upper chest, above his heart. A code, it seemed—at least a series of symbols in no alphabet she recognised.

He was very thin, much thinner than she remembered. Or perhaps he’d lost weight recently. She averted her gaze from the dark line of hair below his belly button, but not before he snorted.

‘What are you waiting for?’ he asked. ‘Get undressed.’

‘What?’

‘I’m not taking your clothes off for you. And no kissing.’ He began unzipping his jeans. He was already barefoot. ‘There are rules to this. No one touches my hair, either.’

‘Hold on. What’s going on?’

His jeans landed on top of his T-shirt. Arms akimbo, he smiled-mockingly-for the first time. ‘If you want me to get hard, you’ll have to work a bit harder yourself.’

She took a step backwards, hugging her ribs. Olivia’s words came back to her. Get out now, she could imagine her friend saying, right now.

‘Zach, look-‘

But he didn’t give her a chance to finish. ‘What’s the problem? That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it? To fuck? To find out what it’s like to fuck an auger?’

‘Did you know Anne Marsden?’ she asked.

His mouth twisted, and all at once Laura felt close to tears. She turned her head, pretending to study the rows of books on his shelves, some volumes awfully old-looking, some even bound in *leather*, till she could control her voice. When she looked back again, he was standing in his boxers by the window, gazing out over the canal. It was a grey afternoon, and little gusts of wind were blowing leaves onto the dull beaten water, the colour of tarnished silver. Then she realised he was shivering-shivering, in fact, quite strongly. He turned his head towards her, and the bruise looked liverish against his now pale skin. He put out a hand to steady himself on the windowsill.

‘You’re ill,’ she said.

He licked his lips several times. ‘I-‘ He broke off, as another round of shivering overtook him.

Laura crossed the room.

‘Where’s your bed?’ she asked.

They stared at each other for a moment, before the humour in the situation struck them both-what the question would have meant just a few minutes ago. Even Zach laughed, despite his haggard state. He indicated a door near his desk and let her accompany him along a short passage into his bedroom. Once she had him lying down under a thick duvet, she asked if he needed a doctor.

‘Just some water.’

‘Or tea?’

‘Yeah, some sweet tea would be great. No milk.’

He closed his eyes. The shivering had subsided somewhat, but red blotches had appeared under his high cheekbones, and there was a sheen to his skin which worried Laura. Max had looked that way during his last bout of viral pneumonia. She went in search of the kitchen. It was small and plain, but spotlessly clean. There was very little except some mustard, a scrap of cheddar, half a pint of sour milk, and a couple of limp carrots in the fridge. It didn’t look as if he’d been eating-or at least eating here-for a while. But she found tea leaves and a full packet of sugar.

He drank the tea greedily, then lay back on the pillow. ‘I’ll be OK now, thanks. Just shut the front door behind you when you leave.’

‘Are you sure you don’t want something else? Some food?’

‘No. Only sleep.’

But his colour was no better, and he was still shivering from time to time. She fetched a spare blanket from the top of the wardrobe and covered him, then hovered near the foot of the bed, considering what to do. In a last drowsy effort he opened his eyes again.

‘Just go, Laura.’

She went, but into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea and ring home on her mobile with an easy lie. In the living room she kicked off her trainers, curled up on the sofa with a novel that looked promising, and settled down to wait. After

about an hour, she heard him crying out and hurried to check. Though the bedding was in disarray, he appeared to be sleeping, but there wasn't enough light from the passage to see his colour. Tentatively she laid a hand on his forehead, which felt moist but not overly warm. When she straightened his blankets, he muttered 'Ben', turned on his side with a groan, and then was quiet.

*

'Why are you still here?'

She must have fallen asleep. The living room was dark, but some light from the streetlamps cast distorted shadows across the floor and up the walls. Zach was silhouetted in the doorway to the passage.

'Are you feeling better?' Laura asked.

Zach snapped on the lights. He'd dressed in a warm tracksuit, but his long hair was uncombed. Coarser than silk, she thought.

'You haven't answered my question,' he said.

'Nor you, mine.'

A burst of raucous laughter from the street below, then silence. At night the canal attracted the druggies and homeless, who wrapped their misery in cheap newsprint. But in Zach's room the silence had the same heavy creamy texture as laid vellum, the kind sold at specialist stationers, which called out for a thick nib and rich black ink-and a hand inscribing with care. Even the first word was a commitment, each successive stroke a further act of bravery. In the end you had to mark the paper, or forever live between empty pages.

'You're the first girl I've met who's comfortable with silence,' Zach finally said. He hesitated, then added, 'Sapiens girl.'

'It's one of the reasons I like to swim. I think I'd have been happy as a whale or dolphin.'

'They have voices.'

'Underwater it always sounds like silence.'

Zach stared at her with those strangely luminous eyes, then turned abruptly and headed for the kitchen. He was filling the kettle when Laura joined him.

‘You need to eat something,’ she said.

‘I won’t keep it down.’

He was starting to shiver again.

‘Zach, please tell me what’s wrong.’

‘Worried you’ll catch something?’

‘Yeah, like maybe your rudeness.’

He merely shrugged.

‘Well, if you’re not hungry, I am.’

He smiled at that. ‘How about a carrot?’

‘I’ll go out and fetch something. There must be a takeaway nearby.’

‘You can’t go by yourself. Not at night, not in this neighbourhood. I’ll ring for a taxi to take you home.’

‘I’m not leaving you alone while you’re like this.’

‘And do what? Spend the night here?’

‘Somebody will cover for me.’

‘You’ve got to be sudsing.’

Laura looked away. She’d always imagined that Olivia would be a friend for life. They’d joked about having a house together, with part-time husbands in separate accommodation. Sharing babysitting. Sharing holidays. Sharing a cottage when they were old and wrinkled and hard of hearing and incontinent. You didn’t risk that sort of friendship for someone like Zach, did you? For an *auger*?

The kettle had boiled, and he was trying to make tea, but spilling half the water

onto the worktop.

‘Go and lie down,’ Laura said, ‘I’ll do it.’

He handed her his wallet when she brought the mug to him. ‘Here, order a pizza or something. There’s a list by the phone.’

‘I’ve got money with me.’

‘Forget it. I earn enough.’

‘How? You’re still in school.’ Her eyes swept the room, the furnishings, the books.

‘Fulgur pays us well enough.’

‘You work for Fulgur?’

His laugh was bitter. ‘You don’t know much about us, do you?’

While she was on the phone, she heard the unmistakable sounds of vomiting. At first Zach refused to let her into the bathroom, but he needed help, and eventually was persuaded to discard his pride-god, how they hated to seem weak-along with his soiled clothes. There was some blood mixed with the thin contents of his stomach.

‘You’re scaring me, Zach. I’m going to ring for a doctor.’

‘No!’

A disturbing thought occurred to her. ‘You’re not a user, are you?’

‘Heroin? I wish.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘There are worse forms of dependency.’

She sat down next to him on the bed. ‘Tell me the truth. Do you still want me to leave?’

She could see him struggling with himself. It was nothing like Olivia trying to resist another piece of chocolate. The stakes weren't in kilos, or image, or self-worth. Not even in bruises from some hormone-challenged thugs. His life was set down in a language she couldn't begin to read. Yet all she'd been worrying about was what a friendship with one of his kind might involve for her-not *him*.

'No,' he whispered at last. 'Don't go.'

Shame made her prickly. 'Then you can explain before or after I clean the bathroom, but no later.'

'I don't want you cleaning up my mess.'

Years of practice with her mother, and teachers, had taught Laura about the leverage to be gained by disengagement, especially if she were likely to be bested in a verbal tussle. She said nothing. After a long period in which Zach's eyes were focused on the pot plant by the window-something odd and tropical-he said, 'It needs water.'

'OK.' Laura stood. 'I'll water it, then I'll tidy the bathroom, and *then* I'll go. On foot. A nice friendly mugger or rapist would be a welcome relief.'

'I'm not sure I can trust you.'

'I'm here, aren't I?'

'Yeah, you're *here* ...'

'If I could change what I did at the club-'

'But you wouldn't, would you?' he interrupted brutally. 'Not with Boyfriend No. 1 looking on, plus all your other mates.'

'He's not my boyfriend.' It was easier to discuss Owen than to think about whether Zach was right about her.

'I don't understand you monkeys. What is it with you and sex? He was practically ejaculating in front of everyone, yet you kept on rubbing yourself against him. And then you say he's not your boyfriend.'

Laura could feel the heat rise in her cheeks. He deserved a sharp retort, and she was more than prepared to deliver one, except that she saw how pale he'd become again, how prominent the bruise, and she forced herself to hold her tongue. He was ill ... grey as trodden snow ...

He pushed off the duvet, swung his feet to the floor, and hunched over his knees, clutching his head, restlessly jiggling his legs. 'I know it's supposed to be bad, but this ... *fuck*.' Then he crossed his arms and dug his fingers into his skin, gouging deep marks and rocking in pain. 'Bastards,' he muttered, 'bastards.'

Laura was genuinely frightened now. She crouched down in front of him and tried to take his hands, but he pushed her away. Then, as the next bout of shivering began, he slid to the floor with a low moan. She wrapped her arms around him. She could feel his heart beating, beating against her like a seal calf imprisoned under the ice.

'I'm going to ring my father,' she said once she'd managed to get a few sips of lukewarm tea into him, and he was back in bed. 'He's a doctor, he'll know what to do. He won't like it, but he'll come if necessary.'

'Perfect. Tell him to swing by the lab and fetch the HC serum.'

'The what?'

'Ask your dad.'

'He won't tell me. He never talks about his work.'

'I'm not surprised. If I were him, I'd also be plenty ashamed to tell my kids what I did to buy their ice cream and pods and swimming lessons and swank clothes.'

'I've got no idea what you're talking about. He's a research scientist. You're making him sound like some sort of criminal!'

Zach sighed. 'He's no worse than any of them, I suppose.'

Agitated now, Laura walked to the window and ran her fingers over the broad fleshy leaves of the plant-an unpleasant sensation, as though she were massaging a dismembered flipper. She rubbed her hand on her jeans, then raised her fingers to her nose and sniffed. It must have been her imagination, there was no smell of

fish oil now.

‘Are you saying my dad has something to do with your illness?’

‘Are you ill when deprived of oxygen?’

She spread her hands in a gesture of hopeless incomprehension. Zach raised his upper body off the pillow, his colour high again, his eyes too bright.

‘Are you sure you want to know? Really sure?’ he asked.

Slowly she nodded.

He spoke fast, almost as if he were trying to outrun a stutter. ‘OK. I’ll tell you. Nobody else will. And then you tell me if you’ll be able to sit down at breakfast with your dad and eat your scrambled eggs and bacon and toast without choking.’ He took a breath, trying to calm himself. ‘We’re flawed genetically, all of us. A faulty gene which prevents our bodies from producing a key protein needed by our brain cells. The biochemical mechanisms are a bit more complicated, of course. But going too long without this factor induces the withdrawal symptoms you’ve seen. And worse.’

‘How much worse?’

‘Worse.’

They were quiet for a time.

‘Then why aren’t you taking the stuff?’ Laura asked. ‘That serum.’

‘I wanted to see if I could manage without it. At least for a while. How would you like to be dependent on the supply of a drug?’

‘Lots of people were, once. All those old diseases—diabetes, schizophrenia, high blood pressure. Still are, for some things.’

‘Not a great way to live.’

‘Haven’t they tried to fix the problem? They can do an awful lot about faulty genes nowadays.’

Zach gave a short harsh laugh. 'You don't get it, do you? It's the other way round. They engineered the defective gene deliberately. To have a hold over us. To control us. To *own* us.'

The doorbell rang. 'The pizza,' Laura said, relieved to escape for a moment. But when she opened the door, it wasn't a deliveryman.

'There's been a complaint, miss,' the officer said.

Chapter 6

On a ridge surmounting the sea ice, Zach and Lev are stretched out on a caribou skin over deep snow compacted by their feet. It's taken a long, painstaking trek across uneven terrain to locate the breathing hole directly below them. There are fresh polar bear tracks out on the ice, clearly visible after the new fall of snow.

'He's hunting,' Lev says. 'Ringed seal's his favourite snack.' He offers no explanation other than a lame joke for the second set of footprints, the ones which resemble their own but circle the aglu without an inbound or outbound trail. 'Some winged angels with a taste for hi-tech expedition boots, maybe.'

'Better than armoured ice bears equipped with subtle knives,' Zach says dryly. 'Listen, seal meat makes good eating. Lots of calories in the blubber.'

'Without a harpoon? Anyway, a seal is no challenge. But it depends on how long you can take the cold.'

Zach edges closer to his companion. For now, their layered clothing, lightweight but well insulated, defies the wind. Though they've avoided overtaxing themselves-sweat, like any moisture, has sinister consequences in the far north-the cold always wins in the end. Zach is grateful for the mitts Lev insisted on, better than his own, and the bubble-fleece face mask. Refusing a pair of ski goggles-'they'll only interfere with my vision'-may have been a mistake. He remembers the feel of Lev's lips, their restorative warmth. And with a sharp twist of pain, Laura's.

'Are you OK?' Lev asks.

'Polar bears are supposed to be curious,' Zach says. 'Wouldn't it be easier to show ourselves? Attract attention?'

'The only way I can hope to take him is when he's distracted, concentrating on his prey.' Lev nods towards the breathing hole, the nearest of several. 'That's the other reason for the caribou pelt. A seal won't surface if it hears the scrunch and squeak we'd make on loose snow, even just shifting in place.'

'How long have we got to wait?'

‘No idea. Could be a while. Don’t worry, I’m not that stubborn-or rash. Seal stew is preferable to hypothermia.’

‘There’s black, open water in most of the agluit,’ Zach says. ‘They’ve been used recently.’

‘You’ve done your homework. Now be quiet.’

‘Look here-‘ Zach says, but Lev puts up a warning hand and points towards the expanse of shorefast ice. The moonlight enables them to see four, maybe five kilometres out. It’s hard to tell, for there are no landmarks which signify anything to Zach, no real means of gauging scale and depth, and the entire vista is so vast, so eerie, so ethereal that he might be gazing upon a poem rendered in light rather than words.

Yet the ice isn’t featureless. Not only are there small domes over some of the breathing holes, but fissures and cracks where the snow shades to lilac and cyan, to a bruised violet like veins under the skin of a newborn; dunes and snowdrifts blown into ridged formations and hollows reminiscent of the open desert; low piles of rubbled ice, grey and barely frosted with white; in places, drifting hoar mist; and even some meandering leads of open water, black as the lead in the great cathedral windows. At first he thinks of a lunar landscape, then realises that the comparison is inadequate-that, in fact, the very attempt to impose a foreign grammar on such a place would prevent him from communicating with it. If it has a language, he needs above all to *listen*. Not like the monkeys, who in their discontent and greed redefine everything with their paltry nomenclature, make and remake and make again in their own stunted image. Little backwater gods, scared shitless that they’ve been shunted onto a sidespur of evolution.

A flicker of movement, barely discrete-more a warping of the light, as though passing through a prism-there, near the edge of a lead. Something is moving across the ice. Zach touches Lev on the shoulder, who nods to show he’s seen it too. The bear has surfaced so quietly from the water that its presence seems like a ghostly gift: *the one who gives power*, according to the Inuit.

As Zach concentrates on the animal, he begins to make out its strategy. Chest flat on the ice, the bear is sliding along centimetre by centimetre in their direction, its hindquarters slightly raised, propelling itself forward by its powerful rear legs. And difficult as it is to credit, this canny creature is pushing a piece of ice in

front of itself like a shield. What does Lev think he's doing, arrogantly hunting such a tool-wielding being? He can't hurt it, of course, but he doesn't know that. VWT only works if its participants are totally immersed in the experience; if they're convinced it's real.

Zach debates rising right then and there to shout and gesticulate and head off the impending encounter. Nark or not, Lev has been decent, Zach flinches to think of what's coming. Briefly he wonders which crime could have sentenced Ethan and Chloe to this place: murder? a bombing? grievous bodily harm? or even the one Zach can hardly bear to contemplate, sexual assault? The harsh polar regions are almost invariably reserved for the most violent cases. He'll find out, of course. More than half the clients tell him themselves within the first twenty-four hours—some boastfully, some defiantly, some with a battery of excuses, some in deep denial and protesting their innocence. Not the child molesters, however; they give nothing away. Like their victims.

Without a watch it's impossible to tell how many minutes pass. Though Zach has learned to read the Arctic sky, its cycles conflict with paradigms so long accepted as to seem natural and unquestioned, instilled since infancy and as much a cultural given as, centuries ago, a geocentric cosmos or humours or hatred of the infidel; *angels*, for godsake. Nor is he entirely sure whether the programmers don't set the time parameters to suit a company directive. Time here is as malleable as the snow itself. Or perhaps no more so than elsewhere, but in the same manner that extreme conditions strip away pretence, the cold distils and purifies the senses till only a true core of perception remains—the dark unfrozen sea which lies beneath the ice.

The bear halts at an aglu about ten metres from their vantage point. Zach can sense Lev's heightened awareness, though he moves even less than before, his breathing so quiet that he might be hibernating. Nor does he tense, the way most people would. Two different species, but in this inhospitable landscape strikingly alike, bear and man—as if the exigencies of the hunt have interfaced their very genetic code. And both understand silence.

Then comes the faintest ripple of sound—a seal surfacing for air. A few bubbles. Like milk at the boil, both bear and Lev erupt instantly. The bear lunges in an explosion of snow and ice and ferocious strength, its massive paws slamming through the aglu. The sea churns, water foams and spumes in all directions. By the time Zach has blinked, Lev is on the ice, knife unsheathed and raised to

strike.

The polar bear whips round. Having lost the seal, it's maddened with rage. It roars and swings for Lev, who dances back, just out of reach of those steely claws. Those paws that can kill a walrus-or man-with a single blow. The bear lowers its head, glares at Lev with febrile eyes, and roaring once more, springs. Lev goes down.

The bear pauses and swivels its head to survey its domain. Zach has risen to his feet, their eyes meet. Afterwards Zach will be ready to swear that it smiles at him. Its intent is plain, and it makes no attempt to conceal it. This Arctic warlord will have its kill, one way or another.

And Zach reacts. He doesn't have time to think about what he's doing, how absurd his impulse is. How counterproductive. How foolhardy.

'Abort,' he cries, and reels off the string of code that will end the run.

Except that nothing happens.

'Abort,' he repeats, enunciating the code more slowly and distinctly.

Then he drops his arms and stares at the scene which is unfolding on the ice, surreal as vintage simulations, as early neuroscience.

Chapter 7

Her eyes stinging from staring at the screen, Laura blinked back tears. She would never understand this stupid useless stuff no matter how many hours she sat here. What did anyone *do* with stochastics? She tossed down her pencil, slid open her bottom desk drawer, and removed the book she was reading. No one, not even brainy Olivia, bothered with poetry. Except, it seemed, for Zach. Laura had been surprised to find out how much she liked the poems. This woman's desperation could make you gasp as though you'd fallen into an icy sea and were struggling to keep your head above water, struggling to swim for shore, unable to see its outline for the frost smoke. Up close, Zach's hair had smelled faintly of burnt matches as he'd handed her the book. She wondered where he'd been.

Her door opened. Quickly she thrust the book under her scratch sheets, but it was only Max.

'When are you going to learn to knock?' she asked. 'I might have been in my underwear. Or naked.'

Max shut the door behind him. One eye was dark and puffy, his bottom lip split. Skin scraped from his cheek and jaw.

'Max! Have you been fighting?'

'Ssh. Mum will hear.'

'You're going to need a mask to hide those bruises. Better yet, a hangman's hood.'

'Yeah, I know.' He sighed. 'I was hoping you'd think of a good story.'

'What happened?'

'Here.' He took something from his pocket and gave it to her.

Laura unfolded the small white envelope, small and white and *blank*. She looked up at her brother.

'Who's it from?'

‘You know.’

Laura hoped that Max couldn’t hear her sudden inrush of breath.

‘You’ve seen him? He’s OK?’

‘Better than me.’

He blinked rapidly, and Laura was touched by his vulnerability. Still a little boy, though she’d never say so. But then he straightened his shoulders in a manner copied from a zillion films. The sensitive yet brave hero facing adversity. Soon he’d not allow himself even a single sniff in her presence. She curbed her impulse to put an arm round him.

‘Where did you see him? What did he say?’ she asked.

‘At the pitch. All he said was to give the envelope to you. He left pretty fast, but not fast enough.’

‘What did they do to him?’ She couldn’t keep the fear from her voice.

‘Not to him. To me.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yeah, well.’ Then he grinned. ‘Broke Tommy Atwell’s nose, I think.’

‘Double shit. More trouble.’

‘Na. They won’t cozz.’

‘You reckon?’

‘They didn’t see him pass me the note. In a fair dust-up you don’t grass on your mates.’

‘Then why the fight?’

Max dropped his eyes.

‘Max?’

‘Stupid auger, he should’ve known better than to come near me when anybody else was around.’

‘Don’t call him that!’

‘It was dumb of him. Real dumb.’ But he didn’t repeat the word.

Laura regarded her brother for a moment. ‘I get it. They said stuff about me.’

‘Is it true?’ Max burst out. ‘That you-that you have sex with him?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘But you’ve been thinking ... I mean ...’

‘Little brother, you’ve got no idea what I’m thinking!’

‘I only meant, you went to his place.’

‘With some schoolwork. He’d been absent a lot. Then I saw he was ill, needed help.’

‘That was just a lie for Mum and Dad. And the plods.’

‘Not exactly.’ Laura smoothed her fingers over the envelope. She could almost feel his voice whispering to her from the paper. If only her skin could hear a little better ...

‘You like him?’ Max asked.

Max would get punished no matter what story they fixed between them. Because of her.

‘Yeah, I like him. Not the way you mean, but I like him.’

‘They said he sleeps with *everyone*. Even’-a whisper now-‘even boys.’

‘Max, he’s just somebody from school, but he’s nice. Don’t believe all the rubbish you hear.’

‘But what if-‘

Their mother's voice went off suddenly like a smoke alarm, only louder. 'Max, are you upstairs? Come down here immediately! You've left your dirty boots in the middle of the hall again. And your holdall. Max!'

Laura tapped her brother on the hand. 'You'd better go.'

'What should I tell her? You know how she gets about fighting. Like *their sort*.'

'The best lies are close to the truth. Twins, hard to tell apart.'

'Max! Do you hear me?' More strident now.

Max went to the door and opened it a crack. 'Coming, Mum. Just need the loo.' He looked back at Laura.

'Don't say too much, *that's* when they get suspicious,' she said. 'Try something about their insulting her.'

'Max! I'm warning you. Get down here right now or you'll regret it. Do you want to be grounded like your sister?'

'Don't worry, even *she* wouldn't ground you for defending her,' Laura said. 'Just make sure to report at least one juicy swear word. *Cunt* will do.'

'I'm not having her ring round to everyone's mum!'

'For godsake. How could any brother of mine be such a bad liar? Then say it was some simu kid from school. *That* she'll believe, but won't be able to do a thing. Especially if you say you can't tell them apart anyway.'

'Brilliant.'

'You got it.' She blew him a kiss. 'And Max-'

'Yeah?'

'Thanks.'

*

After Max left, she stood up and went to bolt her door. Though it wouldn't keep

her mum out for long, at least no one could sally in unannounced. The shouting from downstairs barely registered, much like the noise from the high-speed rail line which ran behind the flats where Olivia's dad lived. You got used to it.

Back at her desk, she picked up the envelope and held it for a few moments between her fingers, then laid it down again. One part of her wanted to tear it open straightaway; another part wanted to enjoy the anticipation-or possibly, postpone the disappointment. He was mad to write to her. Mad to try to contact her at all. Why did madness seem like the true matrix of sanity?

Finally she carried the envelope to the window. Leaning against the casement, she carefully prised open the flap. A crow was hopping among her dad's dahlias, his glossy black plumage contrasting sharply with the ostentatious sprawl of colour in the flowerbed. She'd always hated those flowers-vulgar tarts slathered with lippy, top-heavy and lolling suggestively. She preferred the crows, though her father called them nasty pests and fought an endless, futile battle against them. He'd even offered Max a pellet gun alongside a premium, but her brother had been horrified. There wasn't a bird with a broken wing or an orphaned litter of hedgehogs which Max didn't try to rescue. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought somebody had scrambled his genetic code.

She watched the alert movements of the crow until he cocked his head in her direction. A keen eye whose scrutiny was unmistakable-and familiar. She giggled, then rapped a knuckle against the pane. As he rose into the air, she was startled by the black rainbow of his flight-Zach's hair shimmered in the sunlight with the same iridescence.

Inside the envelope was a thin sheet of white paper which she'd have to destroy no matter what he'd written; no texting and no messaging and no emailing, they'd agreed. She drew it out with fingers just short of trembling. She missed the easygoing times with Livs when they'd been able to say anything and everything to each other. Now even opening a note-or your mouth-seemed to require as much discipline as winning an Olympic gold medal. Towards which, despite her mother, she was most definitely *not* about to swim.

Unfolded, the sheet revealed an exquisite, handcut paper snowflake, as delicately wrought as silver filigree. Utterly anonymous, devastatingly personal. Laura held it up against the light. She could see those long fingers snipping with a scissors, that crow hair swinging forward as he bent over the table.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered, and he might have smiled in response. But the rest—the kiss, the embrace, the future—took place in her own imagination.

*

Owen was waiting for her at the pool on Saturday.

‘You must be starving after all that swimming. Let’s get a burger,’ he said. He made no mention of her weeks of punishment, nor of Zach. Laura should have been grateful; instead, she felt irritated and resentful. That damned niceness again.

‘Only if we go someplace new.’

‘Where?’ he asked, amenable.

‘Follow me. We’ll walk.’

She’d seen what she thought might be a ginkgo tree near the canal. Its leaves would already be yellowing this late in October, but she’d collect a few anyway and slip them into an envelope.

Owen was fit, but she was fitter. She set a punishing pace, then increased it in deliberate increments, remembering how she’d had to stride to keep up with Zach. By the time they reached the old cannery, Owen was panting slightly, with a thin film of sweat above his upper lip and on his forehead. Though the nights had turned cool, the midday sun could still insist on homage like an ageing rock star. Owen stopped to catch his breath.

‘Hold on a sec, I don’t think we ought to be heading this way,’ he said, trying to disguise his physical discomfort by turning aside and pointing towards the canal. ‘Not a good area to hang around. And no place where there’s anything decent to eat, unless you fancy weird spices or rancid grease. Or cockroaches.’

‘Come on, we can sit down for a bit on that wall,’ she said, sweetly solicitous.

He gave her a look that reminded her of one of Max’s strays. The ever-present threat of humiliation seemed to sharpen their wits. She took his hand, abashed. It wasn’t his fault, was it?

He followed her with obvious reluctance. The cannery fronted the canal and was infamous for its contingent of streeters whose numbers only declined-temporarily-after periodic police raids. When she'd been driven away from Zach's flat that night, she'd seen the glow of paraffin lamps and cooking fires through its smeared and partly boarded-up windows.

'Fulgur's thinking of knocking it down and building a new production unit on this site,' Owen said. 'It's prime property.'

Owen's dad was much further up in the corporate hierarchy than Laura's-so much further, in fact, that family assets included an indoor swimming pool, a full-time housekeeper, and a custom-built Jaguar. Another reason Laura's mum fawned over Owen. And to his credit, Laura had to admit that he didn't fit the stereotype of spoilt rich kid. Six siblings might have had something to do with it, plus a mum who was known for her down-to-earth style, which included Household Responsibilities for the kids-and her husband, Laura suspected.

She studied the brick wall of the cannery, which was covered by graffiti. Most of it the usual stuff, lots of tags and dubs and lav epithets, but there was one painting that she wanted to get a closer look at. 'Be right back,' she told Owen, and sprang down from the wall. 'Wait here,' she added at his protest. 'There's nobody around. You can come to the rescue when the kankers show up.' She saw that he intended to join her. 'I mean it,' she said rather sharply. 'I want to go by myself.'

A nice dilemma for him, she thought, irritated once more. Her mum was right, he was perfect boyfriend material. If only *perfect* weren't a synonym for *boring*.

It took her a while to navigate the rubbish-strewn ground. Up close, the creature was even more disturbing: an enormous black figure, half man and half crow, with glittering eyes, talons like scimitars, and a wild disarray of long hair. His torso and part of his limbs were human, his face nearly so. Laura stared at his features for a long time, then walked a few metres to the left, stopped, and regarded him again. After retracing her steps, she repeated the manoeuvre to the right. No matter where she stood, the crowman seemed to be looking straight at her, something she remembered from certain museum portraits. Almost as if he had a desperate message to impart.

Her stomach growled, a reminder that Owen was waiting for her. She turned,

waved, and began to pick her way back across the overgrown tract. After a few steps she cast one last glance over her shoulder at the painting. It was then that she heard a sound from inside the building-moaning, or perhaps low sobbing. She stopped and listened. There. Ignoring Owen's surprised shout, she went in search of a door.

Once her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she was able to see quite well. She had to skirt rubble, puddles of water, and the odd piece of broken equipment, but there was no sign of habitation till she reached a small series of interconnected rooms which, to judge from the overturned filing cabinets, a single shattered monitor, and decaying furniture, must have formed an office block. Several stained mattresses were piled in a corner of the second room, along with newish-looking bin liners, cardboard boxes, and a paraffin cooker. Two battered enamel pans rested near the cooker, some candles and a tablespoon on an upturned metal drawer. The bin liners looked full, but Laura didn't stop to check their contents. Not that she believed they'd contain body parts ... not really. But the whimpering was nearby now, and her courage beginning to wane. She'd noted the empty bottles, the smell. Only the momentum of her search-or perhaps the memory of the crowman-kept her going.

In the third office she found the child.

Her-no, his-wrists and ankles were bound with rope. He lay in a foetal position on a piece of cardboard, his long hair covering most of his face. As soon as he saw her, he ceased moaning and watched with over-bright eyes. He was nearly naked. He was shivering. He was filthy. He stank. And he was an auger.

With a hiss his eyes darted behind her-warning or fear. She spun round.

'What do you think you're doing?' Owen said. 'This place is dangerous.'

Then he too caught sight of the child.

'Shit,' he said. 'What's that?'

That began to shudder at the sound of Owen's voice.

Chapter 8

By the time Zach reaches him, Lev has sliced open the seal's belly and removed part of its liver.

'Here,' Lev says, 'your share.'

Zach stares from the glistening piece of meat to Lev's face and back to the blood dripping onto the snow, dripping and freezing near mitts discarded for the heat of the animal's open cavity.

'Where's the polar bear?' Zach asks.

Lev chews, swallows, licks his fingers clean. 'Eat.'

'Seal liver's toxic.'

'Only in large quantities. Go on, it's good for you.'

'I'm not going to touch raw meat.'

'This is the Arctic. Stop obsessing, I've apportioned the right amount.'

The small slab of liver is still steaming. Zach hesitates for another moment, then pulls off a mitt and cautiously takes a bite. It's strong-tasting, but not nearly as slimy as it looks. He discovers that he's hungry, and eats it all, even to licking off his fingers. Lev, however, has consumed a much larger quantity.

A throaty rumble halfway between burp and purr, then Lev plunges his knife into the snow and wipes it on his trousers before sheathing it. With a large bone needle he sews up the cut in the seal's belly. 'To keep the blood and organs inside while we drag her back to the cabin.'

'Inuit fashion,' Zach says.

'Some things even Fulgur's scientists can't improve on.'

'Right, that axes it.' Zach draws on his mitt. 'Who are you? How did you catch the seal? And where the hell is the polar bear?'

‘Do you really think they tell you everything?’ Lev gives that chuff of his.
‘Frozenhell, they don’t *know* everything.’

*

Zach helps himself to what he hopes is a marmite sandwich and some steaming coffee from the flask on the table. He stirs in several teaspoons of sugar, takes a cautious sip, and grimaces; it tastes of seal liver, heavy as rolled copper on his tongue.

‘Ethan’s looking much better,’ he says.

‘Still a bit feverish, but nothing will keep him from a kill,’ Chloe says, grinning in a way that makes Zach want to look over his shoulder.

‘It’s a big animal, Lev will be glad for the help.’

‘Who?’

A burning wedge of wood tumbles from the fireplace in a fortuitous shower of sparks, occupying Zach while he considers how *not* to react. Chloe comes over with her mug, but when she lays her fingers on his arm, he realises that last night hasn’t been a bad dream, or a glitch in the program. Only in *his* program, he reflects grimly—a release of nothing other than a teaspoon of ejaculate. Self-disgust makes him inept.

‘You know, *Lev*. The tall, fair bloke with the scar and the blue eyes. The third member of your party.’

But Chloe regards him with a sympathetic expression, as if he’s admitted to an endearing secret like stealing library books or masturbating with his teddy bear.

‘Lev,’ he insists. ‘The hunter. The macho, you called him. He’s out in the lean-to butchering the seal.’

‘Ethan’s by himself. I’ve just brought him some coffee.’

‘There’s no way I could have speared a seal on my own.’

‘You can’t remember? I’m not surprised, the cold does weird stuff to you.’

Her hand on his arm. All he does is remember.

Shivering slightly, he stepped back into the alcove and removed a book from the shelf. It was hard enough to believe that Bach or Mozart or Coltrane weren't simus-and then these books, these magnificent books, all written by monkeys. She crowded in close to read over his arm, their hips touching. Customers were rare: most people bought online, and those who came to the tiny, dusty, draughty shop had eyes only for their own obsessions.

'I'd like to buy this for you,' he said. 'But it's a signed first edition, your mum might ask where it's come from.'

'Then I'll keep it at your flat,' Laura said, laying a hand on his arm, and after a moment's hesitation, standing on tiptoe to kiss the corner of his mouth-so lightly that he might have imagined

her hand on his arm, and all he ever does is try not to remember.

'Don't touch me,' he says.

Chloe snatches away her hand, then mutters angrily, 'You liked it well enough last night.'

No good, he's just making his job more difficult. Though why he should bother about what happens to her ... shorten her stay, she just gets to cheat on the next bloke a bit sooner. He doesn't need to know her to know what she'll do. They're all alike, those girls who sleep with his kind.

'Look, I'm sorry,' he says. 'It's not you.'

'Who's to know?' she asks, moving closer again.

'I was tired. It was-you know.'

'It gets lonely here. What's wrong with a little companionship? Not everyone thinks like the Purists.'

'I'm not a very good companion.'

She glances up at him quickly, avoiding his eyes-no surprise there. But her next

words startle him. 'OK, if that's the way it is. I didn't know simus have partners.'

She must have seen something on his face. Uncomfortable now, he goes to replenish his coffee. With his back to her, he says, 'It's not easy, but sometimes we do. Have long-term relationships, I mean.'

'One of your own sort?'

But he won't talk about Laura.

Chloe adds another log to the fire, straightens his mitts and balaclava, which are drying on the mantelpiece, then joins him by the table.

'What was your offence?' he asks.

'Defacement of public property.'

'That must have been one hell of an axe job. Or did you use an explosive?'

'Graffiti.'

'Now you're axing *me*. No way they'll send you here for a bit of spray paint.'

They must learn it early on, like their lying-that trick with the eyebrow. He frowns at her, not bothering to disguise his distaste, then crosses the room to the larger of the two windows and twitches aside the curtain. The building faces south: a thin bruising low on the horizon, dark violet and cobalt, is the most anyone will see of the sun for many weeks. Laura has to be out there somewhere, perhaps at another camp, perhaps trekking in the open.

'Maybe I ought to help Ethan.' Zach says. 'Butchering a seal sounds like a time-consuming task.'

'He likes to butcher, and he likes to do it *alone*.' She laughs softly. 'I expect he'll be in this place for a very long time.'

'You mean-'

'He doesn't talk much about it, but it's pretty obvious.'

‘You’re not afraid?’

‘You’ll just have to keep bringing us fresh kill. I do like my meat.’

Zach can’t tell whether the glint in her eyes is mere amusement-the teasing which is as much a secondary sexual characteristic as functional mammary glands-or a taunt to repay him for his rejection.

Chloe begins gathering together the coffee things. After a moment she stops, walks around the table to one of the bookshelves, and turns her back to him with all the appearance of searching for a title. Zach spends a few minutes trying to piece together the events of the morning. He can recall the journey to the ice, he can recall the wait, recall the advent of the polar bear, recall the return trek with Lev, seal in tow; but he’s not sure if *recall* is the right word for the jarring sense of disjointedness, of double exposure, of slippage when he pictures Lev and the bear on the ice. Which had been which? And that memory of raw liver: would he even eat *raw* liver?

There’s no point eroding a client’s confidence in him any further. ‘Chloe-‘ he begins.

She turns to face him, a half-smile on her face and one hand behind her. After a moment her smile broadens, then she reaches up and slowly unzips her fleecy top. She isn’t wearing a bra.

Shit, he thinks. Not again.

‘Lovely as buttered crumpets, the last bloke said. Want a taste?’

‘I thought you understand.’

‘Last chance.’

‘No.’ And maybe because they *are* quite lovely, and his imagination has begun to work, and there are all kinds of loneliness, he snaps, ‘No bloody way. Get it?’

‘Oh yeah, I get it.’

With no more than a slight tightening of the skin around her eyes, as if she’s just applied a cooling astringent, she brings her other hand out from behind her.

‘I forgot to mention that I’ve always painted my graffiti in fresh blood.’

And then she throws the knife.

A sound like a seal’s harsh bark. A puzzling sensation, as though a fishhook has snared his gut and tugged sharply. No pain. Some burning deep inside. He moves sideways, but slowly, very slowly. The ice is thin, he has to slide one foot forward, then the other, till he can reach her. Laura is clinging with both hands to the jagged edge, her knuckles white. It’s too cold for her to pull herself up. At this temperature you freeze before you drown. Her eyes are wide and dark, fixed on his face. I’ll always hear you, Zach. He can see her forearms trembling. Not long now. Another step. Another. And then the ominous ping of cracking ice, a live wire in his midriff, sudden pressure, the smell of blood, and the world begins to tilt. Her fingers loosen. As he falls, his last thought before losing consciousness: she swims like a sleek seal of ice across her lips.

*

Watchdog duty-routine, necessary, boring. Andy drums his fingers on the console, working out a pull that’s been giving him trouble. Gradually switching up the tempo till his muscles begin to tense, he breaks off, shakes out his hand, begins again. Like any dead-tired mother who sleeps soundly along with her infant but can jolt awake at the first snuffle, he suddenly leans forward to study the code riffing past. That’s odd. After watching for long enough to recognise a break in the usual pattern, he fires off an instruction, then a second. An instant later he swears and keys in the manual override. It takes him only a few fingerstrokes to realise that there’s no change in the data stream. He swears even louder and reaches for the phone. Litchfield, however, is in the midst of a synapse procedure and can’t be interrupted. After another attempt to modify the code, Andy rings the division head. Reluctantly. Russell F.-he always insists on the F, too blinkered to cotton on to the wisecracks-is a total arsehole.

‘Russell,’ Andy says, ‘can you come down?’

‘I’ve got a conference in a few minutes.’

‘Postpone it. We’ve got a problem.’

‘What kind?’

‘An anomaly in the stream.’

‘Where’s Charles? That’s his domain.’

‘In neurosurgery.’

A sigh. ‘Which simu is it?’

‘Zach.’

‘Well, correct it.’

Unfuckingbelievable. ‘First thing I tried, of course. No response. We may have to abort the run.’

‘Nonsense,’ Slade says. ‘The system’s got more backup than a space probe.’

‘And I’m telling you that I know this baby. Better than my vintage Ibanez. Way better. This isn’t a hardware issue.’

‘Then what?’

‘I don’t know.’ He stares at the display, sweat gradually soaking through his shirt despite the room’s carefully regulated temperature. ‘I’ve never seen anything like this before.’

‘You know how much each run costs. They’ll have our heads if we pull him too early.’

‘Fuck that. I’m not going stand by and let you kill him for a better balance sheet.’

Andy can just about hear Slade wince. ‘I’ve warned you before, watch your language. And nobody’s said anything about killing.’

‘Oh yeah? The way this looks, something’s degrading fast. I’m not even sure we can still get him out. Call it, Russell. Now.’

There’s a short silence.

‘You’re overreacting, son,’ Slade says. ‘I’ll send word for Charles to pop down

as soon as he's finished. A few hours won't make any difference.'

'No way, Russell, I'm warning you, I'm *begging*-' Andy breaks off, suddenly aware that he's speaking to the trilling dialtone Fulgur prefers for its phone system. The bastard has rung off.

Chapter 9

Laura crouched at the child's side. Up close she could see the cracks in his lips, traces of blood and spit caked at the corners of his mouth. Cheeks rouged by fever. Bruises-livid, horrifying bruises. And from the stench and the state of his pants, it was clear that he'd been left trussed like an animal for a very long time.

Laura glanced back at Owen. 'Have you got a pocket knife?'

As Owen advanced into the room, the boy seemed to shrink further inside the loose husk of his skin, while his shudders became more pronounced. Soon Laura could detect a new smell, though she wondered how his body managed to spare enough moisture to sweat. At least I've still got some of my apple juice left for him, she thought. Usually she drank all of it right after swimming.

'I don't own a knife,' Owen said, dropping a hand to her shoulder. 'Come away, this is none of our business.'

Laura twitched aside. 'He's scared of you. Go and try to find something sharp. A piece of metal, some broken glass, whatever.'

'What for?'

'For godsake, isn't that obvious?'

'What's obvious is that you're set on getting into more trouble.'

With the same hair-trigger response that made her racing starts so effective, Laura sprang up and rounded on Owen. 'You can't be serious. What if he was *your* little brother?'

Owen tried to make a joke of it. 'An auger?'

The boy's whimpering prevented Laura from slapping Owen. But she came close.

Owen retreated a step or two from the fierce expression on her face before capitulating. 'OK. Have it your way. I'll have a look.' He turned to go.

‘Wait,’ said Laura, rummaging in her backpack for her mobile. ‘Maybe we ought to phone for an ambulance.’ She didn’t like the sound of the boy’s breathing. How long had he gone without that serum? Zach’s words came back to her. *Worse.*

‘You can’t do that. You’ll get your dad fired.’

‘For ringing emergency services?’

‘All calls are recorded.’

‘Then use *your* mobile.’

Owen slowly shook his head. ‘They know we go out together.’

There was a misunderstanding here, but Laura wasn’t about to tackle that now. She pulled out her bottle, dropped to a squat, and addressed the boy in as soothing a voice as she could muster. ‘We’re not going to hurt you. I want to turn you over and give you a little apple juice, then my friend’s going for a doctor. Don’t be afraid. You’re safe now.’

In certain parts of the world simu eyes are prized for their putative occult properties, and it’s rumoured that a single one on the black market will yield enough for a luxury flat in your metropolis of choice, housekeeper included; and an undamaged matched pair, a lifetime of leisure. However, to be of prime value they must be harvested from a living ‘donor’.

The boy stared at Laura with eyes so occluded that she couldn’t tell if he understood her. But he let her roll him onto his back with only a faint cry of distress, or pain. Striving to hide her disgust-she’d never seen anyone quite so filthy-she raised his head and moistened his lips from the bottle, then allowed him to take a few sips. ‘Not too much at once,’ she said when he gulped and rooted for more. ‘I’ll be right back,’ she added, and pulled Owen out of the room.

‘Look, he’s not OK,’ she said. ‘We’re going to need help.’ But what if the EMTs had no idea about the serum? Or even the doctors at the hospital? Isn’t that what Zach had implied?

‘There’s bound to be a phone box somewhere. We can make an anonymous call.’

‘And leave him on his own?’ Contempt, she remembered too late, tended to make meek people like her dad meekly obstinate.

‘He’s not in any condition to notice. And he must’ve endured far worse.’

Worse. ‘Give me your mobie! I’m going to ring Zach.’

‘Bad idea. Anyway, I don’t know his number.’

‘I do.’

An angry rash mottled Owen’s cheeks. ‘You’re not still-‘

They both startled at the loud retching from the room behind them. ‘Shit!’ Laura rushed back to the boy, who by now was choking weakly on the fluid he’d brought up. She got him onto his side in a modified recovery position, thumped his back as much as she dared, then stroked his long dank hair away from his forehead. Washed, she thought, it’d be almost as beautiful as Zach’s. The child had closed his eyes. His breathing was shallow; his skin, no longer flushed but pale and cold and clammy-alarmingly so.

‘Give me your mobie,’ she hissed at Owen. After a moment’s hesitation, he acquiesced.

‘Yeah?’ Zach answered.

Typical. Not even a polite *hello*. ‘It’s me,’ she said. ‘I need your-‘

‘Sabra,’ he broke in, ‘nice of you to ring. What’s up?’

How the hell could he think so fast? Sabra was another simu at school, she’d cover for Zach without blinking. *Especially* after the way Tim had twatted off about having a simu on his ecology team. Which gave her an idea.

‘What do you mean, nice? Where the hell are you?’ If the Insects routinely monitored voice patterns, however, no one, except maybe Owen, would get away with only a warning. ‘Me and Owen have been waiting for ages-*_fucking_* ages-*_by the canal to finish up the stupid project for Tines.*’

‘Damn. I forgot. Was it today?’

‘What’s got into you? You’re acting like a monkey with mashed bananas for brains. Get down here doublequick on your bike, and bring that pocket knife of yours for scraping off the sludge from the stones, like you promised. We’ve got everything else ready.’

‘Look, I’m sorry. Where exactly are you waiting?’

‘Behind the old cannery.’

‘OK. Fifteen minutes.’

‘And Zach?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Got any of that nosh you were desperate for last time? Remember? The one my dad also likes to whip up? There’s someone here with a great whacking hunger.’

Laura heard, in his drawn silence, the questions a lesser intelligence would blurt out. Simus, she was learning, are quick studies at not betraying themselves. She rang off at his ‘OK, I’ll have a look’ and handed Owen his mobile.

‘Go outside and wait for him,’ she said, making it plain she’d tolerate no dissension.

Once Owen had gone, she fetched her damp swimming towel from her backpack and wiped the boy’s face and chest. Aside from fluttering his eyelids, he lay still. He seemed barely conscious. With the cleaner portions of the towel she sponged his body as best as she could, then settled down beside him, taking his hand. To hearten herself perhaps more than him, she sang softly until she heard the muted drone of Zach’s motorbike—a sound that she’d come to recognise as readily as her own ringtone.

*

‘What’s going on here?’

A backpack slung over his shoulder, Zach strode into the room. As Owen came up behind him, Zach glanced from Owen to Laura with a contemptuous twist to his lips. Then he saw the boy. At once he gestured Laura aside and knelt next to

the limp body. Zach's hair was tied back in a ponytail, enabling Laura to observe how his face darkened. Very gently he rolled the boy onto his back and laid his head against the sunken chest to listen for a heartbeat.

'Now that you're here, Laura and I best be going,' Owen said.

Zach lifted his head. 'Wait outside and warn us if anyone approaches.'

Owen looked about to refuse until Laura-with admirable self-control, she thought-smiled at him. 'Please, Owen. I'll be along in a short while.'

As soon as they were alone, Zach used his pocket knife to slice through the bonds. Without a word he ran his fingers over the abraded flesh, which left a smear of blood on his fingertips, then arranged the boy's limbs tenderly. Despite the silence Laura could hardly detect the sound of the boy's breathing, but his chest rose and fell, albeit shallowly, and a weak pulse flickered like a matchlight at the hollow of his throat-the slightest stir of wind, and it would be snuffed.

Zach wiped his fingers on his jeans before removing a plastic container from his backpack.

'Is he going to be OK?' Laura asked.

Instead of answering, Zach ran his eyes over the boy's body, then slipped one arm under his shoulders and the other under his knees, lifting him enough to take the measure of his weight. At last the boy reacted. A soft moan, eyes half open, neck muscles tensing.

'I've got your medicine,' Zach said. 'After that you can have a drink.'

The child's lips moved as if he wished to say something, but his body relaxed. Soon his eyes drifted shut.

From the plastic container Zach brought out a clean paper towel, on which he arranged a sealed disposable syringe, some flat foil packets, and a small bottle. He held the bottle up to the light before rolling it back and forth between his hands, evidently to mix its contents. After checking it once more, he tore open one of the foil packets, releasing the sharp smell of alcohol, and cleaned his hands with the swab it contained. He removed the lid from the bottle, cleaned its top with another swab, and broke out the syringe. All his movements were

precise and unhurried, and despite the circumstances Laura couldn't eschew her pleasure at watching him. For a brief moment she wondered how it would feel if those fingers touched her skin, her lips, her ... Idiot, she thought, what's the matter with you? But thoughts have a sly hunger of their own.

At least Zach was ignorant of her perfidy. He continued with his preparations until he'd drawn up the right amount of serum. Then he addressed Laura for the first time.

'Hold the syringe by the barrel,' he said, passing it to her.

With a fresh alcohol swab Zach cleaned a patch on the boy's upper thigh, followed by a grimace as he noticed how dirty the swab had become. He used a second, then a third. Satisfied at last, he pinched up a fold of skin, held out his hand for the syringe, inserted the needle at a 45° angle, and slowly depressed the plunger. Under his breath he counted to five, removed the needle, and pressed another swab in place over the injection site. Through all of this the boy remained very still.

Zach dropped the spent syringe onto the paper towel. His eyes met Laura's, and she recognised the bleakness in their depths.

'Owen didn't want to ring for an ambulance,' she said.

'Your boyfriend's not as stupid as he looks.'

'I told you, he's not my boyfriend.'

Zach shrugged and turned his attention back to the boy, whose pulse he took with a frown before lifting one of the boy's eyelids, then peeling back his lower lip. Even in the poor light Laura could see the bluish discolouration of the mucous membranes.

'Maybe we'd best get him to a hospital,' Laura said.

'No. Only Fulgur's people know how to deal with this, and they'd write him off straightaway.'

'A child?'

‘Never heard of the *slaughters*?’

‘The what?’

‘The slag augers. The offscum, the damaged goods, the seconds. The Fulgur rejects.’

His bitterness stung like raw alcohol poured full-strength into an open wound, but Laura restrained her impulse to defend her kind. As she stared down at the boy, she remembered the contempt of the police till her father had managed to smooth things over. She’d been too scared to argue. But a boy younger than Max?

‘What about his parents?’ she asked.

‘Does it look like he’s got someone to care about him?’

‘But-‘

‘Look, I appreciate what you’ve done, but Owen’s right. Keep out of it.’ He said nothing further while he stood and stretched, his jumper riding up to expose a gap of skin. He paced up and down for a few minutes, the slap of his booted feet loud against the concrete floor-any carpeting had been ripped away long ago-before coming to rest near a metal coat rack abandoned in a far corner of the room, one leg and several hooks broken off. He crossed his arms, stared down at it blindly, and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. ‘The boy’s probably not going to make it, anyway.’ Zach kept his voice level, but Laura sensed the effort it cost him-a clear cool melt pool disguising needle ice.

‘Be careful,’ she said, throwing a glance at the boy. ‘He might hear you.’

And as though in response, his body arched off the floor, his eyes flew open, and a deep gurgling sound issued from his throat. Like a marionette whose strings had been cut, he fell back almost at once, and was still again. Too still.

Zach launched himself with a cry towards the boy, all pretence of disinterest-resignation-forgotten. As Laura hovered in horror, Zach listened for a heartbeat, then pulled open the boy’s mouth to begin artificial respiration.

‘Not like that,’ she said.

She quickly felt for a pulse in the boy's neck. Nothing. She checked his mouth for any obstructions, then tilted his head back with his chin pointing upwards. With one hand she pinched his nostrils shut, took a deep breath, and holding his jaw firmly in position, blew into his mouth. His chest rose. She placed her ear near his lips to listen for an exhalation. Again she breathed into his mouth, again she listened. There was an exchange of air, but he hadn't resumed spontaneous respiration. Nor was there any sign of circulation.

'You're going to have to help me,' she said, and showed Zach how to administer CPR. His thrusts were steady but too vigorous. 'More gently, you'll break his ribs.'

They worked together, alternating respiration with chest compression, for a good twenty minutes, half an hour. Sweat was dripping off Zach's forehead when Laura laid a hand on his arm.

'It's no use,' she said.

Angrily Zach shook off her hand and continued on his own, breathing in her stead. She crouched opposite him, tears threatening. They should have rung for an ambulance. With the proper training, proper equipment ...

'Zach,' she finally said.

He dropped his head onto the boy's chest, his face hidden from Laura. She couldn't think of what to say, so said nothing. She hoped Owen had given up and left.

Not more than five minutes passed before Zach rose to his feet. Peeling off his jumper, he advanced on the remains of the coat rack, hefted it in his hands, and stepped back from the corner. His breathing was harsh in the silence. Laura saw his shoulder muscles bunch under his T-shirt. Then he swung for the wall. With an explosive whomp plaster and chips of paint flew over him in an avalanche of white. Some of it must have stung his skin, gritted his eyes, but he swung again, and again, and yet again, not once breaking the apparently effortless rhythm of his stroke. If anything, each blow was more forceful than the last. At one point the detonation was so loud that Laura flinched and glanced at the boy, irrationally expecting him to jerk upright in protest. Let me rest, she imagined him saying.

In a short while Zach was covered with a thick layer of snowy dust, and most of the plasterboard had been demolished. Hair now sweat-soaked and straggling free, he prepared to attack the adjoining wall. There was no sign that his rage had abated, despite large wet patches under his arms and along his back. Laura had always hated her mother's angry outbursts-feared them often enough, too-but was riveted by the brute simplicity, the savage power of Zach's feelings. His ragged panting filled the room, filled her inner space, as he paused for a moment to catch his breath. Her own breathing, she was shocked to discover, had quickened in response.

'Have you lost your mind?'

Owen stood in the doorway, his expression-his whole bearing-incredulous. Zach spun to face him.

'Out!' Zach snarled. 'Or you're next.'

Owen hesitated, then took a step towards Laura.

'Laura's coming with me,' he said.

Zach hoisted the tortured length of metal in both hands, cocked it over his shoulder, and with a cold smile closed on Owen. No tribal paint could have looked more feral, more inhuman than Zach's glowing mask of white powder. Suddenly Laura understood why they whispered about a simu's eyes.

'Zach, no. No!' She was on her feet and moving between them. And to Owen, 'I'm OK. Go home. Please.'

For a second or two it seemed as if Zach would dodge around her. Owen backed away, brandishing his hands to conceal their trembling, though not quite succeeding. Zach halted and jerked his head towards the door.

'Go on, get going,' he said.

Laura knew enough about male pride to realise that however cowed Owen might be right now, he'd be the first in a crowd to kick a prostrate Zach in the kidneys, the first to throw a rock or jagged curse from a safe distance, the very first to snicker and crack dirty jokes with his mates. She'd made things worse. Again.

‘I’ll ring you later,’ she said, but immediately regretted her attempt at appeasement. With a grin meant to be mocking, Zach wheeled and stomped towards the intact wall. Owen flicked an anxious glance at Laura, but sighed when she mouthed ‘please’.

Along with the tension, Owen’s departure carried off the last vestige of energy in the room. Rather than battering the wall, Zach rested his forehead against it. His shoulders sagged, he gripped the coat rack like a cane. Laura considered searching for a blanket or bit of sacking to cover the boy, but it was all she could do to keep from sinking to the floor. The plaster dust had settled, leaving the air dry and motionless, the way the desert tombs of the pharaohs once must have been. There was a gritty film on her skin, and she ran her tongue over her teeth and swallowed repeatedly to erase the chalky taste. And she was thirsty, she realised, terribly thirsty, but the prospect of drinking from the same bottle which she’d held to the child’s mouth less than an hour ago defeated her. In her mind she saw those chapped lips desperately puckering for another sip. She could have at least let him have all he wanted ...

How could someone die in the time it took to watch a cartoon? to play hide-and-seek? to decorate a birthday cake with sweets? No, less time than that. The time it took for a little kid to make his wish. To blow out the candles.

As if he’d heard her thoughts, Zach let go of the coat rack, which clattered to the floor. Slowly he turned to face her. His eyes were brimming with tears.

‘Laura,’ he whispered.

It took no time at all to reach him. Nothing she’d ever felt came close to the fierce possessive joy which swept through her at their embrace. Her father controlled every one of his feelings; her mother, none of hers. But neither parent would have felt so elated-so fucking glorious-at someone else’s grief. She buried her face in Zach’s damp, grimy T-shirt, and held on. With any luck he wouldn’t notice.

*

Zach covered the boy with a blanket he’d found in one of the other offices.

‘Do you mind waiting with him for five minutes?’ he asked. ‘I want to fetch something from my bike.’

‘What?’

‘My petrol canister.’

‘You’re not planning to-?’

‘Yeah, I am.’

‘But there should be an investigation. A funeral. Or something.’

Zach regarded her soberly. ‘I’ll do my own investigating.’

*

The fire destroyed most of the cannery. By the time the blaze had been brought under control, Laura had ridden pillion on a motorbike for the first time. TV coverage mentioned a child’s remains, unidentified. ‘Under investigation,’ a police spokeswoman said.

Chapter 10

‘Laura,’ Zach whispers.

For a moment he can still see her and lifts his head, only to gasp as his belly tears apart, deep-gutted. He drops back onto the pillow, riding the waves of pain like a surfer. Breathing. Breathing. Then sinking.

When he opens his eyes again, Lev is bending over him.

‘Here,’ Lev says, ‘drink this.’

He slips an arm behind Zach’s shoulders, and with his help Zach manages to take a few sips from the warm drink.

‘What is it?’ Zach asks.

‘Something to ease the pain.’

‘Tastes vile.’

‘Drink it up. It also contains an extract to promote healing.’

Zach is too muzzy to argue. It crosses his mind that Fulgur might be able to stage a fatal mishap due to a so-called technical error. Would they risk an outcry? And didn’t they still need him? He tries to recall the wording of the release each participant, client and instructor equally, is obliged to sign. Something about ‘highly experimental programme’, ‘unforeseeable developments’. Like moths round a weak light, his thoughts flutter without settling. If he can’t trust Lev ...

‘Think back, we’ve *both* proved that we can trust each other with our lives,’ Lev says.

Clamping his lips round the rim of the mug, Zach finishes the seaweed-coloured liquid. A feeling of lassitude is spreading through his limbs; the stuff must be far more potent than Lev’s offhand manner indicates. But his head is clearing, he’s not spilling any more thoughts, and he discovers he can shift his body with less pain. He draws up his legs and rolls gingerly to his side in a move to sit up.

‘Not so fast,’ Lev says. ‘I want to be sure there’s no internal bleeding.’

With a hand on Zach’s shoulder, Lev coaxes him to relax once more, then folds back the blankets and runs a hand over Zach’s abdomen and chest, lingering longest over a spot just below his ribcage, right of centre where the liver nestles. Lev’s touch is assured but gentle, as though he were a practised doctor, or blind sculptor tenderly examining his model. A nude model, in fact. There’s one sharp twinge as Lev’s fingers light on the area which seems to concern him most, followed by a deep dull ache-but nothing like that surge of excruciating pain, still vivid despite Zach’s initial grogginess. He doesn’t need to be told that some memories are forever; some pain.

A gust of wind heaves at a corner of the roof, and the flames in the fireplace leap in the updraft. For the first time Zach takes note of his surroundings. ‘Where are we?’

‘A cabin I use from time to time.’

‘How did I get here?’

‘I thought it advisable to separate you from the others during your convalescence.’ A wry shrug, the kind that hopes to elicit complicity: yeah, I’m sudsing you, and you know it, and I know that you know it, and you know that I know that you know it, so ...

Zach isn’t amused. ‘If you’re not careful, this liking of yours for equivocation is going to land you on the tip of a knife. Chloe’s, for example. She’s rather quick to anger.’

‘Good, you do remember. I’ve been worried about the integrity of Fulgur’s cognoscens algorithms.’

Now thoroughly disturbed, Zach struggles to an upright position. He’s not about to confront Lev while flat on his back. Questions swarm as thickly as blackflies to caribou, but Lev has his own laconic means of repelling them.

‘I’ve got some things to take care of,’ he says, reaching for a hooded parka tossed on a chair near the fireplace.

‘Look here, I want to know-‘

‘I may be a few hours, but you’ll be all right if you take it easy.’ Lev nods towards a lidded cast-iron pot suspended from a hinged arm over the inner hearth. ‘There’s stew when you get hungry. But not too much at once, mind. And try to sleep.’

‘But-‘

‘Your questions can wait.’ The raffish look is back. ‘Ask the caribou. Merciless insects like mosquitoes and blackflies always return in spring.’ And then, without another word, he’s gone.

The firewood has a resinous smell which Zach finds soothing. Less so, the thought that Fulgur is manipulating him in some way. Once might be coincidence, but Lev has skimmed his, Zach’s, thoughts rather too often for comfort. What if they’ve got what they want? What if Charles couldn’t prevent it? That bastard Randall would stop at nothing. What, in fact, if Max had been right, pleading with a child’s frantic desperation, with a lad’s dry-eyed urgency, that Zach not go?

They couldn’t have succeeded, not this fast. Except ... except that only the best simus-and he *knows* he’s one of them-can function effectively within the interface. No sapiens could possibly do so; their neurophysiology lacks the necessary complexity. It would be like expecting an orangutan to compose a Brahms symphony.

Which wouldn’t stop the monkeys from wanting the impossible. Their whole history is one long attempt to scoff (or shag) someone else’s banana.

Zach swings his legs over the side of the bed, then stops to rest. In the firelight the room is eerie, a flickering shadow of the Litchfield cottage. Shut his eyes and he’d be able to see Laura seated on the floor by the fireplace, arms wrapped round her knees, staring into the flames. Waiting for him in that ridiculously oversized jumper and woollen socks which never seemed to stay put, a bit like Laura herself.

All at once a feeling of dread stronger than the ache in his gut propels him to his feet. Dizziness, which he conquers by breathing deeply and concentrating on the fire. Whatever he does, he mustn’t close his eyes till he’s certain. The programming could alter in an instant, there’d be no proof, no means of dispelling his doubts. They’ve taken enough, damn them, they aren’t *touching*

his memories.

The brain is plastic, and the cognoscens brain more plastic than even the simus themselves are aware. Max's first word, Laura once said laughingly, wasn't *mama* or *dada* but *self*, and no glut of memories has ever shaken his endearingly boyish sense of self. But Max hasn't had to confront the Fulgrid, no child has. Nor will. Do you hear me, Max? That's a promise.

When the furniture holds steadier than the snickering shadows, Zach makes a protracted circuit of the room, using the walls as support and ending at the only window, its curtains drawn. He slides one back, the soft clink of the metal rings punctuating the quiet, then swallows in relief. No shed, no rutted lane, no woodland, no lake glittering through winter trees. Snow and ice-clean, inviolate, innocent. Shivering a bit, he wonders where to find his clothes. He casts one last look at the scene beyond the glass, still as a painting. It's too perfect, he thinks. Not a breath of wind to stir the powdery snow, not a hummock or ridge in the ice, not a ripple on the obsidian slab of open water beyond the shorefast ice, not even a sideways drift to the floes studding the black sea like small iced cakes at a funeral tea. There's something dreadfully wrong. Only the imagination imposes this kind of frozen certainty on a landscape. Reality is fluid.

Then Zach snorts. 'Idiot! What's the matter with you?' His voice is husky, as though parched, or ratched by dope. They can program what they like.

But they always code for verisimilitude. Authenticity. Fine attention to detail.

Once more he stares outside. There should be footprints, shouldn't there? From this angle he can see a small roofed porch, two cement steps to the ground, a corner of the building. No path freshly cleared, yet a snow shovel leaning against the railings. Or is there another entrance to the cabin?

He'd better see about a toilet. And some clothes, there's a noticeable draught. He closes the curtain. As though he's flipped a switch, he hears the wind start up. It whispers under the eaves, taunting him. Running his hands up and down his arms to drive off the gooseflesh, he walks haltingly across the room and stands by the fireplace. He has no intention of playing hide-and-seek with the elements. As soon as his front is warm, he turns to face the room. Really, it's nothing like Laura's cottage. Merely a superficial resemblance, heightened by firelight and weakness and whatever concoction Lev has plied him with. His memories are

safe; they belong only to him, and can't be destroyed or altered-can't be raped for profit or power or sport like the once pristine Arctic, like so much else the monkeys lay their paws on. He swallows, but spit pools straightaway under his tongue again.

By candlelight Zach tracks down warm clothes draped in readiness over a rack in the tiny bathroom. Though rather voluminous, they accommodate his height, and he slips them on. Above the basin hangs a tarnished mirror in which he examines his reflection for a clue to his condition. Pale above the stubble, eyes duller than usual, perhaps a bit bloodshot. At least two, three days since his last shave. Setting the candle on the rim of the basin, he finally has a good look at his stomach-fading bruises all down his front, one neat scar underneath his ribs, pinkish with a pronounced ridge but no sign of stitches. He uses the toilet, splashes his face with cold water, thinks about the pleasure of a toothbrush-failing that, a strong sweet cup of tea.

Further exploration reveals a fair-sized kitchen with table and paraffin lamp, unpainted wooden cupboards, and bottled-gas cooker. Zach locates some matches, dispenses with the candle, and puts the kettle on. He's beginning to feel drained again. Palms down, he leans heavily on the tabletop till the discomfort under his ribs-all right, deep grinding pain-lets up a bit. By the time he can straighten, the room is filling with steam.

A clean teapot has been left on the table, next to a bowl of sticky brown sugar, a tea canister, some enamel mugs sprouting teaspoons, and a large half-eaten bar of chocolate. A note-_help yourself to anything you want_-plus a small origami box made of paper, with a hand-inked, lopsided but recognisable sketch of a crow on its lid. Zach breaks off a piece of chocolate, letting it melt in his mouth as he considers the box. He hefts it and hears a soft metallic clink. It must be for him, so he carefully prises up the lid.

At first there is only blankness-not even disbelief-then his hands begin to shake. It takes him a while before he dares to remove the chain; before he's able to.

A ringed seal worked in gold is resting in the palm of his hand.

'For me?' Laura asked, her eyes startled, then shining as he nodded.

Zach unfastened the clasp. She turned, and he encircled her neck with his hands, laid the supple chain along her throat, and secured it under her hair. She turned

back to him, a delighted smile on her face. The gold complemented the warm honey tones of her skin. Zach stared at the seal, playfully at swim in the gentle swell of her camisole. He was glad he'd bought an extra-long chain-this was theirs alone, he wanted no one else to see. He focused on the delicately worked pendant, but couldn't prevent his eyes from straying, and he wanted very badly, he suddenly realised, to touch those small firm breasts, to find out just how warm and honeyed they were. To taste them-and with that thought, he felt the first tightening at the base of his cock.

With a harsh sound Zach flips the seal over. It feels as real to him as anything he's felt in a long time. And the letters too are there-the *LL* he had the jeweller engrave on the underside. His skin contracts and grows cold. Mind numb, he drops the chain onto the table, turns up some tea bags, and makes himself a mug. Drains it, not caring if he scalds his tongue-welcoming, in fact, the sensation. Mechanically, he rinses the mug. Back at the table he stares down at the chain for a minute or two, then suddenly snatches it up in his hand. He flees with it through the cabin, adrenalin flushing his cheeks and speeding his heart in a mad rush of energy. He yanks open the front door, dashes barefoot onto the veranda, and flings it full force with a loud cry of rage. He stands without moving until silence settles back over the world. Then he spends ten minutes, still barefoot, searching through the snow for Laura's necklace, which he can only contrive to fasten round his own neck once his fingers have thawed before the fire. It has to be his imagination that the chain burns as much as the hot tea.

Back under the covers, he can't seem to stop shivering. In the end he takes himself in hand, the usual litany clacking in his head like beads on a rosary-_someone else, picture someone else, nice big tits, plenty of willing girls, lads, anyone, better yet no one at all, who needs them_-but it does no good, at some point the chain of words snaps, and he comes as always to Laura, only to Laura.

As he finally drifts off to sleep, his hand wrapped round the bit of gold as though, unstable as a dream, it might transmute into a base and bitter memory, he hears the sound of her voice reading to him from a favourite poem: '*Somewhere inside that numbness of the earth our future trying to happen.*' Words now as dry and lifeless as felled wood, welling tears of sap.

Chapter 11

Ping. A sound like ice cracking underfoot. Laura drew the duvet up over her head but Max kept jumping onto frozen puddles in the potholed lane. Ping. Ping.

‘Stop it, Max. Let me sleep.’

Ping.

Slowly she came awake. Her bedroom was dark, but a finger of moonlight lifted the hem of her curtains, traced a pale silvery course across the floor. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and padded to the window. Drawing back the heavy fabric, she started as a pebble struck the pane at eye level. Then she saw the gleam of Zach’s eyes, his unmistakable height. She slid up the sash.

‘You’re mad as a rabid crow,’ she said.

His teeth flashed white as he laughed softly. A sound that caught in her own throat. ‘Only mammals carry rabies.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Come down. Bring your swimming costume and a towel. And dress warmly.’

Was it arrogance or sheer idiocy on his part? Whatever it was, she liked it enough to be downstairs and out the backdoor within ten minutes, twelve at most—the last two spent swearing Max, whose bedroom adjoined hers, to secrecy. A light sleeper, Max was torn between fraternal misgivings and the lure of a midnight adventure. ‘Then can’t I come too?’ he’d asked. But even without the sweetener of a week’s dustbin duty, he’d have covered for her.

They wheeled the motorbike down the road and around the bend to the bus stop before firing up the engine. Zach had brought a helmet for her. As they rode away, she heard that horrid Doberman of Kathleen’s begin his fiendish yelping behind their fence. And hoped that the light which came on was attached to a movement sensor, not the long nose of a meddling parent.

Half an hour later Zach led them through a dense woodland, bracken and

overhanging branches and several small rodents truculent at the disturbance. A path difficult to find by daylight, and impossible at night. But Zach knew where he was going. Perhaps he always did.

They spoke little, which added to the air of mystery. Zach had refused to divulge their destination, and there was something of her brother in the way his lips twitched at her questions, as if he could hear the real ones, the ones she wasn't asking. Though Olivia would clutch her head in despair at Laura's stupidity-and tell her that she *deserved* to be raped or murdered-Laura inhaled the damp woodsy smell, felt the chill breeze stir her hair, watched the last unfallen leaves shiver delicately in the moonlight. Listened to Zach breathing just ahead of her, and wondered that such an ordinary sound could be so reassuring.

The path ended abruptly in a steep rise, which loomed above them like a black iceberg. A rockface impassable as the boundary between species. Its surface glistened with moisture, so that Laura held out a hand to see if it had begun to drizzle. Then she realised that the stone contained flecks of a crystalline substance, perhaps quartz or mica, which reflected the moonlight with an intense and intoxicating radiance. She touched a fingertip to the rock, then surreptitiously to her lips. But there was no milky taste. So much for the metaphors of poetry. They slipped like a rich ice cream over the tongue, yet left you hungry.

'Now what?' she asked.

'We're almost there,' Zach said, pointing to the rock.

I can no more climb that than outswim a seal, Laura thought in dismay.

'Watch your head.' He dug a small torch out of his backpack and snapped it on. A thin, powerful beam lit a narrow gap between crag and the leaning trunks of beech and oak, some uprooted and seemingly barricading their way. But Zach hugged the rock, ducking to a crouch at the first obstacle, and swept the torchlight before her to illuminate the ground.

'Come on,' he said. 'It's easier than it looks.'

She followed him, only once scraping her back on a dead trunk when nearby scuttling in the undergrowth spooked her. She gave a small cry, which brought Zach up short.

‘OK?’ he asked, playing the light over her face.

‘Yeah, just got up too fast,’ she said, unwilling to admit that she could be frightened by a mouse or vole.

‘Not afraid of the dark?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Good. It’s going to get much darker in a little while.’

A few steps further, and Zach handed her the torch, while he lifted away several leafy tree limbs, cut and artfully arranged as camouflage, to reveal a narrow cleft in the rock.

‘It’s a tight squeeze at first, but widens out quite soon. After about twelve metres, you’ll be able to walk upright.’

‘What is it? An old mine?’

‘Cave,’ was all he’d say.

The floor of the passageway was remarkably clear and unbroken, though it sloped steeply downhill, and Laura wondered whether somebody-Zach?-had removed any debris. A thick layer of soft reddish earth, fine and dry as sand, ran through her cupped hand like seconds in an hourglass. Laura wished she understood more about geology: what process had laid down these bands and swirls of sinuous colour on the walls? Murals that told a story in stone-surely an ancient story-if only you could read it. Soon after straightening, she paused to follow a particularly rich orange-and-madder striation with her fingertips.

‘Iron oxide,’ Zach said, ‘and perhaps organic traces from the forest’s leaf litter.’

‘Beautiful.’ Then she listened for a moment. ‘Is that the sound of water?’

Again Zach’s soft laugh.

After another three or four minutes, the tunnel narrowed again, and they came to an irregular belled opening, draped on the left from roof to floor with a cluster of opalescent pleats, which hung overhead from the mouth of what appeared to be a

dark conduit far too small to explore. Laura ran her hand along the fluted surface, to assure herself that it was really stone, not supple folds of cloth. The sound of water was louder now, and a vaguely familiar smell reached her nostrils.

Zach turned and faced her, blocking the passageway. His head still grazed the arch, despite hunched shoulders.

‘I’m going to switch off the torch. Wait right here till I say.’

She stared at him, suppressing her first twinge of uneasiness since opening her window. Perhaps he was just testing her trust in him. Or her nerve. She couldn’t decide what annoyed her more-Owen’s compliancy, or this high-handedness of Zach’s. But she’d come too far to back down now.

He smiled as she craned her neck, trying to see past him. ‘Hold on to the sides with both hands, and don’t walk forward. There’s a nasty drop ahead.’ He waited till she put out her arms to brace herself, then extinguished the light.

‘Remember, don’t move,’ he warned, his voice already receding in the darkness.

And the darkness was total. Within a few seconds Laura realised that the absence of light magnified her other perceptions, so that Zach’s movements echoed around her, while the water flowed ever closer, closer. The air was warmer, too, and she had the feeling that a fine mist was softening her skin. A memory floated to the surface of her mind. That smell-Zach’s hair, the first time she’d been near enough to notice.

All at once she understood what they’d been futilely explaining to her for years in maths about their beloved zero: nothingness was not simply an absence, but something real and solid and substantial. She could *feel* the darkness enclosing her like a caul, a second skin ... drawing tighter ...

What was he doing down there? Even simus couldn’t see in the dark, could they? Though with those eyes ...

Two or three clicks, followed by a skein of high-pitched squeaks at the threshold of her hearing. She dropped her hands, stepped forward, cried out.

‘Zach! Where are you?’

‘Damn it, Laura! Stay where you are! You’re going to fall.’

Laura grabbed blindly behind her for support, and her fingers met with stone. She swallowed nervously.

‘What was that?’ she asked.

‘Vampire bats. Don’t worry, I’ve put out a saucer of blood. They won’t come after you.’

It took her a moment to grasp that he was teasing, and a moment longer to regain her composure.

‘Very funny,’ she said dryly. ‘How long is this going to take? I need a wee.’

‘Two minutes. No longer, I promise.’

She wouldn’t go so far as to claim they were the longest two minutes of her life, but they gave her plenty of time to imagine in glorious detail what she’d do to Zach once she got an opportunity, starting with Max’s secret cache of itching powder. She’d reached the point of sponging it off and applying a soothing body lotion when she realised the direction of her thoughts. Quit that, she told herself firmly.

‘Ready?’ Zach called up to her.

‘I’ve been *ready* since you started slinging pebbles at my window.’

‘Then close your eyes and don’t open them till I tell you.’

‘As if it could get any darker,’ she grumbled, but complied. Not just stupid, but barking mad.

Her eyelids reddened slightly, and she fought an impulse to raise them.

‘OK.’ His voice was suddenly directly below her. ‘Have a look.’

After the darkness, even the low light blinded her. She squinted first at Zach, saw that he’d shed his jacket and pushed back his sleeves. Then gasped as her eyes swept the cavern, her vision clearing.

‘Like it?’ he asked.

She heard a strange note in his voice and glanced at him. Unsmiling, he gazed back at her with a face like a meticulously laid table-starched white linen, polished silver, hothouse flowers. As if he expected a Michelin inspector, someone who’d casually jerk away the tablecloth and then stomp on the wreckage. And deny the long-coveted star.

‘Well?’

‘Zach-‘ She took a deep breath.

‘Yeah?’

‘It’s-it’s the most wonderful gift anyone’s ever given me.’

She would remember his smile forever. Which was an even a better gift, though she couldn’t possibly tell him.

The chamber was lit by a lantern placed next to a gently steaming pool. An underground stream trickled over a canopy of glittering white flowstone, tinged with streaks of red and salmon and coral, and cockled at its lower rim. Laura peered up, but the stream’s inlet was lost in the shadows near the roof. She wasn’t good at such estimates, but at its highest point the cave had to be at least three times Zach’s height. The roof dipped and rose erratically, with projections less like stalactites than whorled and tendrilled and scalloped frostwork, all pearly with minerals and condensation. The slowly drifting mist added to the sense of enchantment, so that for a moment Laura thought she must still be home in her bed, dreaming.

Zach extended his hand.

The descent from the cantilevered ledge on which Laura was standing wouldn’t have been particularly tricky if it weren’t for the deep fissures in the rock almost directly below, where catching a foot might mean a twisted ankle or nasty gash. The stone, for all its sumptuous appearance, was unrepentant, and in places sharp as knapped flint. She let Zach guide her, and was pleased to see the glint of approval in his eyes as she sprang without hesitation.

‘Behind those toadstools you’ll find a run-off channel for the stream. You can

pee there, and change into your costume at the same time.'

'Promise you won't peek.'

'How else can I be sure you won't sample the fungus?'

At school he rarely bothered with jokes at all, and then only the sort which made enemies. And the formations did in fact resemble huge pale-grey puffballs, some waist-high, one as tall as she. With disappointing alacrity he fished their costumes from his backpack and went to strip by the pool. She watched him tug off his jumper. She watched him slip off his jeans. She watched in the trap of her own looking till the knobs of his vertebrae appeared; the vulnerable notched hollows of his lower back. He'd turned the tables neatly on her, damn him. Eyes now fixed on his 'toadstools', she picked her way over undulating mounds and depressions and crevices, at one point hugging a smooth apron protruding from the wall. Despite years of quick-change practice, she chose to dawdle, so that Zach was already lolling in the pool when she returned.

'How warm is it?' she asked.

'Hot.'

'How hot?'

'Ten minutes till hard-boiled.'

She snorted and slipped into the water at the spot he indicated.

For a while they were quiet, basking in the warmth, mesmerised by the play of lamplight over rock as fluid as the water which had shaped it.

'Are there really bats?' Laura asked.

'Yeah.' He pointed upwards. 'Clever creatures. Harmless.'

But if there were any in residence, she couldn't detect them.

'They emit sounds at a much higher pitch than you people can usually hear,' he added, noticing her scrutiny.

‘You mean that simus have better hearing?’ she asked after a short reflection.

‘A wider frequency range.’

Her eyes were drawn to the tattoo on his chest. His lips thinned, and he plunged under the water, to surface with his back to her. He flicked back his long hair, smoothed it down with his fingers, and clambered from the pool.

‘Don’t stay too long, the heat will drain your energy,’ he said, and disappeared with towel and tracksuit behind his toadstools. By the time he reappeared, Laura was seated on the lip of the pool, toes dangling in the water and shoulders wrapped in her towel.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asked.

She nodded.

From his backpack he removed a packet of sandwiches and a flask. He poured them some coffee.

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘I’ve forgotten an extra mug.’

Laura bowed her head to hide a smile. He wasn’t the sort to apologise.

They split the sandwiches between them, passing the flask’s steel screw-on cup back and forth. Too sweet for Laura’s taste, but hot and delicious-no instant coffee for him.

‘Do you come here often?’ she asked, having spotted a good-sized plastic crate in a niche. How had he managed to lug it through the first section of the tunnel?

‘Whenever I can.’ He waved a hand towards the crate. ‘I’ve even slept here for a night or two, on occasion.’

‘A perfect escape.’

‘For a while.’

Laura set her sandwich down next to her. There were so many questions she was longing to ask, but his mood was precarious. And she was ashamed of her

ignorance.

‘Why did you bring me here, Zach?’

He stared at her, then leaned forward. Laura held her breath, conscious of the tension in him. She was reminded of her granddad tuning his fiddle—a minute adjustment made all the difference between harmony and dissonance. Sometimes he’d make the strings caterwaul like a fight-primed tom, yowl like a cruising queen, while Laura giggled in delight. She had a good ear, she could still remember most of his tunes. And his peals of laughter, the time she’d turned the pegs without permission and doggedly snapped all but the lowest string.

With a lopsided smile Zach rose and made his way to the storage box, from whose depths he extricated a black oblong case, the kind that might contain a woodwind instrument.

If asked, she would never have imagined he’d settle on clarinet. Yet once he began to play, its rich liquid timbre suited him perfectly. He stood quite still, his eyes focused on an inner space. Mozart, she thought. There was no hesitation, no fumbling, no harsh notes. It became almost painful to watch him, and she closed her eyes and let the music slowly cocoon her in radiance.

And like a chrysalis suspended from a sun-glazed leaf, she shivered at each new breath, at each rise and fall of the melody. It welled from a source as far beyond her reach—and perhaps his—as the headwaters of light itself. How odd that deep underground, and with eyes shut tight, she could look at long last into the sun.

‘The *Adagio* from Mozart’s clarinet concerto,’ Zach said.

Until he spoke, she hadn’t realised that he’d stopped playing. She said with an effort, an immense effort, as though she were small once more and sleepy, very sleepy, and the room was thick with smoke and laughter and the voices of the fiddlers, and her gran was lifting her struggling from the settee, ‘Play something else.’

He launched into a chortling Klezmer freylach, embellished with boisterous trills and a shifting tempo that didn’t quite follow the beat. Soon she was laughing, then improvising aloud, their voices riffing and razzing and rollicking together off the walls and roof. He ended in an upwards chromatic run, punctuated by a slower staccato. She burst into applause.

‘More,’ she implored.

‘It’s getting late. Another time.’

She finished her coffee while Zach packed away his clarinet. When he came to stand by her with a proffered hand, she risked a question which had been itching for days like a new-formed scab.

‘What about the boy? Have you found out anything?’

He dropped his hand, stowed the flask and the wrappers from their sandwiches in his backpack. Laura was learning to wait it out with him, rather like watching for a splinter to work its way to the surface of your skin.

He looked at her at last. ‘Yeah, I’ve been given some information.’

‘Will you go to the police?’

His laugh was short, and bitter as dock.

‘But you can’t just let him get away with it!’

‘He won’t.’

She rose to her feet and wrapped the towel more tightly around herself. She was beginning to get cold.

‘What are you going to do?’ she asked.

‘Take care of it.’

‘How?’ she insisted.

‘You don’t want to know.’

‘But I do.’

For a moment he studied her face, then shrugged. ‘Since you’ve asked.’ He folded his arms across his chest. ‘When I finish with him, the bastard won’t be abusing anyone ever again.’

‘You can’t mean-‘

‘Squeamish about full castration? I can just geld him, if you prefer.’

‘That’s insane ... *barbaric*.’ Those rumours-surely they were exaggerated.

A soft whooshing, less a sound than a quiver of the air. Laura ducked as a small dark shape hurtled past. It disappeared into the tunnel, never in any danger of collision. Zach hadn’t moved, though his lips were pursed.

Laura stared after the bat for a moment, then rounded on Zach.

‘If that’s your idea of a joke-‘

‘Go back to your nice safe boyfriend, Laura. It was a mistake to bring you to a cave inhabited by wild animals.’

His mouth crooked at the corner, but there was no smile in his eyes. Not much of anything, in fact.

Angrily, Laura swooped towards her clothes, which she’d left on a ledge of shelfstone overhanging the pool. Too late, she heard Zach’s warning cry.

‘Look out!’

She felt a sharp burning sensation on her forearm, like the time at a concert when she’d swung the back of her hand into a lit cigarette. Surprised, she looked down. Two puncture marks, a few drops of blood.

Zach was already at her side. He examined her arm, then snatched up her clothes.

‘I’ll help you dress. Time to go.’

‘What?’

He held out her sweatshirt. ‘Come on, slip it on.’

She rubbed her fingers over the bite, which was beginning to hurt. Zach grabbed her hand and pulled it away.

‘Don’t do that. You’ll only spread the venom faster.’

Only then did she fully apprehend what had happened.

‘A snake?’ she asked.

‘An adder. Rarely fatal, so you don’t have to worry. But we need to get you to hospital as soon as possible.’

‘I don’t want to go to hospital.’ She stepped back, swung her head from side to side, feeling trapped. Her heart beating fast. ‘Oh god, not more trouble. My dad. *My mum.*’ The last came out strangled, as though someone had upholstered her face in plastic wrap.

‘We’ll deal with it.’

We.

She could breathe again. Zach helped her into her clothes, even tying her trainers, then made her lie down on the ground while he dressed quickly and tossed their stuff into his backpack. A brief attempt to use his mobile came to nothing. ‘No reception,’ he muttered. From her towel he fashioned a sling for her arm, which he slipped round her neck.

‘Now listen,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t move any more than absolutely necessary, to slow absorption of the poison. I can carry you some of the time, but you’re going to have to use your limbs to climb into the tunnel. After that, we’ll immobilise your arm in the sling.’

‘I can walk.’

‘Fly too, I expect.’

At the mouth of the tunnel, Zach made a stirrup with his hands to give her a leg up, but despite his strength, it took several tries to drag herself over the lip and onto the ledge. Her right arm was beginning to throb, its muscles unresponsive to her increasingly desperate commands. Without her swimmer’s stamina, what would Zach have done? She made it at last, but only because of his single-minded determination not to give up. She knew no one else who would have been able to lift her so high.

After a brief rest, she crawled forward to make space for Zach, who mounted easily. He used his sleeve to wipe away the film of sweat on his forehead, but he wasn't out of breath. Impatient, though.

'I'll walk,' she said.

'Put your arm in the sling.'

He waited till it was adjusted to his satisfaction, then tucked away the torch and picked her up without taking the least notice of her protests. Moving quickly, he seemed to have no difficulty navigating in the dark.

'Just like a bat,' she murmured into his chest, and giggled.

'What?'

'Getting tired?'

'I'm fine.'

By the time Zach could no longer walk erect, her arm was swelling noticeably. Despite his caution, he jostled it as he set her down. She gasped, then knelt with her head low, a touch giddy. A touch short of breath. Zach switched on the torch.

'Look, I don't think you can manage this. I'm going to leave you here for a few minutes while I go ahead and lash together some branches. We'll use them like a sledge to pull you out.'

'No! Don't leave me alone in here.'

'Laura, exertion will only make things worse.'

'Please.'

He stared at her, his pupils dark as obsidian.

'You said an adder isn't deadly.'

Dark as the berries of black nightshade.

'Please-' She heard the quiver in her voice.

He hesitated so long that she wondered what it would take to convince him of something really difficult. At last he said, 'You go first. When you're ready.'

It was still dark when they emerged, as though no time had passed. Her vision blurring slightly, Laura put out a hand to steady herself against the rockface. Her legs were as slack as old elastic, so that she could almost believe she'd just come out of the pool from a long training session.

'Are you OK?' Zach asked.

She nodded, but as she stepped towards him the top of her head began to float away from the rest of her body. Instantly he wrapped his arms around her, lowering her to the ground, gently brushing her hair out of her eyes. He whipped out his mobile. His end of the conversation retreated into the shadowland beyond the trees.

At one point along the trek to the roadside Laura roused herself to his panting.

'It's too far, put me down.'

'Shut up.'

Her chest felt tight, as if she'd squeezed into a wetsuit several sizes too small. Then she realised that the laboured breathing was coming from her, not Zach.

Only metres from the ambulance she stirred again.

'You know, I think I'd like to kiss you,' she said.

'What, now?' His buttery caramel laugh, the moreish one.

The ambulance crew had been waiting for them beside their vehicle, rear doors already open. Zach explained what had happened.

'Good job,' the paramedic said, 'we'll take over from here.' A tall beefy man, mid-thirties, shaved head, sultry accent.

Within seconds he and the technician had laid Laura on a trolley inside the ambulance, started their assessment.

‘You’re sure it was an adder?’ the paramedic asked.

‘Positive.’

‘Allergic reaction, then.’

The paramedic slipped an oxygen mask over Laura’s face, checked her pulse, listened to her lungs, administered an injection. He continued to monitor her blood pressure and oxygen levels.

‘Blue her in?’ the EMT asked the paramedic.

‘Best to play it safe.’

‘That your bike?’ the technician asked before swinging into the driver’s seat.

‘Yeah,’ Zach said.

‘We’re off then.’

The paramedic began to close the rear doors.

‘Wait,’ Zach said. ‘I’m riding with her.’

‘Sorry, mate, against the rules. You know that.’

Zach shoved a hand between the doors, and the two stared at each other. Laura raised her head from the stretcher. Her eyes were pleading above the oxygen mask.

‘If you’re afraid of losing your job, I’ll tell them I forced you,’ Zach said. ‘At gun point, if you like.’

The paramedic made a thoroughly unprofessional sound, then glanced from Zach to his patient, and back to Zach again. He let out a deep sigh.

‘You needn’t worry about my skin, lad.’ He jerked his head to indicate that Zach should hop in. ‘My people went through this sort of thing for plenty of years. Come on, your girl’s waiting.’

Chapter 12

‘What the hell have you been up to?’

With an angry set to his shoulders Lev tosses down his satchel and seizes the lamp off the floor. In a moment it’s burning brightly again, a stark light which accentuates the planes and angles of his face. But his examination is as skilful and sensitive as before, and this time Zach feels a liquid warmth spread under his skin, a warmth which reminds him of spilled sunlight. Until Lev fingers the pendant with a provocative lift to his eyebrows.

‘No!’ Zach cries, and clamps Lev’s hand in his own. ‘Don’t touch it.’

‘Let go,’ Zach says, ‘or I’ll break your fingers.’

Lev regards Zach without flinching, a frank appraisal. It’s not easy to intimidate someone who can face a polar bear with more steel in his balls than fist. Slowly he nods and Zach releases his hand, which Lev flexes with no apparent resentment. Appreciatively, even.

‘Laura’s,’ Lev says.

Zach’s hand slides back to the pendant. A long silence, in which Lev trims the lamp, moves it to a less prominent position, waits. Zach counts, then recounts the stone figures lined up on a shelf, half of them in creamy green, the other half a dark burgundy. Thirty-one, thirty-two. Lev could have filled the air with verbal shrapnel-most people do. After a struggle, Zach allows that he might need more than Lev’s medical skills.

‘How do you know about Laura?’ Zach asks.

Lev reaches for a pouch lying on the mantel. ‘Mind if I smoke?’

Curtly, ‘No.’

‘I’d offer you one, but it’s best you wait till you’re fully healed.’

‘I don’t smoke.’

Lev extracts a packet of cigarette papers and some tobacco, whose sweet aroma, even unlit and from across the room, is distinctive if slightly noisome. Zach eyes the chessmen intermittently while Lev rolls his cigarette, touches a taper to the hot embers in place of a match, and inhales with serene pleasure, then notices the direction of Zach's gaze.

'Do you play?' Lev asks.

'A bit.'

'I carved them myself. Fine occupation of an evening. Like to see one?'

'You must think me an idiot!'

They study each other again. Lev wears a mask of smoke, no doubt aiming the two thin streams upwards from his nostrils as deliberately as Zach himself would have done.

'How did you get her chain?' Zach asks at last.

'What you really mean is, have I seen her?'

'Well, have you?'

'Let's just say I'm aware of her importance.'

Testily Zach brushes his hair off his forehead, only to grimace. His hair is greasy and needs a good wash. *He* needs a good wash. Meanwhile, Lev flips the end of his cigarette into the fire and proceeds to rummage in his bag.

'Here,' he says, handing Zach an unopened toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

'Do you want me to help you bath?'

'No. What I *want* is to understand what's going on.'

'Will it allay your suspicions to learn we have certain interests in common?'

Zach casts his blanket aside, rises to his feet, and makes his way slowly and laboriously to the shelf on which the stone chessmen rest. He picks up a red pawn and cradles it in his hand. Runs his thumb over its surface. Beautifully

carved for such a minor piece. Yet even a mediocre player knows the value of safeguarding his rooks. He sets it back down and turns to Lev.

‘Are you telling me that you’re also looking for Laura?’ Zach asks.

Lev joins him at the shelf, where he plucks an irregular piece of dull red stone from beside the chessmen. He weighs it in his hand for a few minutes. ‘Funny, but I sometimes prefer the raw stone, unprepossessing as it seems.’ He replaces the stone with the air of a small boy who’s been showing off his treasures. Proud, yet not quite sure someone else will appreciate their worth. ‘How about something to eat? I don’t know about you, but I’m famished.’

At Lev’s words Zach’s stomach grumbles, alerting him that some of the residual ache may be hunger. He has no idea when he’s last eaten; no idea, in fact, how long he’s been here. Despite Lev’s trickster mindset, Zach finds himself asking that very question.

‘I’ll fetch some bowls. It’s warmer by the fire.’ Lev hoists the lamp and takes a few steps towards the kitchen.

‘Hold on. You can’t treat me like this.’

Eyes crinkling, Lev pauses to look from Zach to the chess set. ‘It must be that simus are exempt from military service. Every soldier knows what it means to be a pawn-vital, but not always privy to command information.’

‘And every simu knows not to take orders from self-serving monkeys!’

‘Before jumping to conclusions, ask yourself why the abort function didn’t work.’

‘What the fuck are you trying to prove? That you’re cleverer than me?’

‘Intelligence—at least the sort to which you cling like men drowning—is vastly overrated in the larger scale of things.’

In exasperation, Zach sweeps a hand through the air as though clearing away a cobweb, the kind which hangs in horror films and ghost stories. ‘Any more catchy-’ he begins, then happens to glance down at his fingers. His mouth snaps shut. With mild distaste he rubs his fingers on his trackpants to dislodge the

desiccated fly and sticky strands clinging to his skin.

‘Enough’s enough,’ he mutters. Then louder, ‘Abort the bloody run, you arseholes. There’s a serious malfunction.’ Again he tries the code; as a last resort, the escape key implanted in his upper left third molar, which he’s always thought of as another of Mishaal’s jokes.

‘You still think it’s a malfunction?’ Lev asks, amused.

‘What else?’

Lev lowers the lamp below knee level, making him look much older. Not just older-more skelemental, as though his skin has thinned to reveal struts and fathomless conduits, the very viruses swarming through his system. But a virus is unable to replicate without a host. It’s not alive. Zach feels the hairs on the nape of his neck stir even before Lev speaks.

‘I’ve disabled the return functions precisely so that Fulgur can no longer get its hands on you. Not till you’re ready to deal with them.’

‘Impossible!’

‘Think so?’

‘Look, it’s obvious that whoever you are, you have some understanding of the interface. Maybe I imagined the cobweb, maybe I’ve been so ill that I can’t remember how I got here, maybe even one of the programmers somehow learned about Laura’s chain, but one thing is dead certain-the coding can’t be altered from within. First of all, it’s out of the question technically. And it would be madness to give that sort of power to anyone.’ After a brief pause he concedes, ‘Even to a simu.’

‘I’m not a cognoscens.’

‘A *monkey*?’ Zach asks incredulously.

There’s no dramatic change in the room-no sudden chill, no explosive fatal strike, no fresh blood or gore to stain his dreams. *Tornarssuk*, three-quarters of a ton of shrewd clawed blade-toothed battering ram, remains out of sight, patiently awaiting its long-stalked prey. But as Lev turns to leave, the air around him

shimmers with a light dusting of crystals like fine dry snow in moonlight-a furred nimbus which disappears in an instant as Lev transfers the lantern to his left hand. By contrast, the pungent oily smell lingers first in Zach's nostrils, then in his memory, along with Lev's parting words.

'Remember, not every virus is malignant.'

Chapter 13

The division head waved Litchfield to a seat.

‘Coffee, Charles?’ Slade asked.

‘Thank you, no.’ He settled himself on the edge of the hide-upholstered chair. It never did to act as if they were having an awards-ceremony natter, despite his superior’s genial smile. Slade was active in local politics, and if Molly’s girlfriends could be believed, eyeing the soon-to-be-contested MP seat. A wartime stint in the oil zone was routinely touted, a tweet short of overkill. His squat, toad-like appearance worked entirely to his advantage, reminding you of a favourite bald uncle. Charles would never have known about the women if the adjoining flat hadn’t belonged to Max’s godmother, a piece of information he was hoarding like knowledge of falsified data. There were few others with his knack of reading a gatlas. He’d pick one up most evenings the way others indulged in bedtime thrillers, or Molly, trashy romances.

‘How’s Molly?’

‘Very well, thanks.’

‘And the children?’

Here it comes, Charles thought, but years of marriage had trained him well. ‘Just fine, both of them. Max’s teachers are very pleased with his work, especially in science and maths, and he’s shaping up nicely as a striker. And Laura’s gone back to swimming. The usual adolescent ups and downs with her, and of course we wish she were a bit more academically minded, but nothing we can’t handle.’

‘I’ve heard that she had to spend a few days in hospital. Not a chronic condition, I trust.’

‘Nothing of the sort.’ He reminded himself that this fool sat in on assessments-their ridiculous Vertical Mobility Advisory Board. Andy had another name for it. ‘An allergic reaction. Unfortunate, but we’ll be very vigilant it doesn’t recur.’

Slade leaned his elbows on his gleaming desk and steepled his hands against his

lips. He regarded a single sheet of paper in front of him, at which Charles was careful not to stare. Not that he needed to.

After a measured silence, Slade smiled, picked up the paper, and tore it neatly in half before feeding the pieces through the shredder under his desk. Even in a largely paperless age, it was sometimes best to leave carbon rather than electronic footprints.

‘I’m glad to hear that, Charles. We’re men who understand the need for high standards.’ His voice took on a slight sing-song tone that reminded Charles of his father-in-law in the pulpit. ‘In our homes as well as our work, and above all in society as a whole. We live in unsettled times. We must never forget that the future lies with our children.’

Charles slowly let out his breath. A calculated risk, but the odds had been good—this time. He’d have to arrange a permanent solution. A pity, Zach was one of their best. But if Fulgur fired you, there was the dole, or scrubbing urinals in the morgue—not even cadavers.

‘I couldn’t agree with you more, Russell. Laura and Max mean everything to Molly and me. Well, almost everything.’ He gave a deprecating cough. ‘You know that my—our—commitment to Fulgur is 100%.’

‘No need for that. We never expect more than 98%.’

They laughed together, two men sharing a pleasant joke. Then Slade’s face took on the solemn look of distant relatives at a funeral. He reached forward and flicked a switch on his console. ‘No calls or interruptions, please, Penelope.’ He opened a drawer and removed a flat file. ‘Now about Project Elysium—’

*

‘You’ve been going through my things.’

Her mum laid the iron on its side and reached over to turn down the radio. Bach, thought Laura, when it ought to be Wagner.

‘What do you expect?’ Molly asked.

‘I’m nearly eighteen. I’ve got the right to my privacy,’ Laura said hotly.

‘Not if you break rules.’ Molly’s voice hardened. ‘Break laws.’

‘I’ll buy a lock to keep you out, if I have to.’

‘To keep you in would be better. Away from that-that simu.’

‘I’m not going to let you choose my friends. Not any more.’

Molly’s hand reached for the iron, and Laura took a step backwards, immediately furious at herself for cringing. Her mum smiled and dropped her hand.

‘We’ll see about that, won’t we.’

Laura was too close to tears to notice the small patches of colour on her mum’s cheeks, the slitted eyes, the silken vowels.

‘Then I’ll go to social services. You can’t treat me like a-‘

Molly’s hand caught her across the side of her head, hard enough to bring the threatened tears to overflowing. Laura must have bitten her lip or tongue, she could taste blood. Before she had a chance to swallow properly, her mum had grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked, then began shaking her like a pitbull with a catch in its jaws. But the worst were the words, the vicious threats that Molly hurtled at her-‘piece of shit’ and ‘slut’ about the mildest of them. Long experience had taught Laura to retreat into a sheltered place until her mum’s rage ran its course. Sometimes a deep blue, watery grotto. Sometimes a seal’s pure white lair. And this time, a secret cave where you could float for hours in a warm pool buoyed by the hypnotic notes of a clarinet.

*

Although they had arrived early, Owen’s spacious sitting room was already crowded, and guests were spilling over into adjoining reception rooms. Laura’s mum disappeared with her viola into the downstairs study reserved for warming up. Max grumbled sotto voce to Laura that they’d never get near the food later. Laura felt a touch on her shoulder.

‘It’s ages till they begin,’ Owen said. ‘Let’s get out of this madhouse.’

Laura glanced round. Through the doorway into the conservatory she could see her dad talking animatedly to a pair of bespectacled research types with Nobel Prize engraved on their foreheads.

‘If Dad surfaces before the quartet comes in, tell him I’m going over some maths problems with Owen,’ Laura instructed Max.

‘You can’t just run off and leave me on my own,’ Max protested.

‘Go into the kitchen,’ Owen said. ‘Mike and George are watching TV and eating pizza. Our au pair will make sure you get back in time.’

‘But Dad’ll notice,’ Max said.

‘Doubt it. Those are the visiting Stanford neurogeneticists, your dad won’t even hear the music begin.’

In Owen’s room Laura was surprised to find a bookshelf overflowing with paperbacks.

‘You like to read,’ she said.

Owen shut the door and switched on his sound system. ‘Drink?’ he asked, bringing out a couple of lagers from behind a row of thrillers.

After a hesitation Laura nodded, let him pop the ring-pull for her. The hiss of escaping gas seemed vaguely ominous, though she knew that the adder’s strike had been soundless. She drank a few sips, then set the can on his desk.

Owen watched her over the top of his can, licking a bit of foam from his lips. Laura looked away, his tongue was too wet, too pink-like a small animal that had been captured and skinned.

‘I’m not stupid,’ he said.

‘What?’

He waved at the books. ‘I can read as well as the next bloke.’

Laura coloured. ‘I didn’t mean it that way.’

Owen continued to regard her intently. His gaze was beginning to make her uncomfortable, and she reached for her lager.

‘Do you still see him?’ Owen asked at last.

‘Who?’ As if she didn’t know.

‘Zach.’

Laura shrugged. ‘I don’t think he’s been at school. Haven’t you seen him around?’

Owen drained his can.

‘Do you want to finish mine?’ Laura asked.

He shook his head and moved closer. ‘I don’t really drink that much,’ he said, taking the can from her and putting it aside. Now was the time to leave, if she were leaving.

‘Why did you go there with him? To that wood?’

Neither Zach nor Laura had mentioned the cave to anyone. By the time she’d been well enough to explain, he’d already taken the brunt of the blame on himself. She was very worried what they’d done to him, but could think of no innocuous way to find out. How much did Owen hear from his dad?

‘It was just supposed to be a motorbike ride,’ she said. She wasn’t able to blush on cue, but she’d perfected the lip-biting and fiddling with a strand of hair.

‘Na♦ve of me, I know. That certainly won’t happen again.’

‘Did he try anything?’

She looked away. ‘It’s hard for me to talk about it.’

‘I’ll get some of my mates together, we’ll sort him.’

‘Leave it, Owen. Please. I don’t want any more rack, my mum’s already half-crazed about the whole thing. The police will have given Zach a good scare, and my dad says Fulgur has its own ways of dealing with such things.’

‘Yeah.’ Owen grinned. ‘Yeah, they can be damned effective. And if I tell them about the fire-‘

‘*What* fire?’

‘You know, at the old cannery. I didn’t want to get the two of you into trouble, but now ...’

‘We didn’t have anything to do with the fire.’

‘You left together?’

Laura nodded. ‘The boy died, there seemed no reason to hang round.’

‘But Zach could have gone back later.’

‘Maybe.’ Laura waited to give him the impression she was thinking hard. ‘We separated at the street, I went my way, he ... I guess I don’t know where he went. What would Fulgur do to him?’

Owen was quiet for a moment. ‘You’ll have to keep this to yourself.’

‘Of course.’

Absentmindedly he picked up her lager and swirled it without drinking. Then he took a deep breath, as if he were about to swallow a dose of bitter medicine. ‘There’s something about the augers, about their body chemistry, which Fulgur controls.’

Her expression bland, Laura nodded to reassure him that her promise was no mere placebo.

‘I don’t know all the details,’ he went on, ‘but it’s a big secret. Something so secret that even the augers themselves haven’t been told the truth.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Nor me. But it means Fulgur has a way to keep them in line. Punish them, if necessary.’

‘Painful?’

Owen searched her face. ‘Do you care?’

‘Not particularly. I *used* to think we ought to treat them like us.’

‘Then I’ll tell my dad about that auger kid. You saw how mad Zach went. He’s capable of anything.’

‘I don’t trust him. What if he makes up a whole string of lies?’ She ducked her head, her voice contrite. ‘You were right, you know. I should never have had anything to do with him. I feel so stupid. It was just that ... those eyes of theirs ... Are you racked at me?’

‘It’s OK.’ His smile was so rueful that for a moment she felt ashamed. ‘You remember Xuxa?’ he asked.

‘The Brazilian exchange student?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Have I got the right one? Term before last. Gorgeous melting eyes, guitar, and tripleD cup?’

He blushed, and she had to remind herself what he and Tim and all the rest of them would gladly do to Zach. *Even the augers themselves haven’t been told the truth.*

‘This medical thing about the mulacs,’ she said, ‘you reckon my dad knows about it?’

‘Probably, he’s one of their top neuros.’ His voice skidded in alarm. ‘You’re not going to ask him or anything?’

Laura moved closer, took the can from his hand, and sipped without swallowing. Then she pressed her mouth to his, and when he opened it, gave him a taste of her tongue along with the lager. His reaction was instantaneous.

‘Do you want to?’ she asked.

‘You mean-‘

‘If you’ve got protection.’

‘Have you ever-you know, with someone else?’

Laura pulled back enough to give her room for a proper show of disgust, the dribble of lager he wiped from his chin eliminating the need for much pretence. ‘You’re not suggesting I’d actually sleep with one of *them*, are you?’

‘Shit, of course not. I only meant-I mean, there might have been-I mean ...’

She giggled and kissed him again, her hand straying. ‘You’ll just have to teach me, won’t you?’

Chapter 14

The nightmarish sound of howling rousts Zach from sleep. At least two or three wolves, possibly more. The human brain is an archaeobiological site of ancestral adaptations, so that cognoscens no less than sapiens will freeze when the ground opens at their feet, recoil (or flee) at the sight of a snake. After his heartbeat settles, after he drives any oneiric wargs from the threshold, after a thorough reality check, Zach throws off the covers and stumbles to the window. He presses his face against the glass, draws back to wipe away the condensation, and peers out again through the captive flames, only then noticing that he's still muzzy, perhaps a trifle queasy, but not in much pain. How long has he slept? For the first time he wishes for a watch, one of those fancy chronometers that do everything but sit up and bark. Out front Lev is feeding steaming chunks of something which hasn't seen a slaughterhouse, never mind a supermarket, to a pack of huskies. Zach swallows; Mishaal is a born-again Vegetarian. A sledge, humpbacked, crouches as if ready to spring.

As soon as Lev enters, Zach asks him where the dogs have come from.

'I'm dying for a cup of tea.' Lev is already halfway across the room, bringing the smell of intense cold with him. His nose and cheeks are bright red. 'The wind's fierce today.' He tosses his anorak onto a chair and goes to drape his hat and mitts over the mantelpiece before warming his hands at the fire. 'Feeling better?'

'Much better. Well enough, in fact, to blow your fucking limbic system into oblivion!'

'Care to try?' Again that indulgent note.

Their eyes meet and Zach shrugs, unwilling to test such thin ice. It might be a long winter. 'The dogs aren't black, are they?'

'Mostly white and cream and grey, though Bella's a gorgeous coppery brown, why?'

'Hellhounds, I hear, are the colour of midnight.'

'Like ravens?' Lev laughs. 'Nothing supernatural about my beauties. You'll soon

see how smart and swift they are. How loyal.'

It might be a long winter, but Zach has no intention of skating in the dark.
'Planning a dogsledge race?'

'A small journey.'

'OK by me. Time to get back to basecamp anyway.'

'Sorry, but that's not on. We'll be heading in another direction.'

'No way. This isn't a holiday on ice. I've a job to do.'

'True. Only thing is, we're not talking about the same job.'

'Listen, I'm not going to abandon my clients, however borderline Chloe may be. You don't understand what Fulgur-'

Lev interrupts brusquely, not his usual style. 'And you don't understand what's at stake. Why else do you think I'd risk modifying the STrinth? Every event has a quantum co-event; too many, and there's the chance of a bounce.' He hesitates, then adds, 'Ethan and Chloe have plenty of supplies, they'll be fine for as long as it matters.'

From no information to an overload. Zach doesn't know what to ask first.
'Would you mind making at least a minimum of sense? What's a strinth, for example?'

'STrinthos is actually the customary translation, I seem to have picked up your penchant for abbreviations, your slang too.' The fire crackles and sends out a starburst of sparks. With a stockinged foot Lev nudges the largest ember back from the perimeter of the hearth and waits till it ceases to glow. 'Not *a* STrinth, but *the* STrinth. There's only one fundamental spacetime-well, call it *spacetime entity*. Your language is woefully inadequate to describe the cosmos.'

Zach is silent for a time, watching the flames. Even Mishaal wouldn't dare to saddle him with an alien straight out of a space opera, one with a *penchant* for quantumbabble. Slade and his ilk aren't precisely known for their sense of humour, nor their appreciation of parody. 'You act as if this place is *real*. It's only VR, for godsake. A very fancy sort of VR, but a simulation nevertheless.'

‘I see that we are going to have some interesting discussions about the nature of reality on our journey,’ Lev says dryly.

‘I haven’t agreed to go anywhere with you.’

From a pocket Lev removes something small enough to be concealed in his fist. A flick of his wrist, and it flies through the intervening space like a golden snake, uncoiling in midair. Zach’s hand shoots out in time to snag it with his fingers.

‘I thought you wanted to find Laura,’ Lev says.

Her gold pendant is warm in Zach’s palm, as though he’s been wearing it next to his skin.

Chapter 15

By the end of a grey, rain-soaked week with little else except a minor incident over a teacher's palmer to distract anyone, Laura had been asked about Owen so often that she'd become adept at matching the right phrase to the right face, the way you automatically select golden koi lipgloss for a plain black T-shirt, slick bloodred when your lips need to slash a samurai arc. All the time her eyes wide, candid, alert for Zach.

Who was not in school. Who had left the hospital under escort, her mum had been quick to point out, and now seemed to have vanished. Who didn't want to be found-Laura hoped. The alternatives kept her awake long into the night. And however much she tried to outwit herself with outrageous scenarios of the lonely-megastar-meets-warmhearted-schoolgirl variety, hair like ribbons of black treacle, fingers like warm toast inevitably ended up feeding her fantasies.

At supper on Friday her father laid a sumptuous box of imported chocolates on the table.

'A celebration,' he said.

'For what?' Max asked, his eyes already reflecting the shiny glaze on the first piece he'd have, and the second. A third too, if they'd let him.

'A new patent.'

Laura's mum smiled, but it was a tight little smile. 'What about your promotion? You've been spending a lot of evenings at the lab lately.'

'It'll all help, Molly.'

'The way the mud in the car last night-and on your shoes-will help?'

Laura watched her father duck his head, colour high. She curled her fingers round her knife, then remembered how angry he'd been about Zach: the quiet, obstinate anger of a weak man who needed to prove something to himself, but who would never defy convention. Who would never dare to stand up to his wife, his boss. Probably not even to a paramedic. Her eyes suddenly prickled

with tears.

‘What have you done to him?’ she cried.

Max looked at her in surprise, her parents at one another in alarm.

‘I don’t know what-‘ her father began.

‘What’s the patent for this time?’ Laura cut in viciously. ‘A device to control their thoughts? or merely to monitor them?’

She sprang up and slammed out of the room, thereby missing the frown which her dad quickly erased from his forehead. Molly already halfway out of her chair in furious pursuit, her husband was able to shake his head at Max, then mouth a word of caution without attracting her attention.

*

When Laura pushed open the door, Stella was serving an old man whose greasy hair hung to his shoulders, striated with grey. He smelled unwashed, and Laura was in no hurry to breathe in his rancid exhalations. She’d had her omniflu noc, they wouldn’t let you into school or a film or even the bloody supermarket without it, but you never knew about those weird mutations.

‘Shut the fucken door, freeze my balls here,’ he grumbled testily.

‘No need for that.’ Despite the rebuke, Stella’s gaze passed over Laura as though over a ghost.

Laura closed the door but hovered on the threshold till the greaser dug his hand into a pocket for some coins, and his hair swung forward, curtaining his face. With his head bent, he looked for a moment like a singer pausing for a breath over his mike. Laura stared at him, disconcerted. As if aware of her scrutiny, he glanced up. Sallow eyes blood-webbed with drink or drugs or age, and beneath it all, a deathly fatigue. He’d seen her on a thousand street corners, her disgust as offhand as small change.

Ashamed, Laura hurried to the rack and grabbed the first magazine that came to hand. She was still flipping blindly through its pages when Stella removed it from her hands.

‘If you’re really into bodybuilding, there’s a good gym round the corner,’ Stella said. ‘But don’t crumple the merchandise.’

Laura played with the zip on her jacket, trying to remember her carefully rehearsed lines. The takeaway’s plate-glass windows were fogged, and Laura had a momentary urge to scrawl a message in the condensation, press her nose like a child against the glass.

Stella jerked her head towards the empty table. ‘Go on, sit down. I’ll bring you a cup of tea.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘On second thought, you look as if you could use a meal.’

Laura shook her head, but soon found herself eating the bowl of chilli Stella put before her. Stella settled her bulk onto the other chair, grunting a bit.

‘You’re looking for Zach,’ she said without preamble.

‘Yes.’

‘What for?’

Laura decided to match Stella’s bluntness. ‘I’m worried about him.’

‘You ought to be, after the trouble you’ve caused him.’

‘He said that?’

‘If you need to ask, you don’t know him very well.’

The conversation was heading offshore, and Laura wasn’t keen to do any swimming in these waters.

‘Listen, all I want to know is that he’s OK,’ Laura said. ‘Have you seen him?’

Stella leaned her elbows on the table, which tottered under her weight. Her dark brown eyes offered no safe harbour, so that it took a real effort for Laura to keep from dropping her own. She tucked her arms close to her torso in the hope that Stella wouldn’t smell her sweat. Why were roll-ons only effective when you didn’t need them?

A moment longer, and Laura would have capitulated. But Stella gave an abrupt nod, like a queen grudgingly approving an unwelcome edict.

‘Finish your chilli,’ she said.

And while Laura debated whether not eating the stuff would constitute civil disobedience or a mere tantrum, Stella locked the door to the café, flipped the hand-lettered sign to *closed*, and switched off the overhead fluorescents, leaving only a dim light behind the counter. Without a word she disappeared into a back room.

If she hasn’t returned by the time the bowl is empty, Laura promised herself, I’ll leave. She was hungry; the chilli was good. In fact, she was very hungry, but she ate more and more slowly. Footsteps prevented her from having to eat the rest a bean-a *quarter* bean-at a time.

Stella hung back in the passageway, observing the two of them. Though she’d told Zach that Laura was upstairs, his face changed when he saw her, his whole bearing. And the girl as well. The air around them stirred, and Stella could smell the cloves of her childhood, feel the hot sand burning the soles of her feet as she and Alan raced hand in hand, slipping and laughing when they tumbled together like puppies, kissing, running again towards *their* place between the old jetty and the endless fields of sugar cane. How she could run in those days! Sometimes she still couldn’t believe that Alan was dead, drowned in that sudden storm, his father and brother too, while she’d managed to hold on to a cushion. Even here, in this cold and bitter country, so many years later, she’d turn and there he’d be grinning his rascal grin, beckoning. Did the dead ever let you go? They could be so greedy ...

With a sigh she never permitted herself, Stella slipped back into the dark corridor towards the little office where she kept a bed-slept most nights too, these days. Just a bit, she envied them their youth. As for the rest, she was nearly an old woman, after all. Tired, a lot of the time. But not quite resigned, not yet. And where was that wisdom which was supposed to compensate for being too damned stubborn to drown?

‘Where have you been?’ Laura asked Zach.

‘Around.’

‘Did they punish you?’

‘I’m OK.’

They sat in silence for a while in the soft yolky glow, neither quite sure what came next. Finally Laura touched a finger to Zach’s exposed wrist.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

Still he said nothing, his gaze fastened on her hand. But he didn’t pull away. His skin was warm; his pulse, a small creature quickening under her fingertip. Hesitantly Laura began to stroke its fluttering limbs, its tremulous muzzle.

‘Have you got long?’ he asked, his voice low, a bit hoarse.

‘Now?’

He nodded.

‘Training at four. But Janey-my coach-won’t tell my parents if I don’t pitch up. She’s already had one fight with my mum. *Interfering cow*, Janey called her.’ The encounter belonged in Laura’s archive of favourite memories. ‘To her face.’

He seemed to make up his mind about something. ‘Come on, eat up. You’re too thin,’ he said, pushing the bowl towards her.

‘Girls are never too thin.’

Glinting with amusement, his eyes flicked to her chest. He helped himself to a sip from her tea, then sloshed some when she lifted her jumper and T-shirt in one swift movement. She wasn’t wearing a bra.

‘So?’ she asked. ‘Not big enough for you?’

He looked away. Looked back again. Then down at the teacup.

‘Fix your clothes,’ he said curtly. ‘There’s something I want to show you.’

A single dim bulb illuminated the stairs to the basement. Zach descended ahead of her, his footsteps echoing in the close air. Laura sniffed. Cigarettes, coffee, maybe something fried. Not just storage, then.

About halfway down, Zach stopped. He turned and looked up at her, licked his lips.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Let’s go back upstairs.’

She waited while he struggled with whatever was disquieting him. She could hear his breathing. Her own chest began to tighten, an underwater signal to come up for air, and she must have made a sound, for he took a step backwards, miscalculated, clutched at the handrail to avoid falling.

‘Zach-‘

‘Don’t hurt me, Laura. Please.’

His hair poured into her hands like rich black cream.

*

There were three of them in a smoke-filled storeroom. Seated on a wooden crate, the younger lad was drinking from a mug of coffee while clutching some papers-black-and-white photoprints, it looked like. Spread on a low table was a large map of the city. The second lad, at a guess a few years older than Zach, glanced up from highlighting something near the Fulgur campus with a fluorescent marker, a high-end palmer in his hand. He frowned, but with far less hostility than the girl, who stubbed out her cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and snarled, ‘What the fuck is she doing here?’ She slammed her laptop shut, then rose and positioned herself close to Zach, touching him repeatedly, ostentatiously-on his hand, his shoulder, the crook of his elbow. Zach made an effort to be polite, but finally jerked back and muttered something to her under his breath when she went too far and fingered a strand of his hair. Afterwards she kept her distance, but her eyes never left Laura.

Eyes whose unsettling nature neither long black lashes nor heavy makeup could disguise. Simus, all three of them. Laura tried to act as though they were about to break out the crisps and cokes, rad up a game, but she was sure that Zach was aware of her nervousness-and perhaps the older bloke, who said, not unkindly, ‘Welcome to our humble paddock.’ Then he jabbed the text marker in the girl’s direction. ‘Cut it, Jess. Let’s hear what Zach’s got to say.’ But the younger lad muttered ‘It had better be good’ and dropped the photos facedown onto the map, fanning them out to cover most of its surface.

Zach took his time, first fetching coffee from the flask, then offering Laura a doughnut from a carton. She accepted one, it could be useful to hide behind a full mouth. While he introduced everyone, she noted the shelves of catering tins and supplies, the packing crates, the butcher's hooks, the bulky space heater which explained the almost stifling warmth. With its herringbone-bricked floor and triple-arched ceiling, the storeroom would have made an intimate jazz club, and even now, the odd pieces of furniture and broken tools wouldn't have detracted from its cosiness if it hadn't been for the undercurrents in the room, the feeling that she was going to need her most powerful stroke.

'Laura's the one who found the boy,' Zach said. 'She wants to help.'

Why the hell didn't he warn me? Laura thought. And ignored the tart response Olivia would have made. Though fresh, the doughnut was too sugary, Laura could hardly choke down the first bite.

'How?' Miles asked, his voice loud, just short of belligerent. 'She's a damned monkey.'

Zach moved to stand close to Laura, their shoulders brushing.

'Her dad's a top neuro at Fulgur.'

'You're mad!' Jessica said.

'I trust her,' Zach said.

'Yeah, right,' sneered Jessica, but was prevented from further eloquence by a muffled thump behind the shelf-lined wall. The room went still. Which enabled Laura to hear the groaning that followed, faint but unmistakable.

'I'll see to it,' Nigel said, getting to his feet.

'That's my job,' Zach said. 'She'll have to know.'

The argument was brief, and entirely silent. Laura dropped the doughnut onto a dirty plate and followed Zach into the passage. Unlocking the door to the adjoining room, he entered before her and flipped on an overhead light.

'Zach, *no*.'

‘He deserves much worse.’

Slowly the man dropped his arm, which he’d used to shield his eyes from the sudden glare. He was lashed to a metal bedstead by a nylon rope around his waist, its ends fused, but otherwise he could move about freely-if that was the right word, Laura thought grimly, in the metre or so of space remaining. It looked as if he couldn’t reach the light switch. There was a covered enamel bucket, from the stench obviously serving as a toilet, and even a roll of loo paper. Bottles of water, food on a tray. Warm clean clothes.

‘Auger’s cunt,’ the man said, and spat at his feet. Perhaps he didn’t dare to aim better. Or knew he wouldn’t have the strength to do the job properly.

Expression grim, Zach moved in, and Laura expected him to strike the man. Instead, Zach peeled a long strip from the loo roll, wiped away the gob of spit, and dropped the twice-folded paper into the bucket, his movements as precise as ever. And then she thought he must be trying to impress her, because he crouched in front of the prisoner with the words, ‘Go on, spit in my face. That’s what you really want to do.’

Their eyes locked, the man’s bleary with spite and fear and solitary confinement; Zach’s, unblinking as only his kind’s could be. The man worked his lips, tethered now by more than fibre.

Laura’s mouth filled with spit, and she swallowed hard, afraid of throwing up. ‘Sod this,’ she muttered, and left Zach to his games.

Zach found her seated on the bottom step, head on her knees. When he squatted to address her, tucking his hands under his arms, she looked up and gave a humourless laugh. ‘I suppose you’ll challenge me to spit in your face now, too.’

The storeroom door opened, and Nigel peered out at them. ‘Everything under control?’

Zach waved him back, and Laura noticed that his hand was trembling. She took it before he could thrust it out of sight again.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t have said that.’

‘I’d like to kill him. Slowly. *Very* slowly.’

‘The boy?’

‘Yeah. And god knows how many others.’

She brought his palm up to her cheek, careful not to kiss it. He closed his eyes for a moment.

‘What are you going to do with him?’ Laura asked.

‘What would you have me do?’

‘The police-‘

Zach made an exasperated sound in his throat, snatching his hand away. He rose and paced to the end of the passage, returned, moved off again. Once he stopped at the door to their headquarters, but after glancing back at her, let go of the handle. He strode towards her again, bearing down fast, fast and hard, and her breath caught in her throat. I’ll fight him, she thought. I *want* to fight him.

It took him several passes before he’d worked off enough of his agitation to stand before her, and even so, the walls could hardly contain his words. They splattered against her skin-angry, crimson.

‘Do you have any idea what it’s like?’ he cried.

‘The police?’

‘Hatred.’

Laura rose to her feet. ‘Let him go, Zach.’ He gesticulated in frustration, but she avowed as much for herself as for him, ‘You’re no hater.’

‘If I’m not, then I ought to be! You people have given me enough lessons.’

Reaching into his pocket, he flung something at her feet. She stared at him, then down at the floor, then back at Zach.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

He scooped up the folded piece of paper and started to shove it back into his pocket, but she intercepted his movement.

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean for you to see it.’

But he didn’t stop her when she unfolded the sheet. A crude, ugly drawing with the usual threats. Slowly she refolded it.

‘It’s not hatred. It’s ignorance and-‘ she said.

‘Hatred,’ he said flatly. Wearily.

He watched her as she put the note into her own pocket.

‘Maybe you’d better go,’ he said. ‘Before ...’ His eyes slid towards the storeroom door.

‘No.’

‘Then I hope you’re prepared to be reviled.’ His voice shook. ‘To be despised every day, every single fucking endless day.’ Dropped to a whisper. ‘To look into someone’s eyes and *want* him to spit at you.’

One step, then her hands at his waist. His on her shoulders. The single quaver of the snap, the uneven chromatic slide of the zip. His skin warm under her fingers. A resonant crescendo. Tentative fingerings, needing practice.

But the score was still too difficult.

‘No!’ he exclaimed, taking her wrists.

She felt the fiery flush of shame and tried to turn away, but he wouldn’t let her go. Drew her close again, resting his cool forehead against hers. She listened to the singing of his blood, the drumming of his heart as, gradually, he brought his breath back to a settled tempo.

‘Not here,’ he murmured. ‘Not like this.’

Chapter 16

One of the dogs is lame.

‘We’ll have to go back,’ Lev says. ‘That, or shoot her.’

‘Can’t we splint it?’ Zach asks.

‘She’ll never keep up.’

‘Or camp here till it heals?’

Lev wipes his goggles with a gloved hand, then with a dissatisfied frown lifts them to gaze out over the pack ice. They’ve taken the shortest route from a spit of embayed ice towards the opposite shore, after discussing the delay that travelling along the coast would entail. A stiff wind is blowing, numbing their faces through the thermal masks, and it has already begun to snow-thin stinging flakes which catch on Zach’s lips and eyelids like barbed crystal whenever he slips off his goggles. Most of his kind struggle with the cold. To outrun the weather had been one of those *good ideas* which are so compelling at the time. But Zach is coming to appreciate that no one and nothing defeats the ice.

‘Can’t you do something?’ Zach asks.

‘Like what?’

Zach turns so that his back takes the brunt of the wind. His breath fogs in front of him, though not for long. It too seems to freeze into brittle particles, some of which find their way into his lungs.

‘Like whatever it is you do.’

Lev laughs. ‘A tropical paradise? I’m flattered, but geo-engineering is best left to the experts, and world-building to your novelists. You overestimate my capabilities.’

‘And you, my patience.’

‘Fine. Have a temper tantrum, if you think it’ll help.’

Zach would like to stalk off, but he'd probably land on his arse-and where would he go? Strange, in the real world where it might matter, he can't bother to be accommodating, and here in electronic lalaland, he's learning circumspection. He rubs a hand across his chest.

'Still hurts?' Lev asks sympathetically.

'Some. It doesn't help to breath crushed glass.'

Lev nods. 'OK, we'll get you out of the cold soon.'

'How? It's hours back to basecamp.'

Lev turns and peers again into the distance, but visibility is poor in the absence of moonlight.

'We need to get off the pack ice,' he says. 'We're courting trouble with the wind picking up like this.'

It doesn't feel as though they're moving, but Zach remembers from his reading that displacement is mostly imperceptible on larger floes. Sea ice shifts erratically before the wind, often breaking loose from the pack and leaving any inadvertent hitcher stranded. A polar bear or walrus could swim, but neither he nor the dogs would last more than a few minutes in such water. As to Lev ... anybody's guess.

Yet Lev is alarmed, and making no attempt to conceal it. He pushes back his hood, pulls off his mask, and tilts his head to listen intently. Despite layers of insulation and the obstinate wind, Zach too can hear the constant creak and groan and fretful grumble of the ice as it adjusts and readjusts itself like a bedridden patient beset by sores.

'Wait here,' Lev says. 'I'll be right back.'

He dons his mask and strides off as if heading for the next bus stop. From his own attempts to walk boldly, Zach can tell that Lev has a very long acquaintanceship with snow-a bit like a sailor's sea legs. Within a few seconds Lev has disappeared, leaving Zach alone with the dogs.

Still in harness, the injured husky has curled up on the ice, while her team-mates

is nosing about as if sensing Zach's restlessness. To unhitch them means risking a chase, for even when tired, huskies will run at will ... and run ... and run. The snow is gradually thickening into big fluffy flakes which melt on the dogs' coats. Zach puts out his tongue and catches one, remembering. Laura liked to say they taste like fresh-cut lemons. But this one has no flavour; perhaps his tongue is numb.

He crouches by the lame animal, whose eyes are a brilliant gold-flecked green. Has any of the programmers ever seen a husky? Mishaal can be damned snarky-sly almost-something's going on there, he's made more than a couple of cracks about Fabio's 'fuck me' eyes. You don't like to think about how close you yourself came ... Can Lev sense physical stuff, that first sweet quickening? Incredible, that Max has remained so ... so innocent. Yeah, fuckme eyes, green to fuck all greens.

Except that memory intensifies as it fades. The things we imagine become a vivid presence, daring to quicken where there is no flesh, to sicken where no virus. Zhou dreamt of a quantum consciousness-'a mind able to speak the language of God,' he'd said to appease the religionists. Laura's grandfather would condemn Fulgur from his pulpit-stone his own son-in-law-at the slightest hint of what they're up to, yet Zach can't even heal a ligament tear in the primitive neuroelectronic circuitry of the Fulgrid. 'I daydream about a better interface,' Andy once revealed in frustration. 'What Randall's geniuses know about cyberspace will someday be the equivalent of creationism.' Zach shivers and glances over his shoulder, strokes the dog's head, digs his fingers into her pelt. This place has become so alien that he's glad of any contact with a living creature-a familiar species. At home he sees as few people as possible, wanting only to be left alone. Here you find out triptime about self-delusions. The ice lies like a cold-blooded mirror beneath the skin of snow.

As the minutes pass, Zach becomes perturbed, then agitated almost to the point of monkeydo panic. What if Lev has gone off for reasons of his own? Or if something has happened to him? No one is invulnerable, he'd learned that soon enough with Laura.

He springs up and stares blindly into the rising snowstorm. 'Lev,' he hears himself shouting. 'Lev!'

'You're not going to find her that way.'

Zach whirls, nearly losing his balance. Lev is directly behind him.

‘What?’ Zach asks stupidly.

‘You were calling for Laura.’

Zach shakes his head. ‘No, I was ...’ His voice trails off. What difference would it make?

‘Stay with the dogs. Talk to them. I don’t want to unnerve them.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘The ice is breaking up ahead. We’re going to have to abandon Leila.’

Working swiftly now, Lev attaches a line to the beautiful husky, separates her from her companions, and extracts what can only be some sort of handgun from a pack on the dogsledge. Before Zach has a chance to protest, Lev gestures beyond their rapidly shrinking field of view.

‘There’s a lead ahead. Open water. I prefer not to leave her body exposed.’

Zach’s surprise at such sentimentality is short-lived.

‘Somebody’s stalking us,’ Lev explains.

‘Who?’

But Lev has already been swallowed up by the snow.

Chapter 17

Stella had been the only person allowed to trim Zach's hair till Laura offered to take over the task. This once, however, Stella insisted on plunking him down on a kitchen chair in her back room and draping a towel round his shoulders. 'You tell that girl of yours to keep it trimmed real good. Fact is, I'm going to take off a couple of extra inches, and I want you to think about a proper short cut like the other lads.'

He laughed. 'A skin job, you mean?'

'Fancy I nick some? You hold still now. And no more of your larking, I'm dead serious. It's high time you stopped this hair nonsense. You're a *man*, a man with responsibilities, not some sort of witchdoctor whose powers sprout from his scalp. Next thing you know, you'll start thinking you can shatter rocks with your baby blues or raise the dead or fly. Like one of them net characters, you know the ones I mean, fake as a tart's orgasm, what do you call them?'

'Avatars?'

'Yeah, avatars.'

'No worry. My eyes aren't blue.'

She snorted, then snipped away in silence till her mobile trilled from the shopfront. While she was gone, Zach got up to fetch a broom and began sweeping the hair together, only to pause mid-pass at the sight of the manky stray she'd recently adopted-or more accurately, who had adopted her-crouching under the radiator with something that was still moving, still alive. 'What have you got there, Ra?' He dropped to a knee, and the cat fled, abandoning his meal. It was left to Zach to manoeuvre the twitching, mangled, near-dead thing out with his broom. He sat back on his heels, regarding the creature half in disgust, half in fascination. What in god's name was it? At first glance it appeared to be a bird, a largish crow maybe, but Zach wasn't ornithologist enough to classify it on the basis of its body alone. For its head-that head! Tiny simian features, hairless and earless, mouth working as if mewling soundlessly, eyes already dulling like a stone when the tide retreats.

A shadow fell over him. From behind Stella reached out, snatched the thing up, and with one quick twist wrung its neck.

‘An abomination,’ she said.

For a while neither spoke. Then Zach asked, ‘Where the hell did that come from?’

‘You need to ask? And if we don’t put a stop to it, there’ll be more and more of them.’ She crossed herself, something he’d never known her to do, then wrapped the corpse in several sheets of newspaper, dropped it into a lidded bucket, and washed her hands at the basin. ‘I’ll burn it out back later on.’

‘It’s going to take a lot more than graffiti and a couple of websites to stop the Fulgur juggernaut.’

‘Exactly.’

*

The first bomb detonated in a call box near the main gate to the Fulgur campus—harmlessly—, TV news reports claimed, but word sped round the internet about the black tail and single white-booted cat’s paw, now tinged pink, that needed to be scraped from the buckled pavement. The second bomb blew up an unoccupied cherry-red Lamborghini in the executive carpark, which at school was deemed to have served its owner right, since nobody over the age of thirty had any business driving such a sexy car, particularly a smug-arse Fulgur division head who would have done better to spend his extra cash on anti-dandruff shampoo, a reliable brand of deodorant, and lifetime membership in a fitness club.

The third bomb killed three people, one of them a five-month old baby.

Olivia caught up with Laura after Mandarin. ‘I’ve got to talk to you.’

‘What’s the sudden push?’ Laura asked. ‘There are only two more lessons till lunch.’

Olivia moved closer to avoid the kids milling around them in the corridor. ‘The canteen’s no place for important stuff-private stuff. What are you doing after

school?’

‘Training.’

‘Can’t you skip it? This is *urgent*.’

‘I don’t know ...’ Janey had been pretty understanding lately, but Laura wondered just how far she dared test her coach’s patience. Though her times hadn’t suffered yet, they hadn’t made much improvement, either. With the regional trials looming, there could be some serious rack if she missed any more sessions. ‘Best not. Janey’s going to be very-‘

‘After school by the wall. It’s about that bloody Zach.’ When Laura tightened her lips into a fair imitation of her mother’s, Olivia hissed at her, ‘Just be there,’ then hurried away without a backward glance as the bell rang.

Despite the swipe cards, most everyone knew how to manipulate the system to skive off lessons. Zach had started pitching up at school again, though he and Laura took good care never to meet alone, never to speak, never even to exchange glances in public. But Laura was always aware of his presence, warm as a gossamer shawl round her shoulders. He wasn’t there today, which in itself wouldn’t have worried her, not yet, if it hadn’t been for Olivia. Before lunch Laura ducked out of the building and headed for Zach’s flat. She had a key, and she’d used the cellar entrance before.

Zach wasn’t in. Laura hadn’t really expected him to be, but it was the first place to look. Usually tidy, almost compulsively so, he’d left three red socks on the floor next to his bed, one of them draped over her favourite chocolate bar. She smiled to herself, he was always trying to get her to eat.

One sock, get out fast; two, go to Stella’s; three, wait for me. Kicking off her trainers, she peeled back the wrapper and took a bite of chocolate. Imagined them sharing the bar. Imagined ... no, they weren’t going there. Not till-but here’s where she always back-pedalled. Not till what? She didn’t want to spend her life with someone like Owen, did she? He could be sweet, but ... he could be so ... Christ_,_ then what was she doing with him?

Annoyed at herself now, she tossed the chocolate bar down on the bedside cabinet, and picking up the remote, switched on the TV. She was pulling her fleece jumper over her head-the neck was too tight, the stupid thing always

caught on her ears-when her ears caught the gist of the broadcast. Ripping the jumper free to the sound of a seam giving way, she stared at the screen. At the chaotic scene unfolding in the iconic glass-domed foyer at Fulgur. Then she sank to the floor, her hands gripping her forearms.

... from the blast which rocked one of the neurocognitive research laboratories just before noon ... all buildings on the campus evacuated as a precaution ... CEO Randall shortly to issue a statement ... terrorist attack ... no one yet claiming responsibility ... at least three people killed ... more than a dozen casualties ... critically injured ... no confirmation of exact death toll ... Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Livingstone ... released as soon as possible ...

And more, endlessly. Laura listened for a few minutes longer, but she had begun to shiver. Why didn't the idiot heat his flat? She switched off the TV, then switched it back on again. Kicking aside her discarded jumper, she opened Zach's wardrobe and hauled out one of his cashmere polo necks, the black one. Though he was scrupulous about keeping his gear clean, she held it up to her face and inhaled. Better than chocolate, she thought, her eyes straying to the screen.

A cognoscens research assistant may be one of the victims, a Fulgur spokeswoman admits. Suicide bombing cannot be ruled out at this time.

'Are you going to wear it or eat it?'

Laura spun round at the sound of Zach's amused voice. Arms crossed, he was leaning against the doorjamb.

'What?' she said.

'My jumper.'

'Your jumper?' She snatched a breath. 'That's all you can think about? A bloody jumper?' Her voice was beginning to rise. 'Who cares about a stinking lot of goat hair when I just thought when they just said when you-' How *dare* he grin at her like that! 'What the fuck do you mean by scaring me to to to-' she stopped, her tongue stuttering like an angry woodpecker. 'Bastard,' she added, when he plucked his jumper from her hands and slipped it over her head as if she were three years old. Once she'd managed to thrust her arms through the sleeves,

she fingered the damp spot on the collar-had she really been *sucking* it?

His body felt so good that, unaccountably, she was even more enraged by his embrace.

‘Take your bloody paws off me!’ she yelled.

Zach’s hands dropped to his sides. Slowly he backed away, his face shutting down.

Four fatalities are now confirmed. Amid widespread speculation about the perpetrators, the authorities are refusing to comment.

They both turned towards the TV.

‘Did you kill them?’ she whispered.

In the concussed silence after Zach switched off the TV, the question burgeoned to engulf them both. Momentary blindness can have many causes, including the detonation of a stun grenade; an intense flash of light even at the corner of your vision. Or, if you listened to visitation-mad religionists like Laura’s grandfather, the brush of wingtips.

Zach was the first to recover. ‘You know the answer to that.’

‘Bastard,’ she said. ‘Murdering auger bastards.’ Then shuddered as Zach lunged towards her the way her mother would have done. He stopped just short of a blow, however.

‘Go on,’ she said, ‘hit me. Hurt me. It’s what you want to do.’

‘No, it’s what *you* want me to do.’

Laura was seated in the bus before she realised that she’d left both her jacket and her backpack in Zach’s flat. Despite his beautiful warm jumper, she was shivering.

*

In the lobby of the aquatics centre Owen handed Laura his anorak. ‘Here, put it

on. You'll catch pneumonia without a jacket. It feels like snow.' He looked closer at Zach's jumper. 'Very posh.'

'My dad's. Last year's Christmas gift from my aunt.'

'I'm surprised he lets you wear it. Looks like real cashmere-the expensive kind.'

'It is. But he hates polo necks, won't touch them, and it's too big for Max.' She rubbed her fingers over the soft wool. 'I like it.'

They turned at the sound of footsteps.

'Laura, I'm glad I've caught you.' Janey smiled at Owen. 'I won't be a minute.'

Always well bred, Owen murmured the right words and went to examine the notices on the pinboard.

'Look, Janey, I'm sorry I've been missing so much training.'

'True, I haven't been too happy about your progress lately.' She held up a hand as Laura started to explain. 'I see what's been keeping you busy.' A flash of those dazzling white teeth as she glanced towards Owen. 'Nice lad.'

Laura never knew what to say when adults made such remarks, which happened with dreary inevitability where Owen was concerned. At least she'd stopped blushing. Tucking her hands inside Owen's anorak, she began counting the cornrows along Janey's scalp.

'Anyway, if you continue to swim like you did today,' Janey said, 'I'll have nothing to complain about. You were *vicious* in the water. Like a blood-crazed shark. Nobody could get near you.'

'Thanks.' Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.

'But that's not what I want to talk to you about.'

Laura lost count. 'It isn't?'

Janey glanced once more towards Owen, then placed a hand on Laura's shoulder and steered her through the inner glass doors towards the showcase where the

team's plaques and trophies were displayed. The doors slid shut automatically, sealing Laura and Janey off from curious ears.

'What's wrong?' Laura asked.

Janey pointed ostentatiously towards one of the plaques.

'I had a disturbing visit yesterday,' she said.

Laura pretended to study the list of names engraved on the metal while she waited for Janey to explain.

'Are you in any serious trouble?' Janey asked.

'Christ, don't tell me my mum's been in to see you again! She's always complaining about something.'

'Not your mum. Serious as in Internal Security serious.'

Her fingers clutching Zach's jumper, Laura stared at Janey.

'Police?' Laura finally asked.

'Not quite. A man and woman with all the right IDs and lots of questions about your attendance and friends and attitude. Especially friends. I covered for you this time, but there are too many kids who know you've been skipping out regularly.'

'Bugger.'

'Yeah, it's not good. Is there anything you need to talk about?'

Laura shook her head.

'Laura, I understand that things can be difficult with parents. Believe me, mine were no role models.' Janey rolled her eyes expressively. 'But you don't want the Insecs on your number. You swim like a shark, but they *smile* like one.'

'I bet it's that stupid motorbike accident.'

'What accident?'

‘One of the simu kids from school gave me a lift, and we skidded, that’s all. I ended up getting bitten by a snake at the roadside. Bad allergic reaction, ambulance, hospital. A real drama.’

‘I see.’

‘But thanks for fending off the sharks,’ Laura said. ‘I’ll get my dad to sort it out.’

Janey gave her the look she usually reserved for swimmers who protested that they couldn’t possibly manage another ten laps (and who soon found out they’d survive twenty with Janey’s teeth flashing behind them).

‘OK. Your call,’ Janey said. But as the inner doors slid back, she added, ‘If you change your mind, you know where to find me.’

*

There’s something about the first snowfall which, like the icing sugar it can resemble, always lures the locals from their warm nests, even for a while sweetening their dispositions. The neighbourhood misanthrope, a nasty piece of goods who never failed to ring up about ‘insufferably loud music’ at precisely one minute past nine, summer or winter, stopped his shovelling to mutter a greeting as Laura and Owen walked past. Because of its seclusion, Laura’s mates preferred Pringle Hill for sledging after dark. Tonight, whenever they huddled for a drink-its northern slope was very exposed-the poisonous talk would inevitably start up again: the terrs, the bloody terrs. There’d be lots to drink. Lots of talk.

Turn back now, and Laura would only have to face Olivia tomorrow. Saturdays everyone favours a good lie-in, but when racked-and probably hungover-Livs was perfectly capable of storming over at nine, tongue whetted; earlier. In school plays she was often given the most flamboyant roles, like Blanche Du Bois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* till the head put a stop to the production. Still, she was far too smart not to think of the consequences of a public row, and too good a friend: gossip, like snowflakes, settles everywhere. And an icy wind cools tempers.

Laura and Owen detoured to collect Max together with Mike and George from a hill near the golf course where all the younger kids congregated, as well as some parents with tiny offspring suited up like astronauts and lurching fatly from one

spill to the next. They reminded Laura of a set of cartoonish weebles Max used to have, pesky little ovoid creatures that would wobble and pitch but always pop right back up again. Max was staying the night with George, with whom he'd become matey since the night of the recital. Owen's mother insisted on plying everyone with biscuits and hot chocolate, and afterwards Laura and Owen went upstairs to check out some new music he'd downloaded. Owen didn't understand why Laura was so impressed with his parents. 'They're just too damned busy to bother much about what their kids get up to.' He'd already shed his jeans. 'Not that I'm complaining.'

Come to think of it, when Owen bobbed up and down like that, *he* reminded her of one of those weebles. Hadn't Max taken a hammer to the blandest one, a pearly pink hippo-like ballerina, to see what made it work? 'I like the trolls best,' he'd said. 'They're scary.'

It had begun snowing again by the time Laura and Owen reached Pringle Hill. Above her cupped cigarette Olivia gave her a look which, if poured into a car radiator, would have required antifreeze. Laura usually didn't drink much—training always made a good excuse, since Janey would undoubtedly maul any of her swimmers caught with alcohol—but by now Laura was cold and tired and just a bit edgy. She kept turning towards the stand of fir trees on the spine of the hill, visible only as a memory. Under the cloak of darkness the swirling snow hurled black-winged phantoms through the corners of her vision, though none with a sardonic smile and spice-filled laugh. After two downhill runs with Owen, she found herself sharing a flask of hot whisky punch, which burned straight through the single biscuit she'd nibbled in Owen's kitchen. Cheeks bright red and eyes glittering, Olivia spoke to her at last.

'Let the lads have a run on their own.' Olivia's message couldn't be plainer: you'd best listen to me if you value our friendship.

They stamped their feet to keep warm, the snow too thick and soft and fresh to squeak. Olivia jammed her torch upright into a drift and offered Laura another round from the flask, then asked, 'Lost your mobie?'

'Left it home.'

'This morning too?'

'No.' Laura took a swig of punch. 'Look, I don't want to lie to you. The truth is,

I was ashamed to admit what I had to do after lunch.'

'Which was?'

'My mum's making me see this bloody therapist. Big Family Secret. Daughter who's going off the rails.'

'Sounds like something she'd do.'

'Yeah, well.'

'You could have told me instead of leaving me to wait in the cold.'

'Livs, I'm sorry, I really am.'

'Once upon a time we were friends who told each other everything.'

Were we really? Laura asked herself. Or was it only a fairytale we needed to believe? Aloud she said, 'I despise the bloke. A horrible little man with yellow pointy teeth and a goatee. Can you believe it? A real shrink's goatee.'

'Keep away from little men, I always say. They never think they measure up.' Olivia helped herself to more punch, then giggled. 'I hear Zach's got a good long one.'

Any guilt that Laura was feeling vanished. 'Don't be daft. I wouldn't go near him for a starring role in Kor's next film. Especially after everything that's happened.' She wondered how long the others would be. The snow was falling more heavily now, sledging would soon be impossible. She wanted to get out of the cold, she wanted her bed, she wanted ...

'Why do you keep looking behind us?' Olivia asked. 'Is something out there?'

'Not bloody likely, at midnight in a snowstorm. I need to pee.'

They could hear Damien and Tim exchanging friendly insults in the distance, muffled by the snow. They must still be at the bottom of the hill. Having a snowball fight, from the sound of it. Olivia held out the flask, but Laura shook her head. Her stomach was beginning to slosh unpleasantly, and when she bent to scoop up a handful of snow to suck on, she lost her balance and pitched onto

one knee. Olivia merely laughed, blast her, and upended the flask.

‘What was it you wanted to talk about?’ Laura asked, brushing off her ski trousers. ‘The guys are going to come looking for us before long.’

‘It’s about Max.’ Olivia suddenly sounded sober.

‘My brother?’

‘Know another Max?’

‘I thought you said it was about Zach.’

‘I did, and it is.’

Laura imagined a nice fat snowball-roughly the size of a football-landing on Olivia’s over-endowed chest, and Olivia landing arsefirst on the ground. When they started eavesdropping on thoughts, Laura would ask for a lobotomy. Or something.

‘Max has been going off with Zach on his motorbike,’ Olivia said.

‘*What?*’

‘You heard me. A couple of times this week.’

‘Rubbish. Somebody’s spreading tales.’

‘Nobody’s spreading anything, at least not yet. But they will be, if you don’t put a stop to it.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Laura said flatly.

Olivia gave her a withering look. ‘Have it your own way. I tried.’ She pulled off her cap, shook it free of snow, and jammed it back on her head again. Then she picked up her torch and set off, rather unsteadily, towards the level patch of trampled snow where they’d left the backpacks on a red plastic snow disc.

‘Wait!’ Laura stumbled after Olivia, clutched her arm. ‘How did you find out?’

‘You know that stupid dog-walking job I’ve got after school?’

‘The old Newfoundlander who can hardly move any more? I thought you were going to quit.’

‘Yeah, well they begged me to stay on.’ Olivia mimed crossing her palm with silver. ‘Upped my maos. This week she’s been worse than usual, they really ought to put her down. I can only manage to drag her through the churchyard, where she usually collapses against one of the gravestones.’

‘And?’

‘And that’s where they meet. There’s a lot of shrubs and trees, and it’s obvious they don’t want to be seen.’

‘You’re sure it’s Max? Absolutely sure?’

‘For fucksake, I’ve known your brother since he was in nappies. Of course it’s him.’

‘What are they up to?’

‘Good question. Ask Max.’ Olivia laughed, but her eyes flared code orange. ‘Or Zach. Maybe he’s training the next generation of terrs.’

The wind flung a fistful of snow into Laura’s face, momentarily blinding her. She ducked her head and hugged herself, her mobile a small hard lump in the zipped pocket of her anorak.

‘This cold is killing me,’ Laura said. ‘I’ve really got to pee.’

‘Can’t you wait? You’re going to freeze your arse.’

‘Can’t. I’ll wet my pants.’

‘Frozen arse or frozen pants. OK, let’s walk up towards the trees a bit.’

‘Wait here and keep a lookout. You know what Tim’s like.’

‘Want the torch? You might get lost.’

‘On Pringle Hill?’

Laura fought her way uphill against the wind. Within a few steps first Olivia and the backpacks, then the glow from the torch vanished like socks, one of a pair always missing through decidedly supernatural means. Abruptly Laura stopped, uneasy. Which of them would be lost, her or Olivia? The walls of Laura's hideout thrashed around her, and for a moment she was tempted to part the snowy white sheets and run from under the dining room table to her mum. Who even back then would have scoffed at Laura's fears.

After lurching up against a clump of wild holly, Laura hunched her back against the gusting snow, removed her mobile from her pocket, and peeled off a glove. She knew she shouldn't be doing this, their calls were certainly being monitored. But she could no more stop herself than drown in the club pool.

Pls cn i cu l8r? she texted.

Within a few seconds she had Zach's reply: *no*.

She tried again with *pls urgent*, but there was no further message. Their intermittent voices a beacon, she plunged back downhill to the others, who by now were downing a bottle of absinthe that Damien had nicked from his parents.

Chapter 18

While the dogs feed in the open, Zach and Lev set about unpacking their gear and securing the sledge. Lev cuts some blocks of snow to melt for water, and though not the usual Arctic practice, the huskies are allowed to join them inside the tent. After thwacking the snow from their boots and outer clothing, Lev installs a shivering Zach inside a down sleeping bag on top of several insulating pads, then hangs their clothing to dry from a line strung for that purpose. The temperature rises rapidly once Lev powers up the cunning little device on which their supper is now simmering, a stove which also provides heat and light and appears to work on a type of fuel cell. The tent is snug if a touch overcrowded; the dogs radiate considerable warmth of their own, having consumed a good meal of frozen caribou and fish. With one husky fewer, there are more than enough supplies, including two large sacks of dry nuggets, to last till they reach their destination, a hunters' settlement. Zach has been keen to curtail their rest since learning that a 'white seal' has recently been sighted there—a visitor, sacred in some way, and very beautiful—a piece of information which Lev hadn't scrupled to conceal earlier, and all he claims to know.

'I thought you're worried about being followed,' Zach says.

'We're well hidden here.'

They've pitched camp in the lee of a pressure ridge, a wind-sheltered site which a she-bear herself might have chosen as a maternity den. The snow is still falling heavily, and already their tracks have been obscured. Whereas the glow from their stove is sure to be visible at close range, it's unlikely that anyone will happen their way in near-blizzard conditions. There's no coaxing further information about unwanted visitors from Lev; no coercing, no tricking.

'Here,' Lev says, passing Zach a mug of a thick hot soup which smells similar to fresh-ground almonds. And though Zach doesn't recognise its ingredients, it tastes wonderful, with a gingery afterbite. He finishes it quickly, hungrily, wrapped in his sleeping bag.

'What is it?' Zach asks, holding out his mug for a refill.

'Quarsh. A particularly nutritious grain.'

They drink in silence, companionably enough, while the dogs shift and snuffle, the stove hisses, the wind mutters. While Zach mulls Lev's words.

'Where's it from?' Zach eventually asks.

'Quarsh?' At Zach's nod, Lev says, 'It's native to a high-mass, slightly warmer world than yours.'

'Don't you reckon it's time you finally explain who you are? Or is there some magic number of times I've got to ask?'

Perhaps their isolation-their forced intimacy-induces Lev to answer. Or perhaps he too is simply lonely and needs to speak.

'A facilitator of sorts, I suppose you'd call me.'

Zach laughs. '*I* wouldn't, I hate their psychospeak.'

'Nothing to do with Fulgur, and it does fit, but if you prefer, think of me as a gatekeeper.'

'To where?'

'You wouldn't believe me-not yet.'

'I'm starting to think I'd believe anything of you.'

'Is that a vote of confidence or condemnation?'

Zach shifts inside his sleeping bag, then unzips it partway. The tent is so warm that he's beginning to sweat.

'Why don't you just tell me?' Zach asks, though not belligerently. At this rate he'd soon qualify for the diplomatic corps, he thinks wryly. Not that they accept any of his kind.

'*Your kind* isn't all that different from those you despise.'

Zach shoots him a startled look. '*You can* read my thoughts.'

'Only a few of the stray surface ones. And only because you're a cognoscens.'

The sapiens neural network is too rudimentary.'

'Then don't lump us together with the fucking croakers.'

Lev leans forward and throws a handful of herbs into the boiling kettle, then lowers the power source on the stove. In the dim light his face is shadowed, and weary. Silently he completes a few housekeeping tasks, then without embarrassment hands Zach a squat wide-mouthed plastic jar with a screw-top, not much smaller than the canteen size used for pickles or ketchup. 'To relieve yourself.' Only one of the dogs pricks its ears as he pours two mugs of herbal tea. 'Drink it hot, it'll help you to sleep. I want to get an early start.' He avails himself of a second jar, climbs into his own sleeping bag, and douses the light. 'Goodnight,' he says without much warmth.

'Look, can you blame me?' Zach asks. 'They treat us like crap. And remember what Chloe did to me.'

For a while Zach waits for a response, then gives up and drinks his tea, settles into a comfortable position, and is just drifting off to sleep when Lev's voice jerks him back. 'You don't understand about Chloe and Ethan.'

'What's to understand? Two twisted minds who deserve a life sentence, not rehabilitation.'

'Yeah, well, you've got your wish.'

'What are you talking about?'

Several dogs stir at his sharp tone. From the way Lev turns his head to regard them in the residual glimmer from the stove, murmuring reassurance, his eyesight must be at least as acute as Zach's own.

'Chloe and Ethan are prisoners here. They can't return, because there's nothing to return to.'

'Nonsense. It's only a temporary upload.'

'That's where you're wrong. Fulgur has been systematically destroying experimental subjects to test the viability of memory and personality in a virtual environment.'

Bella, who seems to have taken a liking to Zach, presses closer, lays a paw on his chest, and licks the side of his jaw. His skin prickles at the rough sensation.

Can it be true? Maybe all business moguls are megalomaniacs, but Randall's in a class of his own. Damn the lying, murdering bastard! With little reason to care about the fate of the offenders-of sapiens altogether-Zach doesn't fancy himself an assassin, even at a twofold remove. Though one tidy bullet to Randall's temple ... No wonder Fabio hates to be associated with Fulgur. Once again he's seen it coming: 'Whoever owns the Fulgrid, owns the future.' But he, Zach, is through with all that. Let someone else fight the good fight, let someone else take back what rightly belongs to the simus, let someone else break himself (and those he cares about) trying to break the Fulgur monopoly on the interface. Let someone else be the fucking hero.

'Immortality?' he finally asks.

'Consciousness is far too complex to be replicated like a gene. Chloe has already begun to deteriorate. Hence her actions.'

'But Chloe's only-actually, no matter what it feels like, every person, every sneeze or breath of wind, every last *snowflake* here is only a sequence of encoded binary bits. Why should they degenerate? Is it the programming? Or is there something wrong with the grid itself?'

'No, in fact the hardware is surprisingly sophisticated for your stage of development, but there are certain fundamental principles your physicists have yet to discover.' Lev hesitates, as though debating whether to continue. 'The relevant equations are at least a century in the future, though of course sudden breakthroughs are always possible. Nobody expected Fulgur to develop the neuro-interface quite so fast.'

'OK, suppose I accept, at least as a working hypothesis, that you're from some other world. It doesn't take a genius to figure out our science would seem primitive to you. *What* fundamental principles? You still haven't explained the problem with the simulations.'

'That *is* the problem. They're not simulations, not in the sense you mean, anyway.'

'You keep hinting that this place is real, but that's absurd!'

‘Is it? You know, it’s your arrogance most of all which betrays your close kinship with those you dismiss as *monkeys*.’

The wind buffets the shell of the tent, so that it seems to lift and float for a moment, while its mooring lines groan against the snowflukes anchoring it in place. Then it sinks again.

‘Ethan seems OK,’ Zach says.

‘For now. But degeneration is inevitable.’

Zach’s heart is beating so loudly that Lev must hear. ‘And Laura?’

In the dark Lev reaches out, fumbles for Zach’s shoulder, and squeezes gently. ‘Yeah. Laura too, I’m afraid.’

The smell of wet dog is very pungent. It brings tears to Zach’s eyes.

Chapter 19

Andy comes off the court with sweat soaking his torn vest. The corporate gyms have become a favourite venue, particularly with younger employees. None of the techs wears top-of-the-line gear, though they could easily afford it, and Andy's ancient sneakers stink.

'Way to go,' Fabio says, slapping Andy on the back. 'Last hoop was pure gold, we'll make a baller out of you yet.'

With intense green eyes, earring, and shoulder-length hair, Fabio doesn't look to fit the Fulgur culture. He grew up in Rio, his stubborn streak showing itself early on-no football for him. Claims his mum gave birth to him on a court between games. After a couple of lagers, he's been known to admit he could have played pro ball. But he's one of Fulgur's star execs-in-training, who bashes out directives even faster than a rim-buster.

Andy glances round to make sure they won't be overheard, then draws Fabio towards a bench at the far wall.

'Something's worrying me,' Andy says.

'If it's about that crazy bitch, tell her to-'

'She's no problem.' Again Andy checks the gym. The others have already headed for the showers. 'But if anyone asks, that's what we were talking about.'

Fabio's eyebrows shoot upwards like a sweet singin' jump shot. Though Andy is smiling, the expression in his eyes comes straight from the favelas. Fabio wipes his forehead with the flat of his hand, then settles himself on the bench. Andy sits down next to him, and they both slump forwards, propping their forearms on their knees and staring at the floor between wide-planted feet as if they're too wrecked to move.

'So talk about her,' Fabio says.

'They don't wire the gym, do they?'

‘Man, you’re one jumpy dude.’ But with a half-smile he lifts his left hand and directs a few words in Portuguese at his wrist, which beeps two tones in sequence, an octave apart. ‘That’ll run any interference we need.’

‘You’ve got a matilda?’

‘Yeah. Anyone listening in is going to get an earful of some great Brazilian choro. Ragtime meets samba.’ Fabio sees incredulity lingering on Andy’s face. ‘Where I grew up, you learn to watch your back and be prepared.’

A story no one would believe, Fabio least of all. Possession of such a device is so rare-and so suggestive-that to reveal its existence is a sign of real trust: Andy makes a fist and punches his friend lightly on a sculpted bicep.

‘The next bottle is on me,’ Andy says.

‘Damn right. Now talk.’

Like any good professional, Andy keeps his comments brief and succinct: the problem with Zach’s run yesterday, Litchfield’s reaction, Andy’s own fears. He ends by adding, ‘I’ve tried to abort the run on my own, but it hasn’t worked.’

‘I hope you’ve got a lot of gigs lined up. You’re looking to get fired. *And* blackballed.’

‘Fabio, I can’t just ignore it. By rights we ought to be bringing in some other top brains, Jakobi in Sweden, Gao, Hill maybe.’

‘That serious?’

‘I think so.’

No one who has ever worked with Andy doubts his instincts, which border on the uncanny-some say clairvoyant. Fabio’s current assignment is Human Resources, it’s his job to know. Andy will be believed if this gets round. He’s no Mateus, of course, but they share something of the same hot-headedness. Slade’s a fool not to manage his division better. And as for Litchfield ... just how much has he told his best tech?

‘It might not be a malfunction,’ Fabio says.

‘Look, I’d like to be wrong but-‘

‘Not wrong like that.’ Fabio removes his sweatband, tugs off his trademark black velvet scrunchie, and runs a hand through his hair several times-an uncharacteristic gesture-before securing it again. ‘Wrong about the grounds for a so-called malfunction. If you hung around more with your workmates instead of playing that infernal bass,’-he ducks-‘then you’d have heard some of the rumours.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as Litchfield would happily dispose of Zach.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘Word has it there was something between him and Litchfield’s daughter.’

Andy glances sidelong at his friend. That note of diffidence-it’s too studied. Too much like a feint; or bait. Good ballers are terrific at bluffing. And *he’s* heard rumours that Fabio was present at the old Rex that night; that he and Zach were more than just political allies.

‘What else is new?’ Andy says in his best mates-only voice. ‘You know how it is, the *simus* are exotic. You’ve only got to watch Zach walk into the canteen. Every girl, hell every *woman*, in the place secretly-or openly-eyes him. Some of the blokes too.’

Fabio is quiet for a moment. He twists the heavy gold armband which once belonged to Mateus back and forth on his left wrist before slipping a finger underneath to rub his skin.

‘Zach’s a friend, that’s all,’ he says. ‘The thing between Laura and him, it was complicated. And I reckon you and I *both* know it.’

Andy gestures towards Fabio’s matilda. ‘You’re positive that gadget is working?’

‘It’s working.’

‘OK,’ Andy says, making up his mind without recourse to his usual knuckle

cracking. ‘There’s something I haven’t told you. Litchfield’s running an unauthorised upload with Zach’s help.’

Fabio whistles softly. Andy would expect him to be astonished. ‘Man, you lot are some crazy dudes.’

Andy reaches over and taps the matilda with a forefinger. ‘You’re Insec, aren’t you?’

‘Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourselves.’

‘Litchfield’s worried, all right, but even if he could, he wouldn’t abort the run.’

‘You know as well as I do that if he’s endangering Zach, I’m not about to climb into my rainbow-striped hammock for a hundred-year wank. Isn’t that why you’ve come to me? The situation is dead precarious. Not only is Zach one of the best, he’s the most *visible*. No one can afford a martyr-not now, not with so much unrest and instability. Fulgur least of all.’

‘Litchfield’s dropped his nuts right into a steel nutcracker. He doesn’t want to jeopardise the run-or lose Zach-but he can’t get help without the whole thing blowing up in his face.’

‘Litchfield’s an idiot. A smart idiot, maybe even a brilliant idiot, but an idiot all the same. I’ll do what I can to cover for you, but if it’s a choice between-‘

‘Mateus died horribly, didn’t he? Your brother?’

‘What the fuck has that got to do with anything?’

‘Then you’ll understand how Litchfield feels about his daughter. And Zach about Laura.’ Andy doesn’t bother to spell it out, there’s nothing sluggish about Fabio’s grey matter. ‘*And* why I agreed to go along with the whole scheme.’

‘Jesus F. Christ. You’re saying-‘ A reputation has its uses. Fabio breaks off and gets to his feet, snatches up the rock and dribbles a couple of hard ones, stops at the sound of voices from the shower room, hooks the ball with a loud thud against the nearby wall. ‘Look, I’ve got to get back to my desk.’

Fabio’s cool legendary, Andy rises and watches the ball run out of steam before

asking, 'But you'll help me?'

A flourish. 'Just call me Esu.'

'Who?'

'The Brazilian trickster god.'

Andy snorts. 'Talk to Litchfield. He won't heed me, but you might be able to get him to come clean. And if you've got the clout I think you do'-Fabio holds up a hand, fingers outstretched as if to field a foul-'that I'm *certain* you do, get Randall to give Litchfield some sort of assurance. Nobody here understands the Fulgrid like Litchfield, and crucifying him will only make it much more difficult to rescue Zach.' His smile is wry. 'Besides, Litchfield's family has still got to eat.'

But Fabio has no intention of rescuing Zach, who is exactly where he needs to be.

*

Andy's band was in the middle of its second set when Olivia nudged Laura, sloshing her coke. 'Don't look now, but look who's just come in.' A little slurred, Olivia's voice betrayed that she and Damien had been adding liberally to their glasses from a concealed bottle. Thea's Jazz Club served no alcohol, one of the reasons it had been granted a rare lowered age-restrictions licence. The other, widely known, was Thea's family connections to the City Council. The small basement club was always crowded, even in the worst weather.

'About time he's shagging one of his own kind,' Damien said.

Melting snow glistened in Zach's hair. Laura watched him shake his head so that a shower of fine droplets spangled his date's face. The girl laughed, and Laura watched him wipe her cheeks and forehead with a gloved hand before helping her to remove her jacket. As he unbuttoned his own honey-coloured sheepskin, he turned towards the small stage and caught sight of Laura: she was sure of it, though he gave no sign.

'They make a gorgeous couple,' Olivia said rather slyly. 'Anyone know who she is?'

The girl was tall, with a creamy complexion and features that were modelled for a name like Jade or Candace or Giselle. A draught of icy air must have entered with them; Laura crossed her arms over her chest. Hair that colour ought to be outlawed.

‘No idea, but I wouldn’t mind a couple of hours alone with her,’ Derek said with a crude gesture. He was between girls. Again. ‘Man, you can see her nipples.’

Olivia giggled, then gave him a friendly shove. ‘It’s the cold, you dope.’

Tim looked belligerent. ‘I don’t care how big her tits are. Augers shouldn’t be allowed in here.’ He drained his glass, belched, and pushed back his chair. ‘I’m going to complain.’

‘Won’t get you far at Thea’s,’ Owen observed, his eyes on Laura. ‘The only free table’s off behind a pillar, anyway. You won’t even have to see them.’

But Owen hadn’t reckoned on Andy, who took the lead in more than just bass. Playing two-handed like a pianist by tapping the strings to the fret, he finished a daring contrapuntal attack, then eased off to let his drummer ride the sax into an edgy, almost discordant riff. Even before the final notes were crushed beneath enthusiastic applause, beneath stamping feet and calls for ‘more, more’, Andy had unslung his bass and bounded off the stage to greet Zach. In no time coats had been carried off by a waiter and a table near the front organised, uncomfortably close to where Laura and her mates were seated. After wiping a trace of lipstick from Zach’s mouth with a tissue from her bag, his girl settled into place, seemingly oblivious to the stares and whispers. A good act, Laura thought sourly. Deep in conversation with Andy, Zach passed within touching distance en route to the musicians. It was only when the saxophonist handed him a clarinet that she realised what was happening. Was he doing this deliberately to taunt her?

Laura erected a small tower of pretzels, then flicked them over and rebuilt them as Andy introduced Zach. For a moment she was apprehensive he’d brandish the klezmer song from the cave, but Zach was far too subtle for such displays. Instead he chose a classic Sam Cooke ballad, *A Change Is Gonna Come*.

From the first note Zach shed his usual cool diffidence, though he began softly, almost inaudibly, so that the audience was forced to strain for the melodic line. After a few bars he had them: when Olivia muttered ‘wow, he’s good’, heads

turned to glare at her. The keyboard, the bass, the drums-something was happening here that, just like a river, ran swift and hard and true, a floodwater of sound which swept the clubbers from their moorings, from their skins with raw and implacable power. The clarinet sang as though Aretha herself had dropped by to remind them what had changed, what had never changed. A long time coming.

There was no clapping. In the silence a blue spot anchored on Zach, whose head was bowed. He was breathing hard, as hard as a diver coming up for air. Laura stared down at her glass. That he didn't try to hide the guttural sound-this was as shocking, and nearly as riveting, as his music. Despite her struggle to resist, to break free, the line between them held: both lifted their heads as one, and their eyes locked.

After a short pause Zach played once more, but by this time Laura had made her way to the ladies'. She bathed her face with cool water, then shut herself in a cubicle and rested her head on arms folded across her knees. Dry-eyed, she tried to work out how long she could remain here before Owen sent Olivia on a search-and-rescue mission. Ten minutes, maybe. Fifteen at most. She read the graffiti.

The door swung open, and Laura waited for her name to be called. Footsteps approached the basins, though no sound of running water followed. Not much sound at all. A brush and lipstick job, then. Laura put an eye to the gap, but the angle was wrong. Only one way to see, but if she got down on her knees, she could imagine the woman's reaction. Again Laura read the graffiti, now wishing she had a black marker to add a few caustic lines of her own.

Whatever the woman was up to, Laura couldn't hide out in the toilets much longer. She flushed the loo, straightened her jumper, and clasping her bag tightly under her arm-not that there was much to steal-slid back the bolt.

'Flushes in the key of E,' a familiar voice said.

'You can't come in here!' Laura hissed.

'Is that so?' Zach asked, arms crossed and one buttock propped on the edge of a basin. How did he always manage to upend her expectations?

She moved to the other sink and washed her hands. And washed her hands.

‘They’re not going to get any cleaner,’ he said.

‘Shut up and go away.’

Zach reached over and turned off the brass retro tap-no fancy modern gadgets for Thea. Silently he handed Laura a clutch of paper towels which she would have preferred to toss back in his face. She forced herself to dry each hand with care, finger by finger. Don’t ask him, she told herself. Don’t you *dare* ask him.

‘Who is she?’ she heard herself say.

Their eyes met in the mirror.

‘You’re wearing my jumper,’ he said.

Laura glanced down, reddened. With both hands she dragged his jumper over her head, then realised too late that her camisole wouldn’t conceal the bruise across her upper arm. For a moment she thought he’d be polite enough not to comment.

‘At least my dates don’t slap me around,’ he said.

‘Don’t jump to ridiculous conclusions.’

‘So you walked into an open door?’ He didn’t bother disguising the contempt in his voice.

Laura held up the jumper, knowing full well she’d have to put it back on-or ask him to fetch her jacket, which would be worse.

‘I’ll have it cleaned and returned to you,’ she said.

‘Wear it. It suits you.’

Suddenly she was tired of pretending. ‘Because it’s yours.’

They were quiet for moment, then Zach stepped forward and ran his fingertips lightly over her bruise, while Laura studied the tarnish dulling the mirror like crape.

‘Here, I’ve been carrying this around for days. I planned to give it to you the afternoon of the Fulgur bombing,’ he said.

A small gold pendant lay in the palm of his outstretched hand, chain dangling from his fingers, swinging. His hand, she saw, was trembling slightly. She couldn't believe the necklace was for her, even when he fastened it round her neck.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

Hands resting on her shoulders, he closed his eyes for a short time, allowing her to search his face for an inkling of understanding. To mention the bombing in such a casual-callous-tone, damn him. And then this.

'Do you know the legends of the selkie?' he asked.

The door opened. On the threshold Olivia was already calling out, 'Laura, what's taking you-'

Zach and Laura sprang apart.

'Zach. Why am I not surprised,' Olivia drawled. Always the quick-witted one, she'd never been bothered that people resented you for it, especially your mates, especially when you defended *them*. 'Your own hot curry waiting at the table, while you guzzle ours in the loo.' Sighing ostentatiously, she considered Laura. 'How utterly tacky.'

'Livs-' Laura began.

'Don't worry, I'm not about to tell Owen. Or *Tim*. Just get the fuck away from this freak, even if his instrument's as big as his clarinet. Even if it's bigger.'

And then she was gone.

Laura hadn't realised that Zach could blush. She was trying to decide whether it was anger or embarrassment or something else entirely when the walls shuddered, then tilted. Later she would have trouble remembering the exact sequence of events-have trouble remembering if she even heard the detonation or only felt it. There had been too many films she'd seen, too many news clips. Too many stories.

Zach rolled away from her and slowly sat up, holding his head. His face was the colour of a twice-used teabag left on the worktop to moulder.

‘What was *that?*’ she asked.

He didn’t answer.

‘Zach? Are you OK?’

Hoarse cries, screams were beginning to penetrate her awareness. Laura glanced towards the door, still firmly closed. The mirror had fallen and shattered, otherwise everything in the toilet seemed intact. Perhaps a bit more dust in the air, that was all. And that acrid smell.

‘A bomb?’ she asked, disbelieving.

She found she was still clutching Zach’s jumper. Wrapping it round her hand, she swept the shards away and crept to his side. He was shivering, unable to do much more than lean against her. She picked a sliver of glass from his hair. A small cut above his eyebrow was oozing blood, which she wiped with a spit-moistened tissue from her pocket. It continued to seep, but he shook his head when she tried to swab it again.

‘You people will blame us,’ he whispered. ‘Blame the *murdering auger bastards.*’ Though a little colour was returning to his face, the shivering continued. ‘Oh god, Carla, Andy, all those kids ...’

‘Zach, look, no matter what I said that afternoon, I never *meant* it. Nobody who knows you could believe for one minute-for one *second*-that you’d do something like this.’

‘Haven’t you *listened* to the stuff the Purists spout? They’re everywhere, in the government, the police, the media, the chatrooms, your grandmother’s Bible study group ...’

Above the frightful sounds from the club-and the smoke alarms-Laura now could hear sirens in the distance, heading their way. Despite the heavy snow, ambulances would soon get through. Firefighters, probably. *Police.*

‘Zach, we’ve got to leave. I’m going to try to find our jackets.’

‘Don’t go out there. You don’t want to see it.’

Laura looked round but could spot no place for Zach to hide.

‘Lock yourself into a cubicle,’ she began, but realised it was hopeless. She scrambled to her feet. ‘I’ll be right back.’

The corridor was full of smoke, but there didn’t seem to be any flames nearby. Ducking back for a second to take a swimmer’s deep breath, Laura shut the door behind her, crouched low, and made for the row of coat hooks along the wall. Sheer luck that it was only a few metres. She would not think about the room full of people. She would not think about Andy and the other musicians. She would not think about her friends. There was nothing she could do.

Zach’s sheepskin was right on top, and Laura ripped it off the hook. Eyes smarting, she grabbed the next jacket that came to hand and held it to her face. She was beginning to feel light-headed. The fumes made it easier to ignore the sounds of panic and agony and confusion, only partly dampened by the dense pall. A man was moaning, ‘Help me, help me, someone help me.’ Contrary to her resolve, Laura slid forward for a quick look. Her gaze went straight to the flames claiming the wooden stage, so that her foot bumped up against a solid object, and it took a moment for her streaming eyes to recognise its grisly nature. She gagged.

Nothing you can do.

She stumbled back to toilet, slammed the door behind her, and dropped to her knees, gasping loudly. The air was still clear, there must be an open window. Wiping her eyes, she saw that Zach hadn’t moved except to cradle his head in his hands. Nor did he look up now. The sirens were louder.

What do you expect, a magic knife that would cut you out of here? she could hear Olivia scoff as Laura located the ground-level window, only to find it half open but burglar-barred. At least you’re alive, while I ...

Laura shook out Zach’s jumper, hurriedly put it on, then the jacket. Stuffed into a pocket were a pair of gloves, a packet of cigarette papers, some matches; and best of all, a knitted woollen scarf, which she soaked at the tap.

‘Come on,’ she said, taking Zach’s arm. ‘We’ve got to hurry.’

She was relieved when he got to his feet and slid his arms obediently into the

sleeves of his jacket, which she held open for him. Though trembling no longer, he fumbled with his buttons, then stopped to look at Laura in bewilderment. At first she thought of a child lost in a crowded supermarket, but was suddenly struck by his resemblance to their puppy when her mum had swatted it the first time with a rolled newspaper-before it had learned to cower. It should have bitten her there and then. Rage like boiling tar erupted in Laura. She seized Zach's arm and shook him-shook him till he yelped.

'Don't even *think* of giving up!' she shouted.

With the scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face, he followed her along the passage to the small kitchen, where the smoke had hardly penetrated. She'd guessed right, a service door led to a short flight of stairs and back alleyway. She dragged him at a clumsy run to the next road, skidding repeatedly but not quite falling on the icy pavement, as the sirens converged on the club. Only when they'd reached the charity shop and turned the corner did she stop for breath. They leaned against the wall, sheltered from passing gawkers by a large wheelie bin and by the snow, still falling thickly. Neither the late hour nor the weather would deter the curious from a bomb site.

The cold air had revived Zach. He loosened the near-frozen scarf, and searching his pockets for gloves, also came up with a bar of chocolate, which they split.

'Thanks,' he said. 'I'm OK now.'

But Laura wasn't sure, he kept pulling his glove off, chewing on a knuckle, replacing the glove, pulling it off ...

'I'm going back,' he suddenly said.

'Back where?' she asked. He couldn't possibly intend what it sounded like.

'Maybe I can help.'

'Are you *mad*? They'll lynch you on sight. You didn't see ... there was a ... oh god ...' She broke off and bent over, retching.

Zach held her as she vomited at the kerb, then kicked snow over the patch and drew her a few feet away. With a bare hand he scooped up a mound of clean snow, from which she took a mouthful or two, grateful for its numbing bite.

Sirens continued to approach, hypnotic blue lights: *rule of law*, they flashed. It was hard to think when you were so afraid.

‘And you can’t go back to your flat either,’ she said. ‘You’re right, the Insects have been sniffing round. You’ve got to think of the others in your group, Stella too.’

He walked to the bin and slid open the lid, dislodging a thick crust of snow. The scarf was stiff and unyielding, it took some effort to remove it. Silently Laura watched him compress it into a spongy mass, grey and slushy as grease ice, before tossing it away, then flip up his collar and jam his hands into his pockets. With his shoulders hunched, he trod a few steps away from her, so that she couldn’t tell whether he was preparing to sacrifice himself in some stupid stupid *stupid*-and completely pointless-act of loyalty. Snow lay unsullied on his hair and jacket like fresh breadcrumbs, scattered by the village idiot for the crows. *Rule of claw*, the sirens cawed, *rule of claw*.

‘Maybe it’s time we simus started fulfilling their expectations,’ he said, his voice low.

‘Zach, you don’t mean that.’

‘Don’t I?’ He turned to look at Laura, such a bleak expression on his face that, viciously, she hoped if a couple of Purists had been at Thea’s, they were still alive, and screaming. ‘Savagery requires a savage response.’

‘So who’s first? I reckon you ought to catch them early on. A busload of preschool kids with their biccies and teddy bears?’

His lashes swept downwards, but not before she saw the spurt of tears. Fool, she told herself, why don’t you just peck them out, his heart as well? She moved to his side and with apologetic strokes brushed off his shoulders; even more tenderly, his hair. Snow swirled around them, lingered. Their breath fogged the small shared space. In a brief lull between sirens they could hear a distant church bell, thin and fragile as a rime of frost. *Nine, ten, eleven*-Laura counted the knells.

A sweep of yellow light startled them to attention. As one they pitched behind the wheelie bin, Laura narrowly avoiding a fall, but it was only a snowplough lumbering past. Laura rubbed her bruised shoulder, which had caught against the

protruding lip of the bin.

‘Let me look,’ Zach said.

Laura shook her head. ‘I’m OK.’

After patting his own pockets but only coming up with his wallet and keys, he asked, ‘Have you still got your mobile?’

‘Yeah, in my shoulderbag. Why?’

‘I’ll ring for a taxi,’ Zach said, drawing her near. He tucked a strand of her hair into the hood of her jacket, then worked the slider on her zip, which was gaping open a bit, till his fingers rested under her chin. Still he didn’t release the pull tab. ‘You need to get home.’

‘And you?’

He shrugged. ‘It doesn’t really matter, does it? They’ll find me sooner or later.’

‘Maybe someone will come forward and claim responsibility.’

‘Yeah, *someone* will, all right.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘There’s no faster way to make us feared-hated-than to prove we’re terrors. Scapegoatery’s been around since you lot climbed down from the trees, it’s a favourite pastime. As thrilling as ritual sacrifice, and a hell of a lot better than football to sate-temporarily-your near insatiable hunger for violence. And what a tasty morsel: the auger who, miraculously, escapes devastating carnage with nothing more than a scratch. The auger with known underground connections. The auger so despicable he’s even willing to blow up his own date, his friends.’

Only later would she wonder what it would have meant to let him go back to the club; wonder too at the ease of his acquiescence, as though he were choosing an anticipated, and more brutal, reckoning. In her imagination she’d replay events, and replay them, to avoid the irrevocable.

‘Can you drive your motorbike in the snow?’ she asked.

As if to gauge its density, Zach gathered up some of the powdery stuff and weighed it in his hand, then formed a compact snowball and threw it with a grim smile across the street, where it thumped against the wall, leaving a butterfly-shaped splotch.

‘Not easily.’

‘But it’s possible?’

‘I’ve got winter tyres. Yeah, it’s *possible* ... He brushed his gloves free of snow. ‘If you’re mad. Or desperate.’ Again shrugged his shoulders. ‘And have a place to go.’

‘Come on, then.’ Laura said, plucking at his cuff. ‘We’ll stop in a bit to ring my parents.’

‘And tell them what, exactly?’

‘Oh, I’ll think of something.’ She exhaled in relief when he took her hand. ‘I always do.’

Chapter 20

Zach awakes to ferocious gusting. With luck Lev won't have heard his groan. Their world has been compressed into this small, temporary shelter where they may be warm, they may be fed, they may even be safe, but Zach knows that if he were to risk a few steps beyond the tent, he'd be taken by the storm.

It's supposed to be a sleepy kind of death. Once the violent shivering subsides.

Do they program dreams to taunt him? No Inuk would ever club a seal senseless, then shove it into the water to drown.

He stretches as unobtrusively as possible, mostly his cramped legs, which could have used another four or five centimetres of sleeping bag. Back to back, he and Lev have managed to preserve a semblance of privacy, but Lev rolls over, slips an arm out, and unzips his bag. There's not much he misses.

'I'll turn up the heat and put on the kettle,' Lev says. 'Get up and move round a bit.'

'I'm fine,' Zach says. 'It was just a dream.'

'Remind me to add an entry to my translator. *Fine* can also be used for *stubborn*.'

Light is soon flickering along the sides of the tent, whose billowing and snapping remind Zach of sheets hanging from a washing line. Crisp sunshine, a last brisk day. To elude Ben he dodges through the heaving walls of the maze, where the three-eyed, sword-toothed monster guards the treasure. This time he's going to reach it for sure, and find the gold, and the spell-locked casket of jewels, and win the sloe-eyed princess's hand. The air smells of autumn and woodsmoke. Leaves crunch underfoot. His father is chopping wood, his mother collecting walnuts in a basket. The wind kicks and pummels like a small, baffled child wailing to be let into the snowy labyrinth of memory.

'Zach?' Lev says.

The boy, and the incident, vanish in a whiteout.

They take turns at knee-bends and toe-touching, the dogs watching with somnolent amusement. His self-appointed guard hugs Zach's side while they drink tea. Up close, her coarse fur smells pleasantly oily, like fresh-toasted wheat germ, and Zach finds himself combing her coat with his hand, digging his fingers into her thick ruff.

'Bella's very discerning,' Lev says. 'She's got the team's best nose.'

'I don't suppose you smell any sweeter.'

'Is it my scintillating wit and delightful company, or have you always been so touchy?'

After a moment Zach releases a laugh. 'OK, I deserve that.'

Lev rolls a cigarette, permits himself two brief drags, then extinguishes both it and the light before crawling back into his sleeping bag. 'Let's rest while we can. It's going to be a difficult trek to the hunters' camp.'

'How long will the storm last?' Zach asks.

'No telling. We'll have to wait it out.'

Lev's teas are very soothing. Zach yawns, closes his eyes, drowsily listens for the sound of a zip, the usual presleep noises. They don't come. Instead, Lev's hand skims Zach's shoulder, so lightly that at first he wonders if he'd drifted off for an instant.

'You're welcome to share my sleeping bag.'

So much for sleep. At the end of a held breath Zach mutters, 'Look, it's not that I don't like you.'

'No need to be so nervous.' A soft chuckle. 'I'm not going to jump you.'

Embarrassed, Zach blurts out, 'Is homosexuality common where you come from?'

'Our categories are somewhat different,' Lev says dryly.

Zach rolls to face Bella, who works herself into the harbourage of his body. He moves his hand to her neck, again plies the firm stratum of muscle beneath her coat, and she gives a little whimper of pleasure. Dogs are heavily taxed, enough of a luxury for Laura to have called it her mum's perfect excuse whenever Max asks for a new puppy to replace the spaniel which died young-one of those new and devastating metaviruses. Fucking morons, wanking round with uploads when they can't even develop some decent antivirals.

'I promise you, we'll find her.'

There is something in Lev's voice which sounds pre-recorded. Zach shifts round fast enough to catch the look on his face.

'In time?'

'You keep tugging at Laura's chain like that, it'll break and you'll convince yourself it's an omen.'

After a long hesitation, Zach lets Lev zip their sleeping bags together. A meagre comfort, that shared warmth, but a measure of comfort nevertheless.

*

She comes to him in the hours before rising.

The light is blue, the penetrating eerie blue of an ice cave, and she too is frosted in blue, her hair shimmering with ice crystals.

He says her name. He says

*

In the morning-Zach finds it easier to think in conventional blocks of time-he asks if they can't make a start despite the snowstorm, but Lev is blunt. 'I might manage on my own, but what will you do if something happens to me?' Neither mentions that Zach's chances for survival, alone, would only be marginally better in optimal weather, even with the dogs. Neither mentions the abort function.

To pass the time Lev produces a small, square board which glows from an

internal power source and whose playing pieces float just below the surface of an unfamiliar translucent material, a material with the brilliance of cut glass but the tactile intimacy of free-flowing water. The pieces move at the touch of a finger. The rules are so simple that Zach wonders why nobody has thought of them before, then reminds himself that nobody thought of the Wu constant for the longest time either-or the biro. But it's surprisingly difficult to win, and when he manages to stalemate Lev, Zach grins like a little kid who has just scored his first goal.

'Even trickier than Go,' he says.

'All sentient races develop such games.' Lev kneels before his pack. 'Here, you may as well see what you can do with this.' He passes Zach an oblong case about the length of a devil stick. 'Just keep the volume down or the dogs will go mad.'

The instrument has a mouthpiece, though the reed isn't made of any material Zach recognises, and its body, roughly clarinet-shaped, seems to be constructed from the same crystalline substance as Lev's game. No keys are visible. When Zach raises it to his lips for a tentative blow, he's astonished by the force of the tone he produces, a shrill F#. The dogs lift their heads and Jagger gets to his feet with hackles raised.

'How does it work?' Zach asks.

'Try playing while you think of a tune, a scale, whatever you like. Remember, think *softly*.'

Papageno's aria from *The Magic Flute* teases a smile from Lev, who is nothing if well versed in sapiens culture.

'Will it play anything at all?' Zach asks.

'A full rendition of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, you mean? Complete with soloists, double orchestra and choir?'

'I'd be happy with a chord or two, though I wouldn't turn up my nose at accompaniment.'

'You'll have to be patient. Neuronal changes take time. Ultimately, though, you ought to be able to dispense with the reed, explore far beyond the limitations of

the clarinet.'

'A *musical instrument* which affects my brain?'

'A reciprocal adaptation, though there will be more neurogenesis, more rewiring of your neural networks than hers, since you haven't been brought up with such'-another of his smiles-'such facilitators.'

Zach weighs the instrument in his hand. 'She?'

'He. She. What an odd language you speak. Depends on your understanding of gender. On you, in the end,' Lev says. 'The main thing is, the higher dimensions are conscious. Think of music as one of *their* languages.'

And just for a moment, a velvety arpeggio giggles in Zach's ear. A very girlish giggle.

Chapter 21

‘It’s too risky,’ Laura said. ‘Let me go.’

‘No,’ Zach said.

Voices muted, they stared up at his windows from beneath the cast-iron canal footbridge. Their puffs of breath resembled the wavy speech balloons from Max’s comics, dialogue faded to tremulous wisps. The falling snow afforded a quiet which was eerie in a city that was never truly quiet, and it was all too easy to imagine themselves safely hidden in a priest hole surrounded by flaking mortared walls. But Laura had no illusions about what would happen if they were caught.

‘You must have left a light burning,’ she said. ‘The police would be waiting in the dark, wouldn’t they?’

At that moment a shadow passed behind the drawn curtains in Zach’s living room. Laura clutched his arm.

‘There’s someone in your flat,’ she said.

‘Stay here,’ he said. ‘Without keys my motorbike’s useless. I’ll be back as soon as I’ve packed a few things.’

‘But what about-‘

He was gone before she could complete the question. Stubborn idiot, she thought. Owen would at least *pretend* to listen. Yeah, a small mean voice countered, he’d listen the same way a well-trained pet listens, a sweet spoonfed monkey. ‘Shut up,’ Laura muttered. She didn’t want to think about Owen. And then she remembered that she didn’t want to think about any of her mates-not now, not yet.

She still had her keys to Zach’s flat. Even with his keen hearing, five minutes’ headstart ought to suffice in this weather, but she added another three or four to be certain, then made her way along the towpath until she reached the short flight of steps from which, in daylight, a decaying boat and derelict boathouse

with half caved-in roof could be seen on the opposite bank. Streetlamps, set far apart on this stretch of canal, illuminated little more than the itinerant snowflakes. Laura followed Zach's footprints up the steps, smudged parallel tracks which soon veered off to the left across uneven ground in the direction of the main entrance to his building. Careful to avoid a fall, she crossed the intervening tract, glancing frequently at the windows above her, frequently towards the towpath at her back. It was late, Zach's neighbours all seemed to be asleep, and no abominations arose from the depths of the cut to accost her, no stalkers. No police.

She was going to need new shoes, maybe new feet. Her mum, perfect homemaker that she fancied herself, kept complete sets of both sturdy walking boots and wellies at the cottage for the family *and* spares for guests. But feet ... good, another item to add to the tally of things beyond her mum's command.

Laura stopped and wriggled her numb toes, then with a final look behind her, ducked into the rear stairwell, grateful that no motion sensor was attached to the wall of the building, merely a low-watt bulb in a grimy fixture above the door. Undisturbed by shovel or rubber sole, the steps were slippery beneath the drifted snow, and despite her caution Laura lost her footing on the third step from the bottom and with an involuntary cry landed awkwardly on a metal grate. Rubbing her chin, she listened intently for a few seconds, but when she rose, cursing half in self-disgust and half in relief under her breath, her right ankle protested. That's all we need, she thought balefully, and yanked off a glove. It took her a few minutes to fit and turn the key-her fingers were stiff with cold, clumsy with nervousness. What if Zach came out and found her gone? What if Zach didn't come out at all?

In the end she got her fingers and pulse under control, and with only a slight limp navigated the corridor and staircase till she climbed to Zach's floor. Heedless of the wooden floorboards, somebody had left three sledges propped up against the wall on the landing, along with several child-sized pairs of boots in a greyish puddle, as if a bucket full of cold scummy water had been upended after scrubbing the passageway. Laura wondered where in this quarter there'd be a hill big enough-safe enough-for sledging. Could these be the neighbours who had complained to the police? A family with more kids than sense, Zach had said. She was tempted to lean the sledges against the door to their flat, a trick she'd taught Max years ago with well-filled wheelie bins, and might have done so if she hadn't heard a low werewolf growl behind their door.

Ankle forgotten, she raced along the passage and inserted the key in Zach's lock. In less than a minute she was inside, though she took good care not to slam the door. Heart jiggering like a sail in unsettled winds, she waited near the boot tray while her breathing returned to normal. She was reluctant to kick off her shoes, wet as they were, in case she needed to leave again quickly. Zach was planning to wear his motorbike boots, but in the tray there was also a smaller pair of black leather trainers which looked similar to Max's current favourites. Heels worn on the outer edges like his as well, she was just thinking, frayed and snarl-knotted shoelaces, when her ears picked up the murmur of voices from the living room. Familiar voices.

On the threshold, she stood with her arms crossed until they noticed her, too angry to say a word.

'Hi Laura,' Max said, as if his presence were as humdrum as grated cheese and sweaty socks and long dirty toenails. He was dressed in terry pyjamas, the smart blue-and-cream striped ones he wore for a sleepover. 'We were expecting you.'

That did it.

'What the fuck is going on?' she yelled.

'Keep your voice down,' Zach admonished.

Laura marched straight towards Zach, ready to make someone-anyone-finally pay, though the effect was ruined at the last moment by her ankle, which chose to give out as she came level with the couch table. She stumbled, and Zach caught her. Ignoring the vicious yank on his hair, he settled her on the couch, her foot elevated.

'Leave me alone, I'm OK.' But she lowered her voice: murdering Zach was her prerogative, not the mob's.

'You've sprained your ankle,' Zach said as he slipped off both shoes, then her socks, 'but I don't think you've torn a ligament.' His fingers were gentle, and she winced only once. At least *her* toenails were clean, she thought as she glared at Max, who glanced down at his bare feet, then curled his toes and hid one foot behind the other.

Zach helped her to remove her jacket, then told Max, 'Fetch a towel with some

ice cubes from the kitchen.’ He grinned his infuriating grin. ‘Make that two towels, your sister’s ruining my furniture with her dripping hair.’

‘I’ll ruin more than your sofa.’

He handed her his phone from the table. ‘Go on, then, ring the police.’

She maintained a dignified silence while Zach packed her ankle, but when he tried to dry her hair, she snatched the towel from him. ‘I’ll do it myself.’ In the meantime Max had brought them mugs of tea and a plate of thick cheese-and-blackberry jam sandwiches, exactly the horrid sort he himself liked to eat. She drank some tea while Zach left the room. He returned almost immediately with his backpack, a pair of elegant ankle boots which might fit her with some toe padding, an elastic bandage and dry woollen socks, a tube of ointment, and a bottle of anti-inflammatory tablets, two of which she swallowed without protest—there was no way he was going to carry her out of here. He stowed the bottle in his backpack. Sandwich in hand, he began to pace the room, passing repeatedly before the window and peering out. Finally, with an apologetic shrug, he switched off the lights, though he left the door to the passage ajar so that they weren’t entirely in the dark. Max ate as if he’d missed supper, but kept his eyes on her and attempted a grin whenever she looked his way. Neither he nor Zach offered an explanation.

‘You’d better eat something,’ Zach said. ‘We’ve got a long cold ride ahead of us.’

‘If you think I’m—’

‘Changed your mind? Fine.’ He dug out his wallet. ‘Keep the lights off and don’t answer the door. Here’s enough money for a taxi. And a number to ring—the driver’s trustworthy.’ He rested a hand on Max’s shoulder. ‘You can always have Laura drop you off at your friend’s house. Or your sister will think up a good story; stick to it. There might be some trouble, but you’ll be OK. It’s me they really want.’

Then Zach handed Max some notes and a slip of paper, nodded at Laura, and hefted his backpack over a shoulder, leaving socks and bandage like a reproof on the table next to her foot.

‘Where are you going?’ Laura demanded.

‘He doesn’t know.’ Max spoke through a mouthful of sandwich, hurriedly choked it down. ‘Don’t let him leave.’

‘Zach, wait.’ His footsteps slowed, but he kept his back to her. ‘Please, help me with the bandage.’ He turned. His face wasn’t as expressionless as he tried to make it. Beneath skin as thin as a tissue of lies lay living parchment, word-rich.

‘I haven’t changed my mind,’ Laura said.

Zach said nothing.

‘She isn’t lying. It’s the family temper,’ Max said, ‘Like shaking a bottle of warm coke, but with Laura the gush doesn’t last for long.’

Laura rounded on Max. ‘Listen, little brother, if you’re suggesting I’m anything like Mum ...’

Still without a word, Zach came over and dropped his gear to the floor. He knelt by the table, and Laura forgot to be cross at Max as she watched Zach unwind the bandage, set aside the ice pack, and lift her foot; apply some ointment and deftly wrap her ankle. After securing the material with a clip, he slipped the thick sock over her foot, then held out his hand for the other foot. Max rose from the armchair, went to the window, and eased one of the curtains aside. He continued to look beyond their dim reflections towards the canal, as if he could penetrate a private dark, while Zach slowly drew the sock up over her toes, the ball of her foot, over the arch, the heel, the ankle. Her foot rested in the palm of his left hand; his right smoothed the sock into place, smoothed it over the arch and heel and ankle, smoothed it. She had to be very firm with herself-it would have been such a *little* lie to tell him that something was stuck inside the sock and could he please take it off and start again.

Max laughed. ‘A dirty toenail clipping, maybe?’

Laura slid her foot from Zach’s hand. In the silence that followed, her mind clicked over the implications of Max’s joke. And checked and clicked, like badly rusted curtain rings which needed replacing.

‘You’re scaring me,’ she said.

Max left his post by the window to stand next to Zach, who rose and slipped an

arm around her brother's shoulders.

'You tell her,' Max said.

Her blackout curtains tore. Like a voyeur waiting in the dark, Laura had a bright terrible view of two figures embracing, embracing. There was nowhere to fix her gaze. She balled a fist and jammed it against her teeth, bit down hard. How could you, you bastard? she managed not to cry. He's just a little boy. But she didn't manage to keep her eyes from smarting in the sudden blinding insight, however much she blinked.

'You're bonkers,' Max said. 'He never stops thinking about you.'

Max meant to reassure her, but it felt as though he'd been drilling a hole in her skull-to liberate her thoughts, or was it her demons? There were some people mad enough to claim trepanning expanded your consciousness.

'You really hear me?' she asked. 'It's not just sympathy?'

'Empathy,' Zach corrected.

'I suppose you lot are far too clever to make a slip of the tongue!'

'Since when have you started talking about simus like that?' Max asked.

Stung, Laura grabbed her mug, gulped her lukewarm tea. 'Ugh, it's worse cold. You've dumped half a pound of sugar in it.'

'Max knows I like it sweet,' Zach said mildly.

'Like Mum,' Max added. 'She always jokes that it sweetens her disposition.'

Laura cast a searching look at her brother but saw no guile on his face. From where she was sitting it seemed as if he'd grown recently, the crown of his head nearly level with Zach's shoulder, his wrists pale and fragile in the anaemic light.

'What are you doing here?' she whispered. 'You're supposed to be at Justin's.'

Max pulled the neckband of his pyjama top up over his chin and lower lip, an old childhood habit. Laura remembered his terrifying nightmares-all of his

ribbed collars matted and chewed within weeks. He'd come to her bed, trembling, sometimes crying, and his fear had always soaked into the sheets and pillows and duvet, into the mattress like spilled milk-colourless but with a sour smell that had clung to her hair and skin till she showered, or threw open the window to bright sunlight. She took a few deep breaths to clear the smell.

With a crooked smile Zach tugged the fabric from Max's teeth, but gently, the way he'd tug a slipper from a puppy, your tomorrow from underfoot.

'Zach?' Laura asked.

'Max is a cognoscens,' Zach said.

'What?'

'A cognoscens.'

'That's impossible!'

Zach's eyes gleamed as though a match had been struck along his optic nerves, a look which made her wonder how he'd escaped a flick-knife or tyre iron or garotte till now. Well, that could be remedied. She turned to Max. 'He's sending me up for some reason.'

'Ask Dad, if you don't believe him.'

Which meant that even the impossible is sometimes true.

'But how-how-?' Stymied by the task of framing a question coherently-any of fifty, a hundred questions-Laura rose and walked to the window, not quite limping, but careful not to put too much weight on her damaged ankle. There was no pain, only some throbbing, and the feeling that her foot couldn't bear the strain. She leaned her forehead against the cool glass until Zach joined her. With a fingertip he traced a spiral in the fading condensation, then breathed on the pane and drew a small figure-a rather lopsided seal.

'Max would have been back at Justin's before anyone was awake. I'll run him over now and return for you.'

'The police might pitch up any minute.'

‘You can wait with my backpack in the cellar. I’ll show you a warm corner where you’ll be safe.’

Safe, she repeated to herself.

‘Come away from the window,’ Max said. ‘I think somebody’s walking along the canal.’

‘Can you pick up everything we think?’ Laura asked.

‘Most stuff, if I pay attention. It’s easiest with simus, though.’

‘From far away?’

‘I can’t always tell about distance.’

They followed Max to the bedroom, where he collected his clothes and went into the bathroom to change. Six months ago he’d have still undressed in front of her. Seated on the bed with her leg raised, Laura ate a few bites from the sandwich Zach had forced into her hand, then wrapped the rest in a tissue.

‘I’ll finish it while I’m waiting for you. It’ll give me something to do.’

‘Then don’t shred it all over my bed,’ Zach said with a smile.

She shook out a second tissue to rewrap the sandwich. Zach was exaggerating, she’d only been kneading it a bit between her fingers.

‘He really is a cognoscens, you know,’ Zach said.

‘But he looks nothing like any of you!’

He shrugged. ‘Better for him.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Different DNA coding, maybe.’ She frowned as he added, ‘New improved model.’ She never knew how he managed to convey so much mockery-self-mockery-without the least change in tone or expression. Perhaps it was the way his eyes became as opaque as old glass-antique glass, beautiful and priceless.

‘Are there others like him?’ she asked.

‘None that I’ve run into.’

Laura understood the unmistakable implications, but before she could question him further, Max appeared in the doorway, pyjamas and toothbrush in hand. Grinning with a certain cheeky sheepishness, he didn’t quite meet their gaze, as if he knew they’d been talking about him. You moron, she thought, of course he knows. Only gradually was she beginning to grasp what this all meant, what it must have always meant.

‘How long have you been able to sense our thoughts?’ she asked.

Max glanced at Zach, then reached again for his collar, only to release it when Zach picked up a pillow and tossed it at her brother, who fielded it with his free hand to toss right back. Zach ducked, then laughed. There was an easiness in their exchange which Laura recognised as more than the usual male bonding. She’d always be excluded from parts of Zach’s life, and now from parts of Max’s as well. It doesn’t matter, she told herself sternly, you don’t need to read every word to enjoy a novel, you don’t even have to own a dictionary. But her throat tightened, her chest, and the feeling came back to her then, that terrifying paralysis when she was called on to read aloud in her first years at school. How hard she had tried to make sense of the black squiggles on the page! On a screen it had been even worse; they would never stay put long enough to share their secrets, though sometimes one or another would stop and wink. Around that time her dreams had come to be dominated by a yew-like maze whose openings would disappear whenever she was about to step through, whose hedges shifted and writhed and grew dense with thorn, while the giggling, chattering voices from the centre grew piercing with teasing: *the magic spell, stupid, you haven’t learned the magic spell.*

‘Sometimes you woke me,’ Max said. ‘I can still see those monstrous hedges.’

‘Even back then?’ Laura asked. ‘You were tiny.’

Max nodded and bundled his pyjamas into his backpack. ‘It took me a long time to figure out which stuff was *mine*, and even longer to realise nobody else was like me, but by then Dad had warned me never *ever* to speak of it. Though a few times I came close to telling you. When the nightmares were really bad.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘Why do you think?’

‘I’d never have cozzed you up to Dad.’

‘Yeah, I know. But you’d have been scared of me.’ Laura began to protest but Max cut her off with a sad half-smile. ‘Just like Dad, though he tries to hide it. Even from himself.’

Laura went to Max, who submitted to her hug. She could feel the bony jut of his shoulder blades, his ribcage. Over his head she and Zach exchanged glances.

‘Anyway, it got better when I learned to block most of it out,’ Max said. ‘And Dad gives me medicine to help.’

‘He *medicates* you?’ Somehow this seemed most terrible of all, like a parent plying a small child with cheap booze to keep him quiet, with tranquillisers.

‘Don’t be too hard on your dad,’ Zach said. ‘Max also needs the serum.’

‘That’s rich, coming from you.’

‘Maybe I’m learning.’ He gestured towards Max. ‘Max knows how powerless your dad feels. Fulgur has a stranglehold on its people.’

‘But your own child ...’ Laura’s voice trailed off.

The drift of her thoughts hung in the still, dry air of the room like a pall of acrid smog, and Zach wouldn’t have needed Max’s gift for it to sting. Abruptly he turned and rummaged in the drawer of his bedside cabinet, while Max found something of great interest on the carpet underfoot, then in the signed and framed photograph on the wall—the one she could never decide whether she liked or hated, even less understood. In luminous black-and-white it showed a small genderless child seated cross-legged on the shore, the glistening sea rising behind it in a huge tidal wave, a glass bowl in its naked lap. In the bowl lay what could only be a human brain, from which the child was eating with a spoon. The child’s eyes were dark and lashless and followed you no matter where you went in the room, and you knew that the wave was cresting, cresting very soon. Mostly, Laura thought the child was a girl.

‘Here,’ Zach said, handing her a yellowing envelope with his name written in ink on the front, but which bore neither address nor stamps. ‘Keep it for me. If the worst happens, you may as well open it. If you’re interested.’ He sent her brother a swift sidelong glance, and something passed between them from which she was barred. ‘Or else give it to Max.’

Laura turned the envelope over. Thick enough to contain several sheets of paper, possibly some photos. It was sealed and looked as if it had never been opened.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘A letter from my parents.’

‘You haven’t read it?’

Zach addressed Max. ‘We should go. Get your shoes and jacket on, then help your sister with her bad foot. I need the toilet.’

Max shouldered his backpack while Laura hung back, still staring at the envelope in her hand. Zach had disappeared into the hallway, leaving the door ajar. They heard the soft click of a latch.

‘He needs a moment by himself,’ Max said. ‘But try to talk to him at the cottage. I think he wants to.’

‘He won’t say much, he’s far too secretive. But I guess that doesn’t stop *you*.’ Immediately she was ashamed of the way his chin puckered.

‘You see,’ Max said. ‘It’s already beginning.’

She gestured helplessly, for they both knew there’d be no slipping back into the old patterns. ‘I’m sorry, it’s only that ...’

The sound of flushing interrupted their silence.

‘Did he know all along you’d be here tonight?’ Laura asked.

‘Yeah, but he promised not to tell. He’s the sort to keep his promises.’ Max’s eyes went to the doorway. ‘He’s very special, Laura. Please don’t ...’ He blushed a bit and lowered his voice. ‘I mean, he’s nothing like Owen.’

‘Not that it’s any of your business, but at least with Owen you know where you stand!’ she snapped. Then she remembered the bombing. ‘Stood,’ she whispered. ‘Oh god, he’s dead, they’re probably all dead.’

Max closed his eyes for a moment, but they flickered beneath pale green-tinged lids as though he were dreaming underwater. When he opened them again, Laura looked away, looked back, looked and looked. It took her a while to surface, and she found she was slightly out of breath. And frightened for him-to live with this ... to hide it, always to hide it ...

But his tone was matter of fact, in that way a child still. ‘Tina-have I got that right?’

‘Trina. What about her?’

‘Trina’s lost a leg, she’s in hospital. But your other mates went outside for a smoke. They’re all OK. A few cuts and bruises.’ He reached for his collar, then dropped his hand when, in reflex, Laura’s darted forward. ‘But there’s a lot of really bad feelings-hate stuff. Zach needs to disappear for a while.’

Trina. Trina, who owned slouchy kidskin ankle boots, metallic python dress boots, suede chukka boots, tooled cowboy boots, sheepskin boots, red stiletto hooker boots, vintage white leather platform boots, lace-up work boots, assorted knee boots, stretchy black velvet thigh-high boots with diamante bows.

Nothing you can do.

‘And the girl who came with Zach?’

Max shook his head.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yeah, I’m sure.’ He move forward to tug her sleeve. ‘Come on, Zach’s going to be out in a second.’

She followed him into the sitting room, where she tucked Zach’s letter into her bag and put on her ‘borrowed’ jacket, wondering uneasily to whom it belonged. Though it was tempting to wear Zach’s boots, even if she had to crumple newspaper into the toes, there was no point ruining such a good pair in the snow.

They shone; in a gesture of bravado she positioned them on the couch like two stiff strangers forced to make small talk at a funeral. As an afterthought, she set the black king from Zach's chess set on one upper, the white queen on the other. Then, gingerly, she forced her feet into sodden leather, waving away Max's help, and struggled with the wet laces. Together they went to wait for Zach in the hallway, Laura leaning against a wall to take the weight off her foot.

'How's your ankle?' Max asked.

'Tolerable.' She flexed it first in one direction, then the other. 'Not too bad, actually.'

'What about Mum and Dad?'

'Don't worry about it. I've already rung them.'

'And told them what, exactly?'

'The truth.'

'Stop sudsing me!'

'Have a go at my brain if you don't believe me.'

Now his voice was huffy. 'I'm not a snoop.'

'Then you're a sight more virtuous than I'd be. Maybe it's the simu in you.'

'Yeah, you mean like how all the Africans are great athletes, the Asians disciplined, the Aboriginals drunk.'

'What crap! You know I don't think like that.' She slid the zip on her jacket down halfway, it was getting uncomfortably warm in here. 'And I can tell the truth on occasion. I said there was a bomb, and Zach was so shaken up that I was going to spend the night with him, the weekend if necessary.'

'And they *believed* you?'

'Beautiful, isn't it? They weren't quite sure what to believe.'

'But-'

‘I’ve got my mobie, I’ll keep clocking in. What are they going to do, ring the police?’

‘They might.’

‘Never. They won’t even try my friends. Mum’s terrified that Fulgur won’t promote Dad. After the hospital mess, they’ll cover up anything I get into.’

‘She’ll have a tantrum when you come home.’

‘Fuck her,’ Laura said viciously. ‘Maybe this time I’ll have a tantrum right back.’

‘They’re going to ask me if I know anything. With thumbscrews and cattleprod.’

‘You’ll do fine.’ She ruffled his hair, which she knew he hated. ‘You’re turning out to be even more secretive than Zach.’

Max swayed out of reach, then with a grimace jammed his woolly cap onto his head and zipped his jacket. They could hear Zach moving about in his bedroom, probably picking out a few last essentials. Otherwise the flat was quiet, with the sepulchral hush of a theatre after the audience and actors have left, and there is only a lone cleaner collecting the discarded programmes and crumpled sweet papers and used tissues. Max prodded his backpack with a foot, whistling tunelessly. His breath smelled of Zach’s clove toothpaste. Finally he regarded Laura.

‘Zach’s not really secretive, you know.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘No, listen. He’s angry a lot of the time. Prickly. But underneath, he’s scared and lonely and uncertain. Just like everyone else.’ Max paused, kicked some more. ‘Believe me, just like *everyone* else.’

Chapter 22

For the next three days Zach practises a great deal on what could be deemed a clarinet only by a play of his imagination, gradually developing his facility so that, at times, the instrument becomes his own. Lev dismisses Zach's questions with an infuriating 'the best learning is self-taught'-admittedly reminiscent of Sean-and as the tent shrinks, Zach spends longer and longer outside in the blizzard. He and Lev take turns exercising the dogs, though Lev insists on a safety line, as if Zach were fool enough to race off at the first whiff of caribou. When Lev proposes yet another game of Pace, Zach barely controls his flare of irritation. He stalks to the strut from which the traces are hanging.

'I'll be back soon,' he mutters, 'the dogs could use a run.'

'Don't forget your own tether.'

'Sod it, stop reminding me!'

'Need to cool off?' Lev asks rather too solicitously.

Zach tells himself that he'd probably be ready to throttle a *teddy bear* after another day at such close quarters.

The wind has dropped, and though it's still snowing, the flakes are fat and soft and almost frothy, falling lushly rather than flinging themselves like shards of glass into his face. The temperature must be rising; in the extreme cold, snow is powdery. The last time he'd gone out, his goggles clogged, and he made the mistake of lifting them. The tears which spurted into his eyes froze his lids shut almost straightaway, and he hauled himself back to the tent along the guide rope, blind and thoroughly chagrined.

Perhaps they'll be able to break camp tomorrow. He stops to switch off the torch and peer at the sky, trying to convince himself that the cloud cover is thinning. He hasn't seen the moon in days but knows it's out there. Out there, and singing offkey. With a bitter laugh at his own absurdity, he nevertheless risks frostbite by baring his ears for a spell of magical listening. In the meanwhile the dogs vanish like wraiths, their silhouettes blanching into the snow on their extra-long traces. There's a moment of cognitive fade, when it's impossible to tell whether he still

sees them or merely remembers their shape. Bella is the last to disappear.

In thickly falling snow you move through a labyrinth of self-sealing chambers, recursive like the worst metafiction. Now would be the time for Someone Authorial to pitch up and juggle those fictional devil sticks. Yo Zach, break outa that sad sealed self. Rap an epiphany? An alchemist's retort? A matrioshka brainwave? Or how 'bout Ben? Pesky, tagalonedlong Ben? Gotcha. WHAM! BANG! ZAP! Right over there, bro.

But no matter which way you turn, you see no further than the billowing sheets of snowy, tangled neurofibrils. No matter how loud you call, your voice won't be heard. What would you say to Ben, anyway? The treasure was never real? You're sorry, so fucking sorry? Two choices, Zach, that's all we get: to untie the tether or take it in our clumsy mitts and flounder through the fragile, lonely, dogged business of survival.

Torch in hand, Zach trudges back to the tent, where he tramples a short path in front of the entrance, but makes no effort to clear away the snow which has drifted high above the snow flaps and helps insulate the interior from the cold. His chest twinges, though it's nothing like that early pain. A few more days, and he'll be ready to run in harness with the huskies. A few more days, and he'll run naked, tearing at his skin.

Back and forth he tramps, back and forth, playing out the rope to its limit. A bit out of breath now, he forces himself to keep going. Slack muscles will slow them down. And he certainly doesn't want to give Lev an excuse to put off their departure.

Bella comes bounding out of nowhere. Zach rubs a hand across his goggles and through the smeared plastic sees Patsy and Jagger close behind. All the dogs are covered in snow, and Zach laughs when Bella shakes her head, trying to dislodge the clingy stuff. After a quick sniff at Patsy, Bella thrusts her muzzle in his crotch, then at one of his mittened hands. Some affectionate roughhousing seems called for, part of their usual routine, but Zach is soon puzzled by Bella's actions: repeated nips at his forearm, interspersed with odd little yelps. Huskies rarely bark, but when Bella lifts her head and yowls, his own hackles rise.

'Where's Rosie?' he asks, suddenly aware that the fourth husky is missing.

At the sound of Rosie's name, Bella's howling intensifies, with Patsy and Jagger

joining in, until Zach begins to edge backwards towards the tent, images of wolves baying at a full moon flashing through his mind. Silver moon, silver snow, silver ... Of course he doesn't believe in superstitious nonsense like Norse berserkers or skin-walkers or shape-shifters, but an uneasy sense that legends often have some basis in fact nudges him faster towards the entrance. And faster still when he wonders about Mishaal's reading habits; the other programmers. Computer geeks were known for their fondness for fantasy, weren't they? Mythical creatures. Hostile landscapes. The unending, desolate, *inhuman* snow.

Might that explain Lev's presence after all?

'What's going on?' Lev says, his head thrust between the edges of the outer door. 'Why are the dogs making such a racket?'

Lev's matter-of-fact tone dispels the dense graupel clouding Zach's thoughts. He reels in the long trace to discover that Rosie's harness is still attached. She must have managed to slip free, something a clever husky will occasionally bring off. Lev takes Jagger out to search.

'No sign of Rosie,' Lev says an hour later, gratefully accepting a mug of tea and some dried fruit.

'What could have happened?' Zach asks.

'Hard to say. We tracked her a good ways, but the terrain became too creviced, the fresh snow cover too thick.'

'A fall?'

'Maybe.' But Lev doesn't sound convinced.

*

For the night run before bedding down, Lev checks over the harnesses and traces, then obsessively rechecks them. His better-safe-than-sorry spiel loses its selling power as soon as he takes the gun from his pack and slips it into an anorak pocket. Zach would like to get a closer look at it, and a demonstration if possible, since Lev has been cagey about its particulars, warning that cognitive weapons aren't for the untrained. 'You're a powerful cognoscens, I can't take any chances.' After days of near sloth, the dogs are frisky whenever they're

about to be let out, and Lev must perforce leave quickly before they begin to jump around.

Zach picks up the clarinet with the intention of working on something, just a phrase or two so far, nothing you could even call a melodic fragment, much less a sustained, explicit motif. Electronic reproduction of sound in the last century changed music forever, and no acoustic violinist is without his digital collection or his John Adams; and often plays an electric violin as well. But now Zach has been confronted with an entirely new ... new what? technology? medium? He has only an inkling of its potential and is already wondering if there's any way to obtain-construct?-such an instrument outside the Fulgrid. Instead of lifting it to his lips, he shuts his eyes and runs his fingers along its length. It could almost be his favourite Buffet. Almost, it could be breathing. Now *that's* a real twist for Andy: a liquorice stick more alive than the surfeit of hollow 'dead wood' you hear in the clubs. Lev calls it something unpronounceable, loosely translated as 'the joystick which hypnotises infinity beyond angst'-worth a quick laugh but hardly an irresistible sound bite. Zach will stick with *clarinet*. Never, but never, some sickly-sweet nickname like the saxists fancy. Mouthy up-themselves cretins, most of them.

'I hear her little brother calls her Lolly. Reckon he gets some too?'

'Say that once more, you won't even *remember* what it feels like.'

He remembers. Clumsy first attempts aside, who knows better than a simu just how addictive your drug of choice can be?

His fingers tingle and he flexes them, a suspicion that the clarinet may already be tampering with his head increasing his jitteriness. (How long has Lev been gone anyway?) 'Stop that,' he mutters, then feels foolish addressing the clarinet, and in any case the tingling *has* stopped. According to Charles, Fulgur has finally approved research into the cognoscens capacity to perceive tactile sound; neuroscientists tend to focus on the big two, hearing and sight. Zach raises the clarinet to his lips and blows a few halfhearted tones, but he's restless and there's no life to it. He gets up and fiddles with the stove, rearranges the dishes, moves his sleeping bag a centimetre to the left, then shifts it back again, fiddles with his hair, with the chain, only just restraining himself from unzipping the door and peering out into the frigid darkness. It's tempting to wank off. He opens the bag of dried fruit and sorts it into piles of apples and pears, apricots and prunes and

bananas, counts them all, and tosses them back into the bag with a couple of hefty shakes in case he wants to confirm the data for a rigorous evidence-based study. How long would it take to count the dehydrated vegetables, or better yet, the grains of sugar? He sets a pot of water to boil, reflecting sardonically that he may as well watch something which will result in tea. Lev has shown him how to play Pace against its strategy banks, but he'd lose at noughts and crosses at this point.

*

Lev is grim upon his return. Zach helps him shed his torn outerwear, detaches Bella's lead, and feeds her. He adds extra sugar to Lev's tea, then after a silent nod from Lev, a splash from their small emergency ration of brandy. Zach doesn't drink, and strictly speaking, neither should Lev, because alcohol consumption increases the risk of cold injury and hypothermia by accelerating heat loss. But this seems to be an instance where an exception is called for.

'They would have got Bella too, if she hadn't slipped into a narrow lead and was preparing to scramble out,' Lev says at last. 'I was down on the ground, ready to help if necessary.' He looks away. 'Bastards.'

Zach has never heard Lev swear.

'Who was it?' Zach asks.

After a long silence, Lev indicates that Zach should join him on the sleeping bags.

'Sit down,' Lev says. 'I think it's time I explain a few things to you.'

Chapter 23

By the time they'd reached the cottage, Laura understood about rigor mortis. Zach put both feet on the ground while she eased herself off the motorbike. Not quite suppressing a groan, she stretched, removed her helmet, and took a few stiff, painful steps through the deep snow. Then she noticed that Zach had folded his arms across the handlebars to rest his head, his shoulders sagging with weariness. It had been a long ride, and as they'd ploughed through-sometimes crept through-the blizzard she could feel Zach growing tense, then tenser still. The woodland lane worst of all, there'd been nothing much to do except hang on and will him strength. Will him her trust. Her grandfather, never at a loss for words, never silenced by a strong headwind, never one to miss an opportunity however mundane, would have exhorted her to pray.

She touched Zach's shoulder but he didn't stir.

'Come on, let's go inside.'

He wasn't good with the cold, he'd told her, and it was obvious that he was thoroughly chilled. She raised his head and helped him to remove his helmet. His face was ashen, his pupils dilated, lips cyanic. Had he remembered his serum? Her face close to his, she breathed on his eyes, his cheeks, his lips. His lips, and despite the freezing wind and falling snow, she felt a belly-deep tongue of heat, sudden and sharp, then warmth seeping towards longing to take him in her arms. Perhaps he felt it too, for he drew away and came off the bike like the peel of an apple under a blunt paring knife.

'Should I wheel it into the shed?' she asked.

'I can do it.'

Zach insisted on carrying the saddlebags and his backpack, but left her to lock the shed while he trudged round the cottage to the front door. Once inside, Laura snapped on a torch from several kept on a row of pegs. Zach slumped against the wall and closed his eyes, as if the torch were drawing its energy directly from him.

'Put this on,' she said, handing him one of the thick handknit jumpers which

were as old as Zach himself. After a moment, he straightened and removed his jacket, then stared at his boots till Laura bit back an exasperated snick of her tongue and bent to tug them off. He leaned a hand on her shoulder, then gave her a smile so rare, so different to his usual wry assortment of smiles, so *naked* that her throat clogged, and for the first time she realised what it must cost him to have to stand on his own, always on his own. Don't apologise, she wanted to tell him. But she didn't speak, and he removed his hand; by himself, his snowlogged boots.

Her own ankle was still tender, though bearable. Together they made their way to the kitchen, where Laura propelled Zach into a chair and soon had a lantern glowing snugly. It was a few hours till sunrise.

'It's very tidy,' Zach said.

'My mum comes up regularly. Dirt is an enemy worse than menopause, I reckon. But at least she keeps the pantry well stocked.'

Still shivering, Zach sat quietly while Laura also slipped on one of the woollen jumpers and went back outside in wellies for extra wood to fire up the range. But there was a small bottled-gas cooker as well, and before long they were drinking tea.

'Maybe I'll leave the generator for tomorrow,' Laura said. 'The range ought to give us enough heat for sleeping, though it takes a couple of hours. And there's a wood-burning stove in my parents' bedroom. I'll put you in there.'

'How many bedrooms are there?'

'Four, but they're tiny.'

He snorted. 'This place is a palace.'

'Rubbish. You should see Owen's summerhouse. Pool, sauna, *and* jacuzzi. Boathouse.'

His lips thinned, and he looked away. Hurriedly Laura rose and began unpacking their saddlebags.

'I'll make us something to eat.'

Zach shook his head. 'I'm OK. You go ahead, though.' When she frowned, he added, 'Please. Just show me where I can sleep. But not in your parents' bed.'

'You've got your serum?'

'Yeah.'

'I'll fetch a torch for you.'

'Stay put. I don't need much light. At most a candle.'

Laura's hand hovered over the loaf of dark dense bread Zach had brought, handwrapped in white paper rather than plastic. He ate such odd things, she wondered whether it had something to do with his metabolism. Max consumed huge quantities, but nothing out of the ordinary. As far as she knew ...

'Where do you find this sort of bread?' she asked. 'I've never seen it in the shops.'

'Don't worry, it won't poison you. Or blow up in your hands.'

'You think that's funny?'

The wrapper had unfurled. Zach seemed intent on counting the number of sunflower and sesame seeds on its crust, other kernels that she couldn't identify.

'Sorry,' he said at last. 'Stella bakes it for me.'

'Uses cockroach meal, I expect.'

The range was beginning to radiate some warmth. The hot tea too had helped, Zach's face was already regaining some colour.

*

You hear them creaking like gates to an abandoned property. No trespassing, you tell yourself. But it's too late, their rough-barked limbs are reaching for you, you try to back away but your skin is snagged your hair your breath your

'Laura.'

wake up, you tell yourself, you're dreaming, there's always that moment when you know it's only a dream but you can't you can't they're coming for him *no*

'Laura, wake up.'

She opened her eyes but yew is tenacious. Needles clung to her eyelids, her lips. Like a thick layer of leaf mould, darkness weighted her chest so that it was difficult to breathe. She turned her head first to one side, then the other. The needles, dislodged, slowly drifted back through the gates, which were shutting behind her. Zach, she saw, was bending over her.

'It's OK,' he said. 'Just a nightmare.'

She waited till her heartbeat calmed. 'Was I screaming?'

'Crying out a bit.' He set his candle on the bedside cabinet and sat down on the edge of her bed. 'The explosion?'

In the flickering light she saw the hedges again. She licked her lips, then pushed back the duvet and began to swing her legs to the floor.

'I need a drink,' she said.

'Stay here, I'll fetch a glass of water.'

'No!' She stopped, shocked by her own vehemence, then added in a near whisper, 'Please don't ... I mean, don't ...'

'Get under the covers, it's cold. I'll be right back.'

'Take the torch. It's here somewhere.'

'I don't need it.' He retrieved it from the floor. 'Shall I switch it on for you?'

When she shook her head, he placed it next to the candle and tucked the duvet round her shoulders, his eyes glistening like midnight rain on cobblestones. Barefoot, he slipped from the room, then began a running commentary which she could hear the entire time he was gone. 'I'm in the passage, there's a cold draught, I should have put on some socks, going into the kitchen, I've found a glass, filling it now at the tap ...'

‘I haven’t dreamed about the maze in years,’ she said after she’d drunk most of the water, her hand quite steady.

Zach watched her for a moment, and she could tell that he too was thinking about the jazz club. That he too might not be able to sleep.

‘Do you have nightmares?’ she asked.

‘Are you asking about me? Or all augers?’

‘Stop calling yourself that!’

The candle flickered as his right arm swept out sideways, a gesture that reminded her of a picnicker fending off a wasp. He turned and stared at the flame, the planes of his face cut from granite.

‘You know that Max has nightmares,’ he said.

‘And you?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Have you slept at all? You were so tired.’

‘A few more hours wouldn’t hurt.’ He tucked his hands under his arms. ‘I’ll go back to bed now, if you’re OK.’ He continued to stare at the candle. ‘Unless you’re still nervous. I can stay.’

The silence was as long and taut as the moment just before the starting gun, when you were poised to shatter the water.

‘Zach, I’m not-‘

‘Do you really think I need to force myself on a girl? Or *want* to?’

Laura nearly made a false start, but checked herself. The penalty was disqualification. She shifted towards the wall, then lifted the upper corner of the duvet. ‘If you stop jumping to conclusions, I’d like you to stay. I want both of us to *sleep* without nightmares. There are enough of those lurking underwater.’

‘Underwater?’

‘Never mind. Just blow out the candle and come to bed.’

*

When Laura woke, her first thought was of snow. The light was so milky that she couldn’t tell if her eyes were clouded by sleep or the snowstorm. She raised herself off her pillow to look out the window and only then remembered that Zach was next to her. Only then saw him gazing at her, his eyes warm and newlaid.

‘Morning,’ she said. Cleared her throat. ‘Morning,’ which came out stronger.

He was looking at her with a small child’s look-direct, without artifice, and utterly disconcerting, as if he knew more about you than you yourself. Yet at the same time as unlike a child as she could imagine.

‘Are you sorry?’ Zach asked softly.

‘About what?’

‘About being here.’ His long fingers moved over the duvet. ‘About running off with me.’

‘I haven’t *run off* with you.’ She leaned closer. ‘But if you keep looking at me like that, I might.’

He closed his eyes, but she could still see them.

‘I’m not sorry,’ she said.

She bent forward. Though her lips barely skimmed his eyelids, she could feel them tremble.

When he looked at her again, pressure bloomed in her chest as though she’d been caught in an undertow, unable to surface for air. She struggled to breathe evenly, for her diaphragm had tightened in foreboding; muscle memory.

‘You’re very aroused,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘Zach, I’m not ready to ... It’s not like ... I need to ...’ How could she tell him what she herself only half understood? How could she tell him about Owen?

‘Don’t worry. It doesn’t matter.’

He started to roll away, but she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. She ran a fingertip lightly across his tattoo, then his lips.

‘Don’t,’ he said.

In response she slid back the duvet, lowered the waistband of his boxers, and kissed the bony prow of his hip.

‘Careful,’ he muttered, ‘I can’t-‘

She heard his sharp intake of breath as her tongue touched the corona. He thrust his hands into her hair but otherwise lay quite still until he cried her name, once, hoarsely.

Afterwards they curled together, limbs entwined. Just before Zach drifted off to sleep, he whispered, ‘You needn’t have swallowed.’

‘Now some of your cells will become part of mine. Do you think that makes me a little bit cognoscens?’

*

Several hours later, Zach rose and went to the window.

‘Still snowing,’ he said, ‘though not so heavily.’

‘Are you hungry? Shall I start some breakfast?’

‘Lunch, more like. Soon.’

‘I’d best ring my parents. And get the generator going, so I can charge my mobie.’ She grinned. ‘Even if I keep it switched off. I’ll have to think of an excuse, though, my mum keeps spare chargers here.’

He came back to her side, sat down on the bed.

‘We’ve got a lot to discuss,’ he said.

‘You mean you’re actually going to talk to me?’

He bent to kiss her, and despite the hours of sleep since he’d cleaned his teeth, his mouth tasted wonderful. Then he began to unbutton her pyjama top.

‘I thought you wanted to talk,’ she said.

‘Earlier, you spoke to me,’ He gave her a quirky smile. ‘Now it’s your turn to listen.’

But after a while he leaned back to look at her. ‘What am I doing wrong?’

‘It’s not you.’ She turned her head away, so that he couldn’t see her face.

‘Laura?’

Still staring at the wall, she whispered, ‘Maybe if you were a bit rougher.’

‘How rougher?’

Like some species of jellyfish, her fantasy migrates to the surface mostly at night, or sometimes when Owen is working away at her. Its tentacles, though nearly invisible, have a long reach and deliver a painful sting. She glimpsed them now_._

Zach put a hand on her chin and gently turned her face towards him. She spoke into the underwatery shadows between them.

‘You said it yourself once.’

‘Do you mean *hurt* you?’

‘Something like that.’

‘No. No way.’

*

They ate their meal in silence. As Laura rose from the table to clear her plate,

Zach reached for her arm.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘Please sit down.’

She sat, but at the edge of her chair. ‘If it’s about sex, I guess we’ve made a mistake.’

‘Is that what you really think?’

She didn’t answer.

‘Laura,’ he said softly, ‘it wasn’t a mistake for me.’

‘Even without-?’

‘I’ll never do what you don’t want, or aren’t ready for, no matter what I’d like. But it works both ways. You’ve got to understand that there are some things *I* won’t do.’

She left the dishes on the table, threw on a jacket, and went out to the shed to deal with the generator.

*

Zach was chopping wood. Laura had told him not to bother, there was plenty of fuel, but he’d listened politely and headed for the woodpile. She’d made her phone call, listened politely both to her dad *and* her mum, and after ringing off decided to stop pretending to read and go outside to listen politely to the voice of an axe.

After half an hour of wielding a snow shovel and stamping her feet, she’d had enough. How much would he need to chop for a bonfire big enough to reduce his thoughts to ash? She waited for the right opportunity-no sense adding a gashed foot to their problems-then let loose with a well-packed snowball. The ensuing fight was the best she’d had in years.

‘You play dirty,’ she complained when they’d gone back inside to warm up.

‘Boarding school teaches you that.’

‘You went to a boarding school?’

‘A euphemism.’

‘I’ll fetch my dictionary after tea,’ she said.

‘Come on, dry your hair.’ He tossed her the towel. ‘That’s what the Foundation pretended to be. Still does, I suppose. It wasn’t residential care, because most of us weren’t orphans. It wasn’t a secure unit, because we weren’t mentally ill. And it wasn’t a young offender institution, because we hadn’t committed any crimes. Except the crime of being simus, of course.’

‘How old were you when you went?’

His hesitation lasted no more than a second or two. ‘My turn to cook.’ He headed for the kitchen while Laura yearned for another snowball.

*

‘What did your parents have to say?’ Zach asked.

‘The police want you for questioning.’

‘Another euphemism.’

‘Not according to my dad.’

Zach grinned over his soup spoon. ‘So you do know what the word means.’

‘I’m not a complete idiot.’

Zach put his spoon down. ‘You’re not an idiot at all.’

‘Tell that to my mum.’

Suddenly she was staring into her bowl and blinking back tears. In a moment Zach was at her side.

‘Listen to me, Laura.’ He crouched and tucked a loose strand of her hair behind an ear, then continued to stroke a few imaginary ones into place. ‘The bomb blast was a shock for both of us, and now that I’ve had time to think, I realise all

I've succeeded in doing is make you an accessory.'

'First of all, you didn't make me. And second, how can I be an accessory if you haven't done anything criminal?'

'It's not that simple.'

'Oh yeah? Then explain it to me. For godsake, explain *something* to me.'

He was quiet for a long time, though he didn't remove his hand. Didn't seem to notice that his other hand was also speaking. Pleading.

'I never meant for anyone to die.'

'You're not telling me you *did* have something to do with the bombings after all, are you?'

'Of course not.'

'Then what?'

He rose to his feet and strode the length of the kitchen, where he snatched up a wooden spoon, whipped round, and smashed it against the edge of the worktop.

'I can't live like this any more!' he cried. 'I want a life, not one journey after another into nightmare. They have no idea what it's like. What it does to your mind, your dreams.' With his foot he kicked the splintered pieces of wood aside. 'And wouldn't care if they did.'

Laura had no inkling what Zach meant, but his torment splintered more than wood. Swiftly she went to him. At first his body was remote and wooden, a stranger's, then they were embracing fiercely. There was no gentleness in him now. Together they slammed against the kitchen door, her back catching the handle. She gasped at the pain. His jeans could barely contain him. Yes, she thought. Cunt. 'Tell me I'm a filthy cunt.'

'God no!' He released her, pushed her from him so that she nearly fell. He stepped back, still breathing hard, his face shaved of all expression.

'Zach-'

‘Never!’

He tore open the door, spun out of the cottage, and was away.

*

Without a jacket he wouldn’t be gone long, Laura told herself. And told herself, as darkness fell and it continued to snow.

Chapter 24

‘So explain.’

Zach, of course, should have known that Lev has his own idea of what constitutes an explanation. And certainly should have guessed when told to set down his mug of tea. After that it’s a matter of seconds for Lev to power up his little game. Zach’s protest is strangled mid-breath by a roar of sound, and he whips his head round but the sound is here, within the tent, within him, a swithering tumult within.

too soon, he’s not ready yet

you levellers have no

Zach raises a hand to his temple, trying to sort out the

more time with him, time to

sort out

why the dogs, they’re not

lunging at our wings till

An angry wasp shrills inside Zach’s skull, seethes and buzzes and shrieks, trapped, ricocheting ever louder as it finds no escape from within. ‘Stop,’ he mutters. He’s going to throw up. He swallows, he closes his eyes, he stumbles to his feet.

‘Sit down!’ Lev orders.

The pressure in his head. He can’t bear

Without a thought for the cold he staggers to the entrance and rips open the zip. Peels back his skin.

It’s not the cold that stops him from vomiting, but the shock.

‘Where are we?’ he gasps, as Lev takes his arm and leads him back inside.

‘The first time’s the worst,’ Lev says. ‘Disorienting.’

‘Where are we?’

‘How much maths have they taught you?’ When Zach shakes his head, unable to frame a coherent answer-unable even to recall what they’ve done in the last few lessons-Lev prompts him. ‘What about imaginary numbers?’

‘A classic misnomer,’ Zach says, his distress easing. ‘They’re not really imaginary.’

‘And I’ve already told you, neither is this place.’

*

Zach has never had any doubts about his intelligence, even as a small boy it was his weapon and armour both. *Dumb monkeys*, he’d spit at them till forced to spit blood. Later on, he learned to guard his mouth as well, so effectively that they never even suspected an insult. But dumb monkeys they’ve stayed, a mantra he repeats to himself the way others pray or swear.

‘Do you think we’re stupid?’ he asks Lev.

‘Who’s *we*? Sapiens or cognoscens?’

Zach is silent for a moment.

‘Both, I suppose,’ he answers, reluctantly. Honestly.

He *knew* he’d see that glint in Lev’s eyes, damn him.

‘A few thousand years of philosophy and pure maths and physics and music ought to do it,’ Lev teases. ‘And some other fields whose names you couldn’t pronounce. That’s why I’m so reluctant to explain. *Show rather than tell*, I believe your writers like to say.’

‘You mentioned imaginary numbers, not me.’

‘As an analogy. You can’t count the square root of -1 in the same way you can

count mugs or muggles, but it exists. It's *real*. In your universe you need imaginary numbers to analyse electrical waves, for example, or in quantum mechanics.'

Zach doesn't fancy the sound of *your universe*, and says so.

'Another metaphor.'

'Metaphors are for literature, not science!'

Lev gestures towards the tent closure, his voice crisp. 'The ice is out there. It's real, Zach. Not perhaps the two-cheeseburgers-and-a-coke reality you've grown up with, but real nevertheless. A crossing place between universes may be the easiest way for you to picture it.' A laugh. 'Or training ground.'

The Pace board in Lev's lap emits its own form of laugh, a ripple of UV light which no sapiens would be able to see.

'What else can that thing do?' Zach asks. And immediately hears the opening notes of the *Adagio* from Mozart's clarinet concerto. They expand and fill the tent with warm Aegean blue-the colour he thought lost forever-the wonderful watery timbre of an authentic basset clarinet which he's always longed to own. 'One day,' he said, 'I'll play it for you on a period instrument.' Laura smiled. 'One day, we'll swim there together,' she said.

Nine weeks after writing his only clarinet concerto, Mozart was dead.

Bella lifts her head and whines, a high skirling tone which raises the hairs on the nape of Zach's neck. The blue light fades, and though the tent is battened tight, a seam of cold air slips over his skin as though an unseen door has opened.

'That's enough for now,' Lev says. 'You're getting there.'

'Did you hear it? The clarinet?'

'Not as such, but it's irrelevant. What matters is that *you've* heard it.'

'Don't treat me like an idiot!'

Lev's grin reminds Zach uncomfortably of his own, when listening to his

classmates. ‘If I thought you were an idiot, you wouldn’t be here now.’

‘Yeah, just imagine, I could be cuddled up nice and warm and cosy with someone who thinks I’m a lampshade or a doorknob.’

‘Or an AK-47.’

Lev downs the rest of his tea, then goes to rinse the mug in their washing-up water. Dripping, it dangles from his fingers as he crouches over the bucket, suddenly alert. Bella too raises her head and cocks her ears. Despite his excellent hearing, Zach discerns nothing except the susurrus of snow against the walls of the tent; even the wind has ceased its vicious lashings. Nor are there any untoward shadows which threaten the mellow light from their little stove.

Still, there is something insistent about the near silence, which begins to stretch and stretch and *stretch* like a balloon, till you become disproportionately anxious that it will pop-for it to pop. Just before Zach can no longer hold his breath, Lev snaps his wrist to shake out the excess water and lays the mug upside down near the stove. He turns to Zach.

‘It’s time to leave. I *discouraged* the first lot of them, but they’ll be back.’

‘Are you planning to tell me who they are? And maybe-just maybe, mind you-why?’

‘I could tell you they’re fallen angels. I could tell you they’re winged humans from another universe. I could tell you they’re the incarnation of some madman’s agenda. Or your race’s overweening will to power. Which version do you prefer?’

‘How about the *truth*? Frot it, they’ve slaughtered the dogs!’

‘You’re going to have to learn to make your own truth, Zach. That’s why I’m here.’

Chapter 25

‘It’s getting worse, and we’d bloody well better take some sort of action!’

Pelly sipped from his glass of sparkling water to keep from smiling. Slade was competent enough as a research head, but the squat toad had no clue about PR, and very little about crisis management. Must be fifty-three, fifty-four already. There was no way he’d ever make it in politics-no charisma, no mystique, no animal magnetism. He could manipulate terrified rabbits like Litchfield, but pit him against someone who understands market dynamics, and he’d go down faster than the crows they’d shot as kids. It would be like asking your grandmother to pitch the latest condom flavours to the rainbow generation. Come to think of it, his, Pelly’s, 78-year-old granny could probably do a better job of it than Slade.

The meeting wasn’t going well. No meetings called for Monday morning at eight went well. Those who were expected to attend usually fortified themselves in their private offices beforehand-except for Huang and his dour p.a., of course-Pelly’s *choix du jour* washed down with a hazelnut grande, extra cream no sugar. And when traffic was godawful, with a slurp of water from the tap, having just made it past security at a run. ‘Where’s the fire, Mr Pelly? Left your secretary on simmer?’ Wanker could only get away with sexist remarks like that because he was nearing retirement.

Pelly glanced round the boardroom while several people shifted in their chairs. Slade was always a model of rectitude, never so much as a *hell* or *damn* out of him. Even Huang, inevitably deadpan, blinked several times in rapid succession.

‘Perhaps more surveillance devices?’ Jessica de la Croix suggested. She crossed her legs, and normally the hiss of her sheer black tights compensated for the commonplaces she uttered, the utter fatuousness of her proposals. There was always one at executive level-somebody smart and very hungry, but without the least soupcon of imagination. Even Slade could do better than CCTV, for Christ’s sake. But Jessica was an asset to Fulgur, and Pelly knew it. Huang knew it. Hell, Fulgur himself probably knew it (and there *were* those rumours, subterranean as termites, about a radical project he’d initiated before his sudden death). Unless Legal Affairs poached Addison from Cortech, they’d find no one in the entire country with as comprehensive knowledge of international

corporate law as Jessica. Sometimes Pelly wondered whether a near photographic memory commandeered too many brain cells or synapses or whatever, so that not enough were left over for creative thinking. She was a great fuck, though, and absolutely as discreet as her profession required.

At a signal, Huang's p.a. clicked through the next slides in the presentation. The images were cleverly arranged. (What else? Pelly himself had done it.) The latest bombing incident, first from a distance, then closer and closer shots, till they saw only a corpse ... then parts of a corpse ... then flesh that could have been an abstract mural ... then bright gore. The sequence interspersed with graffiti in bright gory colours, everywhere in the city, and spreading like a virus: *fuck augers, kill the Fulgur transfucks, Fulgur hires terrs, bomb Fulgur not babies.*

'As you can see,' Huang said, 'we have a situation.'

'Do we really need to worry about some street vandals?' Claire Murphy asked. Most of the others nodded, and the new blimpish bloke with the beard that didn't quite conceal his scars-on loan from Jo'burg, supposed to be some sort of genius with net space-muttered 'storm in a teacup' under his breath. Obviously one of those pathetic sods who could copulate with the cyber world, but not the real one.

Lopez sat up from his disarming slouch and indicated with a flick of a finger that he'd like to speak. Nobody could ignore those brazen eyes. He'd have made a formidable journalist, even Pelly would give him that, the sort that smiled as he severed your vocal cords with a mellifluous phrase. It was rumoured the Brazilian commanded seven or eight languages; though Pelly's own school Mandarin was a bit rusty, just last week he'd overheard Lopez discussing the latest provincial poetry with Huang, or maybe it was the latest provincial elections. Currently Human Resources, and one of the youngest team members.

Pelly caught Kantor's eye, the glint in it. This would be good.

Lopez indicated the screen, and they all studied it once more. A caricatured simu with the ubiquitous Fulgur two-headed dragon emblazoned on his chest, wearing a lit bomb like a cap or turban on his head.

'I don't believe we should minimise the potential of underground movements.' Golden Boy's English was perfect, unaccented. 'History has repeatedly shown that they can be very potent indeed.'

Slade reasserted himself. 'Fabio's quite right to be concerned about the growing unrest. Never ignore the grassroots, I always say. These thugs may start with graffiti, but barricades and Molotov cocktails and burning effigies aren't far behind.' He tapped a forefinger against the side of his nose, a sure sign of an impending witticism. 'I daresay we might find these *artists* jobs right here at Fulgur-in media or PR, say-where their talents could be put to productive use.'

'With all due respect, Russell'-there was very little humility in the smile Lopez directed at Slade-'I fear this may be a bit more serious than a few scrawled slogans. And already, at least in part, an internal problem.' His smile broadened. 'A Human Resources problem, you might say.'

He had them now, of course. Huang nodded to his secretary, who switched to a blank screen and took a seat.

'Please continue, Mr Lopez,' Huang said.

Surreptitiously, Keith activated the recorder function on his wrist. Lopez was a daredevil, but reliable; these Insec types were one of Randall's smartest moves. Still, good security work *never* overlooked any possibility, no matter how remote. And Huang actually believed he was above such measures. Overbearing Asians, think they run everything. It amused Randall to let them switch off in-house surveillance, but he wouldn't be satisfied with a transcript; he always insisted on replaying the sessions for himself. With the new sensors, you could see the slightest twitch, hear the slightest mutter; just about smell their sweat. Orientals never seemed to sweat.

'I've had reports that some of our own employees are unhappy with the divisions which rely heavily on cognoscens talent,' Lopez said. 'Very unhappy indeed, in certain cases.'

'Rumours, Fabio?' Jessica asked.

'I'm not going to insult your intelligence by repeating that old chestnut *where there's smoke* etc., but I will say that I'm fully capable of distinguishing between substantiated and unsubstantiated information,' he said, his voice smooth as vanilla ice cream. The cholesterol hit came later. 'While nothing is gained by being unduly alarmist, we can't disregard the long history of fabricated terrorist attacks, often for political gain.'

‘Such as?’ Mfana asked, pawing his beard. He was always touchy about his homeland.

‘Such as the burning of German Reichstag in 1933. Such as the self-inflicted GEL epidemic in the U.S. in the late 90s. Such as what we may be witnessing right now.’

‘No one has ever established that the outbreak of GEL was a propaganda tool,’ Jessica said.

‘It’s unlikely that it will go so far, Jessica, but should you ever need airtight documentary evidence for court, Dr Huang knows that he can rely on my sources,’ Fabio said. ‘The Purists may not be outlawed, but some of their activities are at best questionable, and possibly downright criminal.’ His eyes rested for a moment on Keith. ‘Fulgur can hardly desire or afford such employees.’

‘Isn’t that a matter for Internal Security, or at least the police?’ Keith asked with a touch of belligerence.

Fabio permitted himself another smile. ‘It’s the responsibility of Human Resources to cooperate fully with government. We all know that the simus are beginning to agitate for a new Human Rights Act.’-a sullen mutter of ‘depends on how you define human’ from Keith, largely ignored-‘It’s in fact Fulgur’s *express policy* to support them in this endeavour-within the limits of the law, of course. I liaise regularly with the authorities, who keep a careful eye on simus and Purists both.’

‘Not careful enough, it seems, when people are being blown up,’ Jessica said.

‘Jessica’s right, there are simus, and simus,’ Keith said. ‘My son Tim’s in a couple of classes with one of ours. This Zach is a real troublemaker. Breaks every rule he can, and then some. You know how it is, kids hear things. At least one incident with the police already, a lot of earlier stuff that’s sealed. Savage stuff, too. And Tim told me our prize simu was there at the club when the bomb went off. He disappeared right after his date was blown to bits. Hasn’t pitched up at school since, the police have been questioning all the kids and teachers. Damned suspicious, isn’t it? Anybody else-any decent human being-would’ve stayed and done what he could to help. Like Tim and his mates did. One of their friends lost a leg, another-Litchfield’s girl-has been so traumatised that her

parents have had to send her away for treatment.'

'How sweet. A Purist in our midst,' Mfana said rather sourly.

'Purist isn't a dirty word!' Keith said. 'I'm not a party type, but if someone talks sense, I listen.' He swept his arm in a wide circle, nearly overturning Pelly's glass of water. 'And so should you. Fulgur needs its simus, but not the dangerous ones-the aberrant ones.' His lips were moist, as though he couldn't swallow fast enough. 'The devis.'

'The law makes provision for non-sapiens castration,' Jessica said. 'In severe cases of antisocial personality disorder, particularly uncontrollable aggression.'

At once talk broke through the surface calm of the meeting, blisters of claim and counterclaim in a seething pool of verbal mud. Clay and mud have been used since ancient times to draw impurities from the body. Fabio kept his eyes on Claire, whose husband's 'snog blog' was beginning to stray from the indiscreet to the inflammatory. Her salary was decent, but it was her husband's network of sites which gave them the income to finance the country house, the carbon exemptions, the nanny, the holidays abroad; holidays, according to Mfana, which afforded breathtaking views of Table Mountain. A sociologist with a background in political and economic theory-and a father who had one time been Deputy Minister of Finance-she was something of an anomaly at Fulgur, though her work in building virtual environments was considered exemplary. Most men would find her sleek, dark elegance attractive; Fabio found her feline. The sort of woman whose nails his mother had manicured. Nevertheless, the sort of woman who had her uses. Mfana was a frequent guest in her home.

Claire said very little, her attention following remark to heated remark. One opal fingernail punctuated the corner of her mouth whenever Keith spoke.

Huang raised a hand. 'Ladies, gentlemen, please. We're here to formulate a plan of action with regard to the escalating defamation of Fulgur and its cognoscens programmes, not to debate human rights issues. In a corporation of our breadth, the whole political spectrum-the *legal* political spectrum, I hardly need say-is bound to be represented. In fact, this is entirely desirable, hence the Board's latest directives.' He glanced openly at his wrister. 'Now are there any relevant proposals?'

Pelly squirmed like a schoolboy with the right answer. It was never any different

at these meetings-the same few vying for approval; most of the others hoping not to be called on to recite.

‘It won’t be too difficult to mount what we in PR like to call a *raid*-TV spots, net saturation, a decent song or two (I’ve got just the rapper in mind). Something along the lines of the classic *black is beautiful* model,’ Pelly said. ‘And for the more conservative, some well-documented material about how the simus are helping with research into psychotic disorders, intelligence enhancement, that sort of thing.’ He grinned, entranced by his own cleverness. ‘Maybe even an announcement that Fulgur is near a breakthrough on the neuropsychology of terrorism.’

‘There’s no such thing.’ Kantor rarely spoke at all, whether in a boardroom, his office, or a lab, though everyone knew his work on metapsychology was crucial to far more than the rehabilitation project. Over lunch, however, he’d been known to say *too salty today* or *Geraldine replaced the light pad in the bathroom last night*. ‘Only fools would believe there’s a clear-cut terrorist psychopathology. Even multidisciplinary research has yielded imperfect understanding of what is a very complex phenomenon.’

‘No problem,’ Pelly said. ‘I’ll need fifteen, twenty minutes of your time, say, to get down the key concepts.’

Kantor examined the biro in his hand as though it might write his next research paper on its own. Then with a small shrug he looked towards Huang for help.

‘Thank you, Mr Pelly, I have no doubts whatsoever in your ability to draft an effective campaign despite the awkward propensities of the more scientifically inclined members of our client base,’ Huang said.

Pelly beamed, which decided Huang. The man would have to be replaced. Despite his extensive network of media contacts and decided PR skills-he’d handled that last press conference with both boyish charm and finesse-he lacked the necessary subtlety for this particular division. Perhaps a place could be found for him in Business Communications. Even better-Multimedia Entertainment, which would suit his flamboyant talents. Huang would have a word with Maurice. ‘A lateral move, with much better opportunities for advancement. Someone like you is wasted in Neurocognition.’ It was always bad practice to offend PR people, you never knew where they might turn up a few years down

the road. And Fulgur policy had always been clear-employee loyalty paid for itself many times over in increased efficiency, word-of-mouth marketing, fewer security risks.

‘Mr Lopez?’ Huang could see the amused lift to a corner of the man’s mouth, the almost sleepy crease to his eyelids. Not for the first time, Huang wondered if there were something in Lopez’s genetic atlas which didn’t appear in his records. Fulgur’s clearance procedure was exacting, but there were always ways to hide secrets-or aberrations. Especially for someone in Lopez’s position. Perhaps Manu could have another look. He was very meticulous, very discreet. Very loyal.

‘I’m certain Jim will mount an outstanding PR offensive, but it would be prudent to fight the problem on several fronts,’ Lopez said.

‘And you have a suggestion?’ Huang asked.

‘Oh yes, I’ve got a suggestion. A rather radical suggestion.’

‘Then perhaps you’ll be kind enough to share it with the team.’

‘Naturally. We’ll use one of our own simus-this Zach will be the perfect choice-as bait to flush out any radical activists. And not only in our own ranks.’

‘How?’ Kathy asked bluntly. ‘Some kind of undercover-‘ A grating American accent. With bleached hair the colour of greasy chips and florid make-up to match, Kathy had one of the most astute minds in the room. And *two* doctorates, one in mathematics, one in biological engineering. ‘-undercover operation? Spying, in other words?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Then what?’

‘Mr Huang will confirm that Fulgur is prepared to commit a certain amount of its resources to supporting the fledgling Janus party.’

‘Shrewd move,’ Claire said. ‘Judicious.’

‘A bunch of simu misfits, plus a few teenage hangers-on!’ Keith exclaimed.

‘Hardly that,’ Fabio said mildly. ‘It’s inevitable that simus want a voice; their own representation.’

‘What have the Janus got to do with our problem?’ Jessica asked.

‘If we agree on this step’-Huang inclined his head a fraction-‘I think I may be able to persuade Zach to join. He’s exactly what they’re lacking-someone to rally round. A leader.’

‘How will that rid us of any terrs?’ Pelly asked. ‘Besides, from what Keith has said, you’ve got to admit it sounds like our Zach is one himself.’

‘A risk-taker, yes, maybe even something of a rebel, but no terrorist. I’ve scrutinised his profile and would stake my professional reputation on his innocence. But he’s very articulate, very charismatic, very uncompromising. He’ll tread on a lot of toes-the more, the better.’ He glanced for a moment at Mfana. ‘Using provocation as a political tool has been around for a good long time. And even school children know how to needle someone till they lose it.’

‘I don’t like it. He’s going to be in a precarious position,’ Kathy said. ‘A potentially lethal position.’

‘The police and Internal Security will be happy to cooperate with Fulgur if it means apprehending those responsible for the recent spate of bombings. They’ll keep an eye on Zach. As I will.’

Huang’s gaze circled the table, resting for a fraction of a second on Slade’s drumming fingers before returning to the American. ‘Unfortunately, Dr Shriver, we’re sometimes called upon to sacrifice the interests of an individual for the good of society as a whole.’ There was no mistaking the note of regret in his voice. Nor the faint smile on his lips, the first this morning.

Slade left off drumming to thrust his head forward. ‘Litchfield claims Zach is *virtually* indispensable to the rehab programme’-a modest chuckle at his own pun-‘but I don’t buy it. As far my department is concerned, a good simu serves Fulgur in any way necessary. You’ve got my vote.’

‘And you know what? We’ll sell it as community service,’ Pelly added.

*

‘Stupid fool, do you want to kill yourself?’ Laura asked as she heaped all the blankets she could find on top of Zach, who lay in front of the fire.

‘That might be the easiest solution.’

Despite the hot shower and even hotter drink, he was still shivering uncontrollably. After a moment’s reflection, Laura dragged off her clothes and dropped them onto the floor behind them.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Shut up and make room for me.’

‘I don’t think this is a good idea.’

‘If you imagine I’m about to service you, you’re sadly mistaken.’

The seal pendant gleaming between her breasts, she slid beneath the covers. Her skin radiated brazen heat, like a brazier on a windy beach filled with fiercely glowing charcoal, and ignoring his protests, she stretched herself the length of his body and reached under his tracksuit to rub his back, his flanks, his buttocks with both hands. Though it took a while for the trembling to cease, he soon warmed.

‘Well?’ she asked with a mischievous smile.

‘A purely physical reaction.’

‘What a shame. I actually thought you might like me a little bit.’

It was his turn to tell her to shut up.

Later she brought them bowls of pasta, and they ate the garlicky meal on the floor without talking much. There was even some grated cheese to sprinkle over the sauce, and Laura finished with a few spoonfuls directly from the tin.

‘It’s the country air,’ she said. ‘Always makes me hungry.’

The roguish note in her voice went unnoticed. Zach set his plate aside and hugged his knees, staring at his own thoughts. After a short silence he spoke

guardedly, 'I've decided to go back tomorrow.'

Laura rose and carried their dishes to the kitchen. Despite her best efforts, the washing-up took less than a quarter of an hour. She swept the floor. Mugs of tea occupied her for another five minutes. Finally, she found some candles and a packet of biscuits, added them to the tray, and returned to find Zach in the same position, his eyes held by the fire.

'Please don't be racked,' he said as she set the tray down before him.

Laura fitted the candles into holders on the couch table and lit them.

'Look, Laura, what choice do I really have?'

She moved to the window, where the flames of candle and fire seemed imprisoned in the pane, caught like living butterflies under glass. She admonished herself not to cry-in the wild they would have soon perished, their fragile wings and lush colours reduced to ashen remains. She laid her hand on the glass. It was cold on her skin.

'The roads are probably still blocked,' she said.

'It's stopped snowing, just about. The main roads, at least, will be clear.'

The tea was getting cold. Laura went to the tray and knelt, but picked up her mug without drinking. Zach watched her as she gazed into its depths. The fire hissed and crackled from time to time, the cherrywood still a bit green though very aromatic-almost overpowering.

'There's no place else you can go?' she asked at last.

'Another country, you mean?'

'Yeah, maybe.'

He shook his head. 'Fulgur has a long reach. And then there's the serum. Without a job, I couldn't afford black market prices for long.'

'There's *vending* in it?'

He laughed without much mirth. ‘Worth far more than heroin. With so few of us, the street market’s very limited, and Fulgur’s got the monopoly on manufacture.’

‘If I spoke to my dad ...’ Her voice trailed off, it was too ridiculous even to contemplate.

Zach took her hand and turned it over as if he were studying her palm, her lifeline. When he raised it to his lips, she looked away. The expression in his eyes reminded her of an incident she hadn’t thought of in ages. One spring when the nights were still cold Max had found three tiny unfledged birds on the ground, next to them a nest which had obviously tumbled from the hawthorn. Max wanted to take the birds inside and care for them overnight, but her dad had insisted on replacing the nest. ‘The parents will be searching for them.’ Next morning Max had gone out just after dawn and brought her the lifeless, milk-white little things, huddled together in the nest, bones folded under their skin and heads way too big for their bodies. Though he hadn’t cried, his eyes had been lost inside his face the way colour is lost inside a drizzle.

‘Max needs me,’ Zach said.

Laura jerked her hand away. ‘A lot of good you’ll do him if some thugs get you first!’

‘I’ve been thinking about it. I might move into housing for a while.’

‘Dragonhill?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I thought you don’t trust Fulgur.’

‘I don’t, but they won’t dispense with me just yet.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘A successful business looks after its assets. I’m pretty much the best they’ve got.’ There was no arrogance in his voice, rather a weary resignation.

A long silence before she dared to whisper, ‘And what about us?’

His answer was to fetch his clarinet.

And when he played for her, Laura couldn't tell if he'd opened a sealed casket of jewels or frail ash-white bones.

*

Next morning Zach rose just after dawn and dressed quickly in the cold.

'Did you hear the hooting at night?' Laura asked. 'We even get Snowy Owls sometimes when they migrate this far south. Max likes to imitate their calls.' Max, with his first pair of binoculars. Max, searching the net for toxicity reports on birdseed. 'You'd think he was talking to them, asking about their lives in the Arctic.' Maybe the reason he loved animals so much was that he *couldn't* hear them.

'Yeah, I heard them.' Zach picked up her jumper from the floor and shook it out. 'Want some tea?' he asked, draping the jumper over a chair near the window. 'I'm going to make a pot, then go for a walk.'

'Why so early?' He hadn't slept well; several times at night his restlessness had woken her.

'I need to clear my head.'

She saw his face and sat up in bed. 'Stop blaming yourself.' When he turned away, she hesitated for a long moment before asking, 'Zach, who's Ben?'

He appeared not to have heard. The remains of their late-night sandwiches lay on a plate near the bed, mostly the hard crusts she'd left from Stella's dark bread. It gratified Laura to break this, one of her mum's strictest rules-though of course there were plenty of rules, all of them strict, all of them demented. But food on the floor was about as grievous a transgression as unnatural carnal sins. Dropping crumbs was worse than dropping your knickers.

Zach scooped up the plate, then went to the window and threw it open. After tossing out the crusts, he balanced the plate on the window ledge and stood with his back to the room, as though watching for the morning's first birds. Within a short while he began to shiver, and Laura wrapped the blankets tighter round her shoulders, though the fresh air smelled vibrant with promise; a new day.

‘Zach?’

He turned round, hugging himself, and Laura understood then that the open window was a stratagem to disguise the reason for his shivering.

‘Don’t you want to tell me about Ben?’ she asked gently.

‘Which Ben do you mean? There’s a couple at school ...’

Did he think her a simpleton? ‘Sometimes at night you cry out his name.’ She heard the note of irritation in her voice and held out a hand. ‘Come on, it’s freezing. Shut the window and get back under the blankets.’

As he moved to close the window, his arm caught the plate and it fell to the floor with a clatter but without breaking. Zach picked it up, stared at it for a few seconds, then all at once pitched it outside and slammed the window so hard that Laura feared the pane would shatter.

‘Christ, what a perfect birthday present,’ he said.

‘It’s your birthday?’

‘Carla’s.’ A bitter laugh. ‘I asked her out to *celebrate* her twenty-first.’

‘I should have known you’d like older women.’

‘She’s dead!’ he snapped.

Her fingernails digging into a forearm under the duvet, she couldn’t believe she’d said that. When would she finally learn to think before twatting off?

‘Look,’ he said after a moment, ‘something tells me they planted the explosive on her-in her bag, maybe.’

‘It was an evening bag-very small.’

Another girl would have understood the significance of Laura’s powers of observation, but to her relief, Zach, in a typically laddish manner, marked only her technical ignorance.

‘That’s no problem these days. You can put a powerful bomb into a pen, a tube

of lipstick.'

'Is it possible she-' She stopped, reluctant to spell it out.

'Carla? A suicider?' The suggestion was so far-fetched that he kept his temper. 'Even I'm a more likely candidate.' He turned back to the window, breathed on the glass, and began tracing patterns with a fingertip in the condensation. Her parents hadn't bothered with the latest glazing for the cottage. 'My escape from hypertech,' her dad had said.

'Then it's not your fault, is it? If you're right about Carla, she was probably picked at random-any simu would have done.'

'Yeah, you lot can't tell us apart anyway.' At the sound of her response, part snort and part squawk, he left off doodling and faced her. 'Laura, simus can't keep taking this stuff. I made a mistake by running away, I wasn't thinking straight. It's never a good idea to underestimate your enemy. These people *plan* their strategy. I'm convinced I was supposed to die in the blast. But now they'll play it for all its worth. The only way to prove I'm not an inhuman monster-we're not-is to go back and fight.'

'But why you? Because of some solidarity work, Nigel's flash posters? A blog campaign doesn't make you a terr!'

He shrugged. 'People are beginning to take notice.'

'Then why not hide the bomb in something of yours?'

'I'm a lot more careful than Carla would have been.'

'She was working with you?' Hoping this was true, ashamed of hoping, and hoping even more that nothing in her face would betray her. She was good with a casual tone, but sometimes at the expense of her expression. How did actors manage to concentrate on everything at once?

'Ironic, isn't it? Carla was about as apolitical as you can get. She was studying to become a dentist, for godsake.' His morose smile leaked around the edges. 'She even *liked* cleaning teeth.'

Laura wrapped herself in a blanket and went to him. For a few minutes they

stood quietly together, their breath fogging the windowpane. They could have been two children looking into a picture book. Out into a enchanted tableland of snowy linen and silver and crystal, just beginning to be tipped by light.

‘It’s so beautiful, like a fairytale,’ Laura said.

‘Not the Snow Queen, I hope.’

*

In her dream she was swimming in a sea of light. Slowly she awakened, or half awakened, to the certainty she’d just clambered into a boat, which rocked slightly under her weight. Water ran from her hair, and for a few seconds she closed her eyes again, rocked and floated, rocked, trying to recapture the ripples, the eddy and spume of her dream, the tendrils of glossy black seaweed. Then she realised that the entire room was submerged in dazzling sunlight, pouring through the window, through her pores-transforming her eyelids into panes of skin. Yawning, she sat up and stretched. What time was it? The wooden floorboards gleamed as though freshly burnished, a tender black hair floated in the pool of light warming Zach’s pillow, she must have slept for hours.

Abruptly she pushed back the covers.

‘Zach?’ she called out on her way to the kitchen. At the threshold she stopped, began to giggle. Across the floor lay a trail of footprints cut from white paper, a stack of which was always kept on the living room bookshelf for homework and scribbling. On every footprint he’d drawn a bright red big toenail, each in a different shape-square, triangle, rhomboid, heart. The trail led from the kitchen table through the living room into the hall; the last footprint was fixed under the front door, so that Laura could only see its heel. Enjoying the anticipation-prolonging it-she skipped back to the kitchen, drank some cold tea from the teapot on the table, and went to get dressed.

His clarinet case toppled over when she opened the front door, and she righted it with surprise. Was there some fundi reason he’d put it on the porch? Something to do with acoustics? It was one of several sturdy plastic models he owned for difficult conditions, and typical for him, a vintage instrument: a Bundy, wasn’t it? Wooden clarinets tend to crack in the cold, he’d said.

She didn’t have far to search. Yesterday she’d been yearning to make a

snowman; this morning Zach had built one near the path she'd cleared. But not a snow_man-_a crow about the height of a fair-sized dog, a lab or collie. And in its beak was wedged a paper cylinder.

Laura unrolled the piece of paper. It contained a hand-drawn music staff, some notes. Across the top Zach had written in ink: *Clarinet Sonata in E Major, For Laura*. And at the bottom: *to be continued ...*

It took her a few moments to recognise what she'd probably known all along- she'd better carry a ball of stout twine for the labyrinths into which Zach's mind would lead her.

'You crazy wonderful idiot,' she whispered.

Back in the house she nibbled on a hunk of cheese and an apple while she assembled the ingredients for scones. Plenty of homemade jam on the pantry shelves, packets and packets of longlife cream and milk. No matter how much she resented her mum's obsessions, there were times when they could be useful. As Laura dumped flour into a bowl and added baking powder and salt, her mind sifted through possible objects to leave for Zach as a reply to his message. She poured in cream, then stirred. Too thin, the dough looked like soft drifts of snow, her wooden spoon leaving sleigh tracks for the love-hungry to follow. That was it! Dropping the spoon with a grin, she wiped her hands on her jeans and went to rummage in Max's room. He never threw anything away; his old colouring books ought to be there somewhere.

In fact, it didn't take her long to find the yellowing book. Laura ripped out a picture of the haughty Snow Queen on her sledge, which Max had coloured mostly in blues and silver, with odd touches-long black fingernails, a purple shadow along one cheek and her throat. With a red felt tip Laura scribbled across the top: *Come inside, she can't have you!* Then she rolled it up, slipped an elastic round it, and dashed outside without bothering with boots and jacket to lever it firmly into the snowcrow's beak.

The scones were cooling on a rack when she heard the sound of the clarinet. Again she tore through the cottage and yanked open the door. There he was in the snow, nose and cheeks reddened, clarinet case slung over his shoulder by a strap, eyes golden with laughter, playing. A madman.

When he saw her, he launched into something soulful, and she stood hugging

herself till he'd finished.

'It's wonderful,' she said. 'What is it?'

'It's by O.V. Wright, an American who died in the late 70s. The usual story-drugs, hard life. Some of his stuff really hurts. I've got a compilation of his songs back at the flat, if you want to listen to them.' His smile was hard to interpret. 'You've still got the key.'

'I'll wait for you.'

He tucked the clarinet under his arm and picked his way towards her, the sheet from the colouring book poking out of his pocket along with his gloves.

'What's this one called?' she asked.

'*We're Still Together.*'

*

'When did you realise that Max was a simu?' Laura asked, her mouth full of scone. '*How* did you realise?'

'It's really your brother's story,' Zach said, then ducked. 'OK, OK.' He licked whipped cream from his forefinger and took a long sip of tea. 'Delicious scones.'

'And jam. And cream. *And* tea. When you've run out of stuff to compliment, you might try answering my question.'

God, but could he smile.

'For a long time-months probably-I'd noticed Max watching me at school, but at first I thought it was ...' Zach fished a stray hair from his plate. 'You know.'

'You're too prickly. Sometimes it's just ordinary curiosity.'

Zach studied the hair for a moment before flicking it to the floor. 'Max hasn't told you about the mute swan?'

'Another animal he's rescued?'

‘Not quite.’

Zach prodded a crumb with a fingertip, then skated it round his plate like a reluctant novice with wobbly ankles. Laura waited, silence her sharpest blade. Max had gone through an ice hockey phase when he was about nine or ten, reading everything he could find, dreaming of games and leagues and stardom-or had he? Once she would have sworn she understood him through and through, his skull as transparent as a new skin of ice on water-only the faintest refraction to distort his inner depths. The ice hadn't merely thickened; now coated with frost, it had become a half-silvered surface which transformed the entire world into his personal spyroom. Except, of course, that it had always been-in her own blindness she hadn't noticed.

Waiting, Laura imagined ice-skating with Zach on the lake, rolling the huge round base of a snowman, heating the sauna and rolling in the snow ... Was there any way to keep him here for another day? Round and round her eyes chased his finger chased his thoughts. Laura, someone called. She jerked round, the sudden movement slicing into Zach's reverie.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Nothing. I thought I heard a voice.’

He listened carefully, then shook his head. ‘Nobody's there.’ Though she tried to keep her face blank, he reached over and took her hand. ‘What's wrong?’

She shrugged, but his silence could be very insistent.

‘It's nothing, really,’ she said. ‘Just sometimes, for a moment, I hear my mother.’

‘Yelling?’

‘I guess.’

This time he traced a finger along her lifeline, so delicately that she shivered at the sensation. It felt as though he were writing on her skin with a ghostly quill and invisible ink.

‘She doesn't own you, Laura.’

Laura smiled, a decent effort. There was no point explaining that she could still hear the echo, as eerie as Max's mimic hootings of an owl. And was afraid she always would.

'You were going to tell me about the swan.'

His fingers went back to crumbling fragments of scone.

'Zach?'

'Max had never heard the voice of an animal before. It scared him. *Terrified* him. I came home to find him huddled against the door to my flat, but it took hours before he'd speak.'

'When was this?'

'Not long after the adder bite.' Zach spoke evenly, she couldn't tell if his gargoyle grin concealed a deep-running hurt. 'Just as well, otherwise your parents might have noticed something was wrong with Max.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Try not to blame your brother. It's been very difficult for him, and secrecy becomes a habit.'

'You ought to know.' When he looked away, she felt ashamed. Like poorly controlled blade edges, conversations with him always seemed to skate off in unwelcome directions. 'Listen, I'm sorry. All I meant was it's my parents, not Max, who'd be at fault. My mum sees only what she wants to see, and as for my dad-' She stopped short, annoyed to find herself on the verge of a rant. It was time to resurface the rink. 'Please, let's start over. What happened with the swan?'

'Max was coming home from football practice and made a detour through the docklands.'

'That's mad!'

'Yeah, well. He wanted to check up on an injured water vole he'd been nurturing. He was afraid the reed bed might have frozen over.'

‘Don’t voles hibernate in winter?’

‘Not according to Max. They burrow into mudbanks, even under the snow.’

‘What about the swan?’

‘I’m coming to it. Max located his vole, fed it, tossed some stale bread to a group of swans in the river. Unfortunately, he doesn’t have the heightened acoustic range of most simus, so the blisters were able to sneak up on him.’

‘Who?’

‘Simu slang. People who feed on kids. Not simus, obviously, otherwise he’d have sensed them.’

‘Pervy types?’

‘No. More like hucks who vend fresh meat to the highest bidder. Usually to China, where they’re still exotic.’

‘Shit. What happened?’

‘The swan happened. A big brute of a cob, Max said. Told Max to throw himself to the ground, then flew in hissing like Vengeance itself. A few seconds later, several other swans joined the attack. Their wings are terribly powerful.’

Laura began to laugh. ‘I don’t believe it! Makes a good story, though. What did Max actually do? In football it’s his imagination, and his snark, that make him so brilliant. He’s always pulling something unexpected. Good thing there aren’t any rules banning telepaths from playing.’

‘If you’d seen Max, you wouldn’t-’ Zach broke off and tilted his head.

‘What?’

He held up a hand, but after a few seconds flipped back his hair in a gesture that in fact reminded Laura of her grandfather, who kept his elegant silverwhite coif just a touch overlong. ‘Like a mistress,’ he liked to quip. Once Laura had overhead her Aunt Alice muttering vicious remarks to her sisters, though neither of them would have dared to say anything to their father openly. Otherwise there

was nothing at all similar about Zach and Granddad, except perhaps their startling intelligence, their musicality. And their fondness for Max.

‘My turn to be hearing things,’ Zach said.

‘Not any swans, I trust?’

‘Look, it’s not like Max claims they have human language.’

‘He’s always had a special rapport with animals. You mean he *hears* their thoughts?’

‘No, he doesn’t. I’m not sure it’s even possible cross-species. It would be interesting to see what would happen with an alien intelligence. *If* any are out there, which seems unlikely.’

‘But you said-‘

‘-that the swan spoke to him. OK, that was the abridged version.’

‘And the whole text?’

‘Fulgur has been dabbling in some very freaky, very secret, and very illegal transgenic engineering.’

Laura stared at Zach while she worked out whether you could possibly adapt a human nervous system for a bird. ‘Where would the brain fit?’

‘It depends on how you define brain.’

‘Could you please try to make sense?’

‘Your dad could tell you a lot more about it than me. I’m not privy to that kind of information. But piecing together what I know about neurochip development, and what Max learned from the swan, it appears that Fulgur is playing with uploading consciousness in different ways.’

‘AI, you mean?’

‘Not exactly.’ He hesitated, and Laura could see he was reluctant to continue.

‘Look, I’m not supposed to talk about what I do there.’

‘You don’t seem particularly loyal to Fulgur.’

‘They pay the bills.’ He gestured angrily. ‘They *own* us.’

‘There’s got to a be way to do something about the serum. I’ve been netting round. Isn’t a monopoly on certain kinds of medicine illegal? Under the Essential Drugs Act?’

‘Yeah, except who wants to bring a test case?’ His laugh was short, and bitter. ‘For a handful of freaks? And anyway, challenging Fulgur is never easy-or particularly healthy.’

‘Aren’t you overdoing the sinister stuff just a bit?’

‘Then ask your dad what goes on when Fulgur exercises its simu option. Or better yet, what goes on when someone refuses to accept the contract. Ask him why he’s kept Max’s secret for so long.’

‘Because my mum-‘ she began, then stopped. ‘God, how stupid of me, I should have realised, Dad must have faked Max’s gatlax.’

They were silent, both aware of the consequences of such a stratagem. Only someone who was very desperate, or utterly mad, skirted public exposure in quite that way. There had been dissidents in every society, they’d learned about the phenomenon in history and political science and even psychology, but this was different. The world had changed.

‘You’re afraid for Max,’ Laura said slowly.

‘Yeah.’ He pushed back from the table and stood, resting his long beautiful hands on the back of his chair. ‘For all of you.’

A brackish scum on the tea in her mug, and barely lukewarm. Nevertheless Laura swallowed some before getting up to help Zach, who had begun to clear the table. There was plenty of hot water from the range, and she enjoyed watching his hands at work-the sure, graceful movements for even the most humdrum task. They never seemed hurried no matter how fast his fingers flew. She touched him on the arm.

‘Can we at least wait till afternoon before leaving? There’s still so much to talk

about, and I was looking forward to building a snowman with you.'

'My crow too tame?'

'Why did you pick a crow? Everyone thinks they're such pests.'

'A sadly maligned bird. They're clever and loyal and playful, if a bit noisy. Often fearless too.' He made a raucous sound in his throat, half laugh, half gurgle, and Laura groaned before aiming a finger pistol at his head. 'And hard to exterminate,' he added, now smiling in that wry way of his. 'Though individually not long-lived, their numbers are on the increase.'

'I like your crow just fine.' Laura slipped a hand under the waistband of his jeans so that her fingers rested over his navel. 'But once in a while I crave a nice round belly, something with heft.' She gave him enough of a pinch for him to yelp and grab for her, his hands dripping sudsy water. The ensuing scuffle might have given them a few more minutes if Zach hadn't stopped to remove a twist of hair from her mouth, but there's always a bully waiting behind a tuft of maram grass to kick your castle to ruins, your lives to arid dune.

Zach went still. An electric stillness, the sort Laura remembered from the one time on holiday that she'd been stung underwater by a jellyfish, and the excruciating surge of pain had cracked the hourglass of her skull, so that all thought and all volition drained into the sea, and there was nothing but sensation, she was nothing but pain, and she'd been unable, for a few seconds or as many minutes, to move. Or breathe, which had probably kept her from drowning in the strong undercurrent.

Even as a little kid, she'd been exceptionally good at holding her breath. Max hated how she always won, but had never given up trying to beat her. She stared at Zach, held her breath and stared. She had the feeling that winning this time would be no win at all.

'Is there some place for you to hide?' he asked.

'What's wrong?'

'Several cars are headed this way. Two, I think, and one might be a van or off-road vehicle.'

‘Can you tell where they are?’

‘Close enough. They’re moving slowly in the snow, but I’d guess from the muffled sounds that they’ve already turned off the main road into the lane. You wouldn’t happen to have neighbours you haven’t told me about?’

‘No.’

He shrugged, tried to smile.

‘Police?’ she whispered.

‘Maybe. Probably, unless some trippers are out on a picnic.’

‘There’s no real place to hide except the wood.’

‘Hurry up and get dressed then. Go out the back door and round by the shed, where the tracks will be harder to follow at first.’

‘I know the woodland better than they ever could. We’ll lose them, tracks or no tracks.’

‘*You will.*’

‘You’re not suggesting-‘

‘There’s no time to argue.’

Laura crossed her arms in front of her chest. ‘Absolutely not.’

Under her steadfast gaze his eyes changed from molten to sea glass, from kiln fire to ash. Their colour had never been more impenetrable. He sighed. ‘Look, I’ll tell them you didn’t come with me, that I stole the key from you or broke in or something.’

‘Yeah, as if they’ll believe that.’

‘I doubt they’ll care, so long as they can bring in their trophy.’

‘I told you. No.’

‘Please, Laura. Don’t do this. You’re putting Max in danger.’

She stepped close and gathered a fistful of his jersey over where his tattoo must be. A strong trace of woodsmoke clung to his clothes, but she could also smell the unique signature of his skin-sweet like fresh-pressed cider, peaty, intense.

‘You can’t teach me anything about manipulation, I’ve imbibed it all with my mother’s milk. Max would want me to stay.’ She laid her head against his chest to listen to his heartbeat. ‘And so do you.’

Chapter 26

With only one husky, it's slow going-visibility poor, the ground jagged and uneven beneath the thick layer of snow, the horizon obliterated. A misstep, and they too could slip off the edge of the world. From time to time they catch a glimpse of the moon, and Lev reckons the storm has moved on. Behind them floats a vapour trail, the ghostly wake of their perspiration and breath. It's worrying, for the wind is too light to disperse it quickly, the flurries too sparse. At least there's no sign of pursuit. Lev is heading eastwards towards the pack ice, hoping to find a way to avoid the long coastal detour. And at one stretch along the shore, weathered granite cliffs promise, at best, a steep haul; Zach has no clue what they'll do about Bella (or the sledge) should they need to climb.

Sweating and grim, they struggle to shift the sledge over a particularly bad patch of rocky outcrop, slick with ice and frozen snow. The runners are badly pitted and need re-icing. In the end they're obliged to offload part of their gear, what's left of it after jettisoning as much as possible to accommodate the loss of the dogs. They half drag, half carry the lightened sledge to a shallow basin harled like plaster, station Bella with their pile of equipment, and backtrack for the remainder. By then they're ready for a break, and Zach would like to pitch the tent and call it a day. His muscles are shaking with cold and exhaustion as he drinks the steaming high-energy quarsh Lev forces on him; he can't bring himself to choke down a nut bar. But Lev is clearly keen to press on, for he allots them barely an hour's rest, then cuts it short when the wind begins to pick up.

'I hope we're not killing ourselves for nothing,' Zach says.

Lev secures the last webbing strap across their supplies box-lighter than aluminium, some kind of alloy. Normally clean shaven, he hasn't bothered in the last few days, and his whiskers have frozen to his face mask. He grimaces as he pulls it free to speak.

'There's no other hunting camp within reach. Bella is doing her best, but going back to base would take us far too long, even if we retrieved the rest of the supplies. In the Arctic, hunger is as much a killer as the cold. *Because* of the cold.' He casts a look behind him, then gazes out towards the ice with all the appearance of a man with time on his hands.

‘Maybe you ought to play a round of Pace,’ Zach mutters sullenly under his breath as he bends to attach Bella’s harness.

Lev too has moments when he needs to prove something. ‘Be a good boy scout, and I might just whip you up a cosy iglu and an even cosier supply of seal.’

‘Fuck your-‘

‘Take it easy, lad, your learning curve is flattening by the second.’ He goes to the sledge, burrows deep into one of the packs, and returns with the clarinet case. ‘But I’m glad you’ve reminded me of my little toys. Here, it’s best you keep this on you, alongside that nifty pocket knife of yours.’ He hands Zach the clarinet. ‘And though you may not feel inclined to believe me right now, you can trust me. No matter what happens, just remember to keep practising.’

‘Yeah, blowing my guts out is a great way to end it all.’

All trace of levity vanishes from Lev’s face. ‘They call you Corvus. How about trying to live up to it?’ He sees that Zach is about to protest. ‘No, be quiet and listen to me. I may not get another chance. You should pay attention to your own myths. Like the one in which, at the beginning of time, Raven made the world.’

In exasperation Zach swings round to Bella, who is a much more *companionable* companion, and who probably would talk much more sense too. As he squats to fondle her head, he can’t help thinking of Max. Is he OK? Knowing that you’re needed, desperately needed, by someone who has come to feel like your squirrely kid brother is daunting-humbling-but it’s a reason (on good days) to keep breathing, not any of that Corvus crap. Christ, he thought that at least here he’d

The blow knocks him sprawling on top of the dog.

Bella yelps and manages to scramble out from under, but Zach is pinned facedown in the snow by an enormous weight. Then he hears a groan and rough breathing, realises that it’s a body lying on top of him. An injured body, by the sound of it.

‘Lev?’ he tries to say, but his face is mashed into a drift, and his goggles have been pushed askew. He works his face from side to side, small paddling movements, until he’s able to suck in some air. ‘Lev,’ he mumbles frozenly.

The weight on Zach shunts sideways just enough for him to scull his arms beneath him, looking for purchase. He hears Bella's whimper in the background, then a low voice which raises his adrenaline level sharply. Bracing himself on his elbows, he tenses. The smell of urine is strong now, and he wonders what damage he'll do by heaving Lev off him-if it's Lev. But he's not about to wait passively for what's coming.

The choice is taken from him. A grunt, and the body is rolled away. With a movement like a fish flipping on dry land, he's over and ready to spring. For the first time today he's grateful for the gruelling terrain, which has kept them from using their stubby skis.

A figure is leaning over Lev. Zach has only time to make it to his feet before the man straightens and aims an outstretched arm at Lev's head. There's a burst of light. A sound like a balloon bursting. In one rush the air escapes-then nothing left to breathe.

With a howl Bella springs.

'Don't kill her!' Zach hurtles across the intervening distance, raising a fine shrapnel of frozen powder. Her sharp yelp is lost in the carnival roar of mortality. Is that a laugh he hears from the croaker who's done this?

Wildly he spins round. 'Lev-'

Snow, whitewashed clean.

He drops to his knees at her side, pulls off a mitt, feels for a pulse in her throat. She's not breathing. Oh god, she's not breathing. Shakes her, too roughly. 'Breathe, damn you, just breathe!' Dips a finger in the blood seeping from an ear. Puts it to his lips.

'You needn't have swallowed,' he told Laura.

'I wanted to,' she said. 'I wanted you to know how I feel.'

Nothing left to breathe.

The instant before blackness descends, Zach sees other figures like golden specks at the edge of his vision, a shower of chevrons drifting downwards from

the sky, parachutes-no, *wings*-fluttering and folding gracefully behind them.

And in the middle distance, an indigo-tinted shadow, barely perceptible, which quivers like milk set to boil. Seismic stress. Then the image sharpens into a small hummock, canted to the leeward-a hummock that is stealing forward soundlessly with its nose in the snow and its hindquarters slightly elevated.

Chapter 27

His head next to hers at the window, Zach murmured something inconsequential about her hair. He noticed such things—a pair of new earrings, the smell of the lemon juice she'd used as a hair rinse. There were so many questions Laura wanted to ask—needed to ask—but none found its way past the ticking of his heart, the minutes slipping into memory. She couldn't tell if he were afraid, or resigned, or planning some impossible stunt; nor did it seem to matter much, though one part of her whispered, *do something*, you're mad wasting these last moments to escape, or at least draft a convincing story. But the room was so still, his breathing so soothing, so moth-winged that if she were given the chance to choose a single moment of her life to last for all time, she'd be content to stop the clock at this one.

'Your skin is singing,' she said.

He said nothing, but his arms tightened around her, pinioning the melody between them.

'How close are they?'

'Not long now.'

She felt a shiver go through him, which always frightened her; it reminded her of that first evening at his flat, and how terribly vulnerable he could be. With a shiver of her own, she glanced behind them, and her pulse jumped. Near the corner bookshelf stood a tall, thin man clothed in light. In another century she might have thought, *angel*, but there was nothing remotely angelic about his appearance, and his blue eyes gleamed with intelligence, amusement too. A scar like a cubist smile accented the corner of his mouth, and a chunk of something an art collector would covet winked in his hands, splattering miniature rainbows across the walls and floor as he tipped it towards her.

'Zach,' she cried, tugging him round and pointing.

'What?'

Nothing there. The doors were closed, the room sunny, all the shadows

accounted for. A few dust motes, not even a cobweb.

‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ she asked.

Zach’s laugh startled even the dust motes.

‘I’m serious! I saw someone-OK, maybe something-standing in the corner.’

‘Unless you dad’s been messing with holography, it must have been your imagination.’ His eyes returned to the window, lashes briefly trembling like mothy wings. ‘The mind does odd things when you’re nervous.’

Now she too could hear the sound of approaching vehicles. ‘Zach-‘

‘Don’t worry, it’ll be OK. They’ll take you home.’ He lowered his voice so that Laura found herself straining to hear him, and still she had to repeat his words to herself like a cryptic joke before they made sense. ‘And I deserve what’s coming.’

*

Three policemen; the fat one kept fingering Zach’s hair.

Outside, the sun had become an over-friendly tourist whose bright smile and hectic chatter would arouse any immigration officer’s suspicion-a smuggler, maybe an asylum seeker, by all means a foreigner who had no bloody right to their corner of the universe.

Three policemen: one fat, one jumpy, one avuncular. The nervy bloke reminded Laura of a hairdresser, and in fact his hair was raked and sheeny, scented too. Without being asked, all three had unzipped their jackets and tossed them onto the sofa. They were armed.

Only three policemen: Laura kept telling herself that this was a good sign, they would have sent a much larger squad if she and Zach were reckoned dangerous. She wanted to slap the fat bloke’s sluggy fingers away from Zach, who seemed oblivious of all but the pattern of sun and shadow on the floor, though he answered each question politely. Remotely, as if he’d prepared his answers long since and needed only to reel them off by rote.

‘I asked you for the names of your mates,’ the fat one said.

‘I don’t have any mates.’

‘Your *cell*, fuckhead.’ He yanked at Zach’s hair.

‘Take it soft, Gordon,’ the eldest man cautioned. He’d stationed himself next to Laura and smelled of fried onions when he opened his mouth. He was the only one with a wedding band, which he liked to slide back and forth over the lower knuckle of his ring finger. After a while Laura noticed a pattern to the movement: it speeded up whenever Gordon spoke.

‘Hey, I’m good, Dave.’ Gordon leaned forward and whispered something into Zach’s ear. Laura was watching Zach closely. How did he manage to stay so calm?

‘I think I’d best ring my parents,’ Laura said.

‘They’ve already been informed,’ Dave said. ‘I’ll be taking you home as soon as we finish here.’ He smiled. ‘Early start, long drive. Why don’t you make us some coffee? A couple of sandwiches?’

Laura glanced quickly at Zach, but he didn’t meet her gaze. It came as no surprise when Dave followed her to the kitchen, but his apology seemed genuine, and he helped to butter bread and lay the tray. ‘I’ve got kids of my own,’ he said, ‘a bit younger than you, what are you doing with this terr?’

A tight grip on the scoop, she spooned ground coffee into the filter and poured on the boiling water. The brown sludge rose above the brim, cambering in defiance of logic and gravity. She daren’t jar it.

‘You’ve got it wrong. He’s a decent person.’

‘You can still sort it for yourself. All you have to do is say this mulac forced you, held you prisoner. Nobody will blame you, Laura. A typical case of the Stockholm Syndrome.’

‘What’s that?’

‘And if ... I mean it’s easy enough to claim he ... you know ... molested you. I

can call for a woman officer and a doctor to meet you at your parents' house. You wouldn't even have to go into headquarters.'

'You mean say he *raped* me?'

'It happens a lot with these augers.' Dave indicated the bruise on her chin, the one she'd got when twisting her ankle. 'There'll be a quick trial, afterwards the court will order involuntary castration. It's the best solution. I'm all in favour of the Striker plan to fix every one of them at puberty, makes them docile.' He hurried for the dishcloth. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you, but you've got to think about your own future. *Everyone's* future.' He mopped up the spilled coffee while Laura went to the kitchen window and hugged herself to keep from shivering. This time he made the coffee himself.

'Ready?' he asked.

'He did *not* kidnap me. And he most certainly didn't rape me. He hasn't touched me at all, not *at all*, do you hear? He's a friend from school. I held on to him while we rode here, nothing more. I'm not going to lie to make your job easier.'

'If you were my daughter, you'd have learned more sense by now.'

*

The three of them drank their coffee while Zach sat on a chair and counted sunbeams. Laura tried unsuccessfully to catch his eye. The jittery bloke reminded Laura of a little kid who needed the toilet. He sat down, crossed his legs, took a bite from his sandwich, sprang up, walked to the window, blew his nose on a monogrammed handkerchief, picked up a stray bit of charred wood and chucked it into the fireplace.

'For godsake, Lyle,' Dave said, 'sit down already. Your coffee's getting cold.'

Lyle and Gordon exchanged glances. With a complicit nod and a smile Laura found difficult to interpret, Lyle perched on the arm of the sofa till he'd drained his mug in a few hasty gulps. Laura was surprised: he was the sort who would eat fastidiously, never slurp or smack his lips or belch. She transferred her attention to Gordon, who winked when he noticed her scrutiny. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one with a novelty lighter which must have come straight from a lap club, and exhaled through his nostrils, entirely at ease. Sandwich

forgotten, Lyle had gone back to pacing. What were they waiting for?

Zach raised his head. 'I want to ring a solicitor.'

To conceal her relief, Laura finally poured herself some coffee, but she needn't have bothered. The policemen were paying no heed to her.

'What did you say?' Gordon asked.

'A solicitor,' Zach repeated calmly.

Ignoring the plates, Gordon balanced his smouldering cigarette over the edge of the tabletop, then stood and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand, hitched up his trousers, and refilled his mug, but this time added no milk or sugar. For a fatso he was light on his feet. He stepped behind Zach, and with a smirk in Lyle's direction, emptied the steaming coffee over Zach's head. Zach jerked sideways with a gasp.

'You said something, crossfuck?' Gordon asked.

So much for relief.

Lyle left off pacing but couldn't keep his feet still. Dave's ring must be eroding the top layer of his skin. On a rackety impulse, without thought or reason, Laura glanced at the corner of the room where she'd glimpsed that odd figure. The air felt grainy, as if the harsh sunlight had fused the dust motes to glass. It hurt to breathe.

Zach straightened his shoulders. With the heel of his hand he brushed his hair from his forehead, then lifted the hem of his jumper to wipe his face. Each movement was slow, graceful, choreographed. And utterly provocative.

Don't, Laura pleaded silently. She'd seen Zach when he got this way. Please don't.

'I have the right to a solicitor. I expect you have a mobile phone between you.'

The blow knocked Zach to the floor. Laura cried out, and Dave grasped her arm to keep her from rushing to Zach's side.

‘Let go of me,’ she hissed.

Dave ignored her. ‘I’ll take the girl to the kitchen.’

Lyle’s eyes were glittering, feverish almost, and there were two spots of high colour under his cheekbones. ‘Why? Maybe she’d like to watch.’ He danced forward and yanked Zach upright while Gordon picked up his cigarette to take a deep drag. He might have been at a party, except that at a party you don’t jab a burning fag into your mate’s cheek. This time Zach wasn’t able to suppress a cry of pain.

‘You bastards.’ Laura twisted and swung for Dave, momentarily forgetting his firearm. ‘You’re policemen. You can’t do this. I’m going to-’

Dave slapped her face, hard. She fell back, tasting blood, while tears spurted into her eyes-pain, rage. And that sliver of fear making its way towards her heart.

‘Don’t you dare touch her!’ Zach said, lunging forward. ‘I’ll *kill* you if you touch her again.’

Gordon’s lard evidently concealed a layer of muscle: cigarette dangling from his lips, he restrained Zach easily, as though dealing with a childish tantrum.

‘Threatening the police, are you now?’ Dave asked in a pleasant fatherly tone, a pleased tone. Kids needed to learn, it went with the job, like changing nappies or assigning chores or checking homework.

Why did they always say you went cold? The palms of Laura’s hands began to itch, and her aorta had become a blow hose distending the mass of hot glass now lodged in her chest. She said nothing, however. These men would *pay* for an excuse to use their fists on Zach. For weeks afterwards she wouldn’t be able to smell tobacco or hair gel without gagging. She never touched fried onions again.

Lyle clapped his hands together, breaking the silence. ‘Moth,’ he giggled, wiping his palms on his trousers. Laura stared at him.

After one last drag on his cigarette Gordon crushed it underfoot. Releasing Zach, the wanker indicated the pistol under his armpit. ‘Take off your jeans.’

‘Let’s go, Laura,’ Dave said. ‘No struggling, it’ll go harder on you-on *him*-if you

act like those nutters who resist arrest.’ He clamped one hand to her upper arm, pressed the other to the flat of her back, and began marching her towards the door.

‘Hold on,’ Gordon said. ‘She’s staying. Let her see what happens to cunts like this. Maybe next time she’ll think twice before shagging one of them.’ To Zach, ‘What are you waiting for? You want Lyle to cut them off?’ From somewhere a knife had appeared.

Dave seemed to hesitate, but at a gesture from Gordon he sighed and propelled Laura into a chair. In the meantime Zach hadn’t moved, though Laura could see him beginning to shiver, and his face had paled. The burn mark on his cheek must hurt; it had already blistered into an angry statement.

Gordon pulled out his shirt tails, hoisted his vest, and scratched his white belly, almost hairless except for a few straggling reddish curls. ‘Take them off.’

Now Zach looked at Laura, his eyes the colour of sewage. ‘Never.’

‘You want to change places with her?’ Gordon asked. ‘Fine by me.’ He removed his gun and balanced it like a toy on his palm, then with his thumb toyed with what must be the safety catch. Off on off ...

Zach closed his eyes. ‘Please,’ he whispered, ‘not in front of her.’

‘Move it,’ Gordon said.

Zach’s hands were trembling so much that he could barely manage his zip.

‘See that she keeps her eyes wide open,’ Gordon said to Dave once Zach’s jeans finally lay at his feet. ‘Now your pants, cunt.’

‘No! NO!’ The words tore like a salvo from her throat when she saw Gordon holster his gun, open his belt buckle, and begin to undo his trousers. ‘Oh god no, please no.’

‘Shut up,’ Lyle said, ‘or there might be an accident. We wouldn’t like to be accused of police brutality.’ Again that giggle.

‘You’re so right, Lyle,’ Gordon said. ‘Go and see if there’s any marg in the

kitchen.'

*

Zach made no sound, except one muffled cry. There was a moment when Laura thought he'd stopped breathing, or she had. A moment when the contours of the room blurred, and colour bled from the furnishings into the air, and the dark hedges of nightmare took root at her feet. A moment when the pain was so intense that her vision doubled.

*

*

You see yourself kneel by his head. You see yourself stroke his hair, bend to whisper in his ear. I love you, you say. Again and again you tell him. Listen to me. I love you.

The room is dark but you see him lock the door behind him. You're not asleep. You're waiting. The night is a maze, he says, a secret game I'm teaching you how to play.

*

*

A sharp expletive whipcracked in Laura's face. She jerked upwards, half rising till her shoulder met Dave's hand, and he shook his head. He didn't need to force her to watch, however: she would rather gouge out her eyes than abandon Zach to these men. As she sank back in her chair, a bright flash like the dazzle of sunlight on water caught her attention from the corner of the room. For a moment she saw the figure again, light spilling from the object in his hand. His lips seemed to move. Elusive as a fish, the image wavered and began to slip away as soon as she tried to focus on it, to net it. But in her inner ear she heard the whisper: keep telling him.

Now Lyle took his turn. Zach was so still that Laura thought he'd fainted. She put a knuckle to her mouth and bit down on it as hard as she could without drawing blood. Lyle was noisier, perhaps quicker than Gordon-she couldn't quite tell, something odd was happening to her sense of time. She thought of those

surreal liquid clocks of Dali. Had they already known about gravitational lensing back then? If only the mind could alter the light cone of an event as easily as a painting knife scrapes away a botched or imperfect layer ... if only she could go back and paint over the canvas ...

Stop it! she told herself, firmly damming the opiate drift of her thoughts. Concentrate on Zach. Keep telling him, and telling him, and *telling* him. You've got to believe he'll hear.

Gordon signalled to Dave, who set his mouth and shook his head. It looked as though there might even be an argument till Dave moved to Zach's side and stared down at him, then crouched and shook his shoulder. Head cradled in the crook of his elbow, Zach lay limp and unmoving like an item of bedraggled washing which had been blown from the line and now would have to be relaunched, but Laura could see his chest rising and falling, stalling and catching and rising, hear him struggling painfully to suck in enough air to stay alive. He was close to gasping-the harsh wet sound a heavy smoker makes during a bad cold. She would have been less troubled by his shivering.

'Has your dad got any brandy in the house?' Dave asked her, getting to his feet.

'Bloody hell, nobody croaks from a little rearguard action.' Gordon prodded Zach carelessly with a shoe, almost as an afterthought. (They hadn't even removed their shoes, Laura thought incongruously.) 'Get up, you, it's time to go.'

'Simus aren't able to drink, alcohol is harmful to them,' Laura said. 'Kind of like poison.'

'Then come and help him while we load his motorbike into the van and have a look round.'

'Christ, Dave, you're making-' Gordon said.

Dave didn't let him finish. 'You want to explain to the chief why we've wrecked Fulgur property? He's supposed to be their most valuable auger.'

'A fucking terr!' Lyle said from the doorway. His hands were still dripping, he'd obviously gone to clean himself up, unlike Gordon.

Ignoring him, Dave turned to Laura. 'You'd best make him a cup of tea with plenty of sugar. But no nonsense, hear?'

Neither Gordon nor Lyle were bothered enough to bicker about it, not now. After a halfhearted remark or two, they set about their police business, leaving Dave and Laura facing each other over Zach's prone, half-naked form. Dave's hand went to his ring. Laura wanted to scream at him to get out, finally *get the fuck out*, so she could minister to Zach. There was no way he'd let her touch him, clean him up in front of anyone else, especially not one of them. But he seemed to be breathing a bit easier now.

'Can I trust you not to pull any stunts?' Dave repeated.

'Do you really think I'll give you an excuse to shoot him in the head?'

Dave looked as though he wanted to say something more but confined himself to a vague meaningless gesture, his eyes sliding away from hers. His attack of conscience was even less welcome than a sudden bout of diarrhoea, and his reluctance to leave disgusted her like a bad smell.

Empowered her. 'Look, will you please just let me get on with it? He's not about to run a marathon in the next twenty minutes, is he?'

She could see shame and affront warring for mastery behind his eyes as he turned at last to go, and hurled after him with savage pleasure, 'You did say you've got kids of your own? I reckon this will make a great bedtime story for them.'

But Zach, as always, surprised her. At her taunt he lifted his head, took a deep breath, and refusing her hand, got slowly to his feet without any attempt whatsoever to cover himself. His stubborn dignity brought a prickle of tears, the first since this nightmare had begun.

'Haven't you got a forensic camera with you?' Zach asked. 'That way you could turn the story into a picture book.' Expressionless, he waited in the brittle silence, then picked up his clothes and left the room.

*

Till now essentially a dayclub minus music and swank gear, school became a

form of therapy. The well-greased machinery of justice-or perhaps Fulgur-had swallowed Zach whole, and though everyone was still talking about the club bombing, no one knew what had happened to him. Arrested, was the general consensus. Wild, then wilder tales circulated about his attempted escape, but nothing came close to the truth, and Laura's involvement remained undisclosed. There had been enough confusion in the immediate aftermath of the explosion to cover any number of plausible stories, and her parents continued to speak gravely about her brief 'rest cure'. In pre-emptive self-defence she speculated along with the rest of the kids about the terrors, and the what-the-fuck-do-we-do-about-them simus, and Zach. Due to the exigencies of national security, the police were releasing only the sketchiest of details, and that in barely perceptible increments under pressure from the media. The bloggers loved it.

Laura's mates, who had survived by a dicey evasion of underage smoking laws, sucked every trace of rad from their ordeal. 'Who says cigarettes kill?' Derek repeated so often that even Tim finally told him to shut it or he'd wish he'd not gone outside for a fag. Olivia spent most of her free time with Damien, and Laura almost convinced herself that her friend's coolness derived from the incident in the club toilet. But Olivia remained loyal enough not to spread her insider info round-or else was saving it up like extra dosh for the right investment.

It was Laura's teachers who first remarked on the change. Mr Mitchell spoke to her after a maths lesson. 'I knew you had it in you all the time. If you continue to work like this, you'll soon be getting top marks.' Like everyone else, he assumed that a sideswipe with death had catapulted her into the overtaking lane. Whereas in fact she'd begun to study because she hated it, because she was dolt terrible at it. Soon afterwards, Olivia sent her a cryptic text in history class: *Henry II said at Canterbury, 'Scourge me as I kneel at the tomb of the saint.'* And hissed 'net it, if you're suddenly so bloody smart', when quizzed. Which Laura did, using her laptop. Aside from obvious precautions, she didn't know how to disable-or even detect-a trace on Zach's computer.

She went out with Owen; she went back to swimming; and she went to Zach's flat when all else failed. The first time she stayed less than fifteen minutes, startling at each mumbled complaint of heating and plumbing, an old building which protested arthritically at this unwonted intrusion. The flat was chilly and smelled musty. How quickly possessions take on an air of neglect, lifelessness: they might belong to anyone at all, and whatever Laura was searching for

wouldn't be found among the lonely ranks of books on a shelf, tumble of clothing in a hamper.

She stayed away for two days. Then, after a particularly bitter fight with her mum, she stuffed schoolwork, her pod, and a sandwich into her backpack and headed for the library, with no intention of going to Zach's. As she was turning the key in the lock, the door to the adjacent flat opened-not the one with the dog, at least.

'What are you up to? There's nobody home.'

'I'm a friend.' The old man was glaring at her, so she added rather belligerently, 'I've got his permission.'

'Oh yeah? Prove it. Zach don't give *nobody* permission.'

It crossed her mind to ignore the whiskery snoop by hurrying into the flat and shutting the door in his face, but common sense prevailed. She jangled the keys in front of his beakish nose. In fact, he resembled a nasty old buzzard, with those protuberant eyes and feathery bits of whitish hair.

'I'm looking after Zach's place while he's gone.'

'You could have nicked them from him.'

Laura gave an exasperated sigh. 'Listen, I've been here lots of times already. Even my little brother's got a key.'

'Max is your brother?'

'You know him?'

'A nice kid. Polite, not like some.' His implication wasn't lost on her.

'Thanks.' She ought to go in for politics, she was becoming practised at the ambiguous response. She hefted her backpack. 'I need to do some studying, and I promised Zach I'd wash his clothes, so if you don't mind.'

'Not in any trouble again, is he?'

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Then either you’re stupid or a liar.’ He shuffled in her direction, and suddenly she realised by the way his eyes remained fixed on a point above her shoulder that something was wrong with his eyesight, that what she had mistaken for a stare might in fact be near blindness.

‘Bloody-mindedness seems to be a side effect of deteriorating vision. My great uncle’s got the same syndrome, but he takes pills for it. Maybe you should ask your GP for a prescription.’

To her surprise the man gave a bellow of laughter. ‘That’s telling me all right! Good, Zach needs someone who’ll stick up for him, not some piece of candy floss who’ll melt away after a poke or two from a fancy simu todger.’

Laura was glad he couldn’t see her face redden. ‘He’ll be gone for a while.’

‘A special assignment?’

‘Something like that.’ She couldn’t decide how well Zach knew this man. ‘His job.’

Better than she’d guessed. ‘Zach’s no terr, but they’ve got it in for him.’ He waved a hand in the direction of the third flat on their floor. ‘Brain-dead porkers included. Hope he’s found a good place to take cover for a while.’

Laura squeezed her eyes shut, which merely threw the last hour at the cottage into relief, vivid as a burning tower in the dark, its gutted struts etched in stark, mute, defiant contrast to the raging flames. Where was he? She suspected that her Dad knew, or could find out, from the evasive way he answered her questions. And Max wouldn’t talk much about it. ‘I told you, I can’t always tell about places. But Zach’s OK so far.’ When pressed for additional information, Max sounded sincere. ‘Don’t know. He wouldn’t like it if I snooped.’ Scant consolation that not everything had changed: she could still sense when Max was lying.

‘He’s a fine lad. Does my shopping for me. Takes me to the clinic, too.’

‘Zach?’ she whispered.

‘A fine lad,’ he repeated. ‘Not many his age would bother. Maybe not any.’

Laura turned her head away, though he wouldn’t have seen her eyes filling.

‘Name’s Josh,’ he said, patting her on the shoulder. ‘You go take care of your business, then come round later for a cup of tea.’

‘OK. I’d like that.’ And found that she meant it. Even his uneven yellow teeth no longer repelled her, his sagging skin.

‘I’ll babble on about my youth for a bit, then you’ll be allowed to tell me about yourself.’ At her chuckle, he added shrewdly, ‘Reckon there’s no one else you can talk to about Zach. Years ago had a Mongolian boyfriend, I remember how tough it can be.’

‘You’re not axing me, are you?’

‘That’s another thing about Zach. He looks beyond the wrinkles and baldness and shortness of breath.’

Once she’d let herself into the flat, Laura dropped her backpack by the door, threw off her jacket and boots, and went straight to the laundry hamper. A T-shirt was first to hand. She hauled it out, crept into Zach’s bed, and cried with her face buried in the sweet stale smell till, exhausted, she fell asleep.

*

Dark and icy cold, with a glaze of frozen slush underfoot which numbed her toes despite thick-soled boots, the night aspired to hurry Laura along. By rights she shouldn’t be out on these streets alone, even in good weather. The Christmas decorations already looked past their use-by date, though it was still a few weeks till the holiday, mismatched too, as if they’d been picked at random from a box of jumble. What the fuck was there to celebrate?

It was impossible to walk fast enough to suit her. Several times she threw a glance over her shoulder, several times stared into the shop windows, though they reflected no one else except the odd trudging figure muffled against the bitterest winter in years and intent only on a hot meal and bed. Not even any late shoppers in this district. Once a couple of noisy lads whose interest was perfunctory, something in her look warning them off: ‘Aw, let her be. That one’s

got knives up her cunt.'

Halfway there she stopped and retraced her steps for almost a block, reluctant to involve Stella. Reluctant perhaps to face what there might be to face. Then, just before turning the last corner, she ducked into a bus shelter and leaned against a battle-scarred wall, shivering and hugging herself, telling herself she needed to make sure she wasn't being followed. Sulphurous light from a streetlamp dimly illuminated the graffiti. Among the usual assortment of hearts and vulgar comments was a crude drawing of a fat, snaggletoothed woman wearing a peaked witch's hat and lashed to a post in the midst of a bonfire. Laura grimaced but her nose was running, so she shrugged off her backpack and rummaged for a tissue, fingers clumsy in her woollen gloves, then slowly raised her head when the scrawl underneath the picture coalesced into words, into incendiary words. Grabbing up her backpack, she ran the rest of the distance.

The café was boarded up. Laura couldn't tell whether it had been looted first, but the blackened brick and lingering smell of smoke and the charred sign, once Stella's hand-painted pride, rendered the vicious graffiti sprayed across the plywood panels entirely superfluous.

Chapter 28

A cognoscens is unaccustomed to the complete absence of light. With returning consciousness Zach sees patterns in the deep blackness where there are none, patterns which hover on the threshold of signification. He fixes on them, dazzling and puzzling, a message to decode, a formula to derive, an art form to explore. Like ripples in water, they describe reiterations of a restless, ceaseless, seamless, senseless energy, his liquid mind flowing into itself. Is that why he's not afraid?

You're faced with a choice.

Lev?

Either the abort function is restored

I'll be able to go back?

or you'll remain to find the other way back.

It's Laura I need to find!

Then you've made your choice?

I don't understand the choice.

That's why it's a choice.

*

The iglu perches on a wafer of ice, adrift in a sea darker than the darkest wine. Even from the air it would be impossible to guess the island's size: the monochromic Arctic palette distorts scale as well as depth perception. Is there too much space in this place, or too little? Fulgur instrumentation would no doubt furnish a string of numbers, whose accuracy is an article of faith for their techs and scientists and policy makers. Yet absolute pitch doesn't make a Mozart; and absolute faith, a deity. Zach, however, will not get to see it from above. His wings have been clipped.

Nor will he get to see Ethan strangle Chloe.

*

Trap or shelter? This is the question Zach asks himself as he stares at the iglu before him, its walls glowing with muted but beckoning light. Slowly he turns to take stock of his surroundings, and his memory.

‘Lev,’ he calls.

‘Lev,’ he shouts. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Lev!’ he screams.

A fierce updraft flings snow like a round of curses into his face, once upon a bitter time playground bullies, now a ground blizzard. Skin already burning under his mask, he’s left with little choice but to get out of the icy wind. As expected, the abort code proves useless. He scoots along the trench to the vestibule, then folds himself into the L-shaped cold sink at the entrance, a tight squeeze and at one point a panicky one, when it feels as though the trap has already been sprung and he will be wedged here forever, unable to wriggle forwards or back, frozen into the white purgatory of the Arctic. No one, he recollects grimly, talks about what happens to your head if you die in the Fulgrid. Are your neural circuits wiped so that you’ll be watching snowy static and crooning white noise till someone pulls the plug?

Once inside, he gets to his feet and throws a tense glance to all sides, then hunches over with his hands on his thighs to catch his breath. If there’s a trap, it’s not in the guise of a harpoon-brandishing hunter defending hearth and home. The iglu is lit by a large, cheerful storm lantern-not the traditional *kudlik*, or saucer-shaped soapstone vessel which burns seal fat-with candles and a supply of kitchen matches placed in readiness on a low wooden table, alongside a length of sturdy twine, a water bottle, and basic cooking utensils. The double-burner campstove looks new, and Zach assumes that the storage box contains food. The walls and hardpacked floor are lined with caribou fur, likewise the rear sleeping platform, on which a down bag, more pelts, and a pair of sealskin *kamiks* wait like favourite soft toys abandoned till bedtime, a little shabby but still loyal. On the right he sees a metal bucket, a spade, even a machete-like *panak* for cutting snow. A drum which probably contains fuel. Not much else, but it’s obvious that someone intends for him to survive. For now.

Zach huddles by the lantern, which emits a surprising amount of heat. Within a short time-measured by the metronome beat of his heart-he feels warm enough to take off his hat and mitts, unzip his anorak, and slump down onto the sleeping platform, where he gazes at the lantern, listens to its soft crooning, inhales the pungent smell of paraffin. The painful prickling of skin returning to normal body temperature seems genuine, yet he makes no move to undress further. With his fingertips he traces the line of jaw and cheek, the thin sharp slope of nose, at last his eyelids, trying to recapture the sensation of burning. But sensory memories are erased from the mind's buffer within fractions of a second, as irretrievable as the previous tick of a clock, the final beat of a heart. Briefly, he wishes for a mirror. 'Fool,' he mutters, 'as if that would prove anything.' Shaken by the sound of his own voice, he resolves not to speak aloud again.

He's tempted to remove his boots and crawl straight into the sleeping bag, but he forces himself to make a meal. And it's true, he feels better after the mug of pemmican-and-noodle soup, the fistful of raisins. Underestimating their energy needs killed a great many Arctic explorers. He settles back amid the furs on the sleeping platform to gnaw on a slab of dried meat, thickly edged with fat, and tries not to think of the horror stories they used to tell after lights-out. No one was ever scared; no one admitted to bug-eyed insomnia, to nightmares or-the cringing horror of it-a wet bed afterwards. Zombies, for him, had been the worst: the living dead, sapiens who looked normal but had become inhuman simulacra of an already horrifying species.

Going without sleep isn't an option. *The other way back*: WTF is *that* supposed to mean? Fulgur programmers ought not be allowed within reading distance of fantasy or science fiction. Even a spoilt dickhead like Owen would have no trouble foreseeing that the Abominable Snowman will seem a big, cuddly teddy bear, and the Snow Queen a fairy godmother, compared to the treats likely to be in store for Lord Zachariah, Archmage of the Realm of Fulgur-dupe, more like. He should have paid attention to the weirder totems of gaming, something no simu much bothers with.

After the last bite of biltong-a South African word he's adopted-Zach rubs his fingers together, the greasiness a discomfort only tolerable as a salve to near-constant chapping. The lantern sighs like a living creature, and he gets up to reposition it. Or perhaps it's the entire iglu which has awakened from a long hibernation in his presence. Beneath the insulating furs the walls are sweating, but when he turns the campstove down, they'll refreeze into an even more

airtight surface. Tomorrow he'll calculate his fuel requirements, but a rough estimate-the drum is full-suggests that he'll run out of food first. He can afford to sleep with the companionship of his lantern.

His belly is full, he's warm, and the sleeping bag is for once long enough, yet sleep, fickle as a saucy goddess coyly fingering pomegranate tits, disdains his every offering, every lure and plea, every twist and roll and squirm. A book would help. He remembers how irritated he'd get with Lev during their long hours shut up together in the storm. He remembers the hunger for solitude-he could deal with bodily functions, it's the way another person abrades your skin that leaves you so raw and oozing. He remembers longing for a book, any book, in which to escape for a while. He remembers waking from a nightmare with Lev's arms around him, Lev's breath like tobacco-scented unguent. Zach remembers that he's promised himself not to remember.

'I'm going for walk,' he said.

'Brr, it's awfully cold,' Laura said.

He moved to the window, beyond which lay miles of snowy darkness, woods and frozen lake.

'Stay inside,' he said.

'You're getting sick of being cooped up with me.'

He held out his hand to her then, and she joined him at the window.

'Look,' he said, breathing on the pane.

'What?'

Again he frosted the glass with his breath.

'I don't understand,' Laura said.

He smiled at their reflection. 'Sometimes you need to cover something up in order to see it better.'

Zach flings aside the covers and yanks on the zip, the fabric catches and he's

forced, sod it, to spend some minutes easing it free of the teeth. *Time lost?* How much more inane can you get? He kicks off the sleeping bag and prowls round again, searching the iglu for clues, anomalies, anything really. At this point he'd settle for a sleeping pill, an *aspirin* even, toxic as the stuff is to his system. He finishes off the dregs of his soup, eats another handful of raisins. His water bottle is two-thirds full, hardly an excuse to venture outside. Undecided, he hovers near the entrance. His memory is good, he can recall quite a lot of poetry. A lot of music. There's always the clarinet, but without Lev ... anyhow, you don't need an instrument to play for yourself. Often it just gets in the way like a bad translation. And what about the sonata he'd started in another life? Don't leave it unfinished, Andy said. It's for Laura, isn't it? Write it, and you'll write her into every beat and note. As if notes were knots stitching up all that's come undone ...

'You won't fall in the lake, will you?' she asked.

'It's frozen over,' he said.

'The ice might not be thick enough. It hasn't been cold for that long.'

'I'll keep to the woods.'

'What if you get lost?'

'Look, I promise I'll be OK.'

'That's not something you can promise.'

'Simus keep their promises.' His tone became wry. 'And everyone knows we have a great sense of direction.'

She traced a loopy chain in the condensation on the window pane, again and again, loopier and loopier, threading her way from dot to precarious dot.

'What?' he asked.

'Promise not to laugh.'

'What?' he repeated, already laughing a bit.

‘Take your clarinet with you.’

Then he did laugh. ‘You mean like a dog whistle?’

But she was serious. ‘I’ll hear it. Whenever you play, I hear your music.’

Hear it now. If there’s any justice in the universe, then hear it now.

His anorak is hanging to dry on the line he’s rigged between two of the antler toggles securing the overlapping caribou skins to the walls. He ducks under the damp folds and removes the clarinet case from an inner pocket. The instrument brightens at his touch, but Zach carries it gingerly to his bed and hesitates before putting it to his lips. As if in entreaty, it coughs a delicate subliminal cough while he recalls Lev on the ice, Lev laying his hands on Zach’s abdomen, Lev imploring him to practise. Wherever in this divine comedy you’ve gone, Zach thinks, I hope you know what you’re doing. He runs his fingers along the crystalline surface, wondering as always at its feel-the way warm ice might feel, or Bach’s *Art of Fugue* if worked in matter.

Its simple theme replays in his head: D minor, a serene key. Then the rest of the first contrapunctus, whose four voices fill the iglu with clear black notes like flocked birds in flight-now rising as one, now drawing apart to swoop and counter and plummet, now rising again, and rising, now infolding. Each note with its own sleek body and wings-singular, yet never alone. Meaningless alone.

Eyes closed, Zach waits for the notes to recurve and settle. For a measureless time he waits.

Finally, with a grimace at his stiffening muscles, he lays aside the clarinet, still untried, and lumbers to his feet. How did Bach do it? he asks himself as he bends and stretches. Single notes that anyone can repeat, even anticipate. And yet at some indefinable moment the notes become fugue become never-ending flight.

He adjusts the lantern and slips the elastic from his rather greasy hair, combs it through with his fingers. There’s a bar of strong-smelling yellow soap but no brush-no toothbrush or towel, for that matter either. Washing can wait. He’ll sleep in his underwear and fleece. Wind overalls still damp, he plucks his down trousers from the line, rolls them into a tight pillow, and covers them with one of the furs. After tugging off the kamiks, he slides inside his sleeping bag and rearranges several other pelts as blankets, with one for-well, for the feel of skin

near his face, a ghost of breath. Inside the sleeping bag, the clarinet is tucked safely at his feet. He needs a reason for tomorrow.

*

Woodsmoke-the scent of cherrywood. Some spitting, a few sparks. She brushes a finger across his tattoo. I want to play your clarinet, she says. Yes, he says. She bends her head and rolls her lower lip, seals the corners of her mouth, blows a gentle stream of air until the reed begins to vibrate. Careful, he says. But she has a good natural embouchure, just the right pressure from her jaw. A single rising note, rising.

He wakes, at first disoriented. But as reality remixes, he fights it. Sometimes if you cling to the vestiges of a dream, you can go back. The firewood still a little green, the tree felled only this autumn. The cottage with its sauna and borehole and generator, its owls and mice. Laura's childhood books, his clarinet. The snow. Their music.

Except that he has to deal with the lees. He wrangles out of the sleeping bag, so hungry that he must have slept for hours. Before even lighting the stove, it's a fistful of raisins and a huge slab of something which resembles a cross between dark chocolate and freeze-dried tofu and Josh's dish sponge but tastes surprisingly of ripe banana; surprisingly delicious. Once dressed in his down trousers, he rinses and hangs his things to dry. Coffee, he thinks with zest, extra strong with heaps of sugar. By then the water's boiled, and he takes a few minutes to savour the aroma, the slightly smoky flavour-who thought they'd bother with such a luxury-and chews a bone-hard biscuit that probably contains enough kilojoules to power a wormhole. Maybe he's got more time-more food-than he first supposed. Maybe nothing's been left to chance. Maybe all he needed was sleep and a decent meal, a *monkey* meal-he can hear that indulgent chuff of Lev's. Maybe, in fact, it's time to trust him. After a last swallow of coffee Zach picks up the clarinet and begins to play.

Chapter 29

The freeze continued, promising a white Christmas. Promising Yuletide Blessings. Seasons Greetings and Best Wishes for the New Year. Through deep snow may Friendship's glow our hearts unite this Christmas. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men.

Homo sapiens, of course.

There were no further bombings in the weeks before the holiday, but the three other simus at school disappeared over a single weekend. The youngest, a girl who was a year ahead of Max, had eaten lunch with Zach in the canteen a couple of times at the beginning of term, and once had matched her steps to Laura's in the corridor to ask if there were any openings on the swimming team. Though by herself, Laura had muttered 'check with Saunders' without stopping, without so much as a brief smile, and had veered away towards a group of kids she barely recognised, some of the loathsome Purist types. What was the girl's name? Lily? Leslie? Something like that. Maybe Max would know. It was a bit late to start feeling guilty about such a trivial slight, and at school there was no way she could show any but generic interest in the girl. *Generic*, she thought with a familiar ache. The Head had made an official announcement that Fulgur was opening a new on-campus secondary school for the gifted: 'Naturally we will miss our cognoscens pupils, who, thanks to the generosity and continued support of the Fulgur Corporation, have enriched our intellectual life immeasurably, and provided our school with a unique opportunity to practise mutual tolerance, but it would be churlish to regret what is clearly in the young simus' own best interests.' Olivia nudged her in assembly, while he went on to describe the new media facilities. 'Fartbag. The augers are being rounded up by I.S.' Lately Olivia used *auger* as often as possible in Laura's presence, priming her hotglot for an explosion, with juicy radioactive fallout. But that was the old Laura. Resigned to the growing coolness between them, she only continued to sit with Olivia to avoid suspicion. No, she was lying to herself, there was a certain longing as well-maybe it was like smoking, they said you never got over wanting a cigarette even years after you'd quit.

On the Friday before regionals, Laura came into the kitchen to pack up a sandwich and a bottle of juice, maybe some biscuits. She was always ravenous after training, and her mum was baking again, the whole house smelled like the

inside of a warm oven. Three gingerbread slabs were cooling on the worktop, packets of sweets for decoration nearby-one of the seasonal exceptions to the no-teeth-rot rule-but her mum was staring at the contents of a parcel spread across the table.

‘Christmas presents?’ Laura asked.

‘It looks that way, though nothing’s gift-wrapped.’

‘Who’s it from?’

‘That’s the strangest part.’ Her mum pointed to the packaging. ‘There’s no sender’s name, only a PO box in Cape Town, and no note. South African stamps.’

‘I didn’t know you’ve got friends there.’

‘We don’t.’

‘How weird.’ Laura said, examining the dark-grained Mancala board obviously intended for her dad, a battered single-stringed musical instrument, and a football in an acrylic display case which proved to be autographed by Pelé. ‘Rad, wait till Max gets a look at this!’

‘This one’s yours.’ Her mum took a white envelope with *Laura* printed neatly on its face from her apron pocket. ‘Open it.’

Laura succeeded in keeping her hands steady as she turned it over. The seal still intact, her mum must have just unpacked the parcel. Lifting the flap on her backpack to slip the envelope inside, Laura headed for the door. The pool snackbar was open till nine. ‘Can’t, I’m already late, Janey will murder me.’

*

Clipboard in hand, Janey beckoned Laura from her lane, then flipped through the top sheets to tap a finger on a printed notice. ‘I’m trying to make this inconspicuous. Collect your towel and go to my office while the others are still doing their laps. There’s someone waiting for you.’

‘Police?’ Laura whispered, though they couldn’t be overheard from the water,

and the assistant coach was standing at the other end of the pool. Because of the weather, there wasn't even a pushy parent in sight.

Janey shook her head. 'Make it quick, there's work to do. I expect at least three firsts tomorrow, and one new record.' But she was smiling, Laura had been besting her own times ever since ... ever since the cottage.

'A bloke?' Laura couldn't keep the note of hope from her voice.

'No.' Janey met Laura's eyes, and there was both understanding and something like regret in them. Janey was no fool, however underpaid and underappreciated. Not for the first time, Laura wondered why this tough, articulate woman had chosen to coach at all, and then a minor team. Without arrogance, Laura knew she was about the best material Janey was ever likely to get. Fulgur channelled its support into basketball and football, not swimming. 'I'm sorry, it's an older woman,' Janey added, 'but I think you'll be glad to see her.' She passed Laura her coach's clipboard. 'Here's your pretext, should someone ask. Any papers from my desk will do.'

One slam-dunk of a heartbeat, that was all, for Laura to recognise Stella under the black knitted hat-rounded, not peaked-and metre-long scarf concealing her double chin; the last person Laura had expected. What had the woman told Janey to explain this visit?

'Come in and shut the door,' Stella said calmly, gesturing towards the second chair, from which Laura would have to remove a precarious stack of magazines and books, topped by some spare swimming caps, the sleek silver silicone ones embossed with the club logo.

After bolting the door behind her, Laura rewrapped her towel, which had slipped a bit, and made her way to the seat. She felt at a distinct disadvantage, almost vulnerable, in a skin of dripping lycra, especially since Stella hadn't removed her cumbersome anorak, hadn't even unzipped it.

'Hurry up, girl, I haven't got all day.'

Laura noted with surprise that Janey seemed to like reading poetry and anthropology as well as sports magazines.

'I saw what they did to your place,' Laura said. 'I'm sorry.'

Stella nodded, then unwound her scarf to free her jaw. 'I reckon I'll never get used to the cold.'

'Did anyone get hurt?'

'Only my pet iguana.' Stella guffawed at the expression on Laura's face, a sound like a jackal's call. Laura remembered reading that jackals were highly intelligent animals. 'They don't take down old Stella that easy. You can't joke, you might as well order the coffin.' Her eyebrows snapped towards each other like feinting pups. 'Only so many times you can cheat the hangman, though.'

Laura would have liked to ask where the woman was staying, what she was living on, but satisfied herself with a less risky question. Stella was perfectly capable of leaving without another word if offended, never to approach Laura again.

'How did you find me?'

'You mean *why*, don't you?'

Laura crossed her arms in an attempt to disguise her shiver. But Stella smiled, a genuine smile this time, and the two of them regarded each other with mutual respect, the one thing uniting them acknowledged at last.

'Where-' Laura cleared her voice of a slight hoarseness. 'Where is he?'

'I've got good ears for my age. Word is, you swim a lot. Word is, you swim like no one else in the entire city.' Stella leaned forward to inspect the pendant that, contrary to club rules, Laura wouldn't remove during training-and would definitely, defiantly, not remove while competing tomorrow. 'Word is, you've got flippers hidden inside those skinny limbs of yours. I sure hope so. My da used to fish with a speargun. It takes some mighty powerful swimming to outrace them cunts. And the hate-tipped ones-they're *poison*. You swim with Zach, it's not going to be in a turquoise pool under gently swaying coconut palms, with the five stars of a tropical paradise to lighten his sultry skin.' She saw Laura begin to shake her head. 'Listen, sugar, some things never change. Once a nigger lover, always a nigger lover. Only now they call them *augers*.'

*

After the meet her mum carted off Laura's medals as though she, her mum, had won them herself. Which, in a way, she had. Her euphoria would last as long as it took her to remember the sloppy turn in the 400-m individual medley, and the new record Laura had missed setting by a microsliver of a second in the 200-m fly. Laura made the most of her triumph: two parties, and Owen would bring her home afterwards. His absence at the meet, she'd explained to her mum, couldn't be helped, a family commitment. In fact, he'd be at his grandmother's birthday celebration till late, and she'd been invited.

Laura put in an appearance at the club's victory bash, then let everyone know she was expected at Owen's. Her parents had given her enough money for a taxi, which she'd supplemented with a withdrawal from her sock fund; harder to trace than mobile credit. The taxi driver made no comment as she gave him the address, but his frown, however fleeting, didn't escape her notice. Though she would have preferred to make her own way by bus, there simply wasn't enough time. She'd have to trust that no one would be inquiring. Never explain too much: how many times had she tried to teach Max the cardinal rule of crack lying? The less she said, the more likely the driver would be to forget the one odd fare among many in the pre-Christmas rush. And with such broken English, he probably wasn't some bright student earning extra dosh at night.

She had a moment of trepidation when the taxi pulled away, leaving her, despite her mobile, to wonder whether she was heading into rough, perhaps shark-infested waters. She glanced round nervously and then, turtling further into the hood of her jacket, picked her way across the uneven pavement towards the side entrance Stella had described, not unlike crossing coarse, slippery shingle strewn with wrack. There wasn't much light, and though she'd tucked a small torch into her bag, it would spotlight her presence. She wrinkled her nose, even the cold couldn't deaden the pong. She ought to be relieved that she couldn't see what lay nearby, under the crust of snow.

There was no response to the pre-arranged signal, and after several more attempts, it seemed as though something had gone wrong. The alternative—a nasty sort of stunt-Laura considered for a moment, then dismissed. Without naming names, Stella had warned her of a fair amount of opposition to her, Laura's, involvement, but in the end the group had come to a consensus. Zach was no longer in police custody, Fulgur having produced enough evidence (or leverage) to secure his release. To dissociate themselves from any hint of terrorist activity, the Janus needed to move above ground. 'Convince them,'

Stella had said, ‘that there are a lot more sapiens like you, sapiens who aren’t terror-stricken, who are prepared to work together with the simus. Who better than the daughter of one of Fulgur’s hotshot scientists?’

‘But where’s Zach?’ Laura had repeated. ‘Why hasn’t he-’ She’d stopped herself in time, but Stella wasn’t fooled. ‘Why hasn’t he gone back to his flat?’

‘He’ll have his reasons.’

‘Is Fulgur threatening to cut off his serum?’

‘The formula would be a sign of good faith.’

‘So *that’s* the real purpose of this visit.’

Stella’s silence like no other, Laura heard herself speaking roughly, belligerently-fearfully. ‘What aren’t you telling me?’

‘Zach does his own telling, you ought to know that by now.’

‘Or not-telling.’

Stella nodded grimly. ‘You got it, girl. Maybe, sometimes, we need to do the telling for him.’

She couldn’t know, could she? Though Laura’s pulse rate would have betrayed her, she’d studied Stella without faltering. (What a wimp she’d been, cowering for so many years behind her lies! Why hadn’t she realised that you could practise assertiveness like your crawl?) No matter how thoroughly the simus were disliked, few people cared for police brutality, and a backlash would further the Janu cause. But to disclose the circumstances of his arrest ... Laura’s gooseflesh was no less real for being imagined.

Whatever the woman’s suspicions, she could be as close-mouthed as Zach himself, and probably just as unforgiving. The conversation had begun to feel like a chess game predestined, at best, to stalemate. At the sight of tears, always a useful gambit but in this match ridiculously easy to muster, Stella had relented enough to admit that no one was quite certain of Zach’s whereabouts, or how far Fulgur’s protection would extend. ‘When I was a girl, we had a scrappy little dog who followed me everywhere.’ Grunting a bit, she’d bent and hiked up the

right leg of her trousers, exposing a large, shiny, raised, and altogether ugly scar on her shin. ‘Till he turned on me and bit. Then my da put him down.’ She laughed. ‘Or so he thought. We kids found Rook in time and took him to my uncle’s. The scrappy ones survive.’

That simu boy-over the past weeks Laura had thought about him a lot. Zach had freed his captive, but wouldn’t go into detail. ‘We’ve given him a good scare, I’ve more than enough on my conscience.’ It had been Max who’d told her that dying was often not as scary as living. ‘And kids go to awesome places. Rad magical places like in films, only better. The boy you mean, the one who died, I did catch him sometimes. He chased dragons: hot sun, sharp salty wind, blue blue waves. His hair like black wings, his feet flying the surf. The sea tasting of fish and chips with plenty of vinegar. All the chips you can eat.’ When Laura asked why the fuck he hadn’t told anyone before it was too late, Max had regarded her with confused resentment. ‘I didn’t know where he *really* was. I’ve already told you, I can’t always tell. Anyway, who should I have told except Dad, and I *did* go to him, but something was wrong with the boy, Dad wouldn’t say, but I guess it was a neuro thing, and once Fulgur rejects you, and if you’ve got no family, and no one will give you your serum or medicine or food even ... people who’re hungry imagine mountains and mountains of food ...’ She batted his hand away from his neckline. ‘Yeah, like I *asked* for this? It sucks that there’s so much bad shit out there!’ Less hotly, ‘Ask Zach. One day things will change.’

‘And just *how* am I supposed to ask Zach?’

‘He’ll be back, Lolly.’ Max touched her wrist. ‘He’s OK, you’ll see, things are going to change.’ But he refused to be goaded by supplication; her unspoken imprecations.

Once more Laura rapped on the door, then pounded it brashly in frustration. Political stuff didn’t much interest her, mainly she’d come to see for herself what Stella might be hiding. The woman was too canny, surely, to believe someone like Laura’s dad would breach Fulgur security to a family member, whatever she might claim-or ask of Laura. Maybe these people knew all along where Zach could be found.

The echo dwindling in what must be a long, empty corridor, she yanked off her gloves to check a tad compulsively for her mobile. The old Rex Cinema was huge, a dream palace abandoned at least twenty years before, when this district

had begun to deteriorate and film-goers preferred the smaller places anyway, but a sentry-of sorts-was meant to be waiting for her.

Later on, she could never decide what made her try the handle. The footfall behind her? Which she realised after slamming and bolting the metal door-a wooden one would have been axed ages ago-was probably three-quarters imagination and one-quarter stray cat or rodent. But she was in, and she had her torch. To leave now would leave her guessing forever, and hating herself for scuttling away. At least as a crab, you needn't despise yourself for burrowing into the sand. Ever since she was seven, she'd become very good at burrowing.

Lies taste like a mouthful of sand.

She switched on the torch but didn't budge from the spot. There wasn't much to be seen-remnants of peeling wallpaper, once richly embossed; a twist of wires where wall fixtures had been removed, though one tarnished sconce still dangled like a wild bird left to hang before roasting; a dark red carpet, surprisingly intact if muddied; some water damage in the corner of the ceiling right above her head. She played the torch in all directions.

Somebody had cleared away the usual rubbish that accumulates in a derelict building, or the place had been kept well barricaded-nothing more than a few cigarette stubs, a board leaning against the wall, one crumpled ball of newspaper, which she had, her mother's daughter, a momentary urge to pick up. And there was no sign of the usual vandalism, no graffiti.

The air, though dampish, was still. Too still for her to call out and announce her presence. Despite her determination to proceed, she found it hard to move away from the exit; from what might be her only exit. At last she removed her mobile and stared at it, then thrust it back in her bag when she realised that the only person she wanted to text couldn't be reached.

'I'll find you,' she whispered.

In the cinema itself all but the last ten rows or so of seats seemed to be in place, and Laura surmised that the missing ones had been sold off by the original owners, so clean were the wounds. At a guess the cinema could have accommodated upwards of a thousand viewers-a very blind guess. The vast space was as dark as an underground cavern, into which her torch shone only a narrow, meagre light. From the upper circle she felt like Jonah, entering not the

whale, but the mouth of some even larger prehistoric creature whose multiple rows of teeth would soon grind her to a paste. Though she tried to plot the dimensions of the theatre, whenever she moved towards one wall, the others receded into darkness. Finally she worked her way back to the centre, doing her best to ignore the increasing chill.

*

A step at a time, Laura descended from the upper level along the central aisle, swinging her torch alternately to the left, to the right. Here too everything was tidy-too tidy, as though the cleaners had just come through with vacuum and rubbish bags. She paused as gooseflesh rose on her arms, no longer able to remember why she'd felt compelled to search the building. It was obviously deserted, the group she was supposed to join long fled. She promised herself she'd leave upon reaching the main floor: a cinema this size must have emergency exits on either side. For some reason she didn't fancy turning her back to the screen.

She finds them near the bottom.

Near the bottom she finds them, three in a row, and four more in the next row down: positioned as if watching a film; slumping a bit, as if bored, or half asleep; leaning against each other as if sharing a secret, an embrace.

Straighten up, this is no time for snogging.

She gave a great hiccup of laughter, then swung about, the torch wavering wildly. Was anyone there? She clamped her left hand round her right to steady the beam of light, not very successfully. Was anyone still there? There had already been ample opportunity to attack her, hadn't there?

A line of reasoning which might have worked while tucked up under her duvet with a cup of hot chocolate on her bedside cabinet and her terror confined to the printed page and the dustball monsters under her bed, her dad's snoring comforting if inaudible.

To keep from bolting, she told herself she had to be sure-that they were dead, that no one she knew ...

Don't go there.

With great care Laura sidled along the row of seats till she came to the first body. She studied the lad's face, his eyes closed, his mouth only slightly agape, his skin fairer than Zach's, his hair too—he might really have been sleeping, his head reposing on the shoulder of the girl next to him, and even that track of dried spit not out of place. She bent close, so that his eyelashes trembled delicately at the stir of her breath, though it was her own eyes which stung. How had he died? There seemed to be no frontal wounds, but she wasn't prepared to pull his torso forward to check for bullet holes, stab marks. Despite little reason to hope, she forced herself to feel for a pulse. Then on to the next body. And the next. By the time she reached the last, her hands had stopped shaking; her agitation replaced by a dry-eyed calm.

The head was tilted at an awkward angle. Laura lifted the chin, reluctance her only glove. Unbalanced, Stella's bulky corpse tipped sideways, slid away, and settled itself into the narrow space between the rows of seats. Again no visible wounds. Maybe it had been poison; maybe some sort of gas or bioweapon. A responsible citizen would report this. A responsible citizen might need an antidote.

An irresponsible citizen would take her chances.

Six in all, the kids: two girls and four boys. Her age, Zach's, at most a year or two older. She thought of Owen, right this moment swilling punch and stuffing himself for his grandmother's eightieth-fourscore, a good biblical age. Moses was eighty years old when the waters of Egypt, smote with a rod, ran blood. Four boys and two girls, simus all. And as much as she'd disliked Jessica, Laura would never have wished to see her foundered here, her once vivid face washed clean of all disdain. The others were strangers.

Laura couldn't leave Stella reduced to a wretched bundle, like a secret too sordid to out. It took some doing to manoeuvre the heavy, floppy body back into the seat and prop it upright. At least Stella's eyes were shut; accusations have a way of staring at you in the dark.

After a while, Laura moved on to the others. She passed her torch over their faces, slowly, lingering on each to memorise a particular feature—this one's slateblue stubble, that one's shapely eyebrows, a scar. At first she felt disturbed by her own curiosity, as if her torch were the lens of an intrusive camera, but then she saw how the light flowed over them, anointing their waxy skin. She

lowered her torch, righted another body, and with what she'd have been embarrassed to call a sense of awe, moved from corpse to corpse, clambering between the risers and kissing each forehead in turn.

As she straightened for the last time, Laura searched her memory for a word or two, a phrase which might serve. She remembered plenty of prayers, but Zach had told her *simus* didn't bother with religion. And Stella? Her grandfather would tell her it didn't matter; she knew it did.

Nothing came to mind but a lame *I'm sorry*. She whispered it nevertheless, and at the sound of her voice the cinema screen burst into life.

Chapter 30

On the third day ... no, Zach can't be sure any more about the passage of time, it might be only two days, or already five. Without change there's no measurement, and it's only the amount of his food and fuel that changes. At least he supposes it changes, he seems to have become muddled in his calculations. When he opened the drum after his last restless doze-he no longer sleeps properly-there was more paraffin than the time before. And he could swear that he's already eaten all the dried apricots, yet now he's staring at a whole handful. He lays them out carefully on the table to count them: 1, 2, 3 ... 27. He has no pen or pencil, but this time he'll carve the number into a block of ice. And if that thaws a bit in the heat from his stove before refreezing, there's always his skin-his snowy infinite skin.

Go inside, Zach.

He holds out his arm towards the lantern. The Arctic winter is waning though the sun has not yet pierced the horizon, whose skin bulges with gathering light. A delicate apricot warmth flushes the air, and he breathes deeply, deeply. The scent penetrates his pores, as nourishing as fruit. No need to worry about food when the entire universe is prepared to feed him.

Zach, listen to me. You must go back into the iglu.

'Max?' His voice creaks in the long-unused oarlock of his throat, and the sound startles a school of fish into the open-saffron cod, he thinks. Their only natural predator is the seal. One of them nibbles at his hand, another nudges his groin, still another drifts into the seaweed tangle of his hair. He swims a lazy stroke or two. 'Max, come and join me.' The froth of bubbles makes him laugh, and he wonders why he's been so afraid to speak. To tell her, all he needs to do is migrate with the cod, who have a lifespan of at least eleven years-time enough to savour their silvery flanks, palest yellow belly, creamy throat.

Zach!

With a gasp he breaks the watery surface of his mind to find he's lying near-buried in a pillowy drift of snow against the wall of the iglu, which is probably what has saved his life. He doesn't move. Doesn't speak. There's a hum like the

crackle of radio static in his head. Stiff and drowsy, he's glad to let Max sweep away the snow, brush it from his numb, waxen face. What's happened to his mask and goggles? Max gets him to his feet.

At least you didn't strip, Max says.

They make slow progress through the deep snow, though the wind is light. Zach keeps one mitt on the iglu for support, tracing its circumference until they reach the entrance. Max jumps into the trench, then helps Zach slither down. A dusting of powdery snow clings to Zach's lips and eyebrows, even his lashes. The bucket he abandoned after filling with snow stands where he left it.

You first, Max says. I'll hand you down the bucket.

By now more alert, Zach turns and searches the sky. He remembers that he'd seen the aurora borealis and went to climb the iglu for a better look. There are still ripples and folds of colour, as if large panels of diaphanous watered silk in amethyst and rose madder and jade hang from the stars and billow in the solar wind. Mesmerised as before by the flutter and flow of light, as ethereal as the spirits of the Inuit dead, he stares till his eyes blur. He blinks rapidly, repeatedly, then turns to Max.

'Magnificent, isn't it?' he says. 'Your sister-'

But once again he's alone.

*

Though inside the iglu it's warm, almost hot in fact, Zach turns up the stove to maximum capacity, the lantern as well, yet is still shivering when his coffee is ready. He adds more sugar than usual and gulps down the first few mouthfuls before he can restrain himself. Somehow he'd resisted his impulse to scour the vicinity for Max, merely peering instead over the rim of the trench, but the jumbled tracks told him nothing and he'd hastened indoors. Even those few minutes had been risky, he acknowledges as he pours himself a second mug. He'd begun to tremble so violently that he was forced to leave the bucket outside to retrieve later.

'I guess you're not ready to die just yet,' he mutters under his breath, not quite abandoning his vow not to talk to himself. 'Is that all you're supposed to do?'

Keep going till you go mad?’ Louder still, ‘Damn it, Lev, what now?’

He examines the blisters on his fingers, but in relief concludes that the damage is superficial; he has no desire to lose any digits. Then he rubs his hand over his rudimentary beard, trying to calculate from its length how long he’s been here. But like an obstreperous toddler, time simply won’t cooperate. And despite his so-called prodigious memory, he can’t recollect his last shave. Was it in the tent with Lev? At basecamp? (He backs away from other questions, more fundamental yet invidiously fanged.)

Still groggy, he’s tempted to lie down and sleep. Something tells him, however, that he needs to stay awake and moving for a while longer, and in any case he’s a bit afraid of his dreams. Once the circulation is completely restored to his fingers, he picks up the clarinet. The blisters make it difficult to hold, but he’s nothing if not stubborn. The more it hurts, the more he perseveres; the more he perseveres, the more it gives him purpose, gratification even. He wonders if pain can become addictive, here in this limbic nightmare.

‘What am I doing wrong?’ he asked.

‘Maybe if you hurt me a little ...’ Laura said.

‘Never!’

With a cry of anguish, Zach throws his clarinet to the floor, heedless that it may break. Wanting it to break. Wanting all of its virtual keys to fly like silver bullets through the air and put an end to the bite and suck of memory, its persistent taint. But though the instrument bounces several times, then rebounds off the fuel drum to clatter to a halt near the sleeping platform, it seems undamaged. He waits-perhaps he won’t pick it up at all. Another of his lies, he tells himself grimly, he’s never been any good at letting go.

He crouches before the instrument without touching it. There was a wooden recorder once, his grandfather’s, before his first clarinet. One keepsake, they’d said when he was consigned to the Foundation. With cinematic clarity he replays the final morning-the sleek noiseless black car with tinted windows, the dented music case clutched in his lap, the permanent smile of Mrs Holmes, their housemother, whose breath smelled of peppermints-to this day he gags if obliged to brush his teeth with the usual sort of toothpaste. Remembers too the other new boys, especially Donald with his pale blue, nearly colourless eyes-watery,

tremulous eyes that stayed open long after lights-out. Remembers the high electronic gate, the endless gravel drive, the grounds. The neat bunkbeds, the computers. The smell of roasting lamb and potatoes and something lemony awakening his hunger like an unwelcome guest who's dropped by for dinner (at least they'd always been well fed). Sometimes he wonders what made him take the recorder, rather than his beloved clarinet, rather than a book, one of his dad's, say, what made him take the recorder rather than the ivory and ebony chess set his mum had brought with her from home, rather than that silly teddy who'd lost an ear ages before he'd passed it on. There was no way he knew about the envelope at the time, tucked away in a faded satin pocket amid folded sheet music and a handwritten fingering chart. Maybe because it was the very oldest thing he owned, the recorder on which Oupa had taught Zach's mum to play? Though he still hopes it'll turn up on an auction site, common sense tells him its splintered fragments were thrust vengefully-gleefully-into a campfire.

At last he retrieves the clarinet and blows a few tentative notes, which sound clear and true. He sits down on the sleeping platform, trying to empty his mind of all else. That's the thing about music-he thinks of sex as a wonderful impossible biological prank, the sort of trick the Monkey King himself would have delighted in devising, but even the simplest drumbeat or chant, as any shaman knows, slips the trap of time, of thought, of memory.

Whenever agitated, Zach chooses the lucidity of Bach-not fire and frenzy, but cool fresh water welling from a subterranean source, the very mineral impurities and air bubbles of his own inadequate renderings a reason to keep drinking and drinking. After a good beginning, his breathing falters. He starts again. A few phrases in, he lets the clarinet drop to his lap. Angrily, he wipes the tears from his eyes, then jams the mouthpiece to his lips and drives a loud jazzy *uplifting* tune out the bell until a delighted laugh fills the iglu. He gasps and swings round. 'Laura,' he calls out before he can stop himself. There are no echoes in this house of ice, and very few shadows.

Where is she?

He knows he ought to eat, but instead finishes the lukewarm coffee, lowers the flame on the lantern, and strips completely. Ignoring his sleeping bag, he constructs a nest for himself among the caribou furs. He's not going to pretend any longer, he wants Laura so badly that he'll do anything to reach her. Anything to tell her what he should have told her when he was too proud, too stubborn, too

scared to speak.

For a few minutes he watches the light flicker along the pelt-lined walls, playing an old childhood game. He's back in the Foundation woodlands after dark, where he'd sneak off by himself to lie in a moist nest of bracken and leaves, not doing much of anything-listening, mostly, and watching the trees, the shifting latticework of black and deeper black. He shared the night with all manner of creatures, who tolerated his presence so long as he made no threats. His heightened senses meant that he was never alone, but it was a respite he needed again and again from the uninterrupted *thereness* of the other boys, the teachers, the staff-a *thereness* as stifling as the air in the tube during a severe heatwave. After a while you couldn't breathe.

He'd also learned to masturbate in those woods, where there was no danger of being overheard by your roommates. The other boys didn't seem to mind, they joked enough about it and even coordinated their wank-off sessions, but he always pretended to be asleep. A couple of piss-taking skirmishes, then they let him be. Later on he told them he was meeting a girl from the village, which soon proved easy enough to arrange. And he was a pretty good pimp, too, though of course no one ever called it that.

You used them, he could imagine Laura saying. Maybe so. And why not? What did she think *they* were busy doing? 'You're a terrific fuck,' Melanie used to tell him. No, that was Georgina.

He can remember when he stopped. No matter how tightly he shuts his eyes, the scene in the shed intrudes-the knife, the smell of dank mould and piss (his own), the hatred on their faces; the *elation*. 'Reckon you can rape our girls?' If the croakers had been in a hurry, they wouldn't have thrashed him first. During the week in hospital he'd tried hard to be thankful for the stitches, the pain. But it wasn't at all hard to be grateful to Smyles, the cranky gardener whose name and stuttering were always good for a laugh-dour skinny Smyles who, hearing the thuds and groans, came to investigate. By that time they'd already got Zach's trousers and pants down by his ankles. He still sends Smyles a card for his birthday, goes round with a bottle at Christmas. Even crankier with age.

One of the softest calf pelts is just the right size. At first Zach lies on his back, then he curls on his side, finally he tries stretching out full length on his belly, the thick fur of the bedding almost coarse enough to abrade his skin. Laura's

pendant slides back and forth under him. He pictures it gleaming in the candlelight, swinging gently between her breasts. It's warm by the fire, and the sweet smell of woodsmoke will cling to their hair. Her cheeks are flushed; her eyes lit by the flames, backlit by something very much like mischief. On occasion he's wondered if girls find an erection amusing, if not downright preposterous.

In the end he gives up, his body is refusing to respond. Maybe hypothermia can do that to you, maybe it's this place. It's happened before, especially when he'd miss taking his serum on schedule. He pulls the furs up over his face and settles in for a long night. At the moment even Chloe would be welcome.

Sleep doesn't come. His body aches with exhaustion, bouts of shivery spasms seizing his muscles from time to time, though he's warm enough. But his mind will not settle, writhes like a spawning eel in the weed mats of the Sargasso Sea. There's no sunlight to penetrate the waters, no clear blue depths. It's as though undiscovered species await him, if only he could permeate the murk.

The Zach she saw, he's gone now. There remains only a fleshless skeleton of the person he might have become. He slides a hand from under the furs, holds it up towards the low flame, and spreads his fingers. The light reddens the webby parts of his skin to near translucence. He remembers how she once matched their hands, palm to palm. With an inarticulate sound he throws back the covers, scrambles to his feet, and bounds to the lantern, then slaps his hand onto its hood. He holds it there, feeling nothing and everything, till his palm begins to shrill in agony. *Laura*. He clenches his teeth to choke off her name. He will *not* say it. Words as slippery as eels have always been his self-defence, spawning guile and deceit and spite.

'Why won't you talk to me?' Laura cried.

Because the sea is fathomless, forever hidden by sargassum. Because it's not as warm as you imagine. Because we'd drown.

Chapter 31

‘Who’s there?’ Laura cried, whirling instinctively to peer behind her.

There was no answer, and though she could see the flickering on the screen from the corner of her eye, there was no beam of light from the projection booth either. Her hand unsteady, she swept her torch over the seats, discovering nothing-discovering how many wells of darkness there were in which to hide. Finally, with deep reluctance, she turned round again to face the screen.

She discovered you could gasp without making a sound.

Zach was sitting on a platform made of ice, shoulders slumped and head propped on one hand. Aqua light tinted everything, even his hair and skin, but this was no underwater setting. Could he be inside an ice cave or grotto? a glacier? He looked so tired-so defeated-that Laura found herself descending the steps towards the screen as though she could take him in her arms, but halted with a shiver of recognition at the sound of his clarinet. Suddenly light-headed, she dropped to the carpeted tread and hugged her ribs. This was impossible-
impossible.

Maybe the dead could also rise up and speak.

Her neckhairs stirred, and for a moment she was tempted to crawl under one of the cinema seats, the way she’d done as a small child. She’d nearly forgotten: her dad used to take her to his favourite scifi films, the classic ones with scary aliens and megalomaniac cyborgs and grotesque virus-deformed plague victims, till her mum got wind of where they’d been. Nearly forgotten, too, the ice cream and popcorn; the delicious taste of conspiracy.

I’m not going to look at them, she told herself. The dead stay dead.

After a quick backwards glance, she raised her eyes to the screen. As if on signal, Zach lifted his face, and she could see tears wetting his cheeks. He put his free hand to his hair-his beautiful hair, now uncombed, dirty, lank as Zach himself. Never more beautiful.

‘Zach,’ she said, hoping that whatever window had opened between them wasn’t

glazed in mirrored glass. ‘Zach, where are you?’

He raked his fingers repeatedly through his hair, then straightened up. Laura glimpsed a tousled, black-haired head asleep on his lap. The sight drove her to her feet.

‘Damn you,’ she said, ‘I get to find dead bodies while you-‘ She stopped, conscious of how ridiculous her words sounded, even if nobody could hear. How contemptible.

For there was no mistaking the despair on Zach’s face. Plainly thinking himself unobserved, he closed his eyes, and fresh tears continued to slip from under his lids to the accompaniment of unfamiliar but exquisite music-music which she suspected was his own. He’d lost weight again, and there were smudges under his eyes, dark cratered smudges deriving from more than lack of sleep. The cigarette burn on his cheek had healed to a pearly cameo, crimped at the edges and likely to remain beardless.

Where had they taken him? Fulgur’s network was so extensive that he could be thousands of kilometres away-even, she supposed, on one of the outstations. Laura studied the scene: the blocks of ice, Zach’s clothes, the intense, almost surreal blue light. She felt like directing the camera operator to pan for her. Under her fixed stare, the picture was beginning to blur. She wiped her eyes angrily, she couldn’t afford to miss any details which might provide a clue, though how she intended to penetrate some secret installation had not yet occurred to her-but it would.

Then she noticed that the music was fading as well. ‘No,’ she cried, her voice like a wrong note, ‘wait!’ Now the image was dimming visibly, so that it reminded her of a transparent webskin. ‘Zach!’ The webbed texture of the screen itself lent Zach’s skin a macabre reptilian appearance. Frantically Laura started down the stairs, caught her foot, and flailed the rest of the way to the bottom, cracking her forearm against one of the aisle seats with a jaw-clenching jolt of pain, despite the padding of jacket sleeve and jumper. Fuckfuckfuck, she was making this a habit-falling to reach Zach. Winded, she took a few minutes to right herself, massage her arm, and scabble for her torch, by which time Zach was no more than a pale shadow of himself.

‘Zach!’ she cried even louder, no longer concerned about being overheard.

Zach straightened and opened his eyes. Laura had no reason to believe he saw her, though his gaze was disconcertingly point-blank. Squinting, he leaned forward with an air of fierce concentration, as if searching for something which had slipped from his grasp into deep surf. For a moment his image sharpened, filling the screen in a close-up so that the rest of the room disappeared from view. Then his lips moved, but it was impossible to tell whether he was talking to himself, to his companion, or to someone else entirely, and Laura couldn't read his lips.

'Zach, listen to me'-she started again after a shaky breath-'*listen*. Play, don't ever stop. I'll find you.'

She watched without moving as the screen became blank once more, the cinema dark. She could never be sure at which point Zach's image dissolved into afterimage, though in retrospect she believed it was just at this threshold that she caught a whiff of the sea, briny and chill; that she saw, though only for a fraction of a second, a flash of speaking, bright blue eyes.

Keep telling him.

*

Fulgur was famous for its Christmas bash-luscious food, wine from its own South African cellars, a top band, always a few dazzling celebrities to mingle with the crowd. And a themed children's party, held simultaneously. It was said you needed a postdoctoral degree in child psychology or education, plus a minimum of ten years hands-on experience, to serve the fruit punch. Last year one award-winning children's author had been unobtrusively escorted from the room because he'd been caught spiking his own glass of orange squash. There were always gatecrashers to both events, despite stringent security measures.

Laura spent the evening before the party at Zach's flat. Whatever Josh had done-and he refused to tell her-the neighbours were no longer a problem. 'Just don't make it too obvious,' he'd warned. After cooking him a meal, she presented him with his Christmas gift, though she planned to come by sometime during the holiday. She wasn't a particularly creative cook-Zach, she remembered glumly, had far more flair-but her mum had insisted on teaching her the basics. For years she'd resented not being allowed to eat the frozen pizzas and tinned puddings on her mates' supper tables, so it came as something of a surprise to find that she

took pleasure in rolling out a slab of pastry.

‘Wonderful mince pies,’ Josh said, already on his third or fourth.

‘My mum likes to bake when she’s not disinfecting the toilets or scrubbing the floors with a toothbrush.’

‘About to get your period? Listen, in my younger days I used to bake my own bread.’

Laura grimaced. ‘All that kneading.’ She no longer blushed at his remarks.

‘As good as a massage when you’re wound up, and much better than bashing pillows. Think of the feathers everywhere.’

She smiled to herself at the scene conjured. A shame her mum was allergic, a split pillow or two would be just the thing to induce a heart attack.

‘The way my mum hates mess and muck, I’m surprised she doesn’t wear surgical gloves when faced with a mound of sticky dough.’

‘Kids never have a clue about their parents.’

‘Don’t bet on it. And besides, fair’s fair. *Parents* haven’t got a clue about their kids.’

Just before she left, Josh shuffled to a cupboard and handed her a newspaper-wrapped parcel. ‘Sorry about the paper.’

He always seemed to know when she got teary. ‘No need for that,’ he said, patting her as usual on the shoulder, ‘it’s just some old thing I’ve had lying around in a drawer. But don’t open it now, keep it for Christmas.’

When she kissed him on the cheek, his face pinkened with pleasure. ‘Mind, we don’t want to make Zach jealous.’

They were both silent till Josh said, ‘Ah well, those simus don’t make much of our holidays anyway.’

Laura went back to Zach’s flat to tidy up the kitchen, her fantasy only fleeting

that Zach was in the living room, reading or studying a score, tapping away at the computer. She'd stored extra pies and cheeses in the fridge, two containers of a meaty pasta in the freezer compartment, though she knew Josh would never fetch the stuff for himself. His code of behaviour reminded her a bit of Owen, and rather more of the heroes in the soppy historical romances Olivia liked to read.

Christ, what a bitch you're turning into. Olivia reads all sorts of stuff, she never goes anywhere without a book or, since her last birthday, her reader. In fact, Olivia ought to have been far more Zach's type.

'Come on, you know what he's after,' Olivia had said even before the club bombing. 'You don't think he's interested in your *mind*? No matter how much I dislike him, there's no denying he's damned smart.' She'd laughed in that cool way of hers that made you want to riposte with a subtly double-edged thrust-if only you could think of one. 'About as smart as me, I reckon.'

Laura stopped scrubbing the baking tray for a moment while she recalled the peculiar, almost cagey expression on Olivia's face.

To avoid temptation, she stowed Josh's parcel out of sight in Zach's wardrobe before sitting down at his desk. As futile as the exercise seemed, she was writing him a Christmas letter, and by hand. Zach had an old-fashioned predilection for fountain pens; he collected-and used-the oddest things. But she uncapped one, an elegant black-and-amber instrument she'd seen him write with: some thoughts needed the delicacy, the weight of ink; its idiosyncrasy. It was slow going, and she blotched, then tore up more than she kept, but in the end she folded two closely written sheets of paper, slipped them into an envelope, and addressed it with his name. She stretched and went to the window, thinking how much she hated the short dark days of winter. The streetlamp which barely lit this stretch of canal gleamed like the single baleful eye of an old tom, scarred survivor of innumerable street battles. There was no sign of the snow that was predicted, yet again. Everyone had their own theories about the severity of this particular winter, right down to the religious fanatics.

Could her grandfather be right? Hard to imagine. But if there was the remotest chance ... then she hoped Stella was warm enough at last.

'Why are you doing this?' Laura had asked her. 'If you're arrested, you'll be

tried under the new terrorism laws. They won't deport you, if that's what you're reckoning on.'

'They've got to catch me first.' Stella had made a sound that took Laura a moment to recognise as a laugh. 'Don't you worry none about me, I'm mean and wily as a mountain cat.'

'But why?' Laura had persisted, a trifle dangerously to judge by the yellowish gleam in the woman's eyes. But Stella rose to her feet, grunting at the stiffness in her hips, and stood over Laura. With her fingertips-and with the privilege of age, or perhaps indomitability-Stella lifted Laura's chin to study her face. Laura was reminded of her mum applying paint stripper to an old wardrobe: a swimming costume was fully clothed, and then some, compared to *this*.

'Kids,' Stella said at last with an exaggerated sigh. 'You're in love with him, yet you've got no earthly clue who he is, do you?' A short silence. 'Who he's going to be.' Another, longer, silence, in which Laura could hear an icy surf hurtling towards the shell of her ears. 'But maybe it's better that way.'

Which was all Stella would say.

*

Despite the late hour, Laura made a detour to the cast-iron footbridge over the canal, from which she posted her letter to Zach via the sluggish water.

*

During the second set Laura was sipping tomato juice when the long-haired bloke who had been talking to Andy-his left leg still in a cast-detached himself, wended his way skilfully through the press of overdressed, overheated bodies, and stopped in front of her. Olivia would have already thrust out her chest at the approach of his arresting green eyes, diamond stud, feline grace. He looked as though he'd just stepped out of a cool shower. He looked as though he expected she was picturing him dripping wet, reaching for a crisp white towel.

'Dance?' he asked.

'Sorry, I'm waiting for my boyfriend. He'll be back in a second.'

The man took her elbow. Laura stepped back, trying to pull free without making a scene, and bumped into someone nearby, sloshing some of her juice onto her cream-coloured top.

‘Damn it, let go of me,’ she hissed. ‘Look what you’ve made me do.’

His eyes danced. ‘No problem. Come back to my office, I’ve got a couple of spare shirts in the cupboard.’

‘You’re mad if you think I’m going anywhere with you!’

‘Is that so?’ He seemed entirely unperturbed. ‘We ought to leave straightaway. Randall’s going to make a few remarks that I can’t miss, and you shouldn’t.’ At her glare, he added, ‘The CEO.’

‘I *know* who Randall is.’ Again she tried to tug her arm away. ‘I’m warning you one last time, I’ll scream if you don’t-‘

The man smiled a lazy smile and bent his head to hers, whispering conspiratorially. ‘Scream away, though I doubt Zach will be able to hear you.’ His breath smelled fresh, as if he neither drank nor smoked, fruity without a cloying overlay of mint. ‘The acoustics are far better in my office.’

As the import of his last remark sunk in, Laura went still. The man released his grip and held out his hand for her glass. Wordlessly, she followed him out of the overcrowded room with her heart pounding to match the drums.

Inside the lift the man fiddled with his wrist. ‘There, that should do it.’

‘Do what?’

‘Sorry about the shirt.’

‘Is this some sort of party entertainment? You know, a treasure hunt or maybe charades?’

He leaned back against the brushed stainless steel wall, crossed his arms, and smiled in appreciation. ‘My name’s Fabio.’

‘OK, *Fabio*, tell me what’s going on.’

‘I’ll see that it gets dry-cleaned.’

‘Will you stop pissing on about my damned shirt?’ His grin broadened, but there was nothing mocking nor remotely unkind about it. Provocative, though-and one of his eyebrows lifted like a question mark. Laura wanted to thump herself for being so dim. ‘You’ve planned it all along, haven’t you?’ she demanded, plucking at the damp red stain.

‘I knew Zach would never chose a witless girl.’

With a small dip of approval the lift came to a halt and opened its door at the seventeenth floor. Fabio directed her to the left along a carpeted corridor, on through a glass-domed atrium filled with tropical plants and a large toucan-inhabited birdcage, then along another corridor where after a short distance they halted by a security door. During the voice and retina routine, Laura studied the long but narrow canvas-exceptionally long, a mural-like five metres-mounted on the textured concrete wall opposite. Painted only in black, white, and shades of grey, it showed a stunning if brutal array of street scenes which flowed seamlessly into one another like a dreamscape-a bad dream, including the decapitation of a naked baby by a machete. The painting was worked in fine detail, yet only the animals could be seen in their entirety; men and women, children too, were placed so that either their lower limbs or their heads and upper bodies were truncated by the borders of the canvas.

Laura looked up to find Fabio’s eyes on her, those eyes which despite being obviously sapiens reminded her of Zach’s.

‘Do you like it?’ he asked softly.

‘No ... yes ...’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t know, it’s the sort of art that gives you nightmares.’

‘It’s supposed to.’

‘Probably it’s only my imagination, but somehow it’s like a photograph Zach has in his flat, though I don’t know why, the subject’s completely different, the setting ...’ Her voice trailed off, she felt stupid again.

‘A naked child at the seashore? Eating from a bowl?’

‘You know it?’

‘My brother’s work.’ He indicated the painting. ‘You’ve got a good eye, that’s his as well.’

‘He’s very gifted. What other kinds of stuff does he do?’

‘He doesn’t.’

From the way Fabio spoke, Laura knew it was a painful subject. After a hesitation she asked, ‘Has he stopped painting?’

‘He’s dead.’

He held the door open for her; the subject was closed.

Laura found herself in a reception area which, though not large, would not have disgraced Randall himself-minimal clutter, burnished woods, soft lighting. At first she was riveted by another oversized canvas on the far wall, this one drenched in rainforest colours and hung so that every eye must automatically fall on it, but then an inner door opened, and before she had time to distinguish the subject matter of the painting from its chromatic overload, fluid and vivid as a hallucination, vivid and fluid and synesthetic, it all fell away.

Zach stood in the doorway.

Though half expecting him-and totally passionately blindly hoping for him-she couldn’t even manage his name. She stumbled towards him.

And was stunned when he sidestepped her and moved to one of the windows.

‘I’ll leave the two of you alone for a few minutes,’ Fabio said.

‘I prefer that you stay,’ Zach said.

Laura could *feel* the blood drain from her head, but before she had time to realise how pale she must have become, how unsteady, Fabio was at her side-Fabio, not Zach.

I will not cry. I will not.

Fabio led her to a chair, while Zach flicked back one of the panels of the blinds to gaze out the window, his back to the room. It was dark out, what could possibly be of such interest? For a moment Laura wondered if she'd fallen into one of the paintings, so unreal did everything seem. But the glass of water that Fabio held out to her was beaded with condensation, and cool in her hand. She hung on to it, afraid that it would slip from her fingers.

'You've been looking for me.' Releasing the blind, Zach turned to address her for the first time.

'Stella- ' If he knew, wouldn't he say so straight off? 'I mean, I've been worried.'

'There's no need.'

Laura stared at the burn on his cheek, still an angry red, while searching for something else to say. Something that wasn't as lame as, 'It hasn't healed yet.' Which, for a short sentence, ended up sounding unaccountably like babbling.

Zach shrugged.

When the silence became uncomfortable, Fabio prompted Zach. 'You asked to speak with her.'

Laura took a sip from her glass and wondered if they could hear her swallow. Her teeth had rattled against the rim.

Zach came across the room to stand over her. 'I don't want you to come looking for me any longer.' His voice was level, and only someone who knew him very well would realise why he'd crossed his arms.

'It's OK, you're here now.'

'That's not what I mean.'

'Then explain.'

'It's over. We're not going to see each other again.'

Light-headed be damned. Laura got to her feet, mindful however to rest the fingertips of one hand on her chair. 'Will you at least tell me why?'

‘Relationships end.’

Laura glanced towards Fabio, who was studying his brother’s painting as though for the first time.

‘Is it because of what happened at the cottage?’ Laura asked softly.

Zach couldn’t conceal his shiver. A film like a polar bear’s nictitating membrane slid across his eyes to protect sensitive tissue from a blinding glare. Laura had never seen them so tenebrous.

She spoke to Fabio, ‘Please, will you go now?’

‘No!’ Zach said, then turned on his heel and strode towards the open doorway beyond which, Laura supposed, lay Fabio’s private office.

‘Zach,’ she called, her hand tightening on the water glass. When he stopped and looked back over his shoulder, she asked, ‘What about Max?’

Zach said nothing.

‘Who’s put you up to this? Fulgur? My parents? Who, Zach?’

‘No one. Can’t you accept that things change?’

‘When they do.’

‘For Christ’s sake,’ he said, facing her now, ‘I’d have preferred not to hurt your feelings, but you lot always need to have everything spelled out. OK, here it is then: you bore me. It’s fun for a while, usually a very short while, but then it’s only tedious. And you’ve lasted longer than most. Maybe if you read a bit more ... but I doubt it. Have you got any idea how stupid you monkeys really are?’

He swung round and headed for Fabio’s office.

‘Look, Laura-’ Fabio began, but at that moment the water glass struck the back of Zach’s head, then fell to the floor without breaking as Zach choked off a squawk, staggered, and put a hand to his scalp, then sagged against the doorjamb.

‘Real stupid, that’s me,’ Laura threw at his soaked back, her cheeks suffused. ‘Stupid enough to care. Stupid enough to think we could be different. And stupid enough’-her voice wavered, and she snatched a breath-‘stupid enough *never* to have become bored with you.’

Fabio caught up with her at the security door, which she was futilely trying to open. He made an adjustment to his wrist, flipped the shirt he was carrying over a shoulder, and touched her arm.

‘Are you OK?’ he asked.

‘Perfect, thank you. Please release the door.’

‘I wish you hadn’t done that.’

‘He deserved it.’

‘Not *that*.’ He indicated his wrist. ‘I’m going to change the settings in a moment, then I’m going to kiss you. It’s fine if you want to struggle a bit, but give in after a while. Make it look good. Do you understand?’

‘What?’

‘Don’t waste time. Shut up and do exactly as I say.’

Though there was little dissemblance in her struggling, neither was the subsequent encounter entirely feigned. By the time he’d pulled her into a nearby storeroom, bolted the door, and played yet again with the device on his wrist, Laura had caught her breath.

‘What comes next?’ she asked.

‘Don’t tempt me. Zach’s got very good taste.’ He flicked back his hair and grinned, and just for a moment Laura wondered why everything always had to be so complicated. Then she looked away, afraid that he’d be able to read her face.

‘Here.’ He shook out his shirt. ‘Put it on. And don’t spill juice on it downstairs, it’s pure silk and damned costly.’

She seized it from his hands, then met his eyes and began to giggle.

‘That’s better,’ he said. ‘Feeling sexy is nothing to be ashamed of, even when you’re in love. He’s been gone for a while.’

‘Please tell me what’s going on,’ she said, clutching the shirt to her chest.

‘I’ll look after him.’

‘That’s no answer!’

Fabio was quiet for a time. Then he tapped his wrist. ‘Do you know how many of these there are in the world?’

‘What is it? I’ve seen how often you fiddle with it.’

‘A few people would recognise it as a matilda, but they’d be wrong. There are no more than three on the entire planet.’

Planet?

‘Who are you?’ Laura whispered.

‘Think of me as Zach’s guardian, at least for now.’

‘Guardian as in jailer.’

‘Laura, we *need* augmented cognition. Look at the mess we’re in-one crisis after another. Gaia is strangling, with sapiens at the limit of their ability to analyse and comprehend the data our computers already generate. The only possible direction is a biological interface. Or cede the planet to the machines and the insects.’

‘They talk about moving out into space.’

‘Even more reason to blast through human limits.’

‘There are enough simus. Pick someone else.’

‘No one else is like him, though he doesn’t quite know it yet. Doesn’t want to know it.’

‘He’s that smart?’

‘If it were only about intelligence, there’d be plenty of candidates. Zach’s unique-and a born leader.’

Laura snorted. ‘Zach? A leader?’ Recollections like the recursive patterns of a kaleidoscope-Zach with the ambulance driver, with Owen, with his simu mates, Zach holding an audience in thrall, at school ... *born leader*-patterns flowing to an improbable symmetry, elegant and dismaying. ‘All he wants is to live some kind of quiet life, with his books and his music. And with-‘ She swallowed, completing the thought in her head. How naïve she’d been, how stupid. She could see Olivia’s knowing smirk.

‘You’re old enough to have realised that very few of us get to live the lives we dream about.’

‘So we live the nightmares instead?’

From a stack of paper on a shelf Fabio took a sheet-a pale, slightly felty grey-folded it to make a square, scored the crease sharply with a thumbnail, and tore off the rectangular strip, then turned his back to Laura so that she could change her shirt. The cool silk draped her torso like an indecent suggestion; immediately she wanted to fumble with the buttons again, drag it off, tell him she preferred tomato juice to champagne, cotton to the silky strands tightening round Zach.

‘I won’t let you destroy him,’ she said. ‘However noble your so-called ideals.’

Fabio didn’t laugh; didn’t ask how she, a powerless seventeen-year-old, intended to stop him or Fulgur or whoever else was slaving for their piece of Zach; didn’t in fact remind her of Zach’s injunction. Instead, he handed her a deftly folded origami bird, which she stared at in consternation.

‘Trust him. Trust *in* him. They won’t break him.’

‘They nearly have!’

‘There are already whispers. *Corvus*, they call him.’

‘The simus are hated.’

‘By some, but there are those-‘

‘By *many*,’ Laura insisted, tears of rage-tears Stella wouldn’t have wanted-threatening at last.

‘And many are ready for-long for-a change. The numbers will grow. Wait and see.’

Angrily Laura screwed up the piece of paper and bounced it off the corner wastebasket. ‘You’re just using him.’

‘Yes, I am, but honestly. And he’ll thank me for it later, when he’s grown into his skin. Zach is too restless, too driven, too *visionary* to be satisfied with a quiet life.’

Laura went to retrieve the crumpled bird. Crouching beside the bin, she flattened the paper over her knee, smoothed its creases with the flat of her hand; blinking hard, smoothed her features. But Fabio came and touched her shoulder with a gentle hand.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Don’t think I’m not.’

She rose and tucked the paper into her trouser pocket. Then, not quite on impulse, though later on she’d curse his damned sympathy, she told him about the Rex. About the *bodies*: if he thought her prone to hallucinations, she might never see Zach again.

*

In his office Fabio found Zach at the window, staring into the cheerless winter night.

‘Has she hurt you?’ Fabio asked.

When Zach didn’t answer, Fabio crossed the room to stand near his desk, but no closer.

‘Zach, I need to go down to the party. Randall will be speaking in a few minutes.’

‘Go then,’ Zach said without turning.

‘Are you sure you’re OK?’

Zach rounded on him, the glass Laura had thrown in his hand. That he concealed nothing was statement enough. There was pride, and contempt too, in this open display of tears.

‘Zach-‘

‘Get out.’

‘I’m sorry. You know-‘

‘Get out!’ Without further preamble Zach swung for the framed black-and-white photograph on the wall, a companion to his own. Glass-drinking and photo-shattered upon impact, spraying the room. ‘Unless you want to join your brother ...’

*

‘Hey, Laura, what’re you doing out here by the pissroom?’ Tim asked, still tucking himself in. ‘Owen’s been looking everywhere for you.’

‘Me? What about you? I thought you couldn’t stand this place.’ She matched his leer while scratching himself with the only look he’d understand. ‘Not enough simus.’ Even when sober he was impervious to irony.

‘Ssh, not so loud.’ He glanced round, but nobody was loitering nearby. ‘The music’s crap but being here was part of the deal. At least the food’s rad.’

‘You mean the lager, don’t you?’ She dipped away from his noisome, raucous laugh. ‘What deal is that?’

His ‘whisper’ could probably be heard in Randall’s penthouse suite. ‘My dad’s got me an interview. They need someone my age as a control subject for their teen rehab project. Good money.’ This time it was a belch, and her stomach clenched. ‘Three times what they pay for wanking off. You know, a sperm donation.’

Could be Tim's dad was smarter than his son. Any rehab had to be better than none, and 'control subject' sounded like a splendid pretext. Tim was too dim to realise that though it wasn't illegal to pay research subjects who were minors, Fulgur avoided the practice. 'Child abuse' had a nasty tendency to terminate executive careers prematurely.

'Tell Owen I'll be right in,' she said.

The thought of Owen's arm, Owen's breath on her neck, Owen's signature cologne, the thought of the hot sweaty half-drunken party-goers brought on another wave of nausea, and she rushed back into the toilet where she'd already spent fifteen minutes. But there was nothing left to heave up except some foamy spit, less bitter than her thoughts. She rinsed her mouth at the washbasin, then drank a little cold water. In the mirror her face looked composed: this time tears hadn't reddened her eyes or blotched her cheeks, and she'd already redone her lashes; some fresh lipslap would be enough. She was tempted to head for the bus stop, but she'd promised to rescue Max from the children's party after the speeches, and she was curious what Randall had to say. Fabio had hinted that it would be something important, hadn't he?

She was *not* hoping that Zach would think it important enough to make an appearance-or that they would let him. You hoped for a decent grade on that last history essay; you hoped for a new pod for Christmas; you certainly hoped your protection was good enough (hadn't you heard something about vomiting?); maybe you even hoped that a long-lost, long-lived, and lifelong celibate great-uncle in South Africa would die and leave you a goldmine; but nobody with a nanogram of sense wasted any energy on hoping that an alien spacecraft would land in your yard with the mission to treble your IQ and transform you into a drop-dead gorgeous, honey-voiced number with big tits, megastar charisma, and a custom board that seduced every bloke to surf the wave; aliens who'd beg you to accept the gift of immortality, plus, if you were lucky, exclusive world rights to the grand unified theory of the cosmos.

From the doorway Laura searched the crowd, determined to avoid Owen (and Tim). Either the conference hall had shrunk, or the numbers had swelled like flies to rotting meat. Laura swallowed, then swallowed again. After a deep breath she pushed her way through the swarm of noise and smell to the back of the hall, her eyes roving restlessly, registering for the first time how few simus were in attendance. Most of them were tall enough to stand out, though few as

tall as Zach. She tried to remember how it had been last year (her first time at the 'real' party). Surely there had been more of them. Her stomach cramped. She could feel the juices sloshing like cold slops in a bucket, ready to spill. You are not going to do this to me, she instructed her gut, not here, not again. But her real dread had little to do with throwing up in public.

Laura wedged herself between a display board on casters-the latest success story in Tim's rehab programme, some girl who'd just won a place to study psychology, 'I want to help others like me' bannered in fucking *gold* across the top, do you believe that crap-and a fleshy potted plant as tall as a small giraffe, which growled at her. In her present mood she was ready to growl back, and tear off a few leaves with her teeth for good measure, till she noticed the flash of a metallic collar. The man holding the cat-black, sleek, hardly bigger than a kitten-was half-hidden by the foliage, though he stepped forward as soon Laura caught sight of him.

'What a lovely cat,' she said, a faint inflection conveying her puzzlement.

'Jasmine's an absolute beauty, isn't she?' He took another step forwards. 'Go on, stroke her. She adores attention.'

Laura extended a hand, then jerked it away with a small cry as the cat hissed and sprang into the planter. 'Shit!' Three scratches, already welling. She'd begun sucking the back of her hand before it occurred to her to wonder about pathogen transmission. Animal viruses were mutating all the time.

'Has Jasmine clawed you? How odd.' The man stooped and with a single murmured word enticed the cat back into his arms. 'Let me have a look.'

'I'm surprised Security let you in with a cat,' Laura said as the man examined her hand. He had a plump laugh to match his smooth plump cheeks, pink from heat-he didn't look the sort to drink or dance. The little cat settled back into the crook of his arm like a kangaroo into its mother's pouch, and her purring was so loud that it could be heard above the music.

'Worried about health clearance, are you?'

'Not exactly-'

'Here, take one.' With one hand he extracted a handful of foil packets from his

pocket. His laugh became a loud guffaw when he caught sight of the expression on her face. 'Disinfectant, Laura. A special formula, but only disinfectant. I always carry a few, since Jasmine has got some genetic material from a panther. You're a right little savage, aren't you, sweetheart?' This last to the cat, who, Laura could have sworn, smirked at her the way even your best mate would smirk when asked by the hottest lad at school to the cinema.

Laura broke open one of the packets, removed the strong-smelling swab, and ran it over the scratches, which were still oozing slightly.

'Don't worry, Jasmine's absolutely clean. The disinfectant is just in case she's picked up some stray bugs from the floor. She likes to wander.'

A placebo, then. 'Who is she?' Laura asked.

Jasmine hissed, and her fur puffed to give her the appearance of a small dark thundercloud about to discharge a bolt of lightning. Again the man murmured to her, and though her fur settled back in place, she flicked her tongue as if about to speak, an entirely unfeline movement. Laura wondered what other genetic material this creature incorporated.

'Jasmine's one of my charges.'

'She must like to hunt birds. What about bigger ones, like swans?'

With a yowl Jasmine sprang from the man's arm and disappeared in the direction of the double doors. The man muttered something under his breath, but at that moment the music ended, and in the hush the electronic crackle of the speakers indicated that Randall had stepped up to the microphone. Like everyone else in the hall, Laura's attention shifted to the stage. Grey-haired and elegant, Randall was nearly as tall as a simu. It was said that he spent considerable time on the tennis court and ski slope, and since he was always travelling, his tan might be natural; certainly his crow's feet were. He carried his extra weight with ease, confident of his magnetism, energetic in a way her scrawny dad would never be. It always surprised her when fat people-not that Randall was precisely *fat*, at least not yet-could move with such agility, grace even. Whenever Olivia had complained about getting out of breath while dancing, Laura used to say, 'Just stop eating the stuff.' Where had she learned to be so smug? And that Olivia had never retorted-how stung she must have been.

Just stop thinking about him.

Laura watched Randall take charge of his audience before saying a word. Admittedly there was something engaging in the way he fumbled with the mike, and then the almost boyish, apologetic shrug as he handed it to an assistant for adjusting: it had Laura wondering what Zach would look like in ten years-in twenty. That black hair, threaded with silver? He also had a taste for classy gear: she pictured him coming into the house, tossing a dark tailored jacket over a chair, loosening his tie, unbuttoning his shirt, rumpled, lightly sweat-stained. She pictured the silky skin, with just the right amount of comfortable fleshiness-a bit soft around the centre like a favourite praline; love-handled like a familiar memory.

‘All good speeches begin with a joke. But since this isn’t going to be a speech, and we all know that CEOs have no sense of humour whatsoever’-Tim was probably braying with laughter-‘I’m going to tell you a story instead. A very *short* story-word of honour.’ More laughter, and mostly genuine, though his remarks weren’t particularly funny, or original. The man was a natural. ‘One of my favourite memories.’

It’s not enough, she whispered fiercely under her breath. I want more than memories; more than storied daydreams. They can claim what they like about our brains-there’s a difference, a bloody great difference.

All at once she was desperate to know what Fulgur did with the simus. Why would nobody ever talk about it, not even Zach? She turned to smile at the animal man, whose friendliness might lead afterwards to some information, but he was gone-chasing his Jasmine, probably. A good name for the little wildcat. And with that thought came another, accompanied by a prickling of unease: he’d called her *Laura*. He’d known her name.

‘... so this latest research means that, thanks to you, we have finally achieved what we’ve long been striving for. Thanks to each and every one of you in the Fulgur family. There is good reason to celebrate.’

This was insane, could she have missed the announcement already? With a silent oath she brought her mind to heel.

The crowd crackled with expectancy, reminding Laura of earlier Christmas mornings before the presents were opened. She’d missed the stocking, she

concluded, but not the pile under the tree. Then she noticed that a number of children, each carrying a large basket, were working their way through the throng, distributing crackers. Max was among them, and he was heading in her direction with a fixed smile on his face, devoid of all humour, anxious; he wanted to talk with her.

‘Some of you may have already heard the rumours, so let me reassure you. Like all the tastiest morsels of gossip, they’re true.’

This time the laughter felt like the blast of hot air upon opening an oven door. You took a step backwards.

‘To get to the point: the UN has just passed a new international law requiring all children to be base-scanned at birth, scanned once again upon entering school, and a third time at age eighteen, thereafter every ten years, so that their neural network-like their genetic code-will be part of their permanent record. Because of Fulgur’s breakthrough work in the field, we have been awarded the primary contract to undertake this enormous endeavour.’

Randall paused, a broad smile on his face, till the applause died back. He held up his hands.

‘You know what this means, of course. Rehabilitation in case of brain damage, illness, ageing. For those who want it, the opportunity to recover lost memories, lost skills.’ He put his arm round his wife, who was standing alongside him. ‘Celia is always telling me I really must do something about my creaky Spanish.’ The city’s mayor, she was a clever and able politician who joined in the laughter.

‘And at first for some, but one day for all of us-the indestructible storage of consciousness. Minds that no longer perish.’ He didn’t have to say the word; it was already being whispered through the hall: *immortality*.

‘So,’ he concluded, holding up his own cracker, ‘to celebrate with a flourish, I’m going to break with tradition. Celia and I won’t pull first. Instead let’s all pull together, as in fact we’ve been doing here at Fulgur all along. But before we do-on the count of three-let me just add a word about your Christmas bonus.’

Quiet fell while Randall’s eyes passed over the assembly, so that each person felt the CEO was speaking directly to them alone, a private and intimate interview, a reward. Even Laura felt it, though it annoyed her. Something about this man was

beginning to remind her of her mother.

‘Take one,’ Max whispered to her. She hadn’t noticed that he’d reached her side. ‘Don’t stand out.’

‘Twelve percent. Twelve percent of your annual salary, tax free. And *not* in options.’ This time he had to wait for the cheers to end before he could begin his count. Laura braced herself for the noise of the crackers, but in fact it was Max’s words, muttered just before the outburst, that drowned out everything else.

‘After the crackers, get your jacket and meet me outside by the fountain. There’s something wrong. Weird stuff is going on, *evil* stuff. We’ve got to help Zach.’

Chapter 32

Absorbed by the intricacies of the sonata, Zach hears nothing until a small clump of snow slides to the floor by the cold sink, followed by a second. He lowers the clarinet to listen, but assumes it's only some pieces breaking off from the roof of the entry porch. Almost immediately, a shouted greeting brings him to his feet. Casting the instrument onto the sleeping platform, he snatches up the panak and hastens to peer up the narrow passageway. The voice doesn't sound hostile.

'Lev? Is that you?' he calls out with more hope than conviction.

'Hunters,' comes the response.

'What do you want?'

A laugh, followed by a second and deeper voice. An older voice, Zach guesses. 'A mug of tea would be welcome.'

Zach lowers the snowknife. 'How many are you?'

'Three. Two and a half.'

It's the half that intrigues Zach, and he bids them to join him, leaning his knife within easy reach against the storage box.

Traditionally dressed, the three remove their mitts, parkas, and outer boots, while Zach puts water to boil and sets out dried fruit and biscuits. Hospitality first, questions afterwards. (Could these be Lev's hunters?) The older man settles on the fuel drum, keeping an avuncular eye on the *half*, a boy perhaps Max's age, who first arranges the parkas on Zach's line, then collects the mitts and boots to take to the cold sink, where he flips them inside out and scrapes the cuffs free of snow and ice with his panak. Hardly a word is exchanged, so well does the lad know his routine, but his eyes, bright with curiosity, dart often to the clarinet. The younger man refuses a seat on the sleeping platform, preferring instead to squat by the stove. After the last mitt is hung up to dry, he takes out a chunk of frozen meat from a leather pouch for the boy to shave into thin slices.

'Caribou,' the man says, flashing, of all things, a faceted gold gem implanted in

perfect teeth. And their accents! It has to be Mishaal and that bizarre sense of humour of his. 'It's good. Eat.' It's also raw, but Zach takes a tentative bite, then gnaws away upon realising that the boy will not touch his share till the adults have eaten.

The tea passed round, all of them stir in plenty of sugar, and for a while slurping noises fill the iglu, a discreet belch or two. From somewhere another pouch appears in the younger man's hand.

'Smoke?'

'No thank you, but please go ahead.'

Soon the pall of tobacco mingles with the smell of stale sweat and drying fur, all smells which remind Zach of Lev and Bella and the glow of a small, improbable stove in a blizzard. There's never been a run where things hurt so much, never a run where the rabbit hole loops straight back into his own cerebral vortex, and looping, traps him in the prism, or chasm, of memory. Chesterton: 'It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.' How long can he, a simu, yes, and yes, one of their trained Fulgriders-one of their *chosen*-yet willy-nilly flesh & blood, piss & puke, little more in fact than a rough, slouching beast, just how long can he remain in the gyre and reel and icy thrall of this place, his thoughts ever snowier, his memories ever more arctic, before he dims and dims and dims, finally to go out altogether like a guttering lantern? Are there limits to how much irreality the mind can absorb? He'd like to believe that despite Fulgur, despite reason, despite all that he knows about the interface, he'll turn round one balmy April afternoon at a tap on his shoulder and there, there will be Lev, smiling his irksome, unrepentant, cream-lapping, and utterly beautiful smile. He'd like to believe in answers, not riddles. Damn it, he'd at least like to believe he'll remember the questions.

'What are you hunting?' Zach asks, a safe start.

'Seal,' says the younger man.

'I thought they're only found on the sea ice at this time of year.'

'It's not far,' says the boy shyly.

The man clouts him on the head. 'Mind your manners, Pani.'

Pani drops his gaze and murmurs an apology.

‘Haven’t you got any dogs?’ Zach asks.

‘Out on the ice,’ the older man says. ‘We’ll be leaving soon, we’ve come by canoe to fetch you.’

‘What for?’ Zach asks rather too bluntly.

The two men exchange glances. ‘We could use an extra hand,’ the older one says. ‘One of our men has taken ill.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘In the Arctic there are few secrets.’

Oh yeah? Obviously you haven’t run into a certain Lev. ‘I’m sorry, but I prefer not to kill a seal.’

The older man’s nod, though slight, seems to convey a message to his fellow hunter, who removes a small object from his pouch but keeps it hidden in the palm of his hand. Zach crosses his arms over his chest and studies his kamiks in order not to stare.

‘It’s good to have the proper respect and humility,’ the older man continues, ‘particularly when there are signs that the ice is threatened.’ He pauses to draw on his cigarette, then coughs. ‘In difficult times sacrifice and survival sleep under the same skin.’

‘I wouldn’t be of much use,’ Zach says. ‘I’ve never even held a harpoon.’

‘Nor will you be holding one. The people do not kill the Raven’s wife.’

A lame wisecrack about skewering his own foot plummets from reach. ‘Who?’

‘She who gives life.’

‘Your god?’

‘Sea Mother. Woman. White Seal. She takes many forms.’

Zach waits till his voice is sure to be steady. 'The form of a stranger? A young woman?'

'That will depend on your journey.' He forestalls Zach's protest. 'A shaman with the gift of raven song is not bound to this world and this time and this body.'

Now he *knows* Mishaal is up to his tricks, Mishaal, whose father was a professor of anthropology renowned for his research into shamanic cosmologies and who, unlike Zach, never opens the seven-volume collection of myths-'Imagine, a grown man wasting his life on fairytales!'-which remains, even unfinished, the classic work in the field.

'I'm not religious,' Zach says. 'I mean no disrespect, but it's not what I believe in.' And I'm certainly not anybody's medicine man.

'The universe is indifferent to your belief, my son.'

Silence falls, a silence in which Zach hears the wash of their breath against a perilous headland. There is only a single mast to which he might be lashed, but he himself has splintered it. He sculls into deep water, smoke-wreathed minutes pass while he slips further and further from shore. The light is cool and blue like ice. Then Pani shifts on his haunches and hums a few notes. Sound can travel far in the high Arctic, and hunters learn very young to pay attention to anything out of the norm. At first the sound is no more than a vibration along Zach's skin, as if a tuning fork had been struck against his ribs, against the hull of his fragile skiff. Skin is permeable, and the transformation to note takes place beneath the skin, or in the skin itself. 'Your skin is singing,' Laura said. Zach closes his eyes to see her better, but there's no resisting the melodic line Pani has cast. The boy has a good ear.

'And the seal?' Zach asks.

'She bestows her spirit to return with you,' the old man says. 'That is the nature of renewal.'

A single tone, sustained but faint, so that Zach glances round to see if the others have heard. Pani is staring at the clarinet. Sensing Zach's scrutiny, he looks up. 'Please will you make it sing?'

Again the younger man raises his hand, but this time Zach stops him. 'No, it's

fine. I'm happy to play for him.'

Zach gives the boy some children's songs, classic rock, a little jazz.

'And the song you were playing when we came?' Pani asks. 'It's very beautiful.' He repeats a fragment of the melody in a clear, true, still unbroken voice.

'You have a feel for music,' Zach says.

'This son of mine is forever drumming and singing, even the women's throat singing.'

Zach laughs. 'They used to say something like that about me, too.' He addresses Pani, curious if the instrument will respond to another. 'I'm sorry, that song isn't finished yet. But would you like to try my clarinet?'

'Oh yes, please.' He looks guiltily at the older man. 'If Grandfather permits.'

Within a short time Pani teases a simple tune from the clarinet, then embellishes it with all the signs of a real affinity for improv. Perhaps it's easier for a child to establish a rapport with Lev's instrument, perhaps it's got something to do with his upbringing. *Wunderkind* isn't a word sapiens like to use for those who don't belong to their own little tribes, but Zach is no sapie. He knows musical hunger when it lifts its head and howls.

'Astounding,' Zach says to Pani's father. 'Your son is very gifted.'

'Don't puff him-'

'Angu, a stranger may not understand our ways, seeing envy where there is only a father's love and legitimate concern.' Uakuak interposes, a man of some diplomacy; a man of authority. To Zach, 'No one doubts my grandson's hereditary promise. The spirits will choose.'

Pani launches into a last tune on the clarinet, his dark eyes gleaming mischievously. Slowly Zach turns to regard the boy. It must be a coincidence, mustn't it? Why shouldn't Mishaal or one of the other programmers happen to fancy a folksong he'd taught Max, who took to humming it slightly, but maddeningly, out of tune?

‘You’ll bring your clarinet?’ Pani asks when finished. He gives his father a cheeky grin. ‘Grandmother says music is the best lure for the White Seal.’

At Zach’s nod, Angu offers him the item concealed in his hand. ‘An amulet. Carry it at all times.’

‘To prevent harm?’ Zach asks, careful not to smile.

‘To help call your soul back from its journey,’ Uakuak answers. ‘I’ll not deceive you, my son. The White Seal is very seductive, and sometimes men prefer to remain with her in the spirit realm.’

The trinket, not surprisingly, is a seal carved in ivory.

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Zach lingers behind with an eye to suitable carving material. To break off a table leg seems reasonable till he considers its club-like appearance and, moreover, its suggestion of reckless impetuosity. A perfectly good table in exchange for a child’s toy? If there’s any spare wood or bone at the hunters’ camp, he’d like to show the boy how to whittle a simple flute or recorder. The duets he and Sean used to play, Pani would love that. (Just Pani? Admit it, Zach, you’ve been getting a bit lonely, musically speaking.) At school he’d even fashioned a series of end-blown flutes complete with mouthpiece, rather like small keyless clarinets, but he couldn’t imagine what to use for reeds on the ice.

Sweeping the torch in one final, slow, reluctant circuit of the iglu, he thinks of all the leave-takings there have been in his life, most undertaken without any real sense of finality. You never believe things end, do you? One day you’ll go back. One day your mum or dad will defy all reason and all evidence to come for you. One day you’ll build that snowman ...

And the worst is, he does go back, again and again and again, till he’s carved a story out of hardpack snow which will melt in the first good thaw. Like this iglu, he thinks grimly. It’s not just the monkeys who have to be dragged from the slushpile of their ice-palace dreams. And what the fuck is the matter with him anyway, wanting to teach a cyber shadow to construct a clarinet? About as sane as chiselling it from ice.

Swiftly he slithers from the iglu. Pale light is rimming the horizon, with stars

glittering through broken cloud overhead. In a few days the sun will rise for the first time. There's hardly any ground wind, and Zach can see the small party gathered round two canoes moored on a natural jetty of ice about 100 m distant.

Chapter 33

The fountain was never turned off, and Laura had always meant to ask her father how they prevented the water from freezing. Tonight it flowed gold-shot red and green in keeping with the Christmas season, one colour from each of the dragon's twin jaws, and Laura couldn't help admiring the skill with which an illusion of flame was created. Shivering in the icy wind that even Fulgur engineers hadn't succeeded in controlling, she stepped back to avoid a sudden gusting of spray and grumbled to Max, 'Couldn't we have talked somewhere warm?'

Instead of answering, Max swung his head like a hunter searching for signs of prey, except there wasn't much predator in his running nose and thin, hunched shoulders and bright red cap, nor his coin-sized pupils. He turned to peer behind them, his eyes gleaming like a cat's in the streetlight, and for the first time, from that angle, Laura saw a glimmer of the cognoscens deep within; the lustrous ore, not the counterfeit surety of an alloy.

'Have you got any money for a taxi?' Max asked. 'I'm scared of snugs.'

'If Zach's in danger, I'm not going anywhere.'

Again the darting glances, one shoulder raised as if to fend off a blow. Laura grabbed his arm.

'Will you tell me what's going on before I leave you here to freeze your pygmy walnuts off!'

'They're big enough!' he retorted heatedly.

Blokes! Never too young to bristle when you dissed their todgers. Useful, though, when you wanted to prick them into action. She crossed her arms. 'I'm counting.'

'Come on, then.'

In the bus shelter he leaned against the glass wall to catch his breath, little puffs of vapour fleeing from the sound of his panting. Ashamed of herself now, she

patted him clumsily on the shoulder—a habit she was picking up from Josh. As long as she didn't start scratching her balls when it seemed no one was looking.

'I don't know what to do,' Max finally said. 'Maybe we'd better talk to Dad.'

'You still haven't explained.'

'It's sort of muddled, but there's someone in the building whose thoughts are dead kank. Like nothing I've ever come across.'

Her hand still ached. 'A cat?'

'Zach's told you about the animal stuff?' She nodded, leaving the details for another time, it was Zach who was important. But Max carried on without further prompting. 'No, they're OK. I *hate* what's being done to them, and most of them don't live very long, and I can only hear a couple of them anyway, but they don't hide their thoughts, which aren't simple at all. They don't *care* very much what people think of them. People are the stupid ones, mostly.'

'Then a simu?'

'I'm not sure ... maybe ...' He closed his eyes for a few seconds and appeared to be listening. The cold had rouged his cheeks like an old woman's clownish makeup, highlighting rather than disguising the chalkiness of his skin. '... maybe not a true cognoscens. Dad explained it to me, it's a quantum thing. That's why distance doesn't matter. But I ought to be able to hear better. I can't even tell if it's a man or a woman. They've done something scary to him, to his mind. Or hers.'

'What's this got to do with Zach?'

He wiped his nose on his sleeve. 'I *told* you, it's not very clear, but I think she's trying to warn me. They want me, or someone like me.'

'And Zach?' When tears filled his eyes, she finally realised what Max was too scared to say. 'They're going to *make* Zach tell them about you.'

She rummaged in her pocket for a tissue, then stamped her feet and clapped her hands together, which were beginning to numb. When she tried flexing her fingers, her glove chafed Jasmine's scratches. Underfoot there was no snow or

ice; she stepped outside the shelter and scrutinised the well-lit carpark to give Max a chance to wipe away his tears. For the first time she took in, really took in, how immaculate the tarmac was. Where were the mounds of dirty snow, the patches of ice, the grit for traction? *This place*: it was creepy the way you numbly accepted Fulgur's latest surreal fantasia, as though toilets that played *Oh Come, All Ye Faithful* when you sat down, and *Do You Hear What I Hear?* when you flushed, were perfectly ordinary-rather quaint, actually, in comparison to the red-and-green-striped toilet paper embossed with metallic gold stars. But Zach, she reminded herself, wasn't colour-blind. No one led Zach, with or without a blindfold. Not unless he chose to be led.

'How *make* him?' she asked, wheeling round. 'What are they going to do to him?'

'I don't know.'

'Then use that braintapping trick of yours.'

'I'm not stupid! I've already tried that, but I can't pick up anything. Zach has no information, none of the simus do. Maybe only a few people know, and they're not good senders, or maybe they've figured out a way to keep anyone like me from hearing.' He took a raw breath. 'Laura, how can Dad *work* for them? For people like that?'

For people like Fabio, she thought, people who elicit foolish revelations with the ease of a hypnotist. People with slick talk and slick offices and even slicker gadgets; with silk shirts and slick, silken kisses. 'Was Zach ... I mean, the things he said, was he *thinking* them?' She sped past Max's silence. 'You know what I mean, don't you? That he doesn't want to-' He was shaking his head, but she couldn't brake now. 'Max, you've got to tell me.'

'I can't do that to Zach,' he whispered, tearing his eyes from hers. 'Please don't make me.'

*

While Laura was debating with herself, mustering all the reasons, and their cousins and great-aunts, why Max ought to cooperate, and coming up with a very bare family tree, so moving on to *how* to tap her brother for syrup-just where to drill the right hole-and while Max himself had walked behind a parked

car to pee-no tree trunks in sight-the sirens began. Laura was all for rushing back into the main building to search for Zach, but Max did his listening for a moment, then demurred. 'He's OK, he's left.'

But Max was wrong, an hour later reminding her-*almost*-apologetically-that he couldn't tell much about location unless a person happened to be thinking about it. The party-goers were herded outside to a safe distance, most of them half drunk, and not a few high as noctilucant clouds over the poles, and glowing nearly as much in the dark. Some of the children were frightened, but others seemed to find it a good lark. On the way to search for their parents, Laura overheard one eight-or nine-year-old boy announcing loftily to the others, 'It's a game. Watch, there'll be a Fulgur helicopter landing soon, with Father Christmas and a sack full of presents for us. *My dad works in PR, he told me.*' Max rolled his eyes at Laura, then exclaimed and pointed to the left, hunching his shoulders again. Their mum's face was incandescent with rage, grotesque under the circumstances.

Grotesque under any circumstances: a bomb could only rearrange her features to advantage, I'll do it myself if she says one word, *one* fucking word about Zach.

Laura's mum grabbed her arm and dug her fingers into the layers of fabric hard enough to leave a bruise needing cover-up for a week. 'Where have you been, you stupid idiot.' Hissed directly into Laura's ear, her spite as obscene as some bloke's slurping tongue. 'Snogging that auger?'

Laura wrenched her arm free, her hand throbbing. Shoved her face into her mother's. Raised her voice, raised it good and loud, then raised it even louder. 'Go on. Wallop me if you must. Pull my hair. Pinch me. But don't you ever call him that-not *ever* again, do you hear. He's worth a hundred of you, you bitch.'

Her mum went white and raised a hand to strike, then caught the stares of those standing within earshot and fell back a step, hurriedly smoothing her hair with the raised hand. She smiled a shellacked smile which fooled no one, least of all herself. 'Poor girl, she's overwrought, it's been too much for her,' directed at a woman her own age who dropped her eyes and looked away.

And her dad?

Molly, that's enough now.

scuttled away, that spider, but still shuddery behind the toilet smelly like wet knickers please mummy i'm sorry please

hauls her out by her hair, shakes her

screams

shut up, don't you dare cry, SHUT UP SHUT UP!

Molly, please, the child's terrified.

I'll show her terrified. Disgusting filthy girl.

Her dad dropped his eyes, watery from the cold, and looked away. The wind lifted his thinning hair. They'd been herded outside without a chance to collect their coats.

'I've still got them,' Laura said.

'What are you talking about?' her mum asked. 'Got what?'

'The pink knickers with the butterflies.'

Clearly at a loss, her mum shook her head. After an interval just long enough to raise Laura's hopes, old sugar-coated hopes, her dad cracked a rigid smile. His memory for figures was phenomenal, and he could still recite whole swatches of school poetry. As a little girl she'd loved to listen to him reciting *My Cat Jeffrey*, he always acted out the licking and claw sharpening and cameling his back, the cork catching and spragging upon waggling. 'You're my kitten,' he'd said, 'just like Jeffrey': *'For he can tread to all the measures upon the music. For he can swim for life.'*

A doorframe splintered for a pair of knickers: no special feat of memory for her dad.

'We were worried about you,' her dad said, putting his arm round Molly's shoulders.

*

There were in fact three helicopters, but the Fulgur dragon didn't land until the bomb was disarmed and removed and the infiltrator, in shirt sleeves but fired by his slogans, whisked away. With the children clustering round Father Christmas, the cold and fear forgotten in their excitement, the guests were given the go-ahead by the police to return to the party. Those without the prospect of a gold-wrapped parcel embossed with the Fulgur logo made their way into the lobby with alacrity, rizzy nerves and speculation no longer heat enough, and most were scurrying, they hoped discreetly, to reach the bar ahead of the others. A TV crew had arrived, with reporters tapping the crowd for a pint or two of gossip. Laura hung back, snagging Max's arm, and they were about to slip away to ring for a taxi when a second TV van pulled up, followed by several press cars in convoy which disgorged journalists. Max stared at them with a look she was coming to recognise, then began to move towards the building.

'Where are you going?' she asked.

'Don't you want to hear what he's going to say?'

'Who?' Laura asked.

'Zach.'

*

And all at once, Zach was everywhere. He spoke at public meetings, was interviewed on TV, gazed at Laura from websites and newspapers, began his own blog. Laura had difficulty understanding how a popular movement could combust almost overnight from the seemingly dry rags and odd scraps of society, but Fabio had made it clear enough that there was nothing spontaneous about his plans. And Zach was turning out to be a very charismatic public speaker, damn him. 'Simus are not your enemy. Your enemies are pollution, and dwindling resources, and hunger, and disease. And fear—mostly fear. Don't be afraid of us: we want what you want, a good life lived peacefully. Together we can work towards solving our devastating problems. Together we can remake our lives, and our planet. Together we can move out into new frontiers. I too have dreams ...'

The Janu numbers were still small, but already raising alarm in some quarters. When Laura convinced Owen to attend an open debate at the university right after Christmas break, she was surprised to find that the lecture hall, while not

overcrowded, was only half filled with students; there were young couples, several with pouched babies, there were pensioners and burly labourers and women with signature silk scarves, there were suits; oddly, however, there were no simus except the lad winging Zach, whom he introduced as a medical student. Zach's other companion-chaperon?-was a thirty-something Fulgur psychologist from Ghana, slender and soft-spoken, adversary of the Big Mama school of therapy, and genuinely funny; she had the audience laughing and whistling and clapping when she told a story about a rooster, a prostitute, and a panel van full of stolen computers. Fabio was nowhere in sight.

Laura did her best, but Owen couldn't reveal what he didn't know, and it was tricky to get any information from her dad. Fabio's too old for you, he'd said when she tried the gorgeous-hunk gambit. Fabio, it was obvious, wasn't a corporate drone like her dad, and he seemed to have a conscience. But you could never tell with fanatics. Had he made use of what she'd told him? If the stuff she'd turned up on the net was accurate, his dead brother had been a simu. Everyone knew about Latinos and family. She'd expected Fabio to be here tonight. He *ought* to have been here tonight.

So far there was no sign that Max's secret had become Fulgur property, or was about to. But how could she be sure? 'Dad will kill me if he finds out I've told Zach,' Max had said. 'Don't you dare let on.' In public it would be impossible to talk to Zach, but maybe she could gauge whether anything remained of the old Zach; whether, beneath the glossy Corvus plumage, was parrot or hawk.

There were some critical questions from the audience though none of the rowdiness which had erupted at a few of the meetings. Nor were there any Purist hecklers with their soft fruit and hard curses; security was tight, but the guards had been instructed to let all weapons-cleared parties through. Zach's own directive, it was widely reported: 'We've got nothing to hide. Let anyone who has something to say, say it to our faces. We're not afraid, and we won't be driven off by gutter tactics.' It appeared that his policy was working.

'He's certainly come a long way since quitting school,' Owen whispered. 'But I don't trust him. Remember how he went mad at the factory?'

Laura never argued with Owen any longer about Zach, nor with any of her mates. It just made her look as if she still fancied him. It had been tricky enough getting Owen to accompany her tonight; he wasn't precisely *jealous*, he

maintained stubbornly. ‘Aren’t you curious?’ she’d asked. But her trump had been to imply that Owen was resentful of a former schoolmate’s success.

‘For godsake, he’s just the latest flavour of the month. It’s not even a proper political party, wait and see, the whole thing will peter out in a few weeks.’

‘Even with Fulgur backing?’

‘Dad says it’s miniscule, the amount of money they’re putting in. It’s just a look-good PR move because of the simu programme. Anyway, Fulgur’s got a strict policy of non-partisan political support. They contribute across the board to every party except the Purists. Not to the illegal ones, naturally. So even this new movement would have been bound to get some donations eventually.’ He nodded earnestly, a loyal dragonling-in-training. ‘There aren’t even any tax breaks. It’s all strictly regulated, all publicly declared, all impartial, all transparent.’

Yeah, and I’m the reincarnation of Helen of Troy.

At school the kids were a bit weird about Zach. On the one hand they acted as though he was the latest pop star, the girls especially bragging about *the time he* ... On the other, feelings about the simus were heated, with a lot of mistrust and scepticism. And Tim and Derek and their mates were becoming vitriolic (another Zach word)-and daily more upfront about it. This week there’d been two incidents where a teacher was forced to intervene, the second involving detention. If I.S. knew who was responsible for the club bombing, they weren’t letting on, though several people, including two or three Fulgur employees, had been ‘helping the police with their enquiries’ since the day after the blast. Disgruntled finance types, her dad claimed, one a risk-management intern with Purist connections: ‘Whatever your sentiments on overpaid peacocks, Fabio, admittedly, is beginning to earn those gaudy silk shirts of his, that petrol-guzzling silver Masserati he drives’ (the first Laura had heard of it). So, altogether, it was best that Zach hadn’t moved back into his flat yet. That’s exactly what she’d said to Josh: ‘It’s best.’

Laura bit her lip and leaned forward on the edge of her seat to catch Zach’s latest reply. He was speaking into a mike, but a few rows ahead of her two men were conversing in a choppy undertone, and throughout the room there were other little pools and jets of whispering. Surreptitiously she rubbed her abdomen to ease the heaviness in her gut, that dull ache which usually denoted the onset of

her period in a day or two, three at most. Though it wasn't like her to get a headache, it must be the heat or Owen's latest swank, pricey, practically carnivorous cologne. Worse than girls, the way lads deluded themselves. At least she could look forward to a period of respite, he wasn't the sort to get off on a touch of blood. And he charted her 'tides' better than she herself-talk about euphemisms! Zach would never flinch from straight talk.

'Yes, I'll admit there are some bitter simus,' Zach was saying. 'I'm not going to lie to you.'

Not a Purist, but a middle-aged woman with a face like a sponge. Scared, probably, that some simu would grab her on the way home. *Hoping*, probably.

And stubborn. She began to ply Zach with increasingly vituperative questions, her voice mounting along with her colour. A blood-soaked sponge.

Like a strong wind on the open ocean, the confrontation was whipping interest into whitecaps. The audience shifted in their seats, whispers became louder whispers, then a buzz as sibilant as radio static on the high sea in the days before solar satellites and modern maritime communications. You heard it in the old films. Not only was it becoming difficult to make out Zach's responses, but a photographer moved to block Laura's view, his flash strobing against her temples. With her hands on the armrests to take her weight, Laura strained upwards till she was nearly standing. Owen plucked her back down.

'I thought you didn't want him to notice you.'

But Zach didn't let himself become agitated, or provoked. Even Owen later conceded how well Zach handled the woman. He lowered his voice as hers rose and at one point simply paused, his gaze passing tranquilly over the room. Laura shivered: the effect was masterly. Fabio had been right. She doubted there was a woman present who wasn't aroused by those eyes, including the sponge. Porifera: one of the most primitive animals in the sea, and bottom-dwelling.

'Let's go,' Laura whispered to Owen at the next opportunity, any huskiness concealed by careful modulation. 'I've seen enough.'

At the door she couldn't resist a backwards glance. Zach had become thin to the point of gauntness, and she guessed he wasn't getting much sleep. The cigarette burn, though no longer livid, smouldered like a live ember in her own memory.

Before she could look away their eyes met and held, she stumbled slightly, the moment stretching blood crashing in her ears. Then Owen took her arm. She left with the certainty that Zach had known all along of her presence.

*

‘Why not?’ Owen asked. There it was again—that slight whine, as though his grandma had gone home without slipping him the usual fiver wrapped round a matchbox car. It seemed preposterous that he and Zach were the same age.

Laura jammed her cap on her head. ‘Homework.’ She turned and walked briskly towards the exit.

‘It’s him, isn’t it? I knew we shouldn’t have come.’

Laura rounded on Owen, then took a deep breath. She was really beginning to dislike the smell of men’s perfume, and Owen’s wasn’t improved by an overlay of the eau-de-disinfectant they must be using to swab the floors in the university corridors. She spent a long moment trying to remember if Zach had ever worn cologne or aftershave, which kept her from spitting out a sharp denial. It was becoming harder of late to tolerate what she knew, abstractly, were only mild irritants; but that didn’t prevent them from irritating her in a visceral way, the sometimes chalk-on-chalkboard, sometimes tap-drip irritation of her dad slurping soup at dinner while her mum needled him. Forget miscegenation: there ought to be a *compatibility* code. Her dad worked the human genome like onliners, their latest game; he could probably draw the sequencing maps in his sleep. Too abrasive or judgmental? No problem, modify a gene or two. Too irritable? Synthesise another few. Still too incompatible? Develop a fucking *serum* for it. The harpy in her whispered, go ahead, it’s only Owen, do it, pierce that rubbery niceness, you know you want to, for once be a real cunt.

The Mother-in-law’s Dream moved closer. Her innards sloshed in brackish protest, her mouth puckered, filling with pooling spit. She swallowed and took another, deeper breath. ‘It’s my period, Owen, that’s all. It’s come on suddenly, and I feel ghastly.’

You can’t legislate feelings, she thought glumly as she huddled in the corner of the taxi. You can only medicate them. A pity her mum didn’t believe in pills.

*

Laura kept Zach's flat dusted and aired, but when she unlocked the front door, it smelled musty. She switched on the lights, then, with a groan, off again. They'd all tiptoed round her mum's migraines often enough to write a treatise about hypersensitivity to light (and noise), and Laura endured her own headaches during her nightmarish bouts of insomnia, but this felt more like hot curling tongs applied by a sadistic hairdresser to the strands of her optic nerve. Once the pain settled back into a mere throb, she hung up her jacket and made her way to the living room where she threw open a window and leaned out to drench her face in the cold night air. She was beginning to feel feverish, achy, which couldn't have anything to do with her period. (Owen was so gullible, she didn't know how long she'd be able to stand it before lashing out at him.) While climbing the stairs, she'd stopped twice to catch her breath, whereas normally she bounded up as though chased by a pack of braying hounds. And stumbled over the damned boots those kids were always leaving in the dim corridor. (Josh had looked *very* pleased with himself recently. Next chance, she'd *make* him tell her what he'd done.) Come to think it, why hadn't their stupid dog barked at her? He never passed up an opportunity to practise for his film debut as Attila the Slaving Hund. Warily she leaned against the window frame, brushing damp hair off her forehead, too drained to speculate, and wondering whether she could get away with curling up for an hour before going home. And even that decision seemed to require too much effort.

'What are you doing here?'

Laura whipped round, her hair catching on the window latch so that her cry was mangled. Zach reached her before she could see him clearly.

'Why haven't you switched on the light?' she asked.

'Why haven't you?'

They stared at each other in silence, and his wonderful clean smell-it came back to her in a rush-filled her nostrils. You don't remember smells, she realised, but when you smell them again, they release memories-feelings-sharp and fresh as a lemon under the swift stroke of a knife; inescapable. In the dim light reflected from the snowy banks of the canal, Zach's scar gleamed like a small oyster. Her hand reached for it of its own volition; he submitted, silent and remote, to her touch, but then his sternness dissolved into a raw quiver under her fingertips. A mollusc breathes; does it also cry out when you break open its shell?

‘Laura,’ harsh, choked with words he couldn’t say.

‘I’ll go now.’

‘Are you sleeping with him?’

A lie would be so easy. Why not this one?

‘Yes.’

Zach tugged savagely at the strand of her hair still tangled round the latch, and she suppressed the cry of pain that was hers that was his that was irrevocably theirs. He’s the only person I’ve never lied to, she thought as he grabbed an entire fistful of hair and jerked her head sideways. She lost her balance and fell against him. He shook her. She flopped about as though broken. At last he let her go and flung himself at the open window, gripping the ledge in both hands and breathing in great noisy gulps.

Laura sank to the floor and hugged herself, her eyes smarting and the shivering beginning again. She was so thirsty, and everything ached, her skin, her teeth. Her clothes. Would he ring for a taxi if she asked? She closed her eyes and tried to summon the energy to speak. A glass of water shimmered in the heat behind her lids. Just one cool sip ...

‘It’s because of what I am, isn’t it?’

She looked up at him, his face retreating into the rectangle of night sky. In her ears his voice sounded magnified, distorted the way all sound used to be distorted during childhood fevers.

‘I’m sorry. I know I’m being stupid again, but I seem to remember you-‘

He didn’t let her finish. ‘No way you’d let a dirty auger’s cock defile you.’ The window slammed shut with the finality of a sarcophagus lid. The light he switched on crashed against her face.

She closed her eyes again, and would have blocked her ears with her hands if it didn’t look like a child’s petulant gesture. Her eardrums ached from the pressure of his scorn, and though she had no reason to expect anything different from him, the thin membrane that was her sole bulwark against swimming in polluted

water, and more swimming, and more, into an interminable future, was bulging heartwards and would soon burst.

‘Please,’ she whispered.

At once he was at her side. ‘Oh god, have I hurt you?’

She tried to focus on his face. His hand on her brow and then, miraculously, his lips. Tears now, and shivering.

‘You’re so hot,’ he said.

‘Please, can you ring for a cab?’

‘To ferry us where? Back to before we made our first mistakes?’ A hollow laugh. ‘Even Randall doesn’t earn enough to finance that.’ He wiped her cheeks with his hand, her skin flaying, her nerves raw with him. ‘And we were barely afloat at the best of times.’

‘Did you hear me when those bastards ... when the police were ...’

He misunderstood. ‘Don’t. There was nothing you could have done. They weren’t listening to anything except their own sick words.’

‘I didn’t ... I mean ...’

The room was beginning to silt around them, and she would have liked to watch the wash of colour, if it weren’t so hard to concentrate. Wordlessly she abandoned the struggle for coherence and subsided into the warm lagoon of his arms.

From then on she alternately sweated and shivered, sometimes gulping from the glass Zach held to her lips, sometimes shrinking from the gentlest touch or thinnest cotton sheet, sometimes listening to his eloquent fingers; mostly adrift on febrile swells turgid with jellyfish and breaching seals and bladder-wrack. After her recovery she would try to stitch together some of her dreams, but they remained as crazy patchworked as her memory itself. Why had her father been telling Zach about a cat carrier when they didn’t own a cat? And had Max really come in holding a swan under his arm? Which, when she blinked, became a two-headed baby dragon?

Zach looked up from chopping vegetables when she appeared in the kitchen doorway. His hair was fastened in a neat ponytail, his habit when cooking.

‘How long have I been ill?’ she asked.

He set his knife aside and pulled out a chair. ‘Sit down. You’re very pale.’

The short walk from the bedroom had tired her and she was glad to comply.

‘How long?’ she insisted.

‘Five days.’

Five *days*.

‘And you’ve been here the entire time?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How boring for you.’

Zach snatched up his knife and resumed chopping, while Laura wondered whether she was the leek, the carrot, or the potatoes. Or maybe the parsley, which he soon reduced to a fine mince.

‘I’m sorry. That was uncalled for,’ she said.

He shrugged and turned to sweep the vegetable dice into a saucepan on the cooker. The steam which was released when he lifted the lid brought water to her mouth. Chicken broth-homemade, she guessed.

‘That smells good,’ she said by way of further apology. And then heard her stomach growl.

‘Twenty minutes, then we can eat,’ he said with a hint of a smile. ‘Do you want me to help you wash?’

She realised how clean she smelled. After five days ...

‘Did you ... I mean ... I must have needed to pee, to ... and bathing ...’

‘Yeah.’

‘Thanks,’ she muttered, ducking her head.

‘It’s OK. I’ll be a dab hand at potty training when the time comes, after all this practice.’

She sneaked a look at him, still ashamed of her crappy remark. He was lifting his checked apron to wipe his face-it looked like a bistro tablecloth, only bigger-when their eyes met. One corner of his mouth tweaked, and then they were grinning at each other.

‘And my pyjamas?’ she asked, fingering the familiar blue fleece, her warmest. ‘How did you get them?’

‘Your mother brought them.’

‘My mum came *here*?’

‘Your dad too, several times. You needed a doctor.’

‘You won’t catch what I had, will you?’ She’d never seen him ill, except for that business with his serum, but it had scared her. Still scared her. ‘Dad once told me *simus* have a different immune system. I mean, I didn’t understand it then, but that must explain why Max has been ill so often. Seriously ill.’

‘Don’t worry, your dad identified the pathogen, then gave me an antiviral cocktail strong enough to pickle my’-a laddish glint-‘my gonads. Has he ever expressed an interest in Farinelli?’

‘Who?’

‘An eighteenth-century Italian soprano. Pop stars have been around a lot longer than people think.’ Again that glint. ‘Back then castrati were reckoned to make the best lovers. Society women used to shower them with love letters, faint at their concerts.’

‘Fancy yourself a superstar now, do you? Only fainting anyone’s going to do at those meetings of yours will be from the heat.’ She pushed her hair off her brow. ‘It’s hot enough in here to melt an iceberg.’

He came and laid a hand on her forehead. 'You know I like it warm, but I think you've still got some fever. Go back to bed, I'll bring your soup to you.'

She shook her head. 'I'm OK. It's the stupid flu, that's all.'

'Actually, turns out it's a rare zoonotic virus with a long incubation period. And it's odd that you caught it, your dad says, he'll talk to you about it himself. So far it's only been found in Amazonian bats. Have you been to the zoo recently? Attacked by a wild animal?'

'Aside from my mum, you mean?'

His face expressionless, Zach carefully set soup spoons and two plain white bowls on the small table, added a pepper mill and basket of rolls, filled the water jug from a bottle in the fridge. How could pouring a glass of water manage to chide her so thoroughly?

'She's not always the ogre you make out.'

'Oh yeah? You didn't have to grow up with her.'

'She cares about you.'

'Some caring. All she can-' Laura stopped. Zach had tucked his hands under his arms and was staring blindly at the pepper mill. Softly she asked, 'Do you know where your parents are?'

No answer.

'Zach?' Careful, they were still only treading water, not yet daring a stroke. 'Are they dead?'

He looked up, his voice brittle despite a carefree flick of the wrist. 'Forget it.'

'So you know?'

'Know ... don't know ... none of it matters. It's a long time ago.' He went to the hob to stir the soup.

It will always matter. And it will always matter that he won't talk about it. She

watched him lifting the spoon to his lips for a taste. She watched him scoop coarse salt from the cellar with his fingers and fling it carelessly into the soup, then a second lot. A third.

‘Zach,’ she said, as he delved once again into the salt. ‘Whatever happened, it’s not your fault.’

He swung round, spraying a spoonful of hot broth across the floor. A few drops landed on the table, on her face.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about!’ he said.

‘Don’t I?’

For a moment she hears herself telling him, sees him holding her, feels him sponging off the dirty, sweaty traces with those beautiful fingers. He would never fingerprint a child with four-letter words, with fingers inked in secrets. Laura repeated Zach’s words to herself, pondering: ‘when the time comes ...’

‘What you said before, does that mean you can have children?’ she asked. ‘I mean, someone told me that simus are ... I don’t know, sterile or have a low sperm count, or something.’

‘Why do you want to know? You’re obviously not trying out for the team.’

Laura folded her arms on the table and lowered her head, suddenly fighting back tears. It was time to ring her dad. At least he’d answer some of her questions, Max maybe a few more. As to the rest ... Janey always said that if you weren’t prepared to lose sometimes, you’d best stick to a bikini and sand in your crotch and a slobbering dog trying to wolf your cheese baps. And blokes like Tim and Damien, an Owen if you were lucky. Her hand crept to her neckline where Zach’s chain lay like a golden rune against her skin. In rough seas it’s much harder to hoist anchor; she fingered the links without hauling up the seal. Years from now would another wear it, its secrets undecipherable?

Chapter 34

Zach stumbles from the canoe, chastened by the ease with which Uakuak, despite his age, has pulled for hours against a sea becoming rougher and rougher, a surly headwind. They've beached near a camp from which several young boys erupt at a brisk trot to help drag the kayaks over the groundfast ice to safety. A necessary precaution, Angu explains, because the wind, already erratic, may shift direction and tumble debris about. 'Like feathers from moulting snow geese,' says Pani gleefully, with a child's delight in cataclysm.

Even from a distance Zach can see that the hunters' camp is surprisingly good-sized. Still warmed by exertion, he hangs back until Pani takes his hand. 'Come on, Zach, I'm hungry.'

As they approach the camp, some of the dogs rise so sluggishly to their feet, and some not at all, that Zach reckons they've just been fed. A rich meaty aroma wraps its fingers round his gut and tugs. Saliva spurts into his mouth, and he stops to sniff.

'Fresh seal,' Pani says. 'Yum.'

The large snowhouse is built like a spoked wheel, with a communal workroom at its hub and tunnels leading to private family quarters radiating outwards on all sides. At a guess, there are about forty people sharing the winter camp. Because he's a stranger, Zach learns from Pani, he's been given a small chamber of his own, one vacated in his honour by a young couple with a tiny infant. He washes and changes into the traditional clothes that Pani's big sister Nashuk offers him, her eyes as lively as her brother's. Pani reluctantly returns Zach's pocket knife, fascinated as any lad with a new gadget he's been allowed to play with.

The day's hunt has been successful, so there's plenty of stew to go round. Zach eats with the men and older boys, then listens sleepily to the talk while they mend dog harnesses: the typical male-only jokes, the swapping of stories, a complaint or two, a long, detailed, occasionally derailed and increasingly heated back-and-forth about tomorrow's hunt which reveals a good deal about the social fabric of this little community. Newcomers are encroaching on traditional territory, rogue hunters, as yet unsighted, who don't scruple to slaughter dogs and leave their carcasses strewn about. There's some mystery about the tracks,

but Zach doesn't follow all the speculation. (Did someone really say *rabbit head snow*?) These outsiders appear to hunt with large birds of prey, since oversized feathers have been found twice near the remains. Egged on by Angu, a number of the younger men argue for an aggressive course of action, a trap or ambush. Uakuak has Pani fetch a black feather to show Zach, who, despite its striking length and exquisite indigo shimmer, is unable to identify its source. Perhaps now the old man will quietly drop his shaman nonsense. There are no sideways glances at Zach, no sly or provocative remarks, no cross-examination-no questions whatsoever, in fact. If the men are disappointed, they're too polite to make it obvious, and he returns their courtesy with a tale about a girlfriend, a pair of thermal pants, and a jealous wolf pup, only slightly exaggerated.

He basks in their laughter, some of it undoubtedly relief that, at least for the moment, tempers have been diffused. In this crowded, smoky, noisy, almost festive room, constructed from little more than ice, how easy it is to be seduced by hospitality and warmth, by simple acceptance! Through the long years at the Foundation he'd carried mistrust in his back pocket. Friendships would struggle to survive among the tensions and rivalries and loneliness, the undercurrents and homesickness, part boarding school and part something else entirely. Adult hypocrisy is destructive to kids, but nothing like the harm that comes from treating them like lumps of clay, malleable but inanimate. And a touch rank. You need to *matter*.

One thing he's never done is fool himself. The Janus don't want Zach, they want *Corvus*. They want a leader and a hero and a legend. They want a fantasy.

But dreams matter.

Pani tugs at his sleeve. 'Come on,' he whispers, 'they're going to play games just now. If you tell them you're tired, you can teach me some more songs.' He remembers his manners. 'Please, Zach, if you don't mind.'

Zach suppresses a bubble of laughter. The boy's face is so earnest.

'Aren't you tired too? You've been out all day.' Pani's eyes light up when Zach adds, 'Paddling the kayak as hard as your dad.'

'I'm strong!' Pani boasts, then immediately looks contrite. 'I mean, I'm not really anything special, I can't even handle more than three dogs at once, all the other boys are stronger than me, even most of the girls.' He glances round, then

drops his voice. 'Don't tell Grandfather I was bragging, please.'

Laura hadn't told him how she felt about children. Not the sort of thing you talk about at their age-and not with an *auger*.

Zach makes his excuses to the elders. Considerably taller than his hosts, he tries to ignore the ache in his stiffening muscles as he hunches over to follow Pani through the tunnel, wondering whether he will ever stand under a hot shower again. At the entrance to Zach's quarters, Pani lifts aside the caribou-skin hangings which serve as a door. The iglu ought to be warm and softly lit, since Nashuk left a kudlik burning, but as Pani steps into the room he squawks in surprise and grabs at Zach's arm.

'What's wrong?' Zach asks, but in a moment his eyes have adjusted to the bright glare. Fatigue forgotten, he motions for Pani to remain by the curtain and approaches the slab of ice on which his clarinet rests.

'It's beautiful,' Pani whispers.

When Zach glances back, the transformation-or illusion-is complete. The skin hangings have disappeared, and the two of them are standing in a circle of free-standing ice columns at least three times Zach's height, each as flawless as the next. As far as Zach can tell, they're spaced at equal intervals from one another. Slowly he swivels in place, marvelling, speculating, their strange perfection suggestive of something deeply mathematical-Sean once said that the difference between man and machine is *creative* pattern matching ('You've got to teach those silicon buggers what to look for, no?'), and the difference between a good musician and a great one, knowing when (and how) to subvert the pattern. Zach counts, then puzzled, makes a second pass. After two further attempts in which he positions Pani by one of the pillars as a place marker, he gives up in defeat. Either their number isn't constant, or there's some other principle at work here.

'Where are we?' asks Pani, returning to Zach's side.

'I wish I knew,' Zach answers. 'But I don't think we're in any danger.'

The temperature, though cool, is perfectly comfortable, and the air wears the crispness of freshly laundered clothes, with a hint of bleach. Underneath their feet is a layer of hardpacked snow which extends in all directions. The landscape, flat and featureless, bears no resemblance to any place he's ever

encountered, particularly because there is no sky and no horizon, no depth and no gradient. He's reminded of the whiteouts on training sessions and once on a previous run, but for the pervasive blue colour. And in a whiteout, visibility is almost zero, whereas here you seem to be able to see forever.

'Stay here,' Zach says.

His tattoo is itching, and he knuckles his chest as he walks beyond the perimeter of the ring, stopping to brush the nearest pillar cautiously with his fingertips-cold, but no jolt of electricity, no sudden revelations, no transubstantiation. Ice.

To reach Ultima Thule, the ancients believed, would be to command the most northern place on earth, the most remote. For centuries it was dreamt of, searched for, evoked, feared. Like all such grails-or Arctic mirages, depending on your place in history, your temperament-Thule claimed hundreds, maybe thousands of lives, most of them unrecorded. Now with the Poles mapped and melting, and ice hotels offering package tours and honeymoon suites, Thule has retreated from myth to cyberspace: 'We finally own reality,' Zhou said in his acceptance speech for the Wolf Prize.

A few paces beyond the columns Zach glances back to check on Pani, who has picked up the clarinet. 'Go ahead, blow it a bit,' Zach says, hoping to keep the boy from straying while he himself investigates. When he hears the first notes of *Let It Be*, which he'd played for Pani at their first meeting, he looks over his shoulder to flash appreciation, but his smile fades as soon as he realises that he hasn't covered any distance. He turns on his heel and tries walking backwards away from the circle, but his eyes tell him that he's merely moving in place. Then he notices the cylinders of ice. Originally clear, they're now slightly cloudy, and a fine network of cracks is beginning to appear on their surface the way a frozen puddle fractures underfoot.

'Stop!' he shouts, already halfway across the intervening space.

The columns return to their pristine state as soon as Pani removes the clarinet from his mouth. He hands it to Zach, who licks his lips the way he usually does before preparing to play, then licks and licks again. Pani watches him without a word. Finally Zach raises the clarinet and blows a single note, his eyes on the columns. When nothing happens, he plays a C-major scale in one octave, very softly. This time the ice begins to glow with a distinctive lemony smell-no, that

can't be right. He takes a deep breath and tries a chromatic scale. The rainbow of sensations along his skin brings tears to his eyes, and he's afraid if he doesn't stop he'll embarrass Pani with an erection. 'I want to memorise your skin,' Laura said, 'but every day-every *minute*-it's different. Always yours, yet always different. I'm going to need a *very* long time to try.'

Zach reaches below his neckline for Laura's pendant, whose chain is tangled with Angu's leather thong. Encircling both ivory and gold, his fingers tingle-a dread of failure transcribed in bits.

'Her spirit sings,' Pani says. 'She must be very beautiful.'

'Yes, very.' Then after a moment of disorientation, 'Who?'

'The White Seal. She always chooses a powerful shaman.'

'Yeah, well, you've got a good imagination. I'm not a shaman.'

'But you've brought us here.' Pani sweeps his arm in a wide arc. 'And your music changes the patterns in the ice.'

'Yours did too.'

'Maybe Grandmother is right. *Tornarssuk* often visits me in my dreams.'

Zach looks swiftly round, but if the air stirred his hair, it was from an imperceptible source.

'A polar bear talks to you?'

Pani can't quite suppress the note of pride. 'It's a sign. A powerful white bear will come to swallow me so that I can travel to the spirit realm and be reborn.' Then shrewdly, 'You've also seen *Tornarssuk*.'

'Not in that way.'

'Yes, in that way,' Pani insists in a manner which adds years to his age. 'You're a stranger, you don't know the legends. While you were playing, your skin changed.'

‘My *skin*?’

‘Your spirit skin. Everyone has one, but yours is very strong.’ Pani squints at Zach. ‘Right now it’s salty orange like char roe.’

‘I hope your family doesn’t decide to roast me.’

‘You shouldn’t joke about spirit matters!’ Then his eyes glint. ‘But of course, a shaman follows other rules.’ His grin lacks only the telltale ring of chocolate. ‘When I’ve done something they don’t like, it’s kind of useful.’

Zach laughs, then opens his hand to show Pani the pendants. ‘Do you really hear her?’

Pani nods.

‘Then I’ll need your help to find her.’

‘She’ll be my Seal if I sing her, not yours. She’s different for each of us.’

Zach doesn’t know what to say to this—doesn’t even know if they’re speaking the same language. In the last century technology had driven most shamanic societies to extinction—occasionally underground. And now Wu’s theorems have rendered non-scientific models of consciousness entirely anachronistic: stuff for the historians and cultural anthropologists and odd fringe group (homo sapiens is a notorious recidivist), though the big-time religions have managed to hang on through some curious rationalisations. *Bizarre* rationalisations, which at the Foundation were always good for a laugh at mealtime—without warning, Axel winks at him in that cocky way he had before Martens and Jiao and that cold bitch Malovich ground away his ‘rough edges’. A few kids had shattered beneath the rasp and file of discipline. We’re *simus*, for godsake. Why have we taken it?

Why hasn’t he tried to find out what happened to Axel?

Axel, who’d replaced Donald as their roommate. Axel, who played poker like a pro. Axel, who started an investment club—invitation only—with first-year returns which might have been beginner’s luck if the second and, sadly, final year hadn’t provided Zach with a portfolio he’s been smart enough to hang onto. Axel, who in that second year took to mumbling right before he fell asleep, nothing Zach could make out. The cantillated rhythm of it though. In sleep Axel’s eyes would

flicker wildly beneath lids of delicate veined glass. And Gould was loyal enough to keep his mouth shut, and plainly unwilling to risk his stake in their roommate's market savvy, even when Zach ended up, night for night, crooning lullabies in a half-forgotten tongue, guttural yet magical like all the secret languages of childhood.

(Another of those shameful secrets-afterwards, he missed comforting the tormented boy.)

Zach shifts his gaze to an imaginary point in the distance, or what ought to be distance. His earliest memories are of music-sometimes lilting, sometimes mawkish, sometimes discordant; never less than enthralling. His mother sang at bedtime or at work: certain songs ambush him even now with a frisson of pure feeling, of longing primal and inexplicable. At once he hears the voice, the glorious liquid voice of the cello which drew him away from the stall and through the small rutted carpark, past the rusting postbox with its dangling door, down the flagged path, and into the ramshackle farmhouse itself. 'It's the Adagio from the Haydn Concerto in C,' Marc said. 'Do you want to hear it from the beginning?' Nobody in his home played a string instrument, and Oupa's recorder would only come out on special occasions. Once he was allowed to cycle on his own, he followed the sinuous melodic trail to the farm, several kilometres distant. Two men, sapiens both, yet they didn't mind his visits. Sean gave him his first clarinet, taught him the rudiments of wind technique and theory. They continued to play duets long after Zach's skill outstripped his mentor's. Men who deserved a better end. For a short time in the latter half of the twentieth century, homosexuality was tolerated, even welcomed. He's often wondered if the reversal of public sentiment had anything to do with the advent of augmented cognition.

Zach snicks his tongue in annoyance. There's something refractive about the illusion of infinite distance that is forcing his eye inward, as though to generate a vanishing point within himself. He's always depended on the extraordinary accuracy of his senses, with hearing quite possibly the last he'd relinquish voluntarily. But what happens when far becomes near? Or cold becomes sweet or noisy or heavy? Or all of them? Or none? He rubs two fingers over his tattoo, then drops his hand in dismay when he *hears* the itching in his through his beyond his skin.

'You see,' Pani says. 'Shamans speak in music.'

‘I promise you, Pani, I’m not a shaman.’

‘It’s all right, I won’t tell anyone if you want to keep it secret.’

‘And I won’t teach you another note if you persist in transposing me into a different key.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Listen carefully, I’m going to try something.’ Fixing his gaze on the nearest column, he raises the clarinet to his mouth.

There is no flash of blinding light, no roll of thunder. Lev simply steps from the ice. A Lev for each pillar, astonishingly, but then Zach blinks and the multiplicity is gone.

‘*Tornarssuk*,’ Pani breathes.

Don’t mock him, Zach begs Lev silently. And indeed Lev acknowledges Pani’s awe with an easy, almost indulgent grace. Teachers ought to be screened for downright decency; parents too. Something tells Zach that this man-*_man?_*- would consider it an honour to be called a teacher. He smiles at Pani, then strides to the caribou hangings as though their reappearance were perfectly natural.

‘Your family will soon start fretting. Go back now,’ Lev says, parting the skins. ‘Your turn will come.’

Pani has trouble wearing solemnity for long. As he bows, his eyes fillip a look of delight and mischief and smugness at Zach before slipping into the access tunnel. Lev adjusts the pelts so that there is no crack for a draught to penetrate, while Zach, to dispel the feeling of sway and dip, the slight sense of vertigo, closes his eyes and runs a hand over the clarinet, not trusting his eyesight. Not quite trusting his fingers either.

‘You’re still thinking too literally.’ Lev laughs in his old way. ‘But you’re learning.’

Zach clamps his mouth shut. He is *not* going to ask a ream of foolscap questions. Lev holds out his hand for the clarinet.

‘You know, I prefer *homo musicus*,’ Lev says.

‘What?’

‘There’s a universal music that underlies all cognition. Among other things, this instrument is a very sophisticated translator whose task is to render itself superfluous.’

‘Simus hear differently than sapiens, translation’s impossible. Unless you’re talking about other forms of life?’

‘Ears aren’t anything more than channels. The *mind* generates hearing, seeing, tasting, feeling ...’ Lev taps the clarinet. ‘Music precedes language. Your scientists have yet to discover that music is deeply quantangled in neural structure. Without music there’s no consciousness. Even emotions are essentially musical.’

‘Does that mean the deaf can be taught to hear?’

‘You’ve told me about Max, haven’t you?’ He holds the clarinet aloft. ‘Play.’

Zach reaches for it, but with a sweep of his arm Lev propels it towards one of the pillars. Zach braces himself for an impact. Instead, each of the columns reverberates with a different tone overlaid with subtly fluid intratones.

‘Go on,’ Lev says.

Zach stares at the clarinet, now embedded in one of the pillars. ‘You don’t need it,’ Lev says.

Zach shrugs and closes his eyes. It takes him a while to quieten his mind, but then he begins to picture his Buffet in his hands, its body as familiar to him as his own. He fills his lungs and belly with air. Its mouthpiece moulds itself to his lips, warm and a bit tremulous. At first there is only the first tentative tremolo which far out in the middle of the sea could mean nothing or everything, which is a mere echo of a note, an audible shiver on the surface of the water, but which slowly and inevitably begins to build, gathering momentum, becoming now a line of melody, now a movement of Laura’s sonata. As the piano adds its voice to the rising sonority, the music surges ever wilder ever louder ever closer to the icebound coast.

It's beautiful, Laura says.

Zach flounders, swallows a mouthful of brine. The roaring in his ears syncopates into an erratic heartbeat, and when he opens his eyes Lev and the columns have disappeared.

'Laura?'

The windy hissing of burning oil, bitter in his nostrils, is his only answer. Warily he settles himself on the edge of the sleeping platform without touching the clarinet, which is lying exactly where he left it before the meal. Should he be unnerved? Or just relieved? His eyes pass over the meagre possessions of the family who have given up their privacy for him—the all-important kudlik, a large kettle, some battered dishes and utensils, a coil of rope hanging from a length of caribou antler, skin sacks, a spear. And in the alcove where the platform meets the fur-draped wall, an item even more unexpected than the clarinet.

Zach goes over to examine it closely. Feeling a bit light-headed, he drops to one knee and rubs his eyes, which are beginning to smart from a faint smokiness in the air. His fingers are drawn to the creamy ivory.

A length of narwhal or walrus tusk, he can't tell the difference. The upper half of the figure delicately worked, its grain and glow evoke living skin in the same way a Michelangelo statue breathes and sweats and pulsates with freshly oxygenated blood. But like the Captive Slave the carving is only half-finished: a woman's head, arms, and torso are struggling to emerge from the tapering piece, struggling to escape the restraint of tusk. Her hair lies in a long plait along her back, so finely sculpted that each strand seems combed in place. Zach runs his fingertips over the lower half—smooth and polished, with a small lift to the tail. Perhaps finished after all. Another fucking seal, he thinks savagely, but never the right one.

'Nashuk will tell you the story just now. I've asked her to bring you something hot to drink, something to help you sleep.'

Caught off guard, Zach glances round to find Uakuak standing in the entrance.

'Would you like to come in?' Zach rises gingerly, but the dizziness has passed.

'Just for a moment.' Uakuak takes a seat on the sleeping bench and gestures for

Zach to join him. 'I don't sleep much any more, but my wife insists that I rest my old bones.'

'In my world, men half your age don't have your strength and stamina.'

'My spirit grows restless. I've had a good life, and there's not much I regret, but one thing I would have liked is to travel to other worlds. Alas, I don't have your shaman's gift. My soul will do its journeying soon enough, though.'

Zach is quiet while he struggles to find a measure of truth, not just courtesy. 'Many in my home believe as you. I wish I could.'

Uakuak's scrutiny lasts till Zach is on the verge of getting up and moving away. The old man asks gently, 'Who is it you've lost? Your wife? A child?'

Zach is silent, staring at his hands.

'The dead stay dead, Zach, there's no changing the past.' The quiet words of a man who has no need to prove anything. 'There is only another past, separated from us by a thin layer like young black ice. In dreams we may catch a glimpse beyond the darkness, while a shaman sees further into these realms. And there are so many realms, far more than stars in the sky, drops of water in the sea.'

And far more clicks where they've come from, the old Zach would have thought. Yet snowbound though he is, this wily hunter would have far less trouble understanding quantum theory, if properly explained, than most of Zach's own classmates. Quantum reality is counterintuitive to the average sapiens. Countless times in physics class he's heard them ask, how can something's nature become fixed and definite only when it's observed? And even more often, what do you mean by *random*? Science is supposed to be able to predict an outcome, that's what science *does*.

Science used to: drop a Newtonian apple and it fell in a predictable time with a predictable velocity through a predictable trajectory. But now science deals in probabilities and nonlocalities and emergence and Wu's Qlions. And still without an adequate unified theory to consolidate general relativity and quantum mechanics. Cosmic reality eludes even the cognoscens mind-and might always, if the Purists have their way.

'The worlds to which the spirit travels are real, as real as your own,' Uakuak

continues. 'It's only natural to be afraid. Shamanic journeys are dangerous, and the journey to the White Seal the most dangerous of all.'

'Please believe me, Uakuak. I'm no shaman. My people use special tools to make many things'-he can't bring himself to repudiate their lives-'and many distant journeys, but nothing remotely supernatural.'

Except, of course, that these aren't *lives*, or shouldn't be. Till now Fulgur has only uploaded test participants in the rehab programme, plus a few volunteer research subjects. Everything else is background: programmed modules for verisimilitude, like a sophisticated version of gaming avatars.

Uakuak laughs, then places a hand on Zach's forearm. 'Tools can't teach us how to live. There is no distinction between natural and supernatural, least of all to our true senses.'

'If I'm a shaman,' Zach asks, 'then why don't I know how to find the White Seal?'

'Tomorrow while we hunt, the women will ready a cleansing bath, afterwards you will fast and rest and, if it's your practice, take some of the tea Kiviuk, our shaman, prepares from the plants he himself collects and dries. No one will disturb your solitude. In the evening we will join our music to yours, our drumming, and Kiviuk will guide you till the White Seal appears.'

'And if she doesn't?'

'You have already heard her calling, haven't you? So Lev has told us.'

Damn it, he should have known! Cautiously, 'Lev visits you?'

'A fine shaman from the far south. Whereas you, he tells us, are *angatkuqpak*. A shaman's shaman.'

Yeah, Sean would have been proud of him. This time he curbs his wee daft cognie tongue.

Chapter 35

Fulgur headquarters is located on a substrata of Jurassic oolitic limestone, deposited after the breakup of Pangaea when sea levels rose a good 200 million years ago. Fossilised dinosaur bones and footprints have been found throughout the region, where swamps and salty lakes remained once the seas subsided again.

Andrea Frechen, principal architect for the complex, sleeps very little. She's known for her eccentricities, particularly her habit of driving to the site of her current project in the middle of the night and walking round for an hour or more. It soothes me, she tells the security guards, but any laughter isn't malicious, for she's always been well liked.

Aware of the importance of the Fulgur campus, no one was surprised by the young architect's frequent visits. And it was Frechen who, one rainy November night during the early stages of construction, spotted what turned out to be an almost complete skeleton in its prehistoric resting place, along with well-preserved if puzzling tools. In contravention of the right of sepulchre and in a move that she will never be able to explain satisfactorily to herself, she disinterred the bones without calling in the proper authorities, first hiding the remains in her 4 x 4, then in an outbuilding on her private property. An archaeologist would cheerfully sacrifice his right arm for a glimpse of the skull alone, which Frechen isn't trained to recognise as neither sapiens nor Neanderthal. Nevertheless, she has been prescient enough to safeguard the find, and in time it will surface and cause an upheaval in thinking about human evolution. Lev, of course, could have saved everyone the trouble.

*

At the sound of overboiling Laura wrenched herself back to the present. Zach wasn't in the kitchen. She rose, and after an instant of light-headedness, went to deal with the soup. The air in the room had the feel of half-congealed aspic, transparent but slightly clouded; gelatinous. Just lifting the stockpot and wiping down the hob filmed her forehead in sweat, and she leaned on the worktop to catch her breath. She debated whether to finish laying the table, but the trip to the fridge for butter seemed only a fraction less daunting than a clean dive from the 10m platform. She must have been awfully ill to tire so easily. Slowly she made her way through the flat, her hand on the wall, her legs wobbling and near

to buckling, her thoughts trailing like exhaust from an airplane.

The door to the bathroom was ajar. Laura leaned against the doorjamb; she could see Zach washing his hands at the basin. His hair, no longer bound in a ponytail, fell forward to screen his face. He didn't look up, and at first she thought he was merely concentrating on the task with his usual intensity; it always thrilled her to watch him clandestinely, and even now, when she could barely stand, his presence felt like a secret hoard of sweets: the best ones wrapped individually in metallic foil, so that you couldn't cram them into your mouth all at once; each with its own signal pleasure—the orange, filled with tangy cream; the blue, with the heady bite of a liqueur; the green, concealing the crack and crunch of praline; and her favourite, the gold, bittersweet chocolate wrapped round a rich ganache centre. She'd once kept a collection of the papers, which she used to make a collage for a school art project—how could she have forgotten that airplane, resplendent as a stained-glass bird in full sunlight, soaring like the spires of a cathedral above tiny leaden earthbound figures? She wondered what had happened to it; for the longest time it had hung in the passage like all of their drawings and paintings.

Zach rinsed the soap from his hands. The water still running, he ran his fingers through his hair. The water still running, he hunched over the basin. The water still running, he picked up the bar of soap, stared at it for a moment, and put it between his lips. He took a bite. The water still running.

'Zach!' she cried. 'What are you doing?'

He jerked round, the soap slipping from his hands to the floor. Laura could see the white froth on his lips.

'Spit it out, you idiot,' she said, launching herself towards him. When he made no move to do so, she grabbed his arm and reached for his mouth. He swallowed, gagging a bit.

'Oh god.' She shook out his toothbrush and filled the tumbler with water. 'Here,' she said, thrusting it towards him, 'drink it.'

He backed away. Backed right up against the tiled wall where it met the shower, then dropped to his haunches and covered his head with his arms as though anticipating a blow. Laura knelt in front of him, water sloshing over the lip of the plastic beaker and dripping onto his jeans. She wasn't much steadier herself.

‘Please,’ she said.

Permafrost eyes, but at least he was looking at her. With her fingertips she wiped the soapy residue from his lips, then held out the water. He drank a few sips.

‘They made you watch,’ he said.

She set the tumbler down on the floor. With a fierceness that bordered on anger she gathered him close. He shuddered, but after a few minutes his arms encircled her. His jumper smelled faintly fruity, the wool like a good salad oil, maybe a walnut or light olive. It was terrible to hold him and not know what to do. Though elegant as ever, he was dreadfully thin, and it felt as though he’d slip from her grasp at the slightest misword. Why wasn’t it enough to love someone?

‘I was terrified they’d kill you,’ she said.

‘They will, but not yet.’

‘Maybe this Janu business ... I don’t know, maybe it doesn’t have to be so *political*, so in your face or something.’

He laughed without humour. ‘You ought to read more history.’

‘Yeah, you’ve said.’

His arms tightened, and she stiffened involuntarily, the phantom limb of his rage threatening to seize her hair. She choked back a cry, but too late. A sound like the wind in the dark alley of her throat. He caught his breath, at once released her. His face paled. They stared at each other in silence till Laura rose to her knees, bent forward, and gripped his shoulders. She kissed him, first lightly, then sharing the lingering taste of soap.

‘They raped us both,’ she said.

*

Zach brought their bowls of soup to the living room, where Laura had stretched out on the sofa at his insistence. She was feeling mildly feverish again, and though her hunger had vanished, she made herself eat several mouthfuls before laying aside the spoon. But she drank the sweet milky tea and even asked for

more.

‘I’ll ring my dad,’ she said.

‘I don’t think you’re well enough to leave yet.’

‘You’re very busy. I’m just in your way.’

A lopsided smile. ‘I’ve needed to catch up on my reading anyway. And practise clarinet.’ He gestured towards her bowl. ‘Eat some more.’

To accommodate him she swallowed another spoonful. Then she leaned her head back against the cushions. Perhaps she slept for a while. The room was dark when she opened her eyes to the childhood memory of a blanket being drawn up to her chin, tenderly; of a hand stroking her hair. ‘Tell me another story,’ she murmured, then came properly awake at his soft laugh.

‘Sleeping Beauty?’ he asked, still tucking the blanket round her shoulder.

‘If you promise to kiss me.’

His eyes glittered in the light from the passage as though he were the one with fever. ‘Do you know how many times I’ve imagined making love to you these past five days? How many times I’ve come imagining it?’

‘Come closer.’

He bent and brushed his lips across her forehead.

‘Closer,’ she said.

‘No.’

He moved back and sat down on the couch table, folding himself inwards like a fragile origami sculpture-exquisite, complex, easily crushed.

‘Why?’ she asked. When he didn’t answer, ‘I won’t see him any more.’

Zach looked down at his hands. ‘It would still be rape.’

‘What?’

‘You’re ill. And you’re not ready.’

‘Isn’t that for me to decide?’

In response Zach stood, crossed the room to his desk, and switched on the lamp. Though the sofa was comfortable, Laura shifted to her side to ease the stiffness in her neck, her hips; to see him better. The light cast the hollows of his face in relief, like a high-contrast photo.

‘You’re way too thin,’ she said.

‘Would you like me to read to you?’ He was holding a slim volume which fell open to what must be a favourite page. His every gesture as spare and graceful and consummate as the couplet of a ghazal, he ran his forefinger over the paper, and for a moment Laura fancied that he was writing something of himself into the text.

‘I really ought to go home,’ she said.

A whisper like fading ink. ‘Stay.’

‘Till tomorrow?’

She could see the book trembling. ‘Zach, please talk to me.’

‘I’m not a good person to be with.’ With a brittle smile he shut the book. ‘Not a *safe* person. You’re much better off with someone like Owen.’ He turned so that she could no longer see his face.

Slowly she sat up. ‘Is that why you left me?’

‘I don’t leave people.’

Now she made an exasperated noise. ‘Could have fooled me.’

He whipped round, his voice splattering her with gall. ‘Do you have any idea, any idea whatsoever, how vulnerable you make me?’

So that was it. Laura clenched her fists under the blanket, glad that her face was in shadow. ‘I’m sorry I’ve put you in danger. I’ll ring my dad.’

‘Fuck it.’ He strode across the room to tower above her. ‘I want you to stay-to stay tonight, to stay tomorrow, to fucking stay for as long as you can bear to be in the same room with me, but I’m so afraid. Not for myself, damn you, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing any of this. For *you*, for how they could use you-will use you.’ He plunged his hands downwards in a gesture of such eloquence that Laura wondered what the movement for despair in sign language might be.

‘So why am I still here?’

‘Your parents weren’t easy to convince.’ His sudden grin. ‘Must have been my fatal charm, I reckon.’

‘I didn’t mean my parents. And it’s hardly your charm I’ve fallen in love with.’

A long silence.

‘You know why you’re still here,’ he said.

‘Then tell me.’

*

A very rare virus, her father explained next day, then questioned her about her contact with animals. By then she’d remembered Jasmine, but though he dismissed the cat as a source-‘biosafety measures at Fulgur’s containment labs outstrip the most stringent of international standards, *nobody* does it better’-she could tell there was more to it by the exchange of glances between Zach and her dad. She was too tired to argue with them, and both, in their different ways, could be ridiculously stubborn.

‘So am I quarantined?’

‘No, you’ll be back in school as soon as you feel strong enough,’ her dad said. ‘There are no restrictions. Now what about some ice cream? I’ve put a container of your favourite chocolate fudge into the deep freeze.’

He was hopeless, she’d have to work on Zach.

She remained three more nights at his flat but their relationship was precarious. Though he’d stopped sleeping on the sofa, he shied from all attempts at intimacy.

A kiss, a brief embrace, and then he'd pull away. Twice he'd shifted close enough in sleep for her to notice his erection, while she lay wide-eyed and tense, not daring to move, not daring to whisper a word of endearment, or his name. Inhaling, tasting his name. Nor would he talk about the cottage, not even the good moments. But he brought out his clarinet and played to her. As much as the admission rankled, the years of piano lessons and torturous hours of supervised practice were paying off: she could understand, if not the entire grammar of his second language, then at least enough to decode the rudiments; and she sometimes wondered whether music was in fact his native tongue—the language before language.

The night after her dad's visit had been a night of recurring nightmares for Zach, his 'Ben' anguish. By eight in the morning she was in tears and throwing together her belongings, only to sink down on the sofa as the notes first pounded against her ears like an angry tirade, then muted to a plaintive strain till whimpering to a final hoarse fermata. They were both crying, though his tears were liquid sound. Bitter, but more speaking than words. She stayed.

And stayed when he locked himself in the bedroom during Owen's visit that same afternoon, then went out without speaking and returned before dawn to slide naked into bed. At first it seemed as if he finally wanted her, but he began to shiver at her touch so that she withdrew to the very edge of the mattress, and dreamed of falling.

Max wasn't allowed to visit, though he rang several times. Her dad claimed it was best not to call too much attention to her continued presence, which she'd believed till Owen laughed it off. 'They won't touch Zach now, not for something that minor. Everyone's afraid of the whole Janu thing blowing up in their faces.' Her mum, as usual, must be behind the prohibition, the way she was always going on about Max's health. And about the 'wrong sort of friends', as if the diseases of the rich were any less contagious. Just wait till she found out Max was a simu! When Zach infuriated Laura by refusing, yet again, to discuss his work at Fulgur, she imagined letting her mum loose on him.

'Then at least talk to Max,' she said between spoonfuls of the gooey porridge Zach insisted she eat. 'He's overheard-OK, tuned into-some nasty stuff at Fulgur. They're going to use you to find them someone like him.'

'Nobody uses me,' he said. 'Not any more.'

‘Oh yeah? What about’ -just in time, she choked down Fabio’s name-‘your serum?’

‘Fabio’s working on it.’

*

Like all first-time visitors, Charles’ attention was caught by the painting in Fabio’s office. Even after taking the proffered seat, his gaze strayed towards the canvas as if he’d been invited to an opulent banquet following weeks of near starvation. Human Resources apparently commanded considerable resources. Molly would already be calculating the cost of the sumptuous leather sofa, the hardwood coffee table, the crystal water jug and glasses on the tray.

‘What an amazing painting,’ he said.

Fabio removed his wrist, laid it on the table in front of them, and rubbed the place where his skin had been constricted by the band. ‘I’m glad you like it. My brother’s work.’

‘The lad who died?’

‘Yes. In fact, he’s the reason I’ve asked you here.’

Charles concealed his surprise by feasting once more on the painting.

‘I know you’re extremely busy,’ Fabio continued, ‘so I’ll get straight to the point. Randall tells me that you’ve got neurodata for Mateus.’

‘It could be.’ Warily, ‘I’ll have to check.’

‘There’s no reason to be concerned, this is a perfectly legitimate request. As Mateus’ next of kin-the documents are on file-I’ll need to give my permission for any use of the data. Randall would like to try a Fulgrid upload. Would this be feasible?’

‘I’m afraid not. There’s been some early work, but we’ve only been able to deepscan

with sufficient precision for the interface in the last eighteen months or so.

Unless I'm mistaken, your brother died several years before that.'

'I see.' He relaxed into a smile. 'Yes, I see.'

Charles sympathised with Fabio's open relief. Randall was a tough man to refuse, and many people were still superstitious about the dead, Latinos more than most.

'I suppose it wouldn't really be Mateus anyway, would it? Just an avatar of sorts ...'

'Not at all. Even a first-rate cognoscens like Zach would have great difficulty telling an upload from the real thing.'

'That sophisticated already?'

'Absolutely. Of course, there are some issues to work out, but we're getting there.'

'Still, when it's your own flesh and blood ...' Fabio's gaze shifted briefly to his brother's painting.

'Exactly then. It's no secret that family members of Fulgur employees are being deepscanned as quickly as possible. My own children were among the first, there's really nothing to fear in terms of safety. Granted, in rare instances the neurodata may be corrupt or incomplete, but we're refining our procedures all the time. In fact, I'm planning to schedule Max for a new scan. Which parent wouldn't give his child the chance to live on in case of-well, just in case? It's only natural.'

'Odd definition of natural.'

'You know what I mean. We're not about to go back to blood-letting and surgery without anaesthesia and ECT and penicillin anaphylaxis, are we?'

'I'm not sure the comparison is apt.'

'Wait till you have children. Then you'll understand.'

*

On Laura's last evening Josh handed her a gift while Zach looked on over a mug of tea, hers and Josh's cooling on the coffee table. Josh had already visited several times and apparently had even sat with her for an hour during the height of her fever when Zach needed to do some shopping, though she had no memory of the vigil. Josh's Christmas present was still stowed at the bottom of Zach's wardrobe-a blue amber necklace, enormous and heavy and utterly spellbinding. There was no way she could have hidden it at home. Surreptitiously she slipped her hand under her collar to finger Zach's chain, which she'd been able to conceal so far from her mother. Or had she? She thought of her dad's stethoscope, its cold and intrusive ear, deaf to any plea for amnesty.

Josh had bought the necklace years ago in the Dominican Republic. When she'd gone to thank him after the holidays, he'd demonstrated its strange property. The polished stones were a molten gold in both artificial and natural light, but if the sunlight shone on them against a dark background-not *through* them, for example, against a window-they became a deep cobalt blue. Josh explained the phenomenon by fluorescence, which made it no less mysterious, no less beautiful. 'Kind of like Zach, eh?' he'd said. Once alone Laura had spent a lot of time playing with the necklace, fascinated by the colour tricks it performed. Ice and flame: wasn't it in the Norse myths that life originates where the two realms meet? Zach would know. She hadn't shown him the necklace yet, though perhaps he'd found it during her illness.

Now Laura unwrapped the cloth from the bulky parcel, then opened the front cover of the new gift with shaky fingers.

'Yours?' she asked.

'Yup, no earthly good to me any more. Can't see them,' Josh said.

A photograph album, the old leather-bound sort like the ones at her grandparents' that she and Max used to love looking through when they were small. Magic books, they'd called them. Setting the album down on the table, she went to give the old man a fierce hug.

'I'll treasure it,' she said.

'Treasure him as well,' he whispered in her ear. 'There's no finer man.'

Zach dipped his head to sip from his mug, his cheeks colouring faintly. Laura

supposed that Josh didn't know about Zach's hearing. Though with Josh you never could tell. 'One of the few pleasures left when you're old,' he'd once told her. 'Riling people.'

'I reckon you've been practising for a good long time,' she'd retorted.

Chapter 36

Zach has gone back to studying the sculpted tusk when Nashuk appears with a steaming bowl. 'I've brought you some broth.'

'Thank you,' he says. 'Smells good.'

She indicates the tusk. 'Mikitok is always making something. Do you like it?'

'It's very beautiful.'

'I'll tell you the story while you drink.' Standing on one leg, she rubs an instep with the toes of her other foot and smiles so that her plump cheeks dimple. 'Sit down, you're tired. Let me take off your kamiks and massage your feet.'

Zach feels his face redden. 'That's very kind but ... I mean, it's not that you're not ... I mean, I don't think ...' He takes a sip of broth to cover his confusion.

She giggles. 'You're sweet. Are you sure?'

He nods, too embarrassed to answer.

'Never mind. But sit down anyway. It's a good story.' She selects a fur from the heap on the platform, spreads it on the floor near the kudlik, and kneels so that her face is turned towards the carving.

*

'In the beginning before the beginning,' Nashuk begins, her voice taking on the lilt of a practised storyteller, 'the world is dark and silent and covered by endless water. There is no night and no day, no yesterday and no tomorrow. Only two creatures share the world—a pure white seal and a bird black as the water, swift as the wind, powerful as a great spirit. The seal commands the sea, which nourishes her. The bird, who rules the sky, also has no need of flesh, for the air fills his belly and the cool breezes quench his thirst—except the one thirst from which he has no rest, and that is the thirst for song. The bird, you see, cannot sing, and where there should be music, there is only emptiness and yearning. So he circles the earth, soaring high above the sea, in search of his voice. He is always

listening for the keynote that will unlock his throat. Sometimes his wings tire despite his enormous strength, and then he glides with the currents, allowing them to carry him downwards towards the airless depths. Towards the airless depths he glides, each time a little closer. Perhaps it hides there, he thinks. Still he does not dare to shear the water till, riding a long downwind, he spots a pearly glimmer in the darkness beneath him and sweeps low enough to skim the unfamiliar swells.

This is my realm, says the seal. You have nothing to seek here.

The bird would answer her, but though he opens his beak and sucks in an immense breastful of air and strives with all his might, he makes no sound.

Go from here, commands the seal in disgust, for a dumb creature is no creature at all, merely an abomination on the face of the waters.

Saddened, the bird flaps his wings and is gone.

Again this happens, and again the seal sends the bird away.

But the third time the bird is so filled with grief that a tear falls from his eye onto the smooth surface of the sea. As soon as water meets water, a crystalline note rings out and a small drop of ice forms, as white as the pelt of the seal herself.

Do that again, she says.

The bird hovers into the wind, and another tear falls into the sea. The ice grows larger at the sound of a different note, as pure and silvery as the first.

The seal is entranced. *And again*.

But there are no more tears, for the bird opens his beak and with joy beyond measure trills and trills the two notes he has learned as he sweeps up and away into the air, his sleek glossy feathers and gleaming eyes quickly lost from sight.

It is the seal's turn to be saddened. She has never heard birdsong, which has awakened a new feeling in her breast. The sea has always been her home and her delight, and she has lacked for nothing. So it is to the sea she returns for comfort, diving deep and swimming far. But what had once been a perfect and limitless reach now seems too dark, too salty, too cold. Too narrow to contain her

spinning thoughts.

The seal finds her way back to the small island of ice. She circles it many times, ever more slowly, as she wrestles with her fear of the unknown. To leave the water! But in the end, though it requires utmost heaving and straining and panting, she clammers onto the floe.

Not without cost. In her struggle over the rough edge of the ice, the seal has torn a long gash in her belly, now bleeding and sore. She licks the wound, from which an ugly bulge protrudes. I'm dying, thinks the seal. Unexpected sensations-the wind in her fur, the unyielding surface beneath her limbs, the weight of her flesh-are as frightening as the wound itself. I'm dying, and will never hear that song again. She lowers her head over the brink so that she may at least look upon the sea, and begins to weep.

Her tears flow copiously. As they drip into the water, a wildflight of notes is released until enough ice has been added to the island that her tears can no longer reach the sea. But by then she has ceased weeping: the bird is echoing the song, embellishing it with rich harmonics.

He alights at her side.

You're injured, he says.

He examines the wound. Though alarmed by what he sees, he will attempt to save her, for the gift of his voice suddenly seems empty without someone to share it. He thought it enough to know of her existence-to remember it, to imagine though he couldn't imagine its watery course. It is not enough.

There is something living inside of you, he says. *I shall cut away some of your skin for it to escape.*

He could make quick work of it, for his beak is long and sharp as a harpoon, but he stops from time to time to sing so that the seal remains calm and doesn't struggle. Nor does he want to tear her skin more than necessary. Still he is astounded when a head and arms emerge from the wound, then a featherless, furless torso.

Who are you? he asks the beautiful creature.

A woman, she replies in a low voice, shaking out her seal-white hair over ivory breasts.

At once the bird is enchanted by this new being.

Have you always been inside the seal? he asks.

I am the seal. It's your song that has brought me forth.

I will sing ceaselessly if you remain with me, he says.

I cannot fly, nor you swim. We would sicken and die on the ice.

He has no answer to this and turns away to hide his sorrow. The seal woman lays a hand on his wing and strokes the lustrous black feathers. The bird has never felt the touch of another creature; his heart begins to beat with unaccustomed haste.

Do not grieve, she says. *You have a beautiful voice, which will always sustain you.*

I would gladly relinquish my song for your company.

You would mourn it once it was gone, and hate me for it.

Is there no way for us to be together?

There is one. You must return to the air, and I to the sea, but when your loneliness becomes too heavy to bear with song alone, you may come to the ice and summon me with your sweetest notes. And while we are together, you must grant me a portion of your music, so that I too may sing.

Like this? he asks.

The seal woman accepts the gift. Tears fill the bird's eyes as he listens to her sing. His remaining caws, though harsh, seem to please her, for she lays her head against his breast.

And so it is agreed. The bird flies and the seal swims, but henceforth whenever there is need, the seal removes her skin and joins the bird in song.'

*

The broth is cold by the time Nashuk has finished. Zach drinks it anyway, then hands her the bowl. ‘Thank you, especially for the story.’

‘It’s one of my favourites, though I don’t get to tell it often.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s kept for the eve of a White Seal crossing. Stories enter our dreams.’

‘Dreams don’t always come true.’

‘This is the *Sea Mother*.’

‘Then I’d best make out a wishlist before I sleep. Any special requests?’

Nashuk frowns and rubs a finger round the rim of the bowl. ‘Why are you making fun of me?’ she finally asks. ‘Am I too ugly for you?’ Fingers flutter over a breast. ‘Too skinny?’

‘Of course not!’ he exclaims, now thoroughly disgusted with himself. He should have been more careful of her sensibilities. ‘To dream of the seal, I’ve got to be alone. No ... you know.’

She looks up and smiles. ‘I didn’t know that. Shamans don’t usually talk about their journeys.’

This time, though sighing to himself, he doesn’t bother to argue. ‘Some things are hard to put into words.’

‘That’s why we forget our dreams, I guess. I try to remember where my soul has gone when I sleep, but I’m not Pani. Grandmother says his dream colours are already strong, someday he’ll be able to control wherever and whenever his soul travels, like all shaman.’

Pani would make a better apprentice for Lev than I ever could, Zach thinks. Any of these people.

Despite Nashuk’s storytelling skill, Zach’s sleep is thankfully dreamless, yet he

wakes with a rare headache which reminds him of the time he drank a couple of lagers at school, ending up in the infirmary with the disgruntled ministrations of the nurse as placebo, and detention looming as inoculation against further depravity. He's desperately thirsty too, and fights leaden limbs and drowsiness to drag himself upright. His tongue is furred, and there's a metallic taste at the back of his throat, as though those lagers had been left open in the sun too long, but the icy drinking water helps to clear his head a bit. A piece of dried caribou in hand, he goes back to the sleeping platform. Puzzled, then disbelieving, he stares at the furs after pulling back the upper layers to air. The impression from a second body is unmistakable, and when he passes a hand over the elliptical indentation, he can feel the residual warmth as well. For a moment he's tempted to believe that Nashuk had stolen back while he slept, but on second thought realises she'd never breach shamanic taboo. Once again he brushes his hand over the hollow. The hairs he collects are as long and silky as Laura's, and smell lemony when he brings them to his nose. But he's never seen any quite as white as these. He curls them into a neat tight coil, then on impulse unwinds them and plaits them into a strand of his own hair. Let the hunters think what they like.

His headache has begun to abate. While he chews his strip of meat, washing it down with more water, last night's tale returns in all its vividness, as though Nashuk had indeed crept back to retell it in his sleep. He lays the water flask aside and stoops to pick up Mikitok's carving. Then hastily sets it back down, just managing not to drop it. Then picks it up again, his hand trembling.

The ivory seal-woman has emerged fully from her skin, which lies crumbled at her feet.

Chapter 37

‘I know about Max.’

Laura’s father did nothing dramatic like jam on the brakes or swerve into a parked car. Perhaps he hadn’t heard, so she raised her voice to compete with the windscreen wipers. On the passenger side the black rubber of the blade was scritchng wide bands of slurry across the glass, which she couldn’t remember ever happening before. Her dad undertook all minor repairs immediately, and even repainting a room or laying a new floor was arranged in short order. Her mum wouldn’t have tolerated it any other way.

At the next junction Litchfield slowed, then at the last moment continued straight on. Laura glanced at him. ‘You’ve missed the turning.’

‘There’s something I’ve got to take care of.’

‘Did you hear what I said about Max?’

‘How are you feeling? Need to lie down?’

‘I’m fine.’ She lowered the zip on her jacket and reached to adjust the heater.

Her dad threw her a quick look, concern on his tired face. ‘Sweating?’

‘I’m not feverish, if that’s what you mean. You’ve had the heater at full blast.’ Unlike your mouth, but she knew better than to say so. Instead, she studied his profile. Sometimes he could be persuaded by silence, the power of which her mum had never managed to grasp. It wouldn’t have occurred to Laura that *both* her parents liked it this way.

He was going bald, and on his thin face the pouches under his eyes sagged like a ripped hem. And those lines at the corners of his mouth, how deep they were becoming. A small scared voice piped up from under the covers, ‘Please don’t leave me alone with her, Daddy.’

It would be dark soon. She leaned her head against the cold window and closed her eyes. If her dad needed to run an errand, so what? She was in no hurry to get

home.

The modest brick houses gave way to a superstore complex on the right and some monotonous prefab buildings—a car dealer, warehouses, a sports complex—scattered like a child’s building blocks among scrubby lots on the left, behind which ran the canal. Greyish sleet blurred the passing scene more thoroughly than tears, as though someone had wiped the world with one of those sponges which float like a dead animal in the scuzzy water at a petrol station; she’d always made Max clean the windows. She tried not to think about Zach, but within seconds, five, ten, he’s in the car with her and holding her and this time he’s not holding back and it’s nothing like Owen nothing like nothing like

‘Laura?’

She swallowed a cry. They were bumping over a small bridge. Quickly she rolled down the window.

‘Just a moment of nausea,’ she said, her face in the sidestream, her deep breathing a touch melodramatic. Don’t overdo it, she warned herself. The graupel stung like a cheap, gritty facial peel, not that it would cleanse anything; the worst pustules never rose to the surface.

‘You were whimpering.’ He steered towards the verge. ‘Maybe we’d best turn round.’

‘I’m OK, stop fussing.’

Rolling the window up again, she focused properly on their whereabouts. ‘What are we doing way out here anyway?’

‘You’ll see in a few minutes.’

Within those few minutes they were driving along a narrow lane, which quickly became a track through dense woodland, bare branches as well as needled limbs scraping the sides of the car as if in warning; fingers tattooing a message into the metallic skin that enclosed them. But the track itself was surprisingly free of ruts, smooth as hardpacked turf and gravelled in places, so that Laura speculated how often it was used, and by whom. Somebody was maintaining it, without trimming the overhanging conifers which concealed it even in winter.

Riding in a car in bad weather has the feel of stasis, the sort of timely lull which releases a flash flood of memory. Laura's uncle died soon after her eleventh birthday when his car crashed through a low barrier and flipped into a river late at night; it had been raining, he'd been drinking, and though his window had shattered, he'd been pinned in the vehicle. Does your whole life really flash before your eyes when you drown, she wondered. Is there remorse in the last moments of life? Or only fear? She'd imagined the accident so often as to have become an eyewitness, his desperate struggle to escape, to hold his breath, to *breathe*, a spillway for her own throat-constricting nightmares.

At the end of the track there was a small turning circle. Her dad stopped the car and cut the engine, but only dimmed the headlights. Though the sleet was abating, Laura could see no path, no building, no reason whatsoever for the track to end so abruptly. The windscreen and windows gradually fogged as he sat with his hands on the steering wheel, staring ahead. There was an air of concentration about him, similar to his trancelike preoccupation when even her mum knew better than to interrupt: the solution to a thorny research problem might be lost forever, along with her chance for a Nobel Prize. And nothing like the fixed smile and rigid bearing which Max had dubbed their dad's Charles d'Arc stance after one particularly vicious rave of her mum's. Mummy Dear had overheard, though she was usually too possessed by her own rage to notice anything short of an approaching cyclone, and that only when it had already ripped off the roof. It had been the wooden cooking spoon and no TV for a week.

Zippering up her jacket, Laura decided to give her father till one hundred. Numbers, however, couldn't pin her slippery thoughts in place. By fifty she was wondering yet again how he'd succeeded in covering up Max's nature for so long—the *why* was obvious—and by ninety she was toying with extending her count, since she really wasn't keen to face her mum, when her dad broke his silence. 'Come on. I've warned them to expect us.' Without further explanation, he opened his door and an icy wind blew into the car. He frowned and poked his head out like a dog sniffing the air, then retracted it to ask, 'Smell anything?'

'Wood burning, maybe. Is there a cottage round here?'

At once he shoved the door full back and sprang out. After a brief hesitation Laura joined him where the ground canted sharply into thick brake. She crossed her arms, shivering despite her warm jacket. The smell of smoke was unmistakable now, and beyond the carspaw of light she could see a faint glow

in the distance-the rosy tint of a charming winter scene with bonfire and wooden sledges and apple-cheeked children, painted in oil, the kind reproduced on Christmas cards and calendars.

‘Something’s on fire,’ she said rather unnecessarily.

Her dad stared a moment longer through the trees, his lips thinning to extinction, then hurried back to the car. Laura followed him to the boot, from which he was already removing the survival blankets and emergency medical kit he always kept in readiness.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked.

‘Come on, you’ll have to help.’ He cleared his throat, and his voice strengthened. ‘I can’t abandon them.’

‘Who-‘ Laura began.

He thrust the blankets at her. ‘Carry these. There’s a cottage up ahead-a safehouse.’

‘A what?’

‘Quiet, just listen. There are some kids living here, one of them may be injured. You’re a good liar. I don’t know exactly what’s waiting for us, but follow my cues if anyone’s about, you may have to play up the sweet young girl. Loads of syrupy innocence. It’ll allay suspicion.’ He went to switch off the headlights, pluck his torch from the glove compartment, and activate central locking, then led her grimly towards the funeral pyre.

For that’s what it had become, this ‘safehouse’. She knew it as they trudged through the sodden snow, the sleety wind harrying them despite the treebreak. Knew it as the air grew thick and brack. Knew it as she watched her dad bow further, with each step he took, under the weight of dread. His spirit’s darkfall, and the trees creaking in the keening breath of the winter night. Grey ash drifting like flurries. The burnt smell of it.

Laura’s boots and the bottoms of her jeans were caked with wet snow, her toes numb, by the time they neared the site. Flickers of flame were still flaring up here and there on the wind, and smoke embalming the remains. They shouldn’t

have come, she intoned under her breath, shouldn't have come, though she'd probably get a new pair of boots out of it. It was better to think about boots than what it felt like to be trapped in a fire.

How did Max block out the pain?

Her dad wasn't stopped by the sound of voices, an ugly laugh. Lowering his torch, he waded straight out of the woods and into their midst, while every cell in her body shrieked like a tripped smoke alarm. It was only the thought of what they'd do to her dad, to her, this rough-looking lot who were gathering round, that kept her from fleeing. There were too many of them, ten or eleven, brazening it out was their only chance. Openly hostile faces, and not a woman among them. And maybe a couple more out of sight. Beyond the ruins there was a flutter of movement through the haze of smoke.

'Where the fuck have you come from?' A meaty bloke in a sheepskin jacket, no cheap tatty-looking item either.

Several of the men were carrying rifles, but she had no idea what sort. Not that it made much difference, nobody was about to check their licences.

'If you don't mind, I prefer my daughter doesn't hear such language.' Her dad put his arm protectively-demonstratively-around her shoulders, then squeezed a warning. With the incessant ranting from her mum over the years, he'd had plenty of opportunity to perfect a tranquil bedside manner.

'Answer the question, mate.' This from a belly with thick lips and a broken nose that had been set by someone with training in political caricature. 'You're trespassing on private property.'

'Daddy, I'm really really cold. Can we go home soon?' Laura stamped her feet and shivered and even managed to chatter her teeth. She hadn't used *daddy* since she'd been about six years old.

'Just a moment, sweetheart. These people may need our help.' Her dad hefted his bag. 'I'm a doctor. I saw the fire from the road, though it took me a while to find the lane. Is anyone injured? And have you rung emergency services?'

'A doctor, eh? What are you doing round here at your girl's supptime?'

Not dim, then, the sheepskin. Laura smiled winningly at him. ‘My big sister Grace has just had her baby. Such a sweet little boy, you can’t imagine, so tiny, and those fingers. Mummy’s staying over but Daddy has to operate tomorrow.’

‘I tried to take a shortcut after the Arpingdale campgrounds,’ her dad said, ‘but my nav system seems to be acting up. Sometimes I think we’d do better without all these devices.’

A third man edged closer, his eyes glassy and his words just short of slurred. ‘A medical man like you must like his tech.’ Laura couldn’t tell if all of them had been drinking, or only this bloke. The smell of smoke, bitter as slag, infiltrated everything. If she scooped up a handful of snow, it would probably taste like ash.

‘I’ve no problem with technology to treat disease or save lives,’ her dad said, ‘but not when it’s used to create inhuman monsters.’

A sucking sound like a plug pulled from the bathwater, then a tinnitus of sparks as something in the ruins collapsed. None of the men turned to look. There were a few whispers. Laura glanced round the circle of faces and saw that one or two of them were smiling at her now, and one nodding like a fucking marionette with a string loose. She would have liked to cut it through.

‘Baby OK?’ Sheepskin asked.

‘Completely normal, thank god. Nothing like that in our family. But thanks for asking. So nobody’s injured?’

‘Nah. It’s Siler’s old place.’ Sheepskin nodded towards a man standing near the old well, a lit cigarette cupped in his hands. ‘We neighbours got together and torched it. Roof half gone already, windows too, but you know how it is. Vermin were taking hold.’

She could feel her dad’s fingers digging into her shoulder and clutched the blankets tighter, but his face remained impassive. She didn’t know how long his self-control could last. Seldom as he spoke about his patients, there are deaths impossible to entomb in silence-like the girl who’d been locked since infancy in a cellar, abused, incontinent, and emaciated, with only rudimentary speech, whom he’d tried to help with the latest neurolinguistic techniques. He liked kids. He was patient with kids. His favourite university patients were kids.

‘Daddy, can we go now? My feet are freezing, and I’m hungry.’

‘Here, lassie, I reckon you could do with some chocolate.’ An older man handed her a whole bar, which she accepted with a show of enthusiasm. ‘Save it for the car, you aren’t wanting to take off your gloves in the cold.’

‘We’ll be off, then,’ her dad said. ‘Since there’s nothing for me to do.’

There was a scattershot of goodbyes. As they turned to leave, Laura threw one last look towards the ruin. Only a single wall was left standing, rough-cut stone with fireplace and chimney where one day bats might safely roost. It wouldn’t be long before brambles began to reclaim the blackened ground; spiders, insects, all manner of wildlife. Blinking back tears, she almost missed the flash of light from the trees on the margin of the clearing. This time he was holding the crystal aloft, a glittering arc of rainbow colours sweeping across the snow. Wildly she glanced round to see if anyone else had noticed, but once again, whatever this man-this *apparition*-wanted, he wanted only from her. Who are you? she thought. But nothing in her imagination could have prepared her for the sudden vista which opened before her—an obsidian sea of silence flowing into flowstone sound, and beyond sound, and beyond. She stumbled and would have fallen if her dad hadn’t caught her arm. We have been called many names, in untold languages, but I have always liked the sound of *fylgja*.

Her dad picked up the survival blankets, shook off the snow, and bundled them under an arm. In silence they walked through the wood, following the path they themselves had trampled. When they reached the car, her dad stowed away his kit while Laura plucked the chocolate bar from her pocket, gripped it tightly in her fist as if to crush it, then raised her arm and lobbed it savagely across the track into the opposite bank. She hugged herself in an attempt to subdue-conceal-her shivering. The simus were right, men are predators. Sick, vile, brutish predators.

Dark, but never dark enough. Waiting. Endless sleepless hours waiting. Finally the soft click of the latch, the spill of pallid light and the sourish smell of him, the door sighing shut, the bolt snibbing into place. His footsteps, barefoot, onetwo threefour ... at seven he always reaches the bed. Laura, he says, pretty little Laura kitten. No more waiting. He’s waiting, she knows what to do. The magic ice cream cone which grows bigger with every lick.

‘You’re cold, we need to get you back home and into bed.’ Her dad peeled off a glove and laid a hand on her forehead. ‘A bit feverish.’

Sidestepping out of reach, Laura was about to blurt out a reflexive denial when she realised that bed, and sleep, would in fact be welcome. For a moment she ached to crawl into Zach’s arms, to lie in the sweet simple reservoir of his warmth. But it would have to be a hot bath and flannel pyjamas, as after a bruising swim, and the sanctuary of bittersweet daydreams.

Why had she been so stupid? Why hadn’t she remembered that even kittens have claws and teeth?

*

Once inside the car, her dad gripped the steering wheel without speaking. Laura waited, tears close again. Illness and fatigue make you tremble, shock, there was no reason to think she was going mad: seeing things that weren’t there. Or things that were always there, imperceptible to a mind saned rather than sainted. Joan of Arc heard voices accompanied by a blaze of light. Poets have heard hierarchies of terrible angels. She and Max were siblings, weren’t they? Is that why her dad wouldn’t talk about Max?

The mind builds the walls of its own, perhaps its only, safehouse.

‘How naïve of me, how misguided to think I could keep them safe. How *arrogant*. I should have let Fulgur have them.’ He turned to look at her, his eyes raw with the pain of it. ‘At least they’d still be alive.’

Kids shouldn’t have to give that sort of forgiveness to a parent. ‘Who? You haven’t explained.’

He switched on the engine, the headlights and wipers, jammed the car into reverse, gunned backwards, but when the wheels began to spin, he stopped and took an audible breath, collected himself.

‘Simu twins, a bit younger than Max. Eliot and Nicola. And their foster mother.’

‘You were hiding them?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Why? It’s a pretty serious crime. I mean, I can understand about Max, he’s your own son, but ...’

‘They were very gifted kids. Wonderful, trusting kids.’ He removed his knitted cap and passed a hand through his hair, then stared at the damp wool till Laura was obliged to prompt him.

‘And?’

‘Max told you about the scare he had at the Christmas party, didn’t he? It’s only confirmed what I’ve suspected for a long time. Fulgur is keen to get its hands on a telepath. And Eliot and Nicola were telepaths, fearsome telepaths, so fearsome that it scared me sometimes.’

After a short silence Laura asked, ‘What does Fulgur want with telepaths?’

‘Has Zach said anything at all about his project?’

She shook her head.

‘The wars over oil reserves are nothing compared to what we’re likely to see in the near future. The mind-the cognoscens mind, especially-is our most valuable natural resource. Fulgur has just been quicker to recognise it.’ He regarded his hat as if it had mistaken him for a hat rack, then tossed it onto the dashboard. ‘I’m not surprised Zach has been scrupulous about not involving you. But if you care for him the way I think you do, it’s far too late. You’re already involved.’

*

Later that evening Max came into Laura’s room while she was sitting cross-legged on her bed, Fabio’s origami crow before her on the duvet. She’d succeeded in straightening it enough to roost without toppling, but it was lopsided and badly creased. She liked running a finger gently over the paper wings, and made it into a game: how much pressure could it withstand before falling on its side?

Max thrust a packet of her favourite toffee at her-his favourite too, yet unopened.

‘Thanks,’ she said, touched by this sign of affection. ‘Want one?’

‘They’re for you, otherwise Zach will bite my head off.’

‘What’s Zach got to do with it?’

‘They’re from him.’

‘You’ve seen him?’

With a sheepish grin Max shook his head, then looked at his feet.

‘Max?’

‘You know.’

She was silent for a moment, gnawing her underlip. It wasn’t pretty, being jealous of your little brother.

‘He talks to you?’ she asked.

‘I’ve taught him a few tricks.’

‘Tricks, you call them? I’d love to see the website you got them magic tricks from!’

‘Look, it’s just a way to signal when he wants me to pay attention.’ His cheeks pinked. ‘I’m supposed to tell you he’s thinking about you.’

‘What’s he done? Forgotten to pay his phone bill?’

‘Mum.’ Max rolled his eyes, that stupid mannerism he’d picked up from Owen’s brother George. ‘There’ve been a lot of calls. She’s even taken your mobile so you won’t be disturbed.’

‘Yeah, right. That’s her story. And stop rolling your eyes, it makes you look like a Moss family clone.’ Angrily Laura tore open the packet and shook out several toffees onto the duvet. ‘Go on. He won’t mind.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Just don’t forget to brush your milk teeth.’ It wasn’t like him not to retort, he hated any suggestion of childishness. Something was bothering him. Ashamed of

having flared up, Laura patted the bed and slid towards the wall so that he could sit down. He picked up the paper bird and prodded its crooked beak, his own tentative smile the response.

‘You ought to think of becoming a vet when you grow up,’ she said.

Max unwrapped one of the chocolate-covered sort and popped it into his mouth. Laura didn’t need any special gift to know that it was his way of evading the topic; the future. She reached out and touched two fingers to his bony wrist, just over the vulnerable nexus of veins.

He swallowed. ‘Zach says he might be getting a bigger flat one day.’

‘I suppose.’

Balancing the bird on the palm of his hand, Max kept his eyes on it as though it might spread its fragile wings and take flight. ‘Do you think ... maybe I could ... I mean, I’d keep out of the way and everything.’

‘Max, I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.’

For a while he continued to stare at the bird. When he finally looked up, he still didn’t quite meet her eye, and his cheeks were even rosier. ‘Zach said that in a year or two, Dad might let me move in. In a lot of places the code’s not strictly enforced, and anyway, sometimes there’s special permission.’

‘Simus ought to stick together, eh?’ Laura snatched the bird back from his hand, tossed it onto her bedside cabinet, and sprang to her feet. She strode across the room and yanked at the curtains, though in fact they were already drawn. ‘Mum will fight like hell to keep you.’ She took a deep breath, another, breathing in remembered warmth. ‘Not that it’ll do any good, but I’ll take your side. Zach would look after you.’ *There’s no finer man.* Her back to Max, she continued to clutch the edges of the fabric while blinking hard. It would take someone like Zach to keep Max safe.

‘You mean you wouldn’t mind?’ She could hear the relief in his voice.

‘It’s got nothing to do with me, does it?’

‘Zach said you’d have to agree.’

Slowly she turned to face her brother, her heart beating too fast. It was obviously going to take some time before she was fit again. 'Whatever for?'

'But-'

'What?'

'If you guys are going to share a flat ...' His voice trailed off, something in her face puzzling, or unsettling. 'I thought you *wanted* to live with him. If you don't, you've got to tell him, Laura. It's not *fair*.'

She came over and knelt at the side of the bed, a sensation like the fizz and tickle of a sparkling wine rizzling from her nostrils into her forehead into the very top of her head.

'He said we're going to share a flat?'

'Don't you want to? I thought-'

She pinched him. Hard.

'What was that for?' he whinged, rubbing his arm.

'Listen, little brother, stay out of my head, you hear?'

'I'm not like-' He hesitated, perturbed, then blurted out, 'There's something wrong, they're gone, and Dad won't answer my questions.'

'Who's gone?'

He chucked another toffee into his mouth.

'Max!'

Muffled, 'OK, OK.' He gulped the toffee. 'I'm not the only one, you know. There's a set of twins who are really good, much better than me.'

Without warning the door opened, and their mum pitched herself into their midst. 'What's going on in here? Laura is supposed to be sleeping!' Her eyes fell on the open packet of sweets. 'And where did you get that junk?'

Laura rose to her feet, then to her full height. She crossed her arms. 'From Zach.' Delicious to see vexation flare in her mother's eyes, as delicious as the toffees themselves. 'A goodbye present.' Smack me, Laura thought. Go on, smack me.

Once her grades had begun to improve, Laura had raised her hand in a lesson and rattled off the causes of the Sino-American War. There had been no mistaking the triggerflash of anger that Mr Fuckwit Chester was quick to shutter. A moment of grim illumination: never before had she realised that, far from disliking stupid pupils, teachers relish them, relish and cultivate them. From then on she'd begun to study in earnest, setting herself a punishing schedule.

Her mum took a deep breath. 'Just don't forget to brush your teeth,' she said, her mouth working as though a toffee were gummed to her own molars. 'Max, precisely, but I mean precisely, ten more minutes.'

As soon as she'd gone, Max and Laura exchanged looks, then dissolved into laughter. Laura settled back onto the bed.

'In the 9♦ minutes remaining, you're going to tell me *precisely* how long you've known about the twins.' One last bubble of laughter from Max-'9♦'-while she sobered, trying to figure out how, or even whether, to tell him about the fire.

'I've always known. Sometimes they forget to block. They're megastrong senders, and anyway they talk a lot to each other. OK, not talk-you know what I mean.'

'Why haven't you told me?'

He shrugged, then discovered a loose thread on the duvet to claim his attention. An uncomfortable suspicion crossed Laura's mind.

'What about Zach?'

Max looked away.

'You've told Zach but not me!'

'He made me promise to tell you. He said it was for me to do, not him.'

‘He got that right at least.’

‘Don’t be racked at him. Please. He’s so scared sometimes.’

‘Then he’d better stop with all that political stuff before someone-‘

‘Don’t say it!’

In Max’s eyes she saw a curtain part to reveal the dark mid-winter night of his own fear. Pinpricks of light like stars glittered there, where the darkest matter conversed with fearsome uncertainties, implicate order concealed even from a cognoscens. What must it be like to have a billion billion voices yowling to lynch your soul?

‘Is it ever quiet inside your head?’ she asked softly.

Max sat up straight, his brow furrowing like a much older lad’s. ‘Close your eyes.’

‘Why?’

‘Just do it.’

She closed them, it was easier than arguing. She tried to blank off her mind, but he spoke straightaway.

‘Now think of Zach. Think of him walking along the canal. He’s wearing a thick sheepskin coat, collar turned up against the wind, and a woollen cap jammed far down on his head. His hair’s tucked up under the cap so no one can see it. He doesn’t want to be recognised. Though he’s got gloves on, his hands are deep inside his pockets. He’s cold. He’s walking slowly. His toes are numb, the soles of his feet. His eyes are watering from the cold, his nose running. He’s tired but doesn’t want to go back to an empty flat. Doesn’t want to eat something, alone. Doesn’t want to sit at his desk, alone. Doesn’t want to sleep in the bed alone where you-‘

‘Stop it!’ She tore open her eyes. Viciously, ‘At least *you’ll* never be lonely when you’ve got all those companions in your head.’

Max stared at her for a moment, blinking as though her words were specks of

grit kicked up by a dust devil into his eyes, now reddening slightly. Windblown sand can strip paint, carve rock, and like words, flay your skin raw.

‘You know Aladdin’s genie?’ Max said. ‘I’m just like him, except my oil lamp is made of bone. And there’s no one to let me out.’ He groped for the sweet packet but picked it up by the wrong end, so that the toffees tumbled out and scattered higgledy-piggledy like cobble across the floor.

As Laura bent down to help Max collect the toffees, they cracked heads. ‘Oof,’ she said, rubbing the sore spot, then as he followed suit, began to laugh. ‘Maybe you can release the genie that way.’

Relieved to see him smile, albeit tremulously, she knelt to collect the last toffees. Go home, Zach, she whispered to herself. Please. The wind slicked its wintry tongue along the canal’s bare skin, raising gooseflesh. A torn plastic bag, a sudden slither of ratblack, a patch of ice. In the distance the lonely chatter of an engine. Tomorrow Zach will have to face the prep team for a briefing; a new run is being planned. Tomorrow Zach will be warned by Slade that even an MVP cannot continue to flout the miscegenation code without ministerial dispensation; not that Slade minds personally, of course not, but despite its influence Fulgur can only do so much, and Mr Randall himself has given the magistrate a guarantee after the last little incident. Tomorrow they will hang a plastic bag filled with human shit from the handlebars of Zach’s motorbike.

Chilled, Laura slid her hands inside the sleeves of Zach’s jumper to his elbows, the fine hairs thrumming under the friction of her palms. His skin had a timbre all its own, a timbre which neither cold nor distance could deaden.

‘We’ve all got our voices, Max.’

With a guilty look Max spit out the ribbing of his crewneck.

‘You aren’t even listening to me,’ Laura said. Then it struck her what Max had been humming under his breath. ‘He’s played that to you?’ It’s ours, it’s private, how dare he.

‘Zach thinks a lot in music. Sometimes I can’t help overhearing.’

She studied him for a moment. ‘Now?’ she asked softly.

At first it seemed he wouldn't answer. Laura waited, her skin tingling as though warming from a near frozen state. Waited, because silence spoke in her loudest voice.

'Remember that silly rhyme I used to chant when I was little?' Max said at last. 'You know, before going to sleep?'

'How could I forget? *Bad man, don't talk. Bad man, don't stalk. Got my hawk. Got my hawk.* You didn't even know what it meant.'

'I never *told* you what it meant.'

She eyed him but a quick glance at her clock warned her that their mum was likely to appear at any moment. 'So?'

'So that's what Zach does. Plays the clarinet in his head.'

Sarcastically, 'To keep away the bad man?'

'Even smart people can be superstitious.' Max reached for his neckline again, then thought better of it. 'Laura, you don't understand how terrified he is that he's going to lose you.'

This time it was their dad at the door. A feeble grin to accompany a feeble joke. 'OK you two, bedtime. Doctor's orders.' He waved a hand at the toffee packet. 'And don't forget to brush your teeth.'

Her dad would have to do the telling.

*

At first Laura's mum remained solicitous, almost affectionate. There were special dishes, and special privileges-a TV brought into the bedroom, household chores suspended temporarily-and not a single overt reproach about Zach, though after a few days had passed, she began to wonder, with quite a girlish laugh, whether Owen was afraid of catching something.

'They've got enough kids as it is,' Laura snapped. 'Why don't you ask if you can adopt him?'

Her mum's brow knit and her lips stitched in a way that meant duck, but then she gathered her unravelling temper together-Laura could see the muscles under her mum's skin stretching into a forbearing smile, as though a Fulgur evaluation team had just come into the room.

In the weeks that followed, winter became oppressive, a race you knew was forfeit the instant you hit the water, a race that by everyone's reckoning, yours included, you ought to win. There's no explaining it. You're fit again. You're back in school. You're seeing Zach but still you swim through February as though the pool contained slushy, greying, slightly grainy snow, not water.

It happens to everyone, Janey claims. The better part of a race is in the mind.

Zach remained in his flat where Laura stayed the night at least once, sometimes twice a week. Her mum accepted this arrangement with distaste but no real opposition, evidently fearful of what Laura might do if permission were refused. As usual, her dad said little, but Laura noticed a certain gleam in his eyes when her mum asked about Laura's plans for the evening, a gleam which he hid by clearing the plates or examining the new Mancala board he'd bought; he had a large vintage collection, corresponded with aficionados worldwide, and had even written a book about regional varieties of the game, whose mathematical complexities he claimed rivalled any of the more popular mindsports.

At the end of the month Laura worked up her courage to attend one of Zach's meetings on her own, which was held after hours in a public library. The small room was crowded, mostly with couples who could afford babysitters for the evening and a meal afterwards in a restaurant with starched white tablecloths, serried ranks of cutlery, and a sommelier. Zach was far too coolheaded, too circumspect, to glare at her but it took every bit of her self-control not to get up and leave.

'Not tonight,' he said when she caught up with him by the water cooler. Slowly he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand while he glanced at his companions, one the medical student who had been at the first meeting she'd attended, the other the sort of twenty-something professional woman who made Laura feel scruffy and tongue-tied. Though discreet about their relationship, Zach had become more willing to hazard, occasionally, going out together in publica visit to an art exhibit he was keen to show her, an hour at a caf☞.
'Notoriety has its perks,' he'd said wryly. All the more shocking, then, when the

woman gave him a foxy smile and dragged the student out of earshot.

‘There’s some stuff I need to discuss with them,’ Zach said.

‘With them? Or with *her*?’

‘I don’t want you coming to these meetings.’

Two spots of colour flamed in Laura’s cheeks. ‘It’s you who doesn’t want to sleep with me, not the other way round.’

‘I’ll ring you tomorrow.’

And Laura was left staring after them in a rage. Did he think that she *wanted* to go to art galleries when all her mates were at concerts and clubs or just watching TV with a couple of packets of crisps, some beer, and a good long uncomplicated snog?

‘Think I don’t know you’re scared?’ she hissed. ‘Bloody terrified that it won’t be fairytale perfect?’

She whipped out her mobile and rang Owen.

Chapter 38

‘What does your name mean?’ Pani asks.

‘What a little pest you are!’ Zach says, caught off guard.

‘Names are important,’ Pani insists, unabashed. ‘They’re part of your soul.’

‘What makes you so sure I’ve got one?’

‘If you’ve left it somewhere, I’ll lend you a piece of mine.’

‘Not the tailpiece, I hope.’

Pani ducks his head, but not before Zach catches sight of the merriment in the boy’s eyes. Under other circumstances he’d have been the school daredevil, this lovely child. Zach leans forward and pantomimes a stitching movement in front of Pani’s lips. ‘I thought you didn’t want anyone to hear us.’

At Pani’s instigation the two of them have slipped away before the rest of the camp is fully awake, though they’ve been careful to avoid the communal room where, in a sleepy bustle, the aunties are beginning to prepare the morning meal. Weeks ago Pani and a few of the other lads excavated their own access route in a small storage annexe, the sort of enterprise that Zach remembers from his Foundation days. A narrow squeeze, this tunnel, and he refrains from suggesting that Uakuak is far too canny not to be aware of it. There’s probably a great deal the old hunter doesn’t reveal, particularly to his son.

Without a torch it’s slow going, even though Pani swears to know every centimetre of the terrain. They struggle against a brisk headwind, which is the very reason for harpoon practice before the hunt. ‘My father took his first seal when he was two years younger than me.’ By the time they cross an unforgiving stretch of icy washboard sastrugi to reach the edge of a polynya, Zach promises himself ten minutes alone with Angu.

Pani delicately probes the matte surface of the water with his harpoon tip, then kneels in scrutiny. ‘Ugurugizak-greasy ice.’ He clears a patch not much larger than a breathing hole, lowers a weighted sealskin bladder, and passes the line to

Zach. Rising and stepping back several metres, Pani readies his harpoon. As instructed, Zach waits for a self-determined interval before hauling up the target with a sharp jerk. The boy misses. They repeat the exercise. Again Pani misses, though not by much. Further attempts merely worsen Pani's aim, and he's unable to disguise his mounting frustration. After a while Zach calls a halt to walk about, clapping his hands together and stamping his feet. Despite caribou skin mitts and furlined parka-Uakuak insisted on outfitting Zach with as much 'proper' clothing as would fit-the cold is quick to penetrate his defences. Pani eyes him with a worried expression, the kind a much older lad might use towards a small brother with fever, a beloved dog who's just been injured.

'Are you OK?' Pani asks. 'Maybe we ought to go back.'

'A bit cold, that's all.'

Unconvinced, Pani shakes his head. 'Your face is too pale.' He'd of course know the signs of frostbite.

'Stop fussing, I'm fine. Let's give it one more try.'

Pani regards Zach a moment longer, then lays his harpoon aside and tugs at Zach's sleeve. 'Bend down,' he orders, and proceeds to blow on Zach's face till it begins to sting; on his eyes-his eyes, why hasn't he thought of that?

'Pani, do things sometimes looked blurred to you?'

'Not close up.'

'How close?'

'Arm's length, I guess.'

What kind of cruel joke is this? Program a young hunter to need glasses in a world where there's none to be had.

Pani roots in his pouch and hands Zach a piece of frozen blubber. 'Here, this will warm you.' Zach dislikes the fibrous consistency and especially the tracery of blood-the nutty flavour isn't actually unpleasant-but he chews on it as much to please Pani as to replenish his own energy while mulling the eyesight problem.

‘You haven’t answered me, Zach. About your name.’

Persistent little bugger. ‘It comes from an ancient language nobody speaks any more.’

‘Old like all good names. And it means?’

Zach’s thoughts retreat before the barrage of questions, though it’s hardly Pani’s fault that the Purists are lobbying for their so-called simonym legislation—a proposal to rename all simus in accordance with strict guidelines which would make traditional forenames illegal, even as nicknames. Still hotly debated, yet more and more likely to be passed. Zach rubs a fist across his tattoo. ‘Someday I’ll have it removed surgically,’ he told Laura. ‘No, don’t,’ she said. ‘I like it. It’s part of you, you mustn’t obliterate it.’

‘A shaman’s name, I reckon,’ Pani says.

‘No. It means *God remembers*.’

Persistent sly little bugger. One of these days somebody will knock that grin off his face if he’s not careful. When Pani bends to retrieve his harpoon, Zach scoops up a handful of snow.

‘You fight dirty,’ Pani says a while later in surrender.

Zach turns away, memory lying in ambush behind every hummock and every pressure ridge like a council bleb with his snowball filled with shot. Removing a mitt, Zach stoops to run his fingers through the layer of windblown snow. Though Pani says nothing, Zach can feel his disapproval. Ice crystals are far more complex than described in school geography, even their names suggest a lyrical complexity: *plates, stellars, columns, needles, spatial dendrites, capped columns, rimed, bullet rosettes, irregulars*. This love of taxonomy—how much does it explain, how much conceal of the mystery of ice? It’s staggering that no two crystals are identical when composed of nothing more than water, than a hexagonal latticework of H₂O molecules nucleated under supercooling. Again Zach scrapes up some of the astonishing stuff to study before it melts, as though he could somehow magnify the flakes to reveal their exquisite fingerprints.

‘Stop that!’ This time Pani feels obliged to interfere. Zach wipes his hand on a sleeve and slides it back into his mitt. The air is surprisingly dry, and between

them they empty the seal-flipper water pouch which Pani is carrying under his parka. Drinking is meant to help keep the skin from freezing; Zach wonders if any simus were included in the trials. Pani goes for a refill from a nearby drift-unmelted snow only increases your thirst, he warns-while Zach turns back to the polynya to pee. As a man it's wicked enough to lower his trousers at these temperatures; what must it be like for a woman! The splash of laughter, unmistakable, is disconcerting enough to spray his boots.

He swings round, hastily sorting out his unfinished business. Pani is staring out over the pack ice, and Zach can tell from his stance, a taut predatory stillness, that the boy is all attention. There's something he's trying to make out. If someone laughed, it wasn't Pani.

'What is it?' Zach calls. 'A seal?' The wind snatches away his words. Skirting a finger of the polynya to move closer, he hears a low grinding noise which brings him to a standstill-a primeval sound of rupture, he'll tell himself later, and the memory will become the septic forceps of sweat-drenched nightmare, tearing him from sleep. But now there's no time to think, and no time to take fright, no time to register the frantic movements of a figure emerging from the distant iglu, the scrambling and frenzied barking of the dogs, no time to hesitate or prognosticate or levitate while, in slowtime, the ice buckles and folds beneath his feet, folds and buckles and tears the caul of time in this thin cold place.

'Pani!' he cries, and leaps towards the boy.

And then there is only silence, and cold, and suffocating snow.

'He was born with a caul.' Slowly Zach raises his head against the snowy weight of memory, his mother's words overheard long ago, then explained and soon forgotten; frozen words, jarred loose by the quake.

The light is blue, so deep and pervasive a blue that at first he sees nothing but blue. He spits snows from his mouth, shakes his head, extracts the clumps jammed into the neckline of his parka and beginning to trickle down his back, then works himself to all fours. His own cap, oddly enough, still covers his ears though the hood has slipped back. If anything is broken, he's too numb (or concussed) to feel it. More confidently he scrambles to his feet. Above him stretch high, near-vertical walls of ice and a jagged shard of the sky. In the strange light it's difficult to guess how far he's fallen. 'Pani! Where are you? Are

you OK?’

‘Zach?’ Pani’s face appears at the edge of the crevasse and he begins to laugh with predictable resilience. ‘You look like a snowman.’

So they build those too.

‘Better covered in snow than blood,’ Zach mutters but pulls off a mitt to wipe his face and cap, then right his hood. ‘What was that? An earthquake?’

Pani shakes his head. ‘An ivu.’

Zach has read about them: ice shoves driven by wind and sea currents to ram violently and often precipitously onto shorefast ice, surging landwards like a tsunami; the terror of Arctic hunters.

‘I don’t think I can climb out of here on my own. You’ll have to get help.’

Pani wriggles further over the lip to look for himself.

‘Mind you don’t fall in,’ Zach says. ‘Then we’ll be in real trouble.’

‘I already am,’ Pani says, resigned to the hiding he’ll undoubtedly get from his father. ‘Move round to keep warm. I’ll hurry.’ He disappears from sight, then reappears with his food pouch. ‘Here, catch. There’s not a lot left, but eat it up.’

With Pani gone, Zach sets out to explore his icebox, though without much hope of finding anything to use in lieu of a ladder or ice screws. He checks for his pocket knife, whose presence is more comforting than utilitarian under the circumstances. If Pani had thought to throw down his panak, it might have been possible to cut and stack some blocks of snow—far too few, however, to reach above his head, not to mention ground level. Could he score holds into the ice working one-handed? No hunter in the Arctic, boy or man, relinquishes his most important tool without a compelling reason.

The floor inclines downwards and Zach treads carefully, fearing further instability or fissures concealed by snow. A programmer’s sjambok might have laid open the ice, so whiplike is the shape of the crevasse. He reaches its far end, only to be confronted with a narrow opening through which fresh light wells. It stains the air, the snow, *his skin* the way a death stains the living. To staunch its

course, he shuts his eyes, shuts them and listens. If you listen long enough, the ice will always speak. 'Laura,' he whispers.

In years to come he will cross the ice barrier many times; his *White Time* cycle will become the first cognoscens music to supplant the primitive interface; one of his granddaughters will marry Max's grandson, and *their* daughter will bear the true if nascent Levian gift; Pani, and Lev, and most of all Laura will never be far from him; such are the whispers crossing time's chill rift.

The walls hem his shoulders but soon widen enough for him to walk more quickly despite the gradient, though in fact he slows time and again to take in the eerie beauty of the formations. The subtle variations of colour—here, sapphire, and here, turquoise, and here, lapis lazuli, and everywhere thalassic hues as fluent as the ice itself—pale in comparison to the contours. At one point he has to sidle carefully round lethally sharp icicles suspended like cathedral organ pipes from the roof; at another he can't stop himself from giving a tentative prod to a bubblewrap encrustation surrounding a vertical cleft, curious if the hemispheres will pop (they don't); but mostly he simply gazes at the ice, whose chance carvings surpass any a master sculptor could tool. However frosty his breath, he doesn't feel particularly cold. At a delicate, glittering, frozen waterfall he halts to listen once more.

The ice is ancient, Lev says. It contains questions none of us can answer.

Underfoot the passage is slick, gradually steepening so that his body tilts forward slightly, but never once does he slip or wish for a set of crampons. If anything, it feels as though he's skating along virgin ice on immaterial blades; almost floating. Every now and then he can hear a distant creaking, but not the deep groans he's become used to above ground. When playing at his most concentrated, or composing, or making love, his sense of time is suspended, his consciousness supersaturated at the metastable boundary between now and forever; so too this journey. Yet at the least disruption water vapour can precipitate from supersaturation to freefall. A familiar sound begins to intrude, then to baffle him: how can there be running water down here?

How indeed, Zach? says Lev. How can there be light?

A sharp bend in the passage is screened by a projecting fold with the translucent grace of a Shoji panel in blue. Striations in the walls suggest enormous pressure,

as though one muscled glacier has slammed itself against another, stress fractures and torn ligaments requiring millennia to heal. The soothing flow of water is louder now, with a dreamlike quality that in itself is hypnotic. There is no stark simplicity to ice: even without temple and earthquake, this is an empire of beauty and brutality, of gratuitous light and darkness.

And still he is unprepared for the sight-the preposterous sight-which confronts him. He remembers his joy upon first discovering the cave. He remembers his renewed delight each time he's gone back. He remembers Laura's astonishment when she opened her eyes, and regardless of snakebite, regardless of police and parents, regardless of everything, her unabated wonder upon their return. The steam rising from the pool drifts on a current of air, thins for a glimpse of the water, thins and wafts upwards even as it regenerates itself in sleepy drifts. He takes a step forwards, then startles at the sound of wings.

Chapter 39

History favours the grandiose-the magnificent failures no less than the heroes. Zach would never imagine himself as either one, but by the time of his final run at Fulgur, he will have already become an urban legend; hated by many, idolised by many others. In time the explosive power of his grief will engage historians as well as alternate historians, a conundrum like an unending time loop: what if he hadn't undertaken the run? The moment you realise there are some things you can't alter is the moment you leave childhood behind; so they used to say. Of all his many bad decisions Zach will torment himself most savagely about yielding to Laura over the matter of the Rex. And yet the Rex will become the first cognoscens museum; almost, a shrine.

*

Tuesday. A morose afternoon, grey snow underfoot and the light already failing. Laura barely noticed the clutch of younger kids just beyond the school gates when she came out of the building, Owen at her side.

'What's that crossfuck doing back here?' Tim snarled, loud enough to carry. 'Sod this for a lark!'

'Too right, time to get rid of him for good,' came a loyal echo.

The group of wannabe bikers parted as Zach lowered the kickstand, tossed back his hair, swung his leg over the saddle, and advanced on Tim. Already other kids were drawing near like iron filings towards a magnet, though the lines of flux had yet to be fixed. Already the excited whispers were beginning. Everybody, it seemed, loved a fight.

Zach stopped within spitting range of Tim.

'Care to hit me again?' Zach asked.

'Zach-' Laura began.

He turned his gaze on her for the first time. 'Choose,' he said.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Right here, right now. In front of all your mates. Choose. I’m on my way to a meeting. You can come with me if you’re prepared to stand up on the podium and take sides, not hang about near the exit. Or you can return my key.’

‘You’ve got a key to his flat?’ Owen asked in disbelief.

Laura ignored Owen. ‘I thought you didn’t want me at your meetings.’

‘I’ve changed my mind.’ Zach gave her a humourless smile. ‘Or are only monkeys granted that prerogative?’

‘Don’t call us dirty names or I’ll shove them down your gob!’ Tim said hotly.

‘Tim, be quiet.’ Laura took a step towards Zach. ‘What’s wrong?’ she asked softly.

His gaze shifted inwards for a moment. Then with finality, ‘Choose.’

From the corner of her eye Laura caught the look on Olivia’s face, the same glazed look she’d seen her friend give a triple-dip chocolate fudge ice cream cone before taking her first lick. Laura knew Zach had slept with plenty of girls; had any one of them ever held him when he shivered? (Had he slept with *Olivia*?)

She took a deep breath, preparing herself for the icy plunge; this pool was unheated.

‘Hey, mulac, how come you got away? Word’s out on the net they blew up an entire classroom block in that fancypants school of yours.’ Everyone within range swivelled to stare at Cormac, an outer with more mouth than brains; and more swiffled than stone cold sane. All except Laura, who kept her eyes fastened on Zach. ‘Hidin’ in the bog like a nerdy turdy while your mates are screechin’ and bleedin’ and scrabblin’ for their body parts?’

A gust of wind blew Zach’s hair across his face. Her own eyes tearing in the cold, her cheeks stinging, Laura could see his gloved hands tremble slightly as he wrangled with it. She tugged off her gloves and woollen cap, plucked the elastic from her ponytail, and jammed her gloves into a pocket and her cap back

in place. One step, and she was at his side.

‘Bend down, you idiot. And where’s your helmet?’

As he ducked his head, no smile appeared on his face, no gleam of satisfaction. His hair felt alive in her hands, warmer than it should be in this weather, and sinuous as an electric reeling out of whiplash sound. You couldn’t hold it. It slipped from your grasp, and you reached for it again, this time your fingers tingling with the shock of naked, disembodied song as though skin were a tympanic membrane. The clarinet’s reedy voice sang in your inner ear till you thought it would shatter. *E. electricus* has no need of scales, its stacked electroplaques fire both to defend itself and to communicate; to choose a mate.

For a barless measure Laura held her breath, listening. Rare, the attended moment; rare, *the music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts*. Laura had never read T.S. Eliot, had in fact never read a single poem outside school till Zach handed her that first slim volume, but there are quartets which sing in the meanwhile of wordy time; quartets which electrify even the silt of neural dark.

‘Zach,’ she whispered, ‘I’ll always hear your music.’

With her hands still tangled in his hair he said, ‘You’re the reason I still hear it.’

Laura took a step backwards, a few strands of his hair caught in her fingers. She glanced round. Had they heard? The crowd was watchful, curious, greedy for some high drama. For a moment she was tempted to scream a delicious *fuck off* at them but caution clamped its hand round her vocal cords as she caught sight of Owen’s belligerent face; Tim’s ecstatic one—he was primed for a thunderous, preferably final drum roll.

‘Owen,’ she began in a conciliatory tone, ‘I’m sorry but-‘

Derek elbowed his way to the front. ‘Hey Tim, we’re not going to allow some auger cunt to treat Owen like this, are we now?’

There was an instant of silence. Laura’s heart began to thud, and if her anorak weren’t so thick, those nearby would have surely heard its ominous beat. She forced herself to face Owen. ‘Please.’ She swallowed, steadied her voice. ‘Owen, please. Don’t let them do this.’

Uncertainly he dropped his eyes, but Tim, prancing in place, grabbed Owen by the sleeve and jerked him towards Laura. 'Hold her, while Derek and I take care of the auger.' Owen shook off Tim's hand and looked round the waiting crowd; muttering, a growing buzz, open smirking, a whistle, some catcalls. One or two girls eyeing Owen speculatively. A few kids slinking away, but most jostling closer, the thin frail layer of snow beneath their stamping feet already trampled and muddied.

Owen's eyes returned to Laura. Expressionless, as though waiting to be filled.

'Owen,' she said in a rush, 'you've got it wrong. I'm not going anywhere with him. I felt sorry for him, that's all.' She turned to her friend. 'Livs-'

There was an ugly laugh from Derek. 'Damn right you're not going anywhere.' He made a crude gesture, then moved sideward to flank Zach from the left. 'Come on, Owen, let's not chickenshit any longer.'

What happened next happened so fast that most of the onlookers missed it, though they'd be talking about it for days afterwards, each version more elaborate than the last: 'Did you *see* when he cartwheeled in midair ...' 'A perfect butterfly kick ...' 'Three metres, he was practically *flying* ...'

'Behind me,' Zach ordered. Instinctively, Laura supposed, since there was a blur of movement and then Derek was sprawled on his back, winded, his nose bleeding, while Tim lay curled up in the slush, groaning, his face twisted in agony and his hands cupping his genitals.

Zach stood near the centre of the arena, midway between the fallen gladiators. For a long moment he was still, vapour feathering his nostrils. Then with a small but audible sigh, he raised his head and slowly scanned the crowd, 'Anyone else?' He spoke quietly, neither taunt nor triumph in his voice; rather, the kind of weary resignation which in a lesser person would border on arrogance. Nor was he out of breath.

Laura was astounded by how swiftly the mood of the crowd changed. The scattered whistles became admiring, interspersed with some cheering. Heads turned when someone yelled, 'That's showing them, Corvus!' Zach's *anyone else* kept their mouth shut, and while Owen repeatedly licked his lips, he didn't seem inclined to speak up for his mates. Laura almost felt sorry for him.

Without so much as a downwards glance Zach stepped over Tim and addressed Owen in an undertone. 'You're hanging around with the wrong sort, but you're not stupid and you're not vicious. And you've been misled. That's why you're not horizontal right this minute.' Zach cast a sidelong look at Laura. 'Laura owes you an apology.'

As Laura's cheeks reddened, Olivia pushed her way forwards. Smiling broadly, she reached out to lay a hand on Zach's forearm. He swayed out of reach. 'Haven't you noticed nobody touches me unless invited?' Acidly, with a nod towards the two still on the ground. 'I think your friends might appreciate a hand, however.'

If there had been hope of a reconciliation, it was now lost. The blood rushed to Olivia's head, providing her brain cells with plenty of oxygen to fuel her fury. 'You two deserve each other. I hope Zach here has panoramic vision. He's going to need it to watch his back.'

*

Zach answered Laura's questions in monosyllables, or not at all, as they made their way to his motorbike. While he fiddled with a saddlebag, Laura glanced back towards the milling kids, most of whom seemed reluctant to leave. Owen was crouching next to Derek, a wad of tissues staunching his nosebleed, but Tim had already risen to his feet. His eyes were fixed on Zach. There was no mistaking the look on his face, a look of malice so potent that Laura flinched and laid a hand on Zach's arm. He turned and saw the direction of her gaze.

'Don't worry about him,' he said. 'He's just a bully.'

It wasn't until they were underway, Laura's face pressed into the shelter of Zach's back against the bitter wind, that she recalled Tim's shooting medals.

*

A quarter of an hour later Zach took a sharp turn into a churchyard, slowed along the yew-lined walk until he found an opening, and brought the motorbike to a halt behind a knurled trunk wide enough to hide at least two vehicles. Like a stern monk, its girth of pleats and tucks mounted guard against desecration under a cowl of snowy white. And yet when Laura looked up, her eyes again watering in the cold, a face seemed to be smiling kindly at her. She blinked, and the

features dissolved into knobs and whorls of bark.

Zach switched off the engine. The sudden quiet was thicker than the clean, rimpled snow, and more suffocating. Laura waited, breathing with some effort.

‘What is it, Zach?’ she eventually asked, not quite sure why she was whispering.

For a long while he didn’t stir. The fight had drained her as well. She laid her head against his back and closed her eyes. School she would think about tomorrow.

‘Sorry, I need to get down for a couple of minutes.’ Zach’s voice roused her from the drowsy cloister of meandering half-thoughts. With a soft grumble she clambered from the saddle for him to let down the kickstand and dismount. She yawned, then stretched while he walked off towards the small graveyard. She was a bit surprised; he wasn’t usually shy about peeing in front of her.

The limbs above her creaked in a gust of wind, splattering her with loosened snow. By the time she brushed herself off, Zach had halted by a tombstone. She watched as he cleared the top of the rectangular slab. Watched as he traced his gloved fingers along what must be a carved epitaph. Watched as he pulled off her elastic, tipped back his head, and held his arms out cruciform, an angular scarecrow in a scrim of skirling snow. The headstones like godswept windrows the cold and dead of a winter dusk. His hair blowing wildly. A landscape empty of colour, empty of days; deathwrought.

She began to flounder towards him. He turned, and she could clearly hear the scream he wasn’t screaming. He came to meet her.

‘Please will you hold me.’ Almost begging.

She struggled to contain his shivering. He leaned into her while her rage at the world gave her strength to remain upright. How could you fight every fucking Tim? She slid her hands underneath Zach’s clothing and splayed her fingers against his back, its fretted ribboard sounding at her touch.

‘Nine,’ he whispered.

In counterpoint she leaned backwards to look into his face. And dug her fingers into his flesh to keep from falling.

‘Nine died straightaway in the blast,’ he said. ‘And fourteen, fifteen more are in critical condition.’

‘Oh god, Zach.’

‘I-‘ He stopped, took a shuddering breath. ‘I can’t-‘ All at once he gripped her head between his hands and rammed his mouth to hers so violently that their teeth clashed. She tasted blood, his or hers she couldn’t tell. In the space of a semibreve it was over, however, and he was tearing off his gloves and wiping her mouth and holding her temples, stumbling between apology and breathless rant, jumbling fact with guilt with barely swallowed sob.

‘Zach,’ she said. ‘Zach, listen. Please listen.’

In the end there was nothing to do but hold on and wait till he exhausted himself. Which he did like an engine running out of petrol, shuddering and gasping, then catching again with a last spurt of go, then dropping his head onto her shoulder and subsiding into silence, thoroughly spent.

She stroked his hair, stroked it with mute tenderness in every fingering; with solace in every ghost note. Patiently she stroked his hair, and stroked, and stroked.

After a long while Zach noticed that she was beginning to shiver. He lifted his head. ‘We ought to leave. You’re cold.’

‘Can’t you postpone the meeting? I don’t think it’s a good idea right now.’

‘There is no meeting.’

‘But you said-‘

‘I needed to know.’

They broke apart while she gazed into his rawsilk eyes, still shot with tears. With a garbled sound, half oath and half endearment, she grabbed his hair in both fists, pulled his head to her level, and kissed first one, then the other eye.

‘Now you know.’

His first smile this whole long afternoon.

‘When’s the next occasion to dandle wet nappies and duck rotten eggs?’ she asked.

‘Day after tomorrow.’

‘OK. It’ll give me a chance to prepare.’

He shook his head. ‘No.’

‘No what?’

‘You’re not going. I told you, it’s too dangerous.’

‘Frot that. From now on we do this together.’

‘No.’

She was close to hitting him. ‘Look, either I’m there with you, or I’m back fucking Owen after school. Which will it be?’

‘Is that some sort of ultimatum?’

‘You’re damn right it is. You force me to make a choice in front of practically the whole school. Now it’s your turn to choose. If you want this relationship to work, then you get to wash just as many dirty knickers as me.’

Now he laughed. ‘As long as I don’t have to wear the lacy ones.’

‘Only buy them.’

This time their lips, though chapped, cold, and slightly bruised, conversed fluently without exchanging a word.

A few minutes later, when Zach slid her jacket zip far enough down to speak to the tender chakra of her throat, she wondered what it would be like to make love in the snow, then remembered the ice sculptures during the Festival of Angels, and giggled.

‘Tickling you?’ he asked.

‘No, but let’s go see if the church is open.’

*

Open, but not particularly warm. Zach gave Laura a quizzical look when she worked the wooden bolt on the church door into place, but said nothing. They made their way slowly along the nave, where the age-darkened tiebeams and kingposts seemed low enough to clip Zach’s forehead, so that he ducked reflexively as they passed under the first support. It was a small stone church with a Norman tower, dignified but rather damp and bleak; and probably unlocked because there was nothing much to steal or vandalise. The most interesting feature was a monument slab in the floor, which Laura stopped to examine.

‘She was so small,’ Laura said. ‘Not much taller than a child.’

He crouched and ran a hand over the face of the incised effigy, delicately, as though he were caressing someone beloved. ‘I wonder if she died in childbirth. So many women did.’

‘Or from a fever.’

‘Maybe there was a young child who survived to mourn her. To remember her laughter, her voice when she sang him to sleep, her last-’

Laura looked up swiftly but he’d turned his head towards the pews to his left. She touched his sleeve but he rose and began to walk through the gloom, his footsteps too muffled to echo. Lives trod in memory to stone. After a moment she followed him.

They sat side by side beneath the altar, the only area of the church which was carpeted.

‘Where did you learn to fight like that?’ Laura asked.

‘At boarding school. There were a couple of incidents, so we were offered martial arts training.’

‘But the way you moved-that’s way beyond school sport.’

‘Simus have a physical edge, you know that. And I kept it up when I left, took a few private lessons.’

‘A few?’

He shrugged but despite the failing light she could see the amused gleam in his eyes.

‘It’s getting dark,’ she said.

‘Shall we go?’

‘That’s not what I meant.’ She rose to her knees, unzipped her jacket and tossed it aside, then tugged her jumper and camisole over her head. As usual she wasn’t wearing a bra.

‘Laura-‘

‘Don’t you think it’s time I got a share of that physical edge?’

‘Don’t talk like that.’

‘Owen fancies the way I talk just fine.’

Zach sprang to his feet. Rapidly he shed his jacket, his jumper. ‘Go on, finish undressing.’ His jeans. ‘You’re absolutely right. It’s time you got your share.’ His boxers.

Laura stood up and stared at him. She put a hand on the button of her jeans, hesitated, then dropped it again.

‘You think I’m a slut, don’t you?’

‘You don’t want to know what I think.’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Sure of that?’

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, trying not to shiver. ‘Yes,’ she whispered.

‘I think’-no, she was wrong, she didn’t, absolutely did *not* want to hear-‘I think you’re so confused that you don’t know the difference between fucking and making love. That you’re so desperate you can’t bear to be even a single day without a boyfriend, *any* boyfriend. That you’re so terrified that you swim in the hope of outracing whatever’s chasing you. That you’re so damaged you’ll sabotage anyone who tries to-’ He shuddered to a halt, whirled, and gripped the edge of the altar with both hands. His breathing tore jagged chunks from the air.

Laura closed her eyes but this time the hedges were near enough for her to feel their fetid breath on her neck, hear the snapping of their thorny teeth. Close to tears, she bent to fumble for her clothes. Get dressed. Walk to the road. Thumb a lift. ‘Tart,’ he’d call her just before he came. ‘Sweet cunt,’ his tongue beastly with slobber. Men will always give you a ride on their gearstick.

In the day’s last light she glimpsed the muscular cut of Zach’s buttocks, the bass clef of his spine bowed over the altar. Once, years ago, her mother had taken her backstage to meet the members of a visiting string quartet. Laura had been more interested in the sensuous shape of the cello, the mellow glow of its fine-grained wood, than the musicians. She’d surreptitiously stroked the cello’s sonorous belly when the adults hadn’t been looking-warm, satiny, alive. It had purred beneath her fingertips.

She crossed the short distance to the altar. Zach didn’t move until she bent and brushed her lips across the mossy hollow at the base of his spine, the small secluded spot where he loved to be kissed. At her touch he shivered, and Laura heard his breath catch.

‘You’re wrong,’ she said softly. ‘I’ve known the difference between making love and fucking for a long time. A very long time.’ She paused to swallow. ‘Since I was seven, to be exact.’

He straightened and turned to look at her but said nothing. His eyes were impossible to read; an impossible colour.

She licked her lips and glanced behind her. He was dead, why did she keep thinking he’d overhear, he’d somehow pounce on her?

Still without speaking Zach laid a warm hand on her cheek and ran his thumb along her jawline, which felt less like a caress than a warrant of safe passage. After a moment she was able to continue.

‘When I was seven Max was ill, seriously ill, and contagious. At least that’s what my parents said when they sent me to my aunt’s house for a few weeks.’ A hoarse whisper. ‘My mother’s younger sister Elizabeth. There was only my cousin Toby, a small baby then, and-’ She faltered, and dropped her eyes.

‘And?’

‘I need a drink of water.’

‘Laura, whatever happened, it wasn’t your fault.’

‘My uncle,’ she squeezed out. ‘He-he used to read to me at bedtime. And kiss me goodnight. And soon-’ Her voice trailed off. It was no use; she couldn’t tell him.

But of course Zach understood. He drew her into his arms and stroked her hair. His voice, however, would strip the flesh from a corpse. ‘I’ll kill him.’

He tightened his arms at the sound of her laugh. ‘Too late. He’s dead.’ She continued to laugh, which even to her own ears sounded like a rising scream. ‘Ssh, it’s OK,’ Zach murmured, ‘you’re safe now, ssh,’ over and over again as the hedges crept closer and she edged towards the place where they couldn’t reach where nobody could reach her and she’d be safe forever dark and safe and

‘Laura!’

She shuddered and began to hiccough.

‘It would have helped,’ he said when she rested her head on his chest, ‘if you’d have been able to confront him. To see him punished.’ He clasped her as if she might race off. ‘But you’re strong, good and strong.’

‘Swimming muscles.’

‘Stop that. You’ve got muscle where it counts.’

‘Now you’ll never want to sleep with me.’

He held her at arm’s length. ‘You’re mad. It’s all I can do to keep from jumping you about a million times a day.’

‘But now-‘

He gave her a small shake. ‘Now more than ever, you muggle.’

They stared at each other, Zach’s irises lustering the way they did when he was aroused. Snowflakes are fractals; so too DNA sequences and the distribution of galaxies in the universe. Only a fool could believe there was something *unnatural* about his wonderfully strange eyes.

‘Do you still think about them?’ she asked. ‘You know, the cottage.’

‘If you step in dogshit, you wash it off, not let it foul your soul.’ A harsh laugh. ‘Sometimes.’

‘Zach, if you can’t... I mean, if that’s the reason ... I know how ashamed men are but I don’t mind. Really. We’ll find a way to sort it.’

Now he gave a genuine laugh. ‘Dysfunction, you mean?’

‘It wouldn’t matter.’ She was quiet for a moment, then touched his lips with her fingertips. ‘I love-‘

‘No!’ Hurriedly he covered her mouth with the flat of his hand. ‘Don’t say it.’

She twisted away. ‘Why? Why don’t you want to hear?’

‘Words scare me. They’re so potent ... so *loud*. Mock if you like, but somehow I feel the universe is listening, just waiting for a chance to fuck us over.’ He couldn’t be that superstitious, could he? With all the girls he’d slept with, candyfloss declarations probably sickened him by now. Something of her thoughts must have shown on her face, because he added, ‘Isn’t it enough to know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you?’

And then, here in this cold and dark and dreary little church, it was suddenly easy, and the chancel floor served them very well, and no words could have been as articulate as the promise of this double concerto. Laura lost all sense of the dark backward and abysm of time once Zach was, at long last, inside her. A consummate musician, he understood the fierce and tender emotive depth of a *lento* movement rather than the dazzling flourish of *vivace*.

Afterwards they lay quietly together, wrapped in their shared warmth, until the chill from the stones beneath the threadbare carpet raised gooseflesh. Laura kissed his tattoo before getting up to dress.

‘You didn’t pretend?’ he asked.

‘No.’ She thought of Owen. ‘And I never will.’

‘Only music comes close to this kind of ecstasy.’

*

Laura awoke from a place so flooded in light that her eyes were swimming with tears, and they continued to tear as she squeezed them shut in order to sink back into dream. She’d been hang gliding towards a yolky sun low on the horizon, its rich, almost oily colour spreading across the griddled sea beneath her. Ten minutes. Or even five of that wondrous flight, before the shell of sleep cracked open on the blunt edge of morning, on greasy dishwater light, and school.

‘Tea?’ Zach said, a mug in each hand.

Fully dressed in cords and black jumper, though barefoot, he sat down on the bed, then set the mugs on the bedside cupboard when he saw the moisture on her cheeks.

‘A bad dream?’ he asked, his fingers gentle. She could hear the misgiving in his voice; the unvoiced question.

‘No regrets,’ she said.

He picked up his mug and sipped, then watched her through the rising steam.

‘Tears of happiness,’ she said. He said nothing, his lengthy silence drawing the words up like water from a deep well-cold, clean, unadulterated. ‘I’m so afraid, Zach. I don’t deserve to be this happy.’

‘That’s your uncle’s voice.’ He kissed her forehead, his hair falling forward to tickle her. Still damp, it smelled of the fruity shampoo she preferred to his usual sort. ‘Do you want some breakfast? I’ve got to leave soon.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Just gone six.’

‘Why so early?’

‘After breakfast, I’ll drop you off at school.’

Laura closed her eyes. ‘I don’t know ...’

‘It won’t get any easier. And you promised your dad.’

Laura squirmed to a sitting position and reached for her tea. She blew across the lip of the mug before drinking. ‘You don’t go any more.’

‘You know that’s different. Anyway, it’s not quite true.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve been attending some lectures at university.’ A diffident shrug which wouldn’t have fooled a three-year-old. ‘Some music and literature stuff. A philosophy class. And if there were a chance in hell of escaping Fulgur, I’d love to do a performing degree.’

‘A professional musician?’

‘Yeah, why not? If I’m going to dream, I may as well dream big.’ His grin reminded her of a child’s crayon drawing in which the mouth was lopsided, the colour smudged.

Setting her tea aside, she bent forward and took Zach’s mug from his hand, then parked it next to her own. She would never tire of his heartbeat, which always beat faster than her own, beat with passion, beat with pain, beat with a raffish syncopation, beat against the thin conduits of his veins, against the battens of his breast, beat against the traps and wings and secret catwalks of his life, against his velvety skin, beat right through the iron curtain of her shame, a lifebeat both wilful and terrifyingly fragile.

‘Getting up from bed this morning was one of the hardest things I’ve done,’ he said, feeling along her chain for the seal, which he liked to play with; foreplay

with, she thought with a private little giggle. She could feel his heartbeat quicken when she slid her hands under his jumper to the small of his back. 'Laura, they're preparing a new run. I have to be there.' But he didn't release her, and as her hands moved lower, his heart clapped wildly in its dark red plush-lined theatre just, it somehow seemed, just for her.

As he dragged off his jumper, her eyes fell on his tattoo. 'What kind of run? When are you finally going to stop hiding what you do at Fulgur?'

This time he drove recklessly, as though pursued. She couldn't help wondering if her questions had turned his lovemaking so feverish. 'I'm sorry,' he said, resting his head briefly on her shoulder. 'I was much too fast for you.'

'I told you I wouldn't pretend.'

He was quiet for a moment, then lifted himself away. Laura held her breath. Most lads-most *people*-prefer lies to an unwelcome truth; even Livs had never got full marks on this, Laura's own Secret Assessment Test.

'Then I'll just have to learn, won't I?' Nobody had tweaked her hair like that since primary. 'Now come and shower. If we hurry'-a crooked smile-'if I help you wash the hard-to-reach spots, we'll have just enough time for some toast and coffee. And for me to tell you about my job.'

*

Fabio waylaid Zach outside the laboratory. 'You're wanted upstairs.'

'Now?' Zach checked his wristwatch, a gift from Josh originally belonging to his father. Watches were crack again this year, but mostly the plastic models that changed colour with your mood (and often contained illicit mood-altering components). 'I'm scheduled for a neuro prerun in a couple of minutes. They get pantsy if sequencing time is lost.'

'They'll have to wait. It's the Big Boy himself.'

'Randall?' Zach asked incredulously.

'Comb your hair.'

Eyes laughing, Zach applied his fingers so that his hair became even more flyaway. 'Not unless he's invited the Almighty to the party.'

'Be careful what you wish for.' Fabio spoke grimly, without his usual air of amused tolerance. He gave Zach five minutes to inform, if not quite mollify Andy and his assistant, then hurried Zach through the corridors to the directors' lift.

'Since when do you have this kind of clearance?' Zach asked.

'Shut up, will you.'

*

'I'll speak with him alone.'

Fabio hesitated, unable to conceal his reluctance, but there was nothing he could do except send Zach a warning glance, nod suitably (deference not being part of his repertoire), and shut the door behind him. Randall indicated an austere leather sofa, before which stood a low, glass-topped table. Zach had expected a much more opulent office, not this white-on-white box, spacious of course, but bare of any decoration whatsoever, and perplexingly windowless. It reminded him of a marble or granite mausoleum, not a working space, and with a mausoleum's hush, except that the vaults of mighty princes were decidedly more ornate.

Zach took a seat and crossed his legs, then stared at the tabletop. Intricate patterns formed, dispersed, and reformed within the glass, varicoloured patterns which seemed oddly familiar though he couldn't quite place them. After a few seconds he leaned forward with a soft exclamation. He'd spent some time fooling around with a recently developed program which mapped music in multidimensional space. Unless Fulgur were hacking into his computer, there was no way that the first movement of Laura's sonata could be simulated by accident.

Randall came to stand on the opposite side of the table. 'Like my little toy?'

'What is it?'

'Think of your last fuck.'

Though not easily flustered, Zach coloured and set his lips. The table, however, immediately produced a very tolerable image of his bedroom, his bed, and this morning's interlude; of Laura. He slammed a fist against the glass, damaging it not one whit.

'How dare you spy on me! Where have you hidden the cameras?'

'Do you really imagine we need to use such crude surveillance methods?'

'Then how-?'

'Cybil, let's give him another demonstration.' Randall waved a hand towards the far wall, which became a transparent obsidian pane, rain-spattered. There must be a fierce storm, for the droplets were immediately fleeing like a panicked herd across the glass, fleeing and merging so that all illusion of singularity was lost. In the extreme quiet of the room, which Zach had assumed was soundproofed, it was disconcerting to hear the wind shrieking, the rain stampeding against the window.

The scene changed.

Two figures stood in silhouette before an open but modest fire, so that the rest of the room remained in shadow, though Zach could make out the corner of a worn chesterfield which reminded him of the one in his childhood home-the same cracked brown leather, the same missing buttons. This time the glass was crizzled, as though the window had become pitted by the storm; the tableau slightly blurred like a memory. Not the voices, however.

It's OK, I've arranged it, the man said.

When will we be able to leave?

Tomorrow after dark. We daren't wait any longer.

And you're sure nobody knows? the woman asked.

We have to trust her. The man threw something into the fire, which flared for an instant. There's no other way to keep them from taking Zach away from us.

Zach cried out and rose to his feet, knocking his right shin sharply against the

edge of the table. His eyes filled with tears. By the time he could see clearly again, the wall had reverted to the mute indifference of stone.

‘My parents,’ Zach managed.

Randall dressed conservatively, but there was always one element of attire which slyly proclaimed him to be above the dictates of corporate fashion. When he shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it onto a nearby chair, Zach caught a glimpse of embroidered in red on the lining; not even Randall was egomaniacal enough to pair it with an A.

‘We’re not monsters, Zach. They were foolish and short-sighted, your mother and father. They tried to gamble with your life.’

Zach strode to within a few centimetres of Randall’s face.

‘What’s going on?’ His voice shook. ‘*Where the fuck did you get that from?*’

Randall hadn’t risen to his position by cowering, nor by yielding to threats, implicit or otherwise. ‘Sit down. Or this conversation is at an end.’

Suppressing an urge to bounce Randall’s head off his pristine wall, Zach moved back to the sofa but remained standing. He gazed down at the tabletop. For whatever reason, Randall didn’t repeat his request for Zach to sit.

‘You’d like a dispensation, wouldn’t you?’

‘I haven’t thought about it.’

‘No? Well, she’s not bad-looking, and with all that swimming I bet she’s in terrific shape. Has she done any skiing, do you know?’

Zach kept his eyes fixed on the table.

‘Or perhaps I should ask Edward’s lad? Owen, I believe his name is. He doesn’t seem to mind sharing.’

‘I hear there’s even a club for it.’

For a moment Randall looked disconcerted. ‘That many?’

‘Auger baiting. The new executive sport.’ Zach gave Randall a tight smile. ‘Now what do you want in exchange for a permit?’

Randall cocked a hand into a trouser pocket, his own smile bestowed like loose change on a busker. ‘I’m relieved that it won’t be necessary to give you a tedious lecture in microeconomics.’

‘You haven’t answered my question.’

‘We know there are other simus like Cybil here. An enterprising lad like you ought to be able to find one or two of them for us.’

On the surface of the table, somewhat to the left of centre, a splotch of red colour appeared-almost the shape of a familiar face-followed in seconds by others. Swiftly they spread and ran together, as if the glass were bleeding from a welter of internal ulcerations. Within a short time there was only redness. In the same way, an ugly thought rapidly haemorrhages from a pinprick suspicion into a full-fledged stroke of rage.

‘This thing’-Zach snatched a breath-‘this *toy*, you called it, it’s alive?’

‘A hybrid, using certain cognoscens neural structures.’

‘Whose?’

‘Someone you wouldn’t have known, he died a while ago. A shame, really. Mateus was a promising lad, very promising indeed. In many ways you remind me of him.’ A lightpad on Randall’s desk flashed, but after a glance he ignored it. ‘Except, of course, that you don’t have his special talent. The ability to read minds is exceedingly rare. I hardly need tell you how valuable it would be-how *appreciative* we would be-if our neuros had the opportunity to work together with another such simu.’

For all his finesse, Randall had a great deal in common with a simian like Tim. This man was running Fulgur?

‘Are you saying that Cybil reads my mind?’

‘To a certain extent. She’s only a prototype, you see, and not as stable as we’d like, though quite good with infantile and repressed memories. With trauma.

Which means that some of our current theories about the workings of episodic memory-both encoding and retrieval-are unsound, or at least incomplete. The clinical applications alone would be invaluable.'

The table had reverted to pattern making, silvery hexagonal lattices rotating through a blue-tinged space. Zach circled it, grateful for the simple blocking techniques Max had taught him, but wary enough to keep an eye, surreptitiously he hoped, on any changes in the glass. If there were anything of Mateus left in this Cybil, she'd never betray a fellow simu.

The lattices began to shift through the colours of the spectrum. He almost missed it, the swift subtle play of light beyond the sapiens range.

'How did he die?' Zach asked. And thought, orange.

All the lines became orange.

'Who?'

Violet, please. An indisputable display of violet appeared.

'Don't play the fool,' Zach said, striving to keep a smile from his face. 'Mateus, of course.'

With an athlete's speed Randall crossed the room. The slap cracked like thin ice under a skater's blades.

'I see we need to tighten discipline at the Foundation,' he said.

Zach held himself still, refusing even to lift a hand to his cheek. There would be no apology. Let the bastard throw him out, the dispensation was little more than a pretext anyway.

Cybil, somehow I'll find a way to help you. But you mustn't tell them about Max. Promise me you won't. Promise me with green.

'It was suicide, you know.' Randall flicked a glance at the tabletop, now displaying a spring meadow green with promise, and removed a coin from his pocket. He curled his hand into a loose fist, held the coin between his thumb and forefinger, and with a bland smile, walked it across the back of his hand along

the first phalanx of his fingers. In an unbroken manoeuvre the coin travelled the underside of his hand and returned to the starting position. He repeated the trick several times, watching Zach the entire time. 'It takes a bit of practice. Care to try?'

When Zach shook his head, Randall flipped the coin into the air, where it seemed to hang for a moment, winking like a miniature beacon, before beginning its descent into his outstretched palm. He caught it deftly and tucked it back into his pocket.

'I've never heard of a simu killing himself,' Zach said. 'It must have been kept very quiet.'

A metallic gleam lit Randall's eyes. 'Of course. Surely you understand the need for circumspection. Suicide is always distressing, particularly when the victim is young. Think how Laura's parents would feel under similar circumstances.' Nothing so boorish as a smile, but the gleam intensified. 'Still, if she succumbed to a rare virus like the recent one, her father, outstanding medical man that he is, would be racked just as much by guilt. Don't you agree?'

*

In the lift Zach rested the back of his head against a wall panel and closed his eyes without keying in a destination. Ligeti's difficult, anguished second bagatelle. *Lamentoso*. Seven bars in, his inner voice ran down like a rusting clockwork mechanism. He straightened and stared at the touchpad. Music had been his home, and his refuge, as long as he could remember. Now it threatened to become an empty box, bereft of all but time's ratchet and clack.

Unlike Randall, Zach didn't keep small change at the ready in his pocket. After entering the code for the lift to return him to the laboratory floor, he withdrew three coins from his wallet and amused himself with a simultaneous three-coin walk, first with his right hand, then with his left. Randall was right about one thing: like music, it required practice.

*

The lift door slid shut before Zach realised that he'd got off at the wrong floor. Instead of the corridor which to the left led to a series of small offices for the neurotechs, a kitchen and conference room, a bioelectronics workshop, and

Litchfield's own suite (his theatre and clean rooms, however, were in another wing), and to the right, the double security doors barricading the cognoscens interface unit, Zach found himself in a cramped, featureless vestibule. The walls were white, the floor covered in black coin-patterned PVC, and the air smelled faintly antiseptic, reminiscent of the chlorine which clung to Laura's hair when she rinsed it hastily after training. Oddest of all, another lift graced the opposite wall not two metres away. Despite his curiosity, he gave what amounted to an inner shrug and turned to summon his own lift again. After his session with Randall he had no desire to be caught wandering where he didn't belong, and in any case, Andy would be just about ready to vaporise a few billion of Zach's dendrites by now.

At first he wasn't alarmed not to see a call button for the lift. The facility engineers were always installing some sort of new gadgetry. He passed his hand in front of the door, then along the metal surround, then up and down the adjacent walls. He stepped back and approached again. Nonplussed, he tried enunciating a command. Politely.

'What the fuck?' he finally muttered.

The security centre would know his whereabouts; everybody was tracked. Why weren't they responding? There were never fewer than three people on duty, despite near-perfect algorithms for authentication.

The door behind him opened.

'Right, mates,' he said. 'If you prefer the other one.'

There was no operating panel. 'Third floor,' he said. The door shut almost noiselessly. Later he would berate himself for not being observant. And much later he would come to pinpoint this, albeit arbitrarily, as the moment when he left off expecting to disentangle the enigmatic-the utterly glorious-polyphony of life; when reason became counterpoint to the cantus firmus of his song of songs. No lift, whether at the Fulgur campus or elsewhere, lacked an alarm and emergency controls, and even a position indicator was required by city by-law. Almost at once, however, he noticed that the cab was descending. His luck, they'd stop at every sub-basement to hell, and every floor and mezzanine on the way back up.

'Listen, I'm late enough as it is. Can't you take me straight to CI?'

The lift halted. 'You are about to enter a restricted zone. When the door opens, please remain still during the security check.'

'There's some mistake. I want the third floor.' The situation was so singular, however, that he found his curiosity mounting. Randall would just have to make it good with Andy. Whatever the CEO had in store, it wasn't likely to be dangerous, not at this point, not till he got his money's worth.

The door slid back to reveal an impervious blue light, dense and clouded at first like a wall of ice, then clearing for a moment so that the only barrier to the cave beyond, its pool and bats and glittering flowstone, was his fear.

'Cybil?' he whispered.

In response the lift door shut in his face. 'Entry denied at this time. Please see Dr Zhou for clearance.'

'That's impossible.' he said. 'Zhou's dead.'

He could feel the lift begin to ascend.

'No, wait. Stop, please stop! Let me have one more look.'

But there was no answer; no voice, except the lyre of his own disordered, yearning thoughts that wander through eternity to return, narrowly, to the lived moment.

Chapter 40

Pitched echoes descant above the sound of water. Zach follows the flight of two- no, three-small silvery bats, wondering how the course of history would have differed if humans had been able to comprehend the language of animals. Less bloodshed or more? Sapiens have always preferred to rid themselves of inconvenient voices.

He studies the cave at length, then moves towards the pool. The light reminds him of *l'heure bleue* just before nightfall, a favourite of photographers and filmmakers. In summer it's the time when flowers release their heaviest opiate, but it's also an hour of uncertain visibility, particularly for simus whose aconal photoreceptors and subsidiary optic nerve play havoc with, temporarily, their superb eyesight; the hour in fact of his only motorbike accident, when he skidded to miss a girl on a bicycle, narrowly, dislocating a shoulder and breaking his collarbone. No one would have cared that her lights weren't working, himself least of all.

Even with blindsight he would sense if Laura were here, which doesn't stop him from peering behind the toadstools for a discarded towel, a pair of jeans, her trainers or socks. The yellow rubber ducky with motorcycle helmet she'd given him for a razz only proves that his memory is still intact. He picks it up, squeezes it, recalls how she laughed at the expression on his face at the awful squawk: 'An authentic biker's mating call, they swore at the shop. Or my money back.' The cave is warm, and he removes his mitts and cap and then his parka. When he reaches for her pendant, hunger swells within him, within and against and despite, its pressure compelling. Why does he always have to tremble?

After the funeral he bought himself a small handbuilt raku pot, misshapen and costly, whose torn mouth gives it the appearance of having been pounced on and chewed by a dog at the leather-hard stage. Most people would dismiss the pot as worthless, unable to see that its fragile beauty rests in its very imperfection, not least the contrast between the lustrous metallic blues and the crazing lines typical of raku firing, which is so unpredictable that pieces may explode from thermal stress.

His skin feels hot underneath the chain, on the verge of crackling. And still he is shivering, always shivering: shivering when her fingers played over the

touchpad of his tattoo, as if entering a code to unlock his innermost self; shivering when she kissed his back, shivering when she brushed his hair, brushed and plaited it. In those moments he heard nothing, not even the gun which his neurons fire whenever there is silence. Semen is the body's own morphine for the disease of time.

On impulse he digs out his pocket knife, tests its edge, and whets it on the nearest rock, then loosens his hair from its leather tie. He lops off the plait of white and black hairs, and twists it round the seal, then drops the whole back over his head. It may be that Fulgur is arrogating his memory to its incomprehensible, and probably reprehensible, ends. It may be that Lev is merely some fancy bit of programming, determined from the very outset of the run. It may be that quantum entanglement of mind is an illusion, and Laura will no more hear him than the god to which her grandfather prays. Zach shuts his eyes and hugs his ribs; his shivering is getting worse.

'Laura,' he whispers, 'just this once, that's all I ask.'

Who is he fooling?

To fail now might well mean to fail forever. He passes his gaze one last time over the interior of the cave, over the objects he's furnished it with, as if to fix their thingness in his mind, then closes his eyes, brings his hands into position, licks his lips, and draws upon tactile memory. If every formation and every candle and every detail is perfect, why not this? Don't speak, he tells himself, afraid of the incantatory power of words themselves, which make and unmake in equal measure. Not in some primitive magical sense, but as interface between the amorphous white stuff out there and stellar dendrites or capped columns or needles, the beautiful yet impossibly fragile snow crystals of science, called forth only to melt away at the touch of your tongue.

No, don't speak, Zach. And above all, don't look. It may be that, like Eurydice, Laura belongs to the dark.

His embouchure forms automatically, his right thumb tenses to support the clarinet's weight, his other fingers flex above the keys, the reed welcomes his lower lip. Into his mind comes the memory of their second visit to the cave-his last, he'd sworn not to go back and transform it into a shrine to perfect happiness, perfect harmony, to that one perfect glissando, as fluid as the milky

flowlight from candle and wall and pool which drips from Laura's skin when she clambers out and comes to him and lays her fingers on his wrist so that he stops playing but not the Gershwin which plays on and on her lips and will forever play in the cave of memory.

which

'Laura.'

darkens as if

'I've dreamt of you.' She lifts his hands one by one and kisses them gently. 'Angatkuqpak. Shaman of shamans.'

the candles are guttering

Unerringly she finds his tattoo, then her tongue meets his, and her forefinger strums the thickened vein in his cock.

in a chill draught

A low moan, and he opens his eyes to drag himself back from that cyanic precipice, that rhapsody in blue which is lethal to his concentration. At once the music is gone, above the sound of his harsh breathing there's only the keening of the wind, the crack and grate of the distempered ice. Lev is wrong, Zach can't do it on his own. Better the silence of the deaf than this strident lament: he blocks his ears but the tinnitus of his renegade blood merely amplifies his agitation. Time is an echo chamber with walls of bone. Which tone in a piece of music- which chord, which rest-is *now*? His mind is haemorrhaging ambient dread, is there internal bleeding oh god breathe there's so much noise just breathe just

With a cry Zach snatches up his parka. Shuddering with cold, he yanks it over his head. 'I *told* you to stay put,' he rages, jamming his arms into the sleeves. 'You bloody idiot. Why the fuck couldn't you listen?' He seizes the discarded knife and grabs a fistful of hair, wrenches it taut enough for his eyes to water, and hacks it off; another hank, then another. 'Damn you!' Slashing faster, he nicks a finger and howls. Moments later, he cuts himself again. Without bothering to staunch the blood he drops to his knees, letting the knife fall from his fingers, and begins to sob, a sound as raw as dying.

Except that death is inaudible, its diapason beyond even the cognoscens range.

Chapter 41

Obediently, the lift halted at the third floor. Zach stepped into the corridor, his eyes travelling from the familiar security doors to the ID card in his hand to the lens of the prominent surveillance camera. Mockery will get you nowhere, Jiao would say in a voice whose chilly menace had hovered over their days like a winged omen. Zach saluted the camera with a military gesture, then gave a tired laugh. Nowhere was exactly where he'd like to be.

'Where the fuck have you been?' Andy snarled as soon as Zach entered the prerun room.

'Randall insisted on seeing me.' Zach barely acknowledged Fabio, who ought to have explained. There was no other reason for his presence.

'I'll fetch Charles.' Andy limped away without a glance at his console, a sure sign his departure had been pre-arranged.

And sure enough, Fabio plunged into a rapidhit cross-examination which only ceased when Zach sank down onto a bench adjoining the neural imager and gripped his head as though it were too heavy to support without manual assistance. In the silence which followed, the carrion past smelled so sharp and rank that it brought tears to his eyes. 'Knackered,' he said in response to Fabio's frown. In a few days it would be Ben's birthday. Without a grave there could be no graveyard lilacs to sweeten the spring. The owl's all rained and broken, Zach, can't you fix it? Not an owl, a crow, but don't touch, it's full of germs, must have been a cat.

This would be a good moment for a footnote, to explain how whole futures came into being in Zach's struggle for compass. Qliworlds quantise even as they are born-or *before*, to translate Wu's third theorem into a simple conjunction. In one Zach will have chosen Laura, in another loneliness. The mind is a reverberant space like the great cathedrals: time hewn from mute bone. Wu, of course, will not turn out to be wrong, merely one of the great sapiens visionaries. Confucius' teachings are still contemplated, Shakespeare's plays performed, Gauss' proofs admired, Darwin's works read, Bach's cantatas sung. Levian causality admits of an infinite variety of organised complexity, unlike fledgling cosmologies. Time, Lev will tell Zach, is the strangest, the subtlest, the most beautiful metaphor of

all.

‘Perhaps it’s time to move to the next level,’ Fabio said.

‘What?’ Zach lifted his head, but his eyes were remote, his face like a clock which has stopped.

‘We’re ready for serious networking,’ Fabio said. ‘A lot of people are starting to watch you very closely. And a lot like what they see—the power to inspire, the fierceness, the foresight and ideas and imagination, the *mystique*. This is it, this is the now-or-never moment to sell you big time as the newest new thing. Everyone is sick to death of the old political models. You’re hot, Zach, you’re the startup in someone’s garage that’s going to blow the competition away. I’ve been negotiating with Bender, I think he’ll be willing to take a leave of absence from Netwind if you talk to him, he’s viewed a couple of your meetings but he wants a one-on-one to assess things for himself. Not just the wow-factor, but your smarts and guts and staying power. And mostly whether he can trust you.’

‘Bender’s an entrepreneur, someone who’s built a mammoth social networking site. Sure he’s a wizard, but what does he know about politics?’

‘You’ve got to be kidding me. No funds, no politics. You can’t power a movement, any kind of movement, without cold, hard cash—and plenty of it. Bender understands money and he understands the new media. We’re going to do grassroots the Netwind way: online, friend to friend to friend, quid by quid.’

‘So now I’m viral?’ Enough of a smile to suggest Fabio’s campaign was working.

‘Not every virus is pernicious.’

Zach glanced down at his hands. Pernicious ... vicious ... malicious. What was it about certain word clusters? Did they carry their own sort of virus? Seditious Janus. Ambitious Fabio. Capricious universe. And he himself the most noxious of all, tainted, infectious, contaminating anyone he’d ever cared about. And Laura called him *superstitious*?

‘All right,’ he said. ‘But I need your help first.’

Fabio held up a warning hand while he adjusted his wrist.

*

After a terse summary of what had happened in Randall's office, Zach subsided into silence for a moment, then did what he'd promised never to do. Better to risk Max's ire (and trust) than his life.

The room was too small for pacing. On Fabio's second pass in front of the console, he knocked over a bottle of water, which by some miracle of engineering failed to shatter, though it fizzed and sprayed a small amount on its descent. Zach might have snatched it up to hurl at the neural imager, the soundproofed walls, the past; Fabio nudged the bottle with his foot and watched it roll under the washbasin. And watched it. When he finally retrieved it, he made an attempt to twist off the cap. An offer of help would be no help at all. Zach waited till Fabio positioned the bottle carefully on the ledge above the basin, turned on the tap, and ignoring the plastic tumbler, drank from a cupped hand, then plunged his head under the gush of cold water. Ten seconds, twenty. Zach rose and fetched the towel from the rack, laid a hand on Fabio's shoulder, waited again. By the time Fabio was ready to dry his hair, any sign of anguish had been wiped from his cheeks; not from the depths of his eyes, however.

'A telepath like Mateus?' Fabio asked.

'Yeah.' Zach reached for the towel. 'Bend down.' Zach began to rub Fabio's head as if he were a child, were Max. With a muffled sound-half sob, half bitter oath-Fabio groped for Zach, and they embraced. Fabio dug his fingers into Zach's back. Clumsy at offering comfort, Zach found himself muttering a few words, stroking a shoulder blade, an upper arm, allowing himself to be clutched in bleak need. The first kiss came as a surprise; the second, coupled with dismay at Fabio's erection. It was rare for Zach to be at a loss in an encounter. Why hadn't he seen it coming?

Gently, as gently as he could, Zach disengaged himself. 'Fabio, listen, I'm sorry, but I can't ...'

'Haven't you ever made love to a man?'

'Of course I have, but this is different.' He tried to smile. 'You know how messy sex can get when people work together. And imagine what it would be mean if the media-if the *Purists*-got hold of it.'

Hair still dripping slightly, Fabio stooped for the towel. He took his time over the job, emerging apparently unflustered, and unembarrassed, from its rough folds. 'It's her, isn't it?'

Zach shrugged.

'What the hell do you see in her? OK, she's a looker despite those swimmer's shoulders, and I admit she's got a certain Lolita charm, but you're a cognoscens, you're headed for great things, you're *Corvus*, for godsake.'

'That's enough.'

Fabio plucked the towel from his shoulders, straightening them as though fit to bear the weight of mightiest monarchies. 'One day a wife may be a political necessity, but it's hardly a priority at this stage. And when, she'll have to be an asset, not a liability. You can't possibly imagine that Laura'-the towel, tossed aside, slid from the bench to the floor-'that *Laura* ... come on, you're worth fifty, a hundred of-'

'That's fucking enough, I said!'

'OK, OK.' Fabio held up his hands, candour plainly mistimed. 'Forget it, my mistake. I'm not being fair, I don't really know her, I apologise. The stuff about my brother threw me, I wasn't thinking straight. Now let's figure out what to do about Max.'

They didn't have much time; Andy would have to hide every minute under a steganography payload: time is data. Their discussion, stilted at first, each prickly, each weary, circled round and about, the ice thin where Laura was concerned, the water icy. Neither of them believed Randall was bluffing. Neither expected he would be patient. Neither could guess exactly what he knew, but it was imperative (or at least good sense) to assume he knew *something*. Neither thought a scandal-supposing one could be staged-would stop the Fulgur juggernaut for long; there was a hungry, clamouring queue of Randalls to replace him. And Zach was adamant. 'No way I'll betray a cognoscens. If it comes to it, I'll go underground first.' But even while speaking, he pictured Laura as a pawn or hostage; alternately, Laura spending her life on the run. 'And I've already decided this is my last run.'

'We're not ready to break with Fulgur,' Fabio said. 'Not yet, anyway. We need

their backing, their money. And then there's the little matter of your serum. *Litchfield's* serum.'

'Serum or no serum, I'm through with their damned Fulgrid and their damned uploads. Let them assign me to the kitchens. Better still, bog duty. Nothing like the sound of flushing water to refresh your mind.'

'Don't worry, Litchfield will add a mind-altering substance to your serum. Or strychnine.'

'No luck with another source?'

'No.'

'So you think we ought to tell him?' Zach asked.

'That wimp? No way he'd risk his own scrawny neck.'

'Come on, they're his kids.'

'And his neck. He's so risk-averse I bet he wears a life jacket in two centimetres of bathwater,' Fabio said. 'Tepid bathwater.'

'The quiet ones can fool you. Look how long he's kept Max's secret, that's not the actions of a coward.'

Fabio shook his head, on guard not to capitulate too quickly.

Zach, however, was already convinced. 'He loves his kids. With the right approach, he'll help, I'm sure of it. Any decent lab will be able to produce enough serum once they're given the molecular portfolio. It would have happened long ago if Litchfield hadn't engineered a self-mutating drug.'

'So what if he's Nobel Prize material. I've studied his profile. Don't take offence, but just because he's Laura's dad ... I mean, it's understandable that you're trying-'

'Nonsense! Trust me on this one. He'll do it.'

'I don't know ... maybe ... You're right, though, that if we can break Fulgur's

stranglehold on the serum, we'll be in a much better position to negotiate. And Litchfield's undoubtedly easier to manipulate than Randall.' He glanced at his wrist to conceal his smile. A simple strategy, but it worked almost every time. People love to persuade you of your own ideas.

'You've just given me an idea,' Fabio said.

'What?'

'There *might* be a way to ensure Litchfield's cooperation. Look, I need some time to think it through, do a bit of checking. Not to mention that they'll have Andy transferred to sanitation-on one of the outstations-if you don't start your prerun damn soon.' It was Fabio's sang-froid, so at odds with his fiery Latino looks, which unsettled most of his colleagues. They could never quite tell when he was making fun of them. 'In fact, I'll be obliged to do it myself.'

'Don't worry about Andy. He was hacking before he was out of nappies. From what I gather, he rewrites the stego manual every couple of months.'

'Fulgur issues a manual?'

Zach laughed. 'It's so well concealed that only he can find it.'

*

Her neck stiff from holding it high the entire day, Laura let herself into the house. Max had loped off to football practice, and she could hear the sound of her mum's viola from the spare room. She needed to collect some of her gear before the meeting, and then do a bit of shopping. It worried her how little Zach had been eating. In sleep his hipbones looked as if they'd tear through his skin at a touch, and though he was beautifully muscled in that understated simu way, an image of the Tollund Man from when they'd done the Heaney poem in school had insinuated itself last night into her consciousness and wouldn't be dislodged. Something like two thousand years ago he died, hanged in sacrifice to the old gods. It was the eerie tranquillity of his face which haunted her, its distinctive features preserved by the bog as though he'd lain down to sleep only yesterday; how he'd apparently accepted his fate without a struggle.

In the kitchen she located an old lasagne pan which her mum used for extra wooden spoons and eggwhisks and skewers, for all the odd bits and pieces which

like your tarnished bangles and tattered friendship bracelets you didn't need any longer but were loathe to discard. As she was filling some dried oregano into a plastic container, the music broke off, and a few minutes later her mother appeared in the doorway.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'I'm going to make a lasagne.'

Her mother's eyes rested on the container in Laura's hands. 'Haven't you looked in the oven? I've already prepared a fish flan.'

Laura lowered her eyes and shrugged. There was a short silence.

'It's for him, isn't it?'

Laura propped the packet of oregano against the pot of early daffodils on the kitchen table but it fell over, scattering most of its contents across the clean surface. She felt herself tense, but instead of raising her voice her mum turned and left the room. Quickly Laura swept the dried herb into a small mound with the edge of her hand, then went to the cupboard for a storage jar.

'Leave it, I'll do it.' Her mother handed her a brown envelope the size of a paperback book.

'What's this?'

'Open it.'

While her mother tidied the tabletop, wiping it with spasmodic strokes of a J-cloth, missing some spots and almost scouring others, Laura opened the flap and extracted a sheaf of folded newspaper cuttings and internet printouts. After skimming the topmost item, she pulled out a chair, sat down, and spread the sheets out in front of her. They all were yellowing and brittle. They all dated from the same period eight years ago. They all concerned her uncle's death and the subsequent police investigation. Her mother went to the sink, rinsed the cloth and draped it over the spout, then stood watching Laura with an intent look, her hands propped on the worktop behind her as if for support.

'I don't get it. Why should this old stuff interest me?'

‘How serious are you about this simu?’

‘He’s got a name, you know.’

Her mother didn’t take her eyes from Laura’s face, a momentary knitting of her brow the only indication of her irritation. Laura picked up the clipping which, in addition to a picture of the wrecked car being winched from the water, showed a ‘before’ shot of her uncle carrying Toby on a summer outing. They were at the zoo, a pair of giraffes in the background, and Laura supposed that Aunt Elizabeth had taken the photo. Toby was wearing a floppy hat, his nose was smeared with zinc paste, and he clutched a dripping ice cream cone in one chubby fist.

‘From the family album, I daresay. How sweet.’

‘Sometimes no father is better than the wrong sort.’

To cover her surprise at such an incongruous-even for her mother, such an *unfeeling*-remark, Laura returned the cutting to the table and picked up another, this one about the autopsy.

‘A drunkard,’ Laura said in disgust.

‘Very convenient, if I may say so.’

At this Laura gave up all pretence of disinterest. She pushed back her chair, rose, and went to stand directly in front of her mother.

‘When did you manage to get so tall?’ her mother asked.

‘I haven’t been a little girl for a long time now.’

‘Then don’t make a child’s mistake.’

‘If you mean Zach-‘

Her mother interrupted. ‘I *mean* that you mustn’t chose someone for all the wrong reasons. Unnecessary reasons. Like protest. Like revenge. Like self-punishment.’

‘Is this a new way of trying to get me to stay together with Owen?’ Laura took a step backwards. ‘Because if it is, you’d better forget it. It’s over, and it’s none of your business anyway.’

Her mother brushed back her hair wearily, then gestured towards the tabletop. ‘I’ve kept them for you. I was waiting for you to be old enough to understand, but maybe I’ve left it too late.’

‘Too late for what? I still don’t get it.’

‘I never gave him the chance to get near you again.’ A light came into her mum’s eyes that Laura had never seen before. ‘But do you think I wouldn’t make sure he was punished for what he did?’ How even her teeth were, how white. ‘It took a while for the right opportunity, that’s all. The viola has taught me a great deal about patience, and timing, and careful preparation. Something I imagine your Zach would understand.’

*

Laura was frowning at the list of unsolved differential equations on her screen when she heard the door to the flat open. With a small sigh of relief she pushed back the chair from Zach’s desk and went to meet him. The wintry light was fading, and with it her desire to attend his meeting. Still, he was late, which wasn’t like him, and he hadn’t responded to her text.

‘There’s a lasagne in the oven,’ she said as he hung up his jacket. Over dinner she’d tell him about her uncle. Or maybe after the meeting.

He was very tired; she could see it in the line of his shoulders, the pallor of his face. He smiled at her, but it was an effort. And his kiss was perfunctory-like an old married couple, she thought with some amusement before remembering her mother’s ‘play housekeeping’.

‘OK, I’ll just wash my hands.’

He was silent at the meal. It was surprising, and a bit hurtful, that he didn’t ask about her morning at school. After a first, then a second attempt to start a conversation, she was half relieved by his withdrawal and kept her eyes on her plate till, unable to resist, she looked up to find he’d cast his fork aside and was staring at his glass, most of his food still untouched.

‘Don’t you like it?’ she asked.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘it’s really good but I can’t manage it right now.’

‘What’s wrong?’

He gave her a wan smile. ‘Just tired. I think I’ll lie down for a short while.’

She followed him into the bedroom, where she drew back the bedding as he shed his jeans. Wordlessly she picked them up from the floor, the first time she’d seen him do that, and draped them over a chair while he slid into bed without bothering to remove his jumper or socks.

‘Will you wake me in an hour?’ he asked.

‘Zach, you don’t have to go tonight. There are other speakers.’

He shook his head.

‘What if I ... I mean, I suppose I could say a few words in your stead.’

‘No.’ He held out a hand, which she took as she sat down on the edge of the bed. ‘It’s important for me to be there.’

‘Why are you so knackered?’

His eyes were already half shut, and he opened them again with a struggle. ‘Some new prelims. I’ll tell you later, OK?’

‘Then I’d best go back to my stupid maths. There’s a test tomorrow.’

His hand tightened on hers. ‘Please stay for a minute or two.’ And when he was nearly asleep, so that she couldn’t be certain she heard him right, ‘He killed them.’

Chapter 42

Pani has cleared overhanging snow from a section of the crevasse, shaved away its lip, and tamped down his harpoon as reinforcement, across the shaft of which he lowers a line that reaches Zach's brow but looks too fragile to support his weight. To loop it round his chest is all but impossible. Zach tests its hold with stiff fingers. He dare not wait till his hands are frozen into useless claws to decide between slackening grip or loose, unwieldy mitts. It will have to be the mitts.

'Ready?' Pani says. 'I'm going to back away from the edge, I can anchor the line better that way, but I'm not strong enough to haul you up on my own. You've got to climb.'

'Where are the others?'

Silence as Pani retreats from view.

'Pani?'

'There are no others.' Though muffled, his voice quivers for an instant. 'I'm doing the best I can. Now come on.'

A quick oath under his breath, directed at shapeshifting gatekeepers who desert their posts when most needed, then Zach grasps the strip of triple-ply hide with outstretched arms, pulls himself up till he can wrap one leg round the line-tricky to secure with heavy boots-and slowly begins to ascend. The first third is straightforward, but his arms are soon aching, and he feels the leather stretching, hears it creaking under his weight. It'll hold a seal, won't it? a walrus? At what he hopes is the halfway mark he stops to catch his breath and ease the strain one arm at a time by bracing himself against the wall. You can do this, he tells himself. You *have* to do this. When Pani calls out, a note of impatience-or is it nervousness?-in his voice, Zach prises himself loose from the ice. 'Just resting for a second.' Lift knees, anchor feet, stand, reach; again. How many more times?

Don't look, he warns himself, and there's a second when it seems he won't, and another second when it seems it won't matter, and one more when he says 'oh

fuck' as, sickeningly, he plummets and thuds and rebounds and cries out and then then *then* the line jerks-jerks and holds.

He's too shaken to gasp a question.

'Zach! Zach!'

'I'm here. Are you OK?'

'Hang on.' Very slightly, the line gives. 'The harpoon tip's broken loose, but I'm sitting on the line. Try to hurry.' Desperately, 'Please.'

Zach wipes his face with the back of a mitt, cautiously, before the drops of sweat freeze and, cautiously, glances upwards. It's not as bad as might be: he's lost maybe two metres. Pani is alone up there; Zach can imagine only one circumstance in which Uakuak, or any of the camp for that matter, wouldn't have rushed to help. From a distance the ice appears solid, but it shifts as all things in his life shift, precipitously and without the least regard for consequence. The sounds it makes, the deep groans and crangs of a living creature, the way it rises up to gobble the unwary: what Fulgur swallows, it never releases whole.

Ben had no fucking chance, had he?

The sudden flare of memory is intense, as jolting as an ember flicked into his inner eye: 'Leave me alone, Ben, I'm practising.' Not that there were ever any reprimands, any accusations of wasting Sean's time when Zach came badly prepared to a lesson: just those quizzical brown eyes and a lift to his eyebrows, then with a patient smile, the piece played as it ought on Sean's battered clarinet. Zach remembers how discomfited he'd been that his own instrument was so spang-so much newer and more valuable-his boyish indignation at life's unfairness tainted, however, by a scarcely acknowledged smugness that *his* family could afford top quality. Had Sean realised? It would have been like him not to let on. Yet another injury for which he, Zach, won't get to make amends.

He blinks at the hot sting of tears. 'You're doing a great job, Pani. I'm nearly there.' He takes a deep breath and begins to climb.

Chapter 43

As it turned out, Zach didn't get his hour of sleep, not then, and not later that night either. Laura rushed back after about twenty minutes, her mobile clutched in her hand. It was hateful to rob him of the rest he obviously needed, and under other circumstances she'd have been alarmed at how long it took to rouse him, how drugged he seemed. He muttered a few incomprehensible phrases before opening his eyes, then groaned and squinted as she switched on the bedside lamp. He was still so groggy that for a moment she wondered if someone had slipped him a drink. Urgency overrode her qualms. She shook him, no doubt too roughly, but it worked.

As soon as she told him about Max, he threw back the covers, made it to his feet, and stumbled into the bathroom to pee and dash cold water into his face.

'Don't worry, I'm not going to bother shaving,' he said when he saw her hovering in the doorway. Not that she ever minded his stubble.

After tying back his hair, he yanked on his jeans while she went to brew some strong coffee, which he then gulped fast enough to scald his mouth. Though at first he grimaced at the suggestion of food, she pointed out, quite reasonably, that he'd need the energy. He ate some lasagne straight from the pan, standing at the hob and spooning it in like medicine.

'What are you going to do?' she asked while he poured a second mug of coffee.

'First try to contact Max.'

'That signalling he's taught you? What's the point, if you can't hear him?'

'To reassure him.'

In order to concentrate, Zach, mug in hand, went into the living room, leaving Laura to drink the last of the coffee despite her jitteriness; leaving her to regret her promise to her dad; leaving her to remember the fire, and the other kids he'd tried to protect.

There's a rash-like persistence to the memories you'd rather forget-often

quiescent, mostly in fact, yet itchier than hell, and uglier too, when you need them least. One year her dad had bought her mum a hand-carved mahogany music stand for her birthday, a 100-year-old antique which no one else was allowed to touch. Max must have been four or five at the time, Laura couldn't remember precisely. On the afternoon Dad had brought it home, her mum was out-shopping, or a rehearsal, maybe. They'd seen her dad carry it in from the car and take it upstairs to hide in the loft. 'Don't tell your mum,' he'd said, 'it's a surprise.' When the babysitter left, Laura persuaded Max to spring the secret at supper. 'I *told* him not to say anything,' she pronounced over her chicken leg with just the right note of innocent dismay. She'd been a good liar, even then. Her mum had never bothered to disguise her preference for Max, but his wails of protest were too loud to be convincing (aided by a judicious pinch under the table). He knew better than to provoke Laura's wrath, whereas there'd be no punishment from their dad; he didn't do punishment, except the punishment of disappointment. And better yet, he'd blamed himself for mismanaging the whole business.

Her dad must have already begun drugging Max. How else could her brother have missed the nasty pus oozing from her brain cells? Laura pushed back a sleeve and scratched her forearm, and scratched. Severe itching is close to pain. Her dad would have explained that they share some neurophysiological pathways.

Not ten minutes later Zach came back into the kitchen. He stared at the red welts she'd raised, then took her arm and ran a hand over her skin, smoothing it as only he was able, smoothing and easing the ache.

'We'll find him,' he said. 'I promise.'

'I'm terrified that Fulgur's got him.'

He shook his head, then regarded her intently. 'Why Fulgur?'

Though it had never disturbed her before, concealment felt a good deal like subterfuge, like deceit. Keep something back, Olivia liked to say. Secrets are sexy. Olivia liked to say a lot. Another talker like Laura's uncle.

After a silent apology to her dad, she told Zach about the fire. 'Max doesn't know exactly what's happened, Dad didn't want it. But *someone* knew about the twins, what if they also found out about Max? What if word has got back to

Randall?' Zach's face grew stony but he didn't reproach her, not that he wasn't prepared to be secretive himself when it suited him. And inconsistent. In a lot of ways he was like every other lad she'd met-those sapiens lads he was so quick to despise.

'Fulgur would have no reason to kidnap him, the law's on their side,' he said. 'It's got to be someone else.'

'Who then?' She hesitated, then forced herself to ask, 'Have you told Fabio?'

'Fabio would never, but *never*, jeopardise Max.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Family means everything to Fabio. I was going to tell you about it, it's something I've just learned. You see, his brother Mateus was another like Max, maybe the first.'

The wars over oil reserves are nothing compared to what we're likely to see in the near future. The mind-the cognoscens mind, especially-is our most valuable natural resource. Fulgur has just been quicker to recognise it.

Goosebumps, and a sense of d❖j❖ vu. Without a word she plunged from the room. The photograph on Zach's bedroom wall looked even eerier in the half-light of biography. Zach appeared in the doorway and switched on the overhead, but the dead need no s❖ance, and no darkness, to speak.

'The fire was a hate crime,' Zach said. 'But kidnapping is different. More business-like. It gives us a much better chance.'

'So what now? Dad will go to the police only as a last resort, unless my mum changes his mind. She's convinced that the police are capable and trustworthy, equipped for this sort of thing, our only real hope.'

Zach looked away. When she reached for his hand, the tensing of his muscles gave off a buzz like static and a sharp electric smell which she knew could only be her imagination. For a terrible moment it seemed that he might reject her gesture of solace, but then he brought her hand to his lips.

'I'm going to ring Fabio,' he said.

*

It had just gone midnight, with Laura's mum sound asleep under sedation. Zach was pacing back and forth in the kitchen while Laura and her dad sat at the table drinking coffee, a plate of untouched sandwiches testimony to her need to do something, *anything*. Upon their arrival her dad had welcomed them with almost furtive relief, his eyes straying frequently to her mum, who accepted Zach's presence, if not warmly, at least without hostility. It could have gone either way. When distraught, her mum was as unstable as pure nitroglycerine, liable to detonate at the slightest shock. She'd been persuaded to lie down for a short while till the police arrived, Charles having promised to ring them, though from her snores he'd obviously given her a much stronger dosage than he let on. There was still no further word from the kidnappers. Again and again Zach tried to reach Fabio, the interval between each attempt shorter than the last, Zach's messages terser. Laura was beginning to think her dad was right, that they had no choice but to notify the police. The longer Zach paced, the greyer her dad's face became, the deeper the lines of fatigue. Silent and withdrawn, he sipped his coffee, and sipped. She preferred Zach's pacing.

'I'm going to ring them,' her dad said, breaking the silence. He reached for the phone, which had been centred between them like a piece in a bizarre game of feint and counterfeint-who would seize it first?

Zach stopped his pacing. 'Don't be a fool.'

'I haven't noticed that you've made any useful suggestions.'

'Who else do you expect me to call? Randall? The head of the Purist Party? The Almighty Himself?'

Laura thumped her mug onto the table, sloshing coffee. 'Stop it, both of you.'

The phone rang.

They all stared at it, and Laura was reminded of an old picture book of Max's in which some children find a board game whose playing pieces come ominously to life. She couldn't remember, however, if the story ended well.

Her dad snatched up the handset and thumbed the talk key. 'Yes?' He listened for only a minute or two, then rung off with a curt 'All right, I understand.' Pushing

back his chair, he beckoned for them to follow. 'We'd best switch on the pc.'

*

It was impossible, and yet it was happening: Max gagged, bound, and blindfolded on a bed in a darkened room; after a few seconds, Fabio under harsh lights. Trussed to a chair with wide bands of duct tape, metres and metres of it, he stared into the webcam as though his eyes alone, green as serpentine, green as goldengrove, a raw and blazing green, could bridge the strips sealing his mouth. Moments ahead of Laura, Zach understood why Fabio was allowed to see his captors.

'Don't look,' Zach said grimly and gripped her hand.

Though the voice that spoke was distorted through some sort of filter, there was no mistaking the message. 'If you want to see your son again, then provide us with the formula for the serum, and complete instructions for its production. No police and no tracer and no negotiations. You've got till 7:00 a.m. for Laura to bring it on her own. She knows where. We'll be waiting.' The voice broke off to whisper something. 'And to show you that we don't play around, watch carefully.'

Fabio jerked now, throwing himself against his restraints, straining against an off-camera threat, against and against. His head whipped as far to the side as the bonds permitted but there was nowhere to go, no escape from the already. His back arched. The tendons of his neck ridged in protest, and a strangled cry issued from his stoppered throat. Laura dug her fingernails into Zach's hand. 'Please,' she whispered. 'Please no.' But which gods could you beseech for this?

A sound that she recognised from a million movies.

'This is a live transmission.' A laugh. 'Or was.'

More distorted laughter as the camera panned to convey the *mise en scène*, then the screen went blank.

The silence which entered the room had a palpable presence. It felt heavy on Laura's chest, and in her lungs; the sensation of air too dense to breathe. Once on holiday they'd stepped from a chilly air-conditioned airport into the humid heat of a tropical island. It had been her first experience of the solidity and sheer

weight-the *thingness*-of things not seen.

She didn't want to go back there.

She would have to go back there.

For a long while no one moved. Then Zach released Laura's hand. He ran the ball of his thumb along her lifeline, slowly, gently, back and forth several times, before caressing each finger in turn.

'I'm going outside for a moment,' he said.

'I'll come with you.' Laura said. 'It's too warm in here.'

He shook his head. 'I want to try to communicate with Max again. He must be terrified, and he's also going to need his medication soon.'

Laura glanced at her dad, whose lips were moving as he played with his wedding band. She couldn't imagine her dad praying, so it had to be another sort of mantra. The formula for the fucking serum, maybe? She felt her arms begin to itch, and she had to make an effort not to dig at them while Zach was still in the room. It wasn't just that he'd notice. He had a way of looking at her which made *her* look at the things she'd rather not see—a certain blistering truth which burned like sunlight. You could only take so much exposure before you ended up with skin cancer; with cataracts.

Her father was one of their chief neuros. It was possible—no, it was *likely* that he'd helped develop the genetic defect and its fix. How ironic, she thought viciously, that he would be made to pay in this way. Then she remembered that it was Max who was paying, and Fabio who'd already paid. And how many others?

Zach returned from the doorway to remove her hand. 'Don't scratch,' he said. 'We'll get him back safely.' She almost believed him, so flinty were his eyes despite the windscreen of lashes. A slight spin of circumstance, the smallest spark, and he'd ignite.

'Is it a complicated formula?' she asked her dad once Zach had gone.

Her dad left off fiddling with his ring. She saw something very sobering in his

gaze, so that the start of a new unease sharpened her voice. ‘You *will* give it to them, won’t you?’

‘There’s nothing to give.’

‘What?’

‘There’s no formula, not in the way they mean.’

‘But surely a good-‘

Her dad didn’t let her finish. ‘Laura, you don’t understand. No serum exists, and no genetic flaw. I expect the kidnappers are simus who hope to break free of Fulgur. And they’re not going to believe me.’ His eyes glistened, as close to tears as Laura had ever seen him. ‘They’ll think I’m holding out on them. We all saw what they’re prepared to do.’

‘What do you mean, no genetic flaw?’

Her dad spread his hands helplessly, then went over to their old upright piano and stared at the framed photos on display, which her mum had programmed to change each Sunday. He picked up the one in which Max, legs and kit streaked with dirt, was squinting in bright sunlight, a football under his arm. The grass was very green, its blades sharply defined. An ordinary day not too long ago. After a lengthy silence, her dad replaced the picture and turned to face her, though he blinked rapidly, and his eyes kept sliding sideways.

‘There was never any question of defects. Fulgur needed a way to control the simus, that’s all. This seemed the easiest solution.’

Her brain felt sluggish. ‘But I’ve seen for myself what happens when Zach goes too long without the stuff.’

‘The withdrawal symptoms are even nastier than from heroin. And the damage from long-term use, unfortunately, much more profound.’

It took a few seconds for this to sink in. ‘Fulgur has reduced the simus to *junkies*?’

Just above a whisper. ‘Yes.’

‘Which drug is it? A form of heroin?’

For a moment she thought he wasn’t going to answer. ‘No. It’s purpose-made.’

‘By who?’ His reluctance forced her to walk across the room and stand right in front of him, repeating, ‘Who?’

He gestured with his face averted.

‘Answer me! Say it, damn you.’

‘I did. I developed it.’

‘And you give to Max? To your own child?’

‘No. He gets something else for his special needs. Something non-addictive. Something safe.’

Safe. All at once Laura couldn’t breathe the same air as this monster. She spun on her heel and strode away, but paused at the doorway with one last question.

‘Tell me, Dad, just how many years have you stolen from Zach’s life?’

She slammed the door without waiting for a response.

*

She was crying in fear-fuelled rage by the time she located Zach, who was sitting on their old childhood swing in the cherry tree. He rose, unzipped his jacket, and folded her under its wings.

‘It’s too cold for you to be out here only in a jumper,’ he said, wiping her face with a gloved hand. ‘And your tears are going to freeze to your skin in a moment.’

She gave a watery laugh, then rested quietly in this temporary shelter while working up the courage to tell him what she’d learned. To her bewilderment he showed no sign of anger; not much reaction at all.

‘Zach, did you hear me?’

‘All of us, all these years ...’ Pensive, he pulled off his gloves, stuffed them into a pocket, and felt for her chain. She’d noticed how often he ran it through his fingers while working something out. For all his smarts, he had some dead weird habits. Maybe she ought to buy him a rosary. (Or ask her granddad for one, she could just imagine his face.) The more she came to know him, the more of an impossible, infuriating, rackety, wickedly gorgeous enigma he became. Those Fulgur neuros, they were *idiots*, imagining they could replicate a person like Zach with a bit of silicon and a handful of novy algorithms. Any ten-year-old had more sense.

He tucked the chain back under her collar. ‘It’s not good, but it’s not so bad either. I detest the cold. Fancy living someplace where you can swim outdoors all year round? In a hot-pink thong?’

‘How can you joke about it? They’ve turned you into an addict.’

‘Addictions can be broken.’ He nuzzled her, very not-Zach. ‘Some kinds.’

‘I hate him!’

‘Your dad?’

When she nodded, tears welling again, Zach said, unconvincingly offhand, ‘Listen, the kidnappers won’t believe you or your dad, but they’ll believe me. I’m going in your stead.’

‘Sod that! Don’t you *dare* even think it. You heard their instructions. They’ll kill you on sight.’

‘I don’t kill all that easily.’

‘And Max?’

‘He’s a simu. They won’t hurt him, not when I tell them.’

‘What if they’re not simus?’

‘Trust me, they’re simus.’

‘They’re also bloody murderers who know exactly what’ll happen to them.’

‘Not if nobody else finds out.’

‘You can’t do that. What about Fabio?’

Zach was quiet for a moment or two. ‘He was after the formula, he told me himself about some sort of plan. I don’t know what went wrong, but the only way I can find out is by talking to them.’

‘They’ll never believe you won’t turn them in.’

‘Simus don’t betray each other, Laura. And Fabio’s the last person to want me to. *Fabio* damage the Janu cause? No chance. Not to avenge himself, not even to avenge his brother. They may be calling me Corvus, but Fabio is the real mover, the cognoscens he could never be, farsighted and driven and just demented enough to haunt you. Yeah, he’s made enemies, and there have been times when I could have throttled him myself, but everyone recognises him for the rare person he is.’ At last, a breath like a gash. ‘Was. A visionary.’

A fanatic, more like. This wasn’t the first time she wondered if Zach could be a touch naïve when it came to Fabio. But he was dead, and she didn’t like to speak ill of the dead. In another century, they would have walked in retribution.

An anxious wind berated them for lingering. Zach insisted on giving her his jacket, though his cheeks and nose were already reddened from the cold. As they made their way back towards the house, a flash of light from the far corner of the garden caught Laura’s attention, and she swung round, expecting her mystery figure. Maybe Zach would believe her now; maybe he’d even see the man for himself. But it was merely the neighbour’s motion sensor, triggered by the swaying branches of a rhododendron, whose frosted leaves glinted in the sudden illumination.

‘Come on, you’re going to get pneumonia out here,’ she said, glancing round again.

‘I won’t mind if you promise to give me hourly sponge baths to bring down the fever.’ More preoccupied than deadpan, he didn’t even attempt a smile, and he sounded far too much like Fabio. If this was the best he could do ...

‘You won’t need them,’ she said testily. ‘In about ten minutes your body temperature will be below freezing.’ She turned to leave but he snared her arm.

‘Where are they?’

She watched the vapour formed by his breath, as if something ghostly had appeared between them, or was dissipating. Smoke lingers for days, even now it might rise from the ruins of the cottage.

Zach wasn’t her dad. Zach had caught that child molester, hadn’t he? The Zach she knew would never ignore a monstrous crime. But she wasn’t her dad either.

Moving closer, she teased a finger the length of his zip, then quite deliberately began to arouse him. For a moment he leaned into her, his cock trapped within the narrow leg of his jeans, trapped under the flat of her hand, and she thought he would give himself over to the relief of pure sensation, but after a harsh intake of breath he grasped her wrist and broke away. ‘Don’t.’ Unlike her dad, he held her gaze. ‘No. I want you to tell me.’

‘I’m going by myself.’

‘Out of the question. You know that I’m right, they’ll never believe you. And if you’re hoping to get away with a bogus formula, I’m certain they’ll hang onto Max till they’ve run their tests.’

Still she hesitated, her thoughts scrabbling like a drowning skater at the frozen ceiling overhead; scrambling for air, for an out, for a solution, for another way to rescue her brother.

‘Laura, if we fail, if I don’t do this, it will always lie between us like thin ice. One false step, and you’ll plunge through, or I will. I promise you, we’ll end up hating each other.’

‘I could never hate you.’

Exasperated, he grasped her by the shoulders and spun her round to face the deep night, its tenting so moth-eaten that the cold light of far-distant galaxies drilled into her face. She expected him to argue, but as usual he surprised her. Though his lips were close enough for her to feel the warmth of his breath, she had to strain to hear him.

‘When I was first sent to the Foundation, I’d wait till my roommates were fast asleep, then get up and open the curtains. I can still remember the feel of the

heavy cotton. It was rough. It smelled dusty. Someone told me they'd saved money by purchasing an auction lot of the same sort of sheeting exported for burial shrouds.' Lightly he stroked her left shoulder as if back in that room, back at that window, the fabric of the past unfurling beneath his fingertips. 'From my bed I had a clear view of the window. I couldn't stand being indoors but it took me a while to figure out how to sneak past the night guard. It's not like we were locked in, exactly. It only felt that way.'

Laura reached up to lay a hand atop one of his, but she dared not interrupt lest he stop speaking.

'For months I'd try to count the stars. Whenever there were stars, which wasn't often. Some silly kid's idea, like not stepping on cracks or touching every fence spike between home and school, that if I got the number right, the past would unhappen, my family would be restored to me. I thought it was my fault, you see. I thought I'd done something wrong.' He gave a bitter laugh. 'Which I reckon I had, in a way. I'd been born an auger, hadn't I?'

At this she was unable to remain still. 'You're the most *right* person I know.'

She couldn't see his eyes but he went on as though he hadn't heard. As though he'd unlatched that long-ago dormitory window to let the fetid air escape. 'After a while-after something like four or five months, I was a tenacious little bugger-I finally gave it up. I stopped missing my parents and began hating them instead. *They'd* made the mistakes, *they'd* been stupid, *they* were the monkeys. Hating is terribly easy. I got very good at hating.'

He was shivering now. She slipped out from under his hands and turned to face him. 'The only person you hate is yourself.' Holding his gaze tautly like a guy rope, she bunched his jumper in her fists so that he couldn't pull away. 'And you've never stopped missing them.'

He shook his head but she persisted. 'I think you should try to find them.' He drew her close, a sad ploy which fooled her not at all, but she left him that remnant of his pride, or self-delusion. Even for Zach tears were difficult.

His voice was muffled when he finally spoke, 'I know where they are. They're dead.' It was all he could manage at the moment. Though it was late, and the garden fenced and gated, and the night riven with cold, they weren't alone; she felt them buffeting against her, the windy dead. Their fingers plucked at the

seams of her self, loosening a thread here, unpicking a stitch there. She pressed closer to Zach until the skin of him stretched to sheath her, until the silk of her spindled round his bones. The dead, she thought, aren't dead. They're the very stuff from which we're sewn.

'All right,' she said, 'but I'm going with you. They've got Max in the old Rex Cinema.'

Chapter 44

Pani has saved his strength for good reason, needing every bit of it, and then some, to haul hard on the line while Zach braces himself and heaves, claws and heaves and finally flails over the lip of the crevasse. Both sprawl in the snow till they catch their breath, though it's Pani who recovers first, who urges Zach to get up and move about. Still drained, Zach lifts his head to stare at the deposit of rubble ice, some slabs the size of prehistoric megaliths. It doesn't take much to imagine a team of extraplanetary archaeologists excavating this site centuries from now, speculating about what destroyed such massive tower blocks. The ivu has obliterated any landmarks he'd have recognised; obliterated everything, it seems, but the deadly cold, and the shrilling of the wind. He thinks of the banshee legends he's read about and scrambles to his feet. Ghosts in Fulgur's god machine?

Pani butts Zach in the stomach and sends him sprawling again.

'Why?' Pani screams. 'You're a shaman, you saved my life, why not theirs?'

Zach holds the sobbing boy, all the while trying to figure out how they're going to survive without food or equipment or destination.

*

They've lost track of time, and Zach suspects they're lost. Overhead the stars provide a measure of illumination, frost smoke rising deceptively above the open lead at their feet in mimicry of hot springs. Pani bends to examine a darkish clump in the snow.

'Polar bear kill,' he explains. 'And we're lucky, he's left enough for us.'

'What is it?'

'Natsiq. A ringed seal. Most of the skin and fat is gone, but there's some meat.'

Zach gazes across the black channel of water, ridged on the far side with debris, beyond which lies a deeply fissured, torturous icescape. It's doubtful he could make the leap even in peak condition, not to mention half frozen and falling-

down exhausted; and he wouldn't allow Pani to try under any circumstances. Which leaves them where? Scavenging a chewed-over carcass. When you're hungry, a little polar bear saliva sounds as tasty as a dollop of aioli.

'If the bear has eaten, I guess it won't attack,' Zach says.

'He's probably far away by now.'

Zach moves off a few steps to conceal his shivering, but Pani follows and takes his arm.

'I'm tired, Zach. Can we stop here and build an iglu?'

At least they still have Pani's harpoon, panak, and pouches, as well as Zach's pocket knife; they've eaten the pilloined blubber hours before. Left to himself, Zach would simply burrow into a drift the way dogs will do, hunters if caught out in a blizzard. Despite their arduous trek, Pani moves nimbly to search for suitable building snow-not too soft, not too icy, not too granular. Once Pani has found a supply, Zach does his best to assist but his trembling has become despotie by now, and no amount of exertion can warm him. Finally Pani lays down his snowknife on one of the dozen or so auviqs already extracted from the drift.

'Go and sit down for a bit,' Pani says, pointing to the nearest block. When he sees that Zach is about to refuse, he abandons his attempt to spare Zach's pride. 'Please. I can do it faster alone. Rest for a couple of minutes till I call you. I promise, I won't let you freeze.'

The auviqs spiral upwards with such speed that Zach finds himself blinking back tears-the boy could have walked for hours yet. Teeth chattering, Zach hugs himself and rocks back and forth while he considers their options. Even if Pani is right about another winter camp, his sole information is that it lies vaguely westward along the shear line-'four, maybe five days away.' With some food in their bellies, they might just make it that far, or at least Pani might. The truth is, Zach isn't much use, and by tomorrow, with no source of heat, he'll be none at all. Worse than none.

'It's not your fault,' Laura said.

'It's not your fault,' Stella said.

Zach closes his eyes but the voices continue to intone not your fault when the smell of your fault the slaughterhouse smell of his mum screaming to the god of fault for Laura to dive while the shivery silvery water spindles away along a deep fault towards

‘Zach.’

At Pani’s touch he jerks awake, confused, half submerged, still swept by the tide of voices, a wrack of images.

‘It’s finished,’ Pani says. ‘Come inside.’

Now, and snow.

It’s surprisingly bright within the small shelter, as if the snow itself were radiating a fierce supernal energy. They settle themselves on the platform Pani has managed to construct as additional insulation. He’s also carved up the seal remains and insists that Zach accept the fattiest pieces. As they eat, they exchange only a few words, and though Zach is still shivering, he feels marginally warmer. He considers whether they might risk lying down for an hour or two.

‘Is Laura your wife?’ Pani asks.

Zach’s chapped lips are coated with grease. Before answering, he rubs the last scrap of fat over his cheeks, which are taut with windburn. It stings like saltwater on abraded skin.

‘A friend,’ he says.

‘You must miss her. You were crying her name when I woke you.’

‘Yeah, I miss her.’

They finish their meal without further conversation, and Zach is again impressed by Pani’s delicacy, his considerateness. Just about any other boy his age—even Max—would ply Zach with questions. And then he asks himself if this isn’t a prejudice like so many. When did he ever pay much attention to others? Except to spurn them. Except to fuck them.

‘We can take turns sleeping,’ Pani says. ‘You go first.’

Though reluctant, Zach eventually yields because there is sense in Pani’s argument. With his head in the boy’s lap, he stretches out and closes his eyes, but his shivering soon resumes full strength, and after a while Pani shifts uncomfortably and bends to whisper, his voice hesitant.

‘Zach, I think I need to help you get warm.’

‘How?’

From the blush that rises to the roots of Pani’s hair, Zach realises what the boy is proposing. Zach almost laughs, then looks away and feels his own cheeks reddening-Pani is serious.

‘Please, Zach, don’t be cross. It’s normal, it’s what we do when something like this happens.’

In the end, Zach agrees rather ruefully, then dozes afterwards, his sleep fitful. Later he will remember rough waves, the taste of salt. Sometimes he mutters, and Pani hears Laura’s name several times, though the rest is the sort of gibberish which sounds like sense, if only you’d listen a bit closer. But when he strains to catch hold, the words flop about like a badly speared fish. At one point Zach raises his head and opens his eyes to stare at Pani without recognition, music like firesong filling the iglu, warming their blood, then gives a strangled cry, rolls to the side, and retches. Pani holds Zach’s head till the spasm passes, but at no time does silence fall. The iglu is bathed in an intense blue light.

When Zach finally rouses, it takes him even longer than before to clear the soupy frazil from his mind.

‘Pani,’ he mutters, ‘why didn’t you wake me?’ Then, ‘Why is it so warm?’

‘You’re a very powerful shaman.’

‘I’ve told you, I’m no shaman.’

‘Oh yes you are. You talked a lot in your sleep, strange shaman talk, but it was when your raven flew far out over the ice that I wished for spirit wings.’

There it is again, that switchback of memory, or dream, or *something*, then like a deer that's already leapt away from your headlamps, it's gone, and he remembers nothing-sensation without content, a neuronal misfiring in this place of ice. He passes his hands through his hair-his hair! It feels indecent, the depth of his hunger. What else would he give to have Laura back for good? His limbs as tithe, his eyesight, his mind? There are far too many questions he hadn't got round to asking Lev, but the crucial one, the one which would have made a difference, had been self-censored: will a cognoscens upload eventually disintegrate to the same degree as a sapiens?

Pani follows Zach's gesture. 'You shouldn't have cut it off. It's bad luck for a shaman.'

'Some shaman.'

'Zach, I saw a cave deep under the sea, a beautiful blue cave, and the White Seal. You were combing her hair.'

Zach stands rather too abruptly, then sits down again till the vertigo passes. 'First a raven, now a fish. Not a shark, I hope.'

Pani regards him soberly. 'That's not all I saw.'

Must have been like an all-night cinema.

'The best part was the music.' Pani hums a few phrases, his rendition as accurate as ever, so that Zach, with the sudden feeling that Cybil has been robbing the graveyard of his memory all along, gropes under his parka. Laura's pendant warms under his fingertips, warms and silken into cloth of gold. He remembers his history-the cloth of kings and emperors and sultans, of tapestries and pageantry. And funerary palls.

'You see?' Pani says. 'She's kept the ivory seal.'

Zach feels round under his clothing, then gets up and flaps each layer vigorously, front and back, sides, front again, to dislodge the pendant. 'It's missing,' he says. Hearing how lame this sounds, he dredges up, 'I must have lost it in the crevasse.'

'You think so?'

That grin! Feeling vaguely guilty-but for what, exactly?-he catches himself about to say 'It's not my fault.' Irritation sharpens his tongue. 'Believe your fairytales, if you must, but they're not going to get us out of this mess.'

Pani turns away, but not before Zach sees a bleak expression cross his face.

'Pani? Look, I'm sorry.'

The boy busies himself with apportioning the remaining food.

'I'm sorry about your family. I wish I could change what's happened'-if only Pani knew-'but I can't.'

His face now expressionless, Pani removes one piece from the pile closest to him and adds it to Zach's; a second. The silence lengthens, each minute longer than the last.

'Will you please stop that,' Zach says at last, 'and look at me.' When Pani complies, Zach is blindsided, aching, by the hope which trembles beneath the child's long, dark lashes, a pleading look; the look of a much younger boy. Words leak as though from an aneurysm before he has a chance to clamp the memory. 'Where I come from there are many different sorts of-well, you'd call them shamans. Maybe I can talk to one of them. Maybe one of them can help. But no matter what, I promise not to leave till you're with some of your own people.' Damn his glibness! If Fulgur hasn't pulled him by now, there's a good chance they won't-or can't. He mutters the abort code under his breath, then half in self-mockery, half in defiance, reels it off backwards. So much for magic incantations (and prayers).

Pani delays lying down for as long as possible, and even then fights to keep his eyes from drifting shut. He talks about the 'white time' of dreaming. He talks about the First Spirits. He talks about the people's ways till Zach takes his hand and begins to hum the same ballad which lulled Laura at her most feverish. Most of his favourite people live in books, yet are no less real to him than the lost or dead. Memory has a certain plasticity: imagination can replicate the engram encoding of past experience. And the simu neural network, never static, is subject to multiple coding.

Pani's hand, the warm skin, the bones. Zach brings it to his lips, while Pani widens his eyes in surprise, then smiles a sleepy smile. Zach can smell the

mixture of sweat and seal and sea, can anticipate the salty taste. Pani's breathing is slowly slipping into a presleep rhythm, its own lullaby. If he, Zach, a cognoscens, can't tell the difference between this boy and the one who must have been his template, is there one? Or has the very question become irrelevant, supplanted by new metaphysical conversations?

Zach wonders how much time remains to him here, then laughs wryly to himself. We never escape our earliest grammars, do we? Even in Mandarin, where verbs have no tense, you slice time by adverb and particle into discrete slivers of an imaginary cake; in reality, a quantum cake. Wu's Qli theorems are the most inaccessible of all his work, often misconstrued to mean that consciousness by and of itself begets time. But in fact he demonstrated that there are manifold timeframes—an infinite number—though the human mind can't access them. That had been Zhou's dream: to facilitate a consciousness which could escape the windy tunnel of linearity; a consciousness capable of quantum perception. Homo cognoscens.

Except, like everything else, there is no predicting what you actually render.

Pani's breathing has become regular enough for Zach to remove his hand, but as soon as he attempts to rise, the boy curls up his legs, renews his grasp, and mutters 'stay,' all without waking properly.

With a small shiver Zach lowers himself like a bather reluctant to plunge into frigid water, props his elbow on a thigh, and bows his head. The restive quiet eddies round him, deceptive, plosive in its power to burst the dykes and dams of constructed choice. Again he's being asked to fulfil someone else's expectations. Again someone wants him to play the hero. There's something bizarre about a virtual existence which parodies the real. Who in god's name has been doing the programming? For all his pranks, this isn't like Mishaal. It's rumoured that, before the Reign of Randall, Groening would occasionally appear in the labs to watch a caged mouse run itself to death on its treadmill. Novelists must feel a certain omnipotence over their fictional characters: how much more skewed do you have to be to make your living transcoding real people into virtual fictions?

'Lev,' Zach whispers, 'what now?'

At the sound of Zach's voice, Pani opens his eyes to reveal fully dilated pupils, dark tunnels shot with veins of raw, molten light. 'Play your clarinet.' He slips

his free hand under the opposite sleeve and begins to dig at his forearm, a gesture so familiar that Zach's vision blurs.

'Laura?'

'Play,' the boy repeats before his lids seam shut.

Chapter 45

Zadie set a large latte down in front of the backpacker studying his *Lonely Planet*. 'You don't want to go there,' she said, indicating the left-hand page. 'You'll get ripped off, that's a market for tourists.' Sometimes advice was rewarded with a bigger tip, but this lad looked as if he could barely pay for his coffee.

He glanced at her, then down at his mug. 'That's me, Mophead Mark.' She liked the bottlebrush hair, the freckled ugliness, the seafoam eyes flecked with turbulence, his slow smile. 'It's terrific, who made it?'

Coffee art-another good source of tips. But she was giving this one away. 'I'm a design student. Keeps me from getting bored on the job.'

'It takes real talent to catch a likeness with only a few strokes-and in froth no less.'

'Nah, it's mere trickery, like being able to add up a column of numbers in your head. It doesn't make you Ramanujan; it doesn't even make you an accountant.'

He seemed surprised by her mention of the mathematician. 'You're local?'

'I didn't peg you for a racist.'

'Wow, a bit touchy, aren't you?'

'In South Africa you'll learn race is the *first* thing everyone thinks about.'

'A few more years, skin colour will be irrelevant.'

'A post-racial world?' she scoffed.

'Depends how you define race. I hear there's already a cognoscens presence in Cape Town.'

From the corner of her eye she saw Anton come through the swing door from the kitchen and hurriedly pulled out her order pad, then scrawled a number. 'Here, ring me after six, and I'll show you round. There's a few places might interest

you.'

That evening, succumbing to his entreaties-'on your stubborn mophead, then!'-Zadie led him down to the beach. They ate the gutsy samoosas she'd brought, licking their fingers and laughing as the southeaster freewheeled like a surfer high on his own recklessness. Mark wasn't much of a drinker, so the second can of beer stayed in her backpack. He offered a joint, though. Barefoot, they walked along the ribbon of firm, vermiculated sand, and stopped to talk, to gaze into the moonlit spindrift, and walked on again. He liked the way her hips moved as if she were treading water, a serene swell. He liked her liquid accent, and the way it raced away from her when she described a recent exhibit, her new kitten, the hungry stick kids up north. He liked the way she pretended that sand in your pubic hair was erotic, not messy and uncomfortable.

Towards midnight they began to retrace their steps, she knew a jazz club where the drinks were cheap, and the music Cape Town's best-kept secret: 'Even if you could find it, they'd never let you in. Security tighter than the Island, back in Mandela's time.'

'They don't fancy foreigners?'

'They don't fancy rich white boys.'

'So if I had a fanny ...'

She laughed then, and gave him further reason to appreciate his endowments. Later, when he came to write his first novel, he'd invoke a surfer's finely tuned sense of wind and wave, but now there was no metaphor, no transcendence, now no heady rip of words, only the stoptime of breathing in rhythmic unison-a break in the incessant hip-hop of pounding surf and pounding wind and pounding thoughts.

'It'll be your cash, and no friggin' shit, ya hear?'

Hastily they uncoupled and stared at the two kids, one with a knife glinting in the moonlight, the other with a screwdriver. Zadie reacted first; nodded, unslung her backpack, handed it over-every movement slow and smooth, unthreatening. Mark studied the knife-wielding mugger while his mate cast Zadie's belongings onto the sand and rifled for wallet and mobile. They couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen.

Memory rides the long corridor of time with grace for month upon seamless month as if the wave will never break, then it's arse over tit into whitewater, into seething depths. This was the moment Mark would remember time and again; remember, years on, when it ended, as he came to fear it would end. The moment he'd sought. The moment he could have chosen to grab his board and paddle ashore.

'Tell you what,' he said. 'I'll give you my cash *and* 500 Euros from the nearest ATM if you let me meet the rest of you.'

The younger lad left off his scrabbling, the older one gave a disbelieving snort. 'There ain't no rest, ghostbag. And damn sure no ATM.'

It was Mark's quiet confidence-his lack of fear-which confounded them. 'I think there is. And lads like you can earn *real* money, not crotch coins. You think I'm stupid enough to come down here without a motive? Everyone knows to keep off the beaches at night, even the tourists. It's in all the guidebooks.'

They were wary now, uncertain. A drug deal, it was written on their faces.

'You know that *simudzai* means forward, don't you?' he added. Then a touch scornfully, 'The drug trade is for fools, not simus.'

'You're not afraid of cogs?' the older lad asked.

'Do I look afraid?'

*

The simu imijondolo crouched like a wounded animal in a cleft between sheer grindstone cliffs. They reached it by a narrow, scrubby track which forded a shallow lagoon before zigzagging out of view from the shore. If there were crocodiles-weren't there always crocodiles?-no one seemed particularly fussed. The walls of rock retained the day's heat and magnified their breathing, though it wasn't a steep climb. Despite a distressing scrawniness, the simus were surefooted, lissom even, and the extraordinary vision of their kind enabled them to scamper through the darkest pockets and beneath the lowest overhangs with ease. Soon they increased their pace, smelling the campfire before they could see its shielded glow; tonight, at least, there would be meat or a stew for the hungry.

Zadie had volunteered at the Cape Flats, but these sad little shelters of plastic sheeting and rusting, corrugated tin wouldn't keep off even the mild summer rains. Around the campfire she counted half a dozen ragged figures, at least two she thought were girls, one of whom looked no older than six or seven, though chronic malnourishment may have stunted her. Simus usually grew very tall.

Their energy was undiminished by hunger, however, and they argued fiercely, if quietly, among themselves at the appearance of strangers, *monkeys* no less, in their midst. To her surprise, Mark seemed to follow the rapid talk in Afrikaans, though he said nothing till invited by the tallest lad-Rafi, someone had called him-who had a compelling, self-assured air. Simus were known for their arrogance, but she wondered what had given this lad such a decided sense of entitlement. There were plenty of angry young men about, blokes ready to kill you for a pack of cigarettes or a wrong word, blokes on tik whose nerves crackled and sparked like shorted wires, whose sweat smelled of leaking battery fluid. At fifteen or sixteen Rafi already stood taller than most men, in a few years he'd be plucking lightning bolts from the sky and filliping them coolly at any sapiens underfoot. Though much of what you heard was bound to be exaggerated, she found it hard to meet his eyes; all their eyes.

The wrangle might have continued if Rafi hadn't held up a hand, waited till they fell still, and addressed the youngest child. 'So, what do you think, Leonie?'

The girl's eyes passed quickly over Zadie to come to rest on Mark. Her scrutiny was solemn, followed by a child's sweet smile and a confident switch to English. 'He's OK, we can trust him.' Then her thumb slipped into her mouth, a ripple of what Zadie first mistook for amusement sweeping the group. But Mark nodded as though he understood a secret language and was rewarded with a groundswell of approval.

'Ugly muggle's got a brain.'

'Brought any sweets?'

'Rad hair.'

'Hangs tough, doesn't he?'

'Must be someone like Leonie in his family.'

Meanwhile the older lad from the beach had busied himself with removing several lopsided wooden spits from the fire. One by one he sliced the roasted birds from the skewers with the same bone-handled hunting knife he'd brandished as a weapon, its tapered blade now glistening with fat, and deftly segmented the meat into equal portions which he arranged on two battered enamel plates by his feet. At this last remark, he paused and looked up from his crouch, thrust his knife to the hilt into the sandy ground as if to scour it for another task. The others also gave Mark their heightened attention.

'Is that how you know?' Rafi asked, a slight edge to his voice. 'A brother or sister, a cousin maybe?'

'Not exactly.'

'Then how?' The edge sharpened on the whetstone of their hardscrabble lives. For all her gifts, Leonie was still a young child who sensed more than she always understood.

'There was a girl-' He glanced sideways at Zadie. 'My girl, till the accident.' A gust of wind stirred the embers, sifting ash over the plates of meat, wafting chalky swarf into his face so that he was forced to blink several times in rapid succession. 'At least that's what the police called it when they closed the case.'

With a soft gasp Leonie shucked her thumb, but Rafi didn't even look her way. 'Right, boet,' he said, gesturing briskly towards their meal. 'Let's eat.'

The meat smelled good, but these kids needed every calorie-which lowlife nicked from a beggar's bowl? Gamely Mark and Zadie split a tactful piece, pied crow proving to be gamey but perfectly edible, a bit chewy perhaps. Within a month, they were sharing a flat. Within six months, married. Within a year, she was pregnant with Zach.

*

It wouldn't be till his stay in Cape Town that Zach learned of his parents' role in founding the cognoscens network which by then provided training camps for politicised simus worldwide-nobody, it seemed, could do it better than the South Africans, and drug-money rumours notwithstanding, support from private foundations and wealthy Fulgur rivals (or wannabe rivals like flamboyant biotronics magnate Leo Chandra) kept the Scorpions from making any key

arrests. At the outset Mark's confidence matched Rafi's, but he'd not grown up with knives and taped pipes as his cricket bats; muggings, his test matches. A single disembodied incident might not have done it, but when Leonie was found dismembered on the strand, crows already feeding, something broke inside him, tore loose like a bough in a gale. He stopped writing. He stopped surfing. One evening from the shelter of their veranda Zadie watched him drag driftwood into a heap just beyond the dunes and set it ablaze, standing so close that she feared for his hair, his eyebrows, his skin. She didn't interfere when he emptied a sack of crows-five, six, nine, maybe ten, where had he collected so many?-onto the flames, the stench nothing like the smell of roasting meat. Next morning at the corner shop she was forced to tell old Ibrahim a stammered lie, which he was too kindly to dispute. Two days later they had the results of the prenatal genetic workup, and providentially after a tattered night, Chandra's offer of a lectureship. Though Mark's father was dead, and his mother dissuasively remarried to a Californian banker, Mark was relieved to go home. In celebration they bought two dozen oysters, but one look at the first plump and quivering mollusc on its splayed shell, its liquor briny as sweat, and he was unable to sever its lower adductor muscle. They ate a supper of bread, cheese, and sunny mangoes instead.

*

Laura was in and out of Max's room fast enough to have changed into a fleece tracksuit, a good dark green, by the time Zach knocked. 'I'm just about ready,' she said, but he came in and shut the door on the sound of her mother's snoring. Nervously she thrust a hand into the deep right-hand pocket; needn't have bothered. Preoccupied, he circled the room, not quite pacing, not quite breaking off mid-sentence, since he actually said nothing, yet breaking off nevertheless. Couples develop their own duolect, a sort of textese, though in Zach's case often *textease*; she was obliged to read the message even when there seemed to be no signal.

His attention fell upon Josh's album, which lay open on her desk. Most of the photos on view were stiff, cheesy poses in front of bazaar or amphitheatre or mosque, sunburnt faces of lads in khaki shorts and sandals who were interchangeable in their anonymity-there were no labels, not even a date-and about as lifelike as an effigy. We hitchhiked everywhere, Josh had said, what a summer. She'd squinted over the pictures trying to recognise him, without success. If the faces of the young are a roadmap of their future, the resolution

was too low for her to zoom to the present. Or maybe, quite simply, he was always holding the camera.

One photo, however, didn't belong to the set. It looked so much like the 'hi, having a great time, wish you were here' postcards people used to send-a recent row had erupted when her mum had clandestinely 'sorted' her dad's overzealous collection-that Laura had prised it from the page to check. It was undoubtedly a photograph: a weathered beachfront cottage, almost a shack, with shaved dunes as front yard. The lush collection of plants in hanging pots and huge terracotta urns offset the slight air of neglect. But what drew the eye, possessed it, were the two glossy ravens perched on a skeletal piece of driftwood near the steps. Heads cocked, they were gazing at the photographer-the viewer-so raptly that everything else faded into insignificance, like an incident not worth recalling. The image didn't look photoshopped. When she asked Josh, he denied any knowledge of it: 'No such photo. Trying to test me, eh? Worried I'm getting senile?' For an old man, his memory was good, his stories about each picture even better (and often ribald), so that he was probably ashamed to admit he'd forgotten.

'Where did you get this?' Zach asked.

'It's the album Josh gave me.'

'But this photo ...'

'Strange, isn't it? Beautiful too, looks almost like some art gallery thing.'

He looked up at her, and she noticed he was beginning to shiver. 'Zach, what is it?' When he didn't answer, she went over to him. 'It's just an old picture, the crows mean nothing. Even Josh can't remember why it's here. I'll throw it away.' She reached for photo, but he stopped her with a brusque grip.

'No, you don't understand. I know this place. I've been there.'

'You have? Where is it?' His shivering was worsening. 'Zach?'

With a harsh sound he shrugged away and crossed the room to lower himself onto her bed. She gave the photo one last look, then marched to his side. She wasn't in the mood for patience.

‘Look, I’m leaving for the Rex. Stay here and shiver till you feel like talking.’

He raised his head, a welcome flash of anger loosening his tongue. ‘It’s near Cape Town. They took me to see it while I was there.’

‘So that’s where the parcel came from.’

He nodded. ‘Yeah, it was stupid of me, I suppose, but I couldn’t help myself.’

‘A snowflake from South Africa, how droll.’

‘Actually, it snows sometimes on Table Mountain, elsewhere in the mountains too.’ He gestured in a way that she understood, and she took his hand. His fingers were cold. ‘My parents’-a deep breath-‘my parents lived for a while in that cottage before I was born. I don’t understand how Josh could have a photo of it.’

‘Ask him, maybe he’ll remember.’

They were quiet for a few minutes, then both spoke at once.

‘We’d best get going before my mum-‘

‘About Ben-‘

His grip tightened so that she knew to give him this interlude. Max, she thought, if you can hear me, we’re on our way, we’ll get you out of there, those bastards will believe Zach, he’s pretty fucking amazing. Without releasing his hand, she crouched before him. ‘The Ben you dream about?’ Still he didn’t speak, though he met her eyes with the look of a small boy who’s begun his recorder solo-his chance, thoroughly rehearsed, to shine onstage in front of his parents-then three bars in, loses his place, blanks out, and can’t go on. His mum and dad would have been gentle with him afterwards; terribly tender and understanding. ‘Zach, who is he? Who’s Ben?’

Softly, as though from a distant slope. ‘My little brother.’

Laura grabbed for his knee with her free hand to steady herself. ‘I see. Only a little *brother*. You don’t happen to have a little wife as well? Or a son tucked away who you’ve forgotten to mention?’ Then felt her throat tighten when saw

his eyes begin to fill. 'Shit, Zach, I'm sorry.'

When the burden is too great, a snowpack will fracture and fail, triggering an accumulating avalanche, the rush and roar of it, time unhinged as a slab of the past tears free. Try outrunning it, you'll suffocate or be pulverised under the weighted truncate of memory.

'I was eleven when they'-

*

The cupboard under the stairs is dark and dusty and crammed with creepy stuff and the vacuum cleaner smells like Marc's car. It's not a good hiding place, so he pinches his nose to keep from sneezing. Dad shoved him in so fast that Ben burst into tears. Through the door Zach heard Dad hissing at Ben to be quiet, then the sound of a smack. Ben began to howl and Zach, to shiver. Mark never hits his boys, only crude parents need to resort to violence. If the Insects take someone away, what do they do to him? Mum and Dad would never say, exactly. In books they cane pupils in boarding school, though Mum laughed when, goofy years ago, he'd asked about the board. But soon she'd been weeping.

Now he can hear an angry jumble of voices from the sitting room, now Dad talking the way he talks to a student complaining about a bad mark. Maybe a student whose father is a bigshot, though Mark always says he will *not* bow to threats whenever Zadie argues with him. So far, he gets his way-'gets away with it,' according to Mum.

Footsteps. One set going into the kitchen, two sets clattering upstairs, one set lingering in the hall. Zach shuts his eyes and hugs himself to stop the shivering. He holds his breath. What if they've got a simu with them, someone who can hear like him? 'How did they find out?' his mum had cried as she came running in from the studio. His dad, 'We've made the worst mistake you can make about your enemy. Underestimating them.'

The odd noises from the sitting room have stopped, but Ben is still sobbing, though more quietly.

Zach's chest feels hot and itchy, he needs to breath. Ten, count to ten, you can hold on that long. Three, four, five. Peeing can wait. Upstairs they're in Ben's room now. They must know about his hearing, why are they so loud?

-Fucking little freak, where's he hiding?

His eyelids reddening.

-They'll slap an e-tattoo on him after this crap.

His skin prickling.

-Ought to geld him at the same time.

His scalp tingling.

-Quiet, the chief'll hear.

His head floating. Hold

-Nah, I know too much about him and his cunts. The mum's a looker, eh? See the tits on her?

He sucks in a lungful of air, chokes on some spit, sputters, and the door is yanked open.

'Got him!'

A hot stream of pee fills his jeans and runs down into his trainers as the man grabs him by the arm and hauls him out. Feet squelching, he's dragged into the sitting room while the pair charge from Ben's room and hurtle downstairs.

His dad is seated on the piano bench, duct tape binding his arms behind his back, his feet, his mouth. Ben is whimpering and clinging to Mum's leg. They've gagged her too, but only tied her arms. One of the Insects has a gun trained on her. She moans upon seeing Zach and tries to speak, stops straightaway at the warning oath. His dad's eyes shift back and forth between his wife and Zach, back and forth.

At the sight of his big brother, his hero, his *god*, Ben cries 'Zach!' and bolts towards him. The shot is loud. With an animal noise his dad launches himself from the stool and falls to the floor, writhing as if caught in a leghold trap and making dreadful sounds in his throat. His mum is keening through the tape but they've seized her now and she can't run. Zach hears hoarse screaming coming

from his throat. Then the Insect raises his gun again.

*

-‘when they came for me.’

Zach’s voice faded to an unstable silence, a fragile layer of ice over depth hoar which could shear or collapse at any moment. His face was pale, and though he was still shivering, Laura dared not touch him.

‘It took so long for him to die,’ Zach said after a while. ‘I’ve never understood that.’

A person who’s drowning can lose consciousness within two minutes; in an avalanche suffocation must take about as long. She took a long breath, and then another, longer one.

‘And your parents?’ she asked.

He stood and went back to her desk, switched on the lamp, fingered the corner of the photo. It might be the only one he had, or at least the only one he knew of. Maybe now he’d open the envelope from his parents.

He lifted his head to listen, and a few seconds later she heard footsteps on the landing, her dad’s which halted briefly at his own bedroom door, his and Molly’s, then moved on to Max’s room. She pictured her dad switching on the light, looking round hungrily, picking up a T-shirt from the floor, sitting down on the bed, smoothing the hollow from Max’s pillow.

‘You once asked me about nightmares.’ Zach gave a bitter laugh. ‘For years there were *only* nightmares.’

‘Wasn’t there anyone you could talk to? If not a teacher, one of the older simus? And in spite of his ghastly jokes, Josh makes a good listener.’

Zach’s gaze was elsewhere. ‘I didn’t even know men could do such things to a woman. Probably I’d already heard the word *rape*, and afterwards at school I certainly read it in this or that book, I was always in the library, but it wasn’t till much later that one of the boys explained, and even then it took ages for me to make the connection. To grasp, really grasp, that what happens in books is what

I'd seen.'

'They made you watch?'

'They made us *both* watch before they shot my dad.'

'Oh god.'

'They made us watch.' His voice breaking, 'Laura, they made us-'

Keep telling him.

Chapter 46

As soon as Zach emerges from the iglu, an icy wind snatches the breath from his lungs. He shuts his eyes and doubles over, gripping his knees till a shout drags him upright. Through his tears he discerns Pani silhouetted against the horizon, gesticulating anxiously. Despite the clouds, colour is returning to the world. Has he really forgotten how beautiful even weak sunlight can be? There, beyond the iglu, lies a low bank of rubble, blushing at its own mounds and crevices. There, the lead sheeted in crumpled purple. And there, shyly, lifting the curtain on the first morning after, the sun. My god, has he been blind! The promise of it has no counterpart in fact. One day he'll not visit Svalbard or Greenland as a tourist. Not walk on the ice, what remains of it. Not listen to the groaning of the distant, dying glaciers. Not scan the tundra for a sign of polar bear. Not shiver except in the chilly breezes of memory. For only here, in Thule, his Thule, is the wind fierce enough to defy the guardian equations of time. 'I'll never let you go,' she said. He turns his face to the punishing wind, wondering how long it would have been before she left; before he'd have *wanted* her to leave. For only here, in Thule, their Thule, the light itself can sing.

Then, Zach, you have still not understood the Arctic.

'Lev?'

Though Zach peers in all directions, there's no sign of man or bear.

Pani is nimble-footed, but Zach slips midway across an innocent-looking belt of glossy, meringue-like crust, lands awkwardly on one knee, and while recovering from the jolt of pain, makes out a dull wingbeat overhead which sends him scrambling to his feet.

'What is it?' Pani asks upon doubling back. 'Some sort of bird?'

The air quivers as if to the flight of a pterodactyl. They stare into the sky, the black dots which Zach first takes for afterimages from unaccustomed exposure to the sun-simus are particularly susceptible to retinal damage-quickly transforming his blindspots into birds into raptors into paratroopers into a menacing sense of $d \diamond j \diamond v u$. He curses himself for his foolish daydreaming. Even Pani wouldn't make it back to the iglu now, not that it would offer more

than a short-lived bulwark against the swarm dropping from the cloud cover. The winged figures swoop straight for them, fifteen of them, twenty, and as they descend, Pani grabs Zach's arm with a soft cry, while Zach at last recalls the source of his dread.

'No one move!'

The warning has the opposite effect on Pani, who whirls into a half-crouch, mitt at his feet and panak already grasped in a fist. Zach has barely enough time to wonder how long it takes to perfect such a slick manoeuvre swathed in thick furs before a soundless burst of light sends the boy sprawling.

'Pani!' Zach dives for him. A second flash of light, this time aimed at Zach. Though he maintains a desperate hold on consciousness, the sensory overload stuns him, and he just manages not to vomit, not to lose control of his bladder, not to let go of Pani.

'Another rash stunt, and the boy is dead.'

Within moments they're surrounded. At a signal from the spokesman, Zach gets slowly, dazedly, to his feet. Pani is still crumpled on the ice. Zach stares at the creatures, trying to make sense of what he sees: tall, graceful men clothed in the thinnest of black bodysuits, masks, and boots, but whose enormous wings, no matter how virtual, pulse with cold-defying life. He's never envied Max his particular gift, but right now an inkling of their intentions would be welcome. These are not the monstrous chimeras of ancient myth, of psychosexual nightmare, of budget flick and massive multiplayer games, but have a fearsome Blakean beauty which confounds him. And then a grim thought: is this how the sapiens see *us*?

The same spokesman beckons for Zach to approach.

'Don't hurt the boy,' he says. 'Please.'

'That's up to you.' The birdman levels his right hand at Pani, and a weak pulse of light arcs from a fingertip to strike the boy, who jerks slightly and moans.

'No!' At a peremptory and unbirdlike gesture, 'OK, OK, I'll do whatever you want. Just tell me what it is.' Zach stumbles aside, exaggerating however his weakness.

‘First, your chain.’

‘My what?’

This time the finger is pointed at Zach’s throat, and within a fraction of a second he snatches off the pendant and flings it at the man’s feet, then fingers the blister already forming on his skin.

The man bends to retrieve Laura’s pendant. ‘We’re not inhuman, you know. Those dogs you were fond of-I’d never have removed them if they hadn’t been so menacing. Some of the retrogrades cannot seem to tolerate us. And though I genuinely regret the need to deprive you of your keepsake, your age has yet to understand the full nature of entanglement.’

Several of the birdmen move to encircle Pani, and one kneels to examine him with worrying care, then nods at the spokesman. No words are exchanged. An image of powerful white wings and a whiplike neck, a vicious beak, surfaces from Zach’s memory. He’s never learned the full story behind Max’s swan, though he has his suspicions-now stronger than ever.

‘Primitive,’ the man says, ‘but a beginning. It will take upwards of a century for transgenic organisms to become truly viable. *Intelligent* transgenic organisms.’ Eyes that knowing ought to be hidden behind goggles. ‘The crow, for obvious reasons, will be of particular interest; pivotal, a Leveller would say.’

All arrogance, the birdman doesn’t wait to see if he’s unsettled Zach, but wheels towards the iglu, spreads his wings, and fans the air, feathers gleaming like iridescent onyx. As if on command, the others take up position in a semicircle, the one in charge of Pani carrying him gently-almost tenderly.

‘Who are you?’ Zach asks.

The spokesman doesn’t trouble to answer, his attention focused on the area inside the formation. Again he raises an arm, and the ice wavers and shifts, not precisely melting; terraforming in a swirl of snow to a shallow, milky bowl. Pani’s caretaker steps forwards and sets the boy down in the centre, then joins his cohorts, who proceed to close the circle. The spokesman, wings now folded, strides into their midst.

‘What are you doing with him?’ Zach’s voice cracks, sign of his struggle to hold

himself in check.

‘Your self-control is admirable, but in fact I’d like you to join me.’

As Zach reaches Pani’s side, columns of ice begin to appear inside the ranged guards, proportioned as before but etched like petroglyphs, each with a different carving. On one there are pterodactyls and a Spinosaurus; on another, a troupe of apes; a Neanderthal woman; a simplified Vitruvian man; a crow. Some bear symbols which seem to be mathematical, some a script or alphabet. Zach wonders if the sign for infinity could possibly be universal. The glyph which disturbs him most, however, is the two-headed Fulgur dragon. And there’s no representation of the birdmen.

Play, Zach.

Zach whirls round, half expecting-hoping-to find Lev, only to stiffen at the shameless laugh which strips the fraying insulation from his temper. He snaps, ‘So, what are you then, a flock of telepathic robots?’

Something in this finally gets to the creature. ‘Corvus is reputed to be a lot smarter than you’re acting. Potentially all humans are telepaths.’

‘Except you’re obviously not human.’

The man shoots a hand towards Pani, then after a hesitation lowers it again. ‘Perhaps we’ve made a mistake. If you’re not Corvus ...’ He indicates the column engraved with the Fulgur dragon. Only a cognoscens would be able to detect this beam of light; whether anyone else can see the image it reveals becomes superfluous as soon as Zach cries out. At the sound of Laura’s name the column reverts to icy inscrutability.

‘So ... as I thought,’ the man says. ‘We’ve killed the right girl.’

‘Zach-‘ If Pani weren’t beginning to stir, Zach would be at the birdman’s throat. ‘Zach, my head hurts.’

He crouches, helps Pani to sit up. ‘It’s OK, just take it easy for a moment.’

‘He’ll be fine. The pain fades quickly. *Unless* further treatment-sedation-is required.’

Zach looks up. 'Let him go. It's me you want, isn't it?'

'Rather over fond of an avatar, aren't you?'

'He's no'-shivering now-'say that again about Laura.'

'It's really very simple. Most things are, in the end.' The birdman sweeps a hand round so that each column in turn emits a different gonglike tone, the last three deep within the cognoscens register. 'She died to bring you here.'

Would that the casings of self were wound from steel. Zach feels the way a violin string might feel, if it could feel and articulate the feeling, the instant before it snaps from over-tightening. Too much tension in the string can damage the integrity of the instrument itself.

'Why? *God damn you, why?*'

'Zach-' Pani tugs at Zach's sleeve. 'Your spirit skin, it's orange again. Almost red, like flames.'

Play, Zach.

'In ice and in fire: so the beginning. And sentient life multiplied to fill the world until the world was desolate, the cities burning and the land laid waste. Hunger walked the face of the earth, thirst dredged in its bowels. Rank were the once sweet waters and the salt. The two-headed dragon with claws of steel and scales of gold and heart of ice grew fat on the children of men. Who would slay him? Who would rise up and lead us? Who renew our strength so we would mount up with wings like ravens, renew our spirit so that we would rejoice in song, renew our minds so that we would sunder the barriers of time and space forever?'

'What kind of answer is that?' Zach asks.

'The incipit from the *Book of Corvus*.'

Silence falls, a belljar silence in which each breath is audible, a silence so glassy it seems to magnify the collective tension.

'I am not that Corvus,' Zach says.

Play.

Chapter 47

At Stella's name, Zach closed his eyes against and against, lashes trembling. He made no sound except the sound of a laboured bellows, as if he had to remind himself to breathe. Is there ever a right time for such news? His scar glinted with the veneer of healing, a pearly sheen, and a small dark shape scuttled along the alley, but Laura was unable to fix her gaze on anything for long. They were both shivering, and the air smelled of snow. Zach needed shelter more than the anaesthesia of cold. Whatever else was waiting for them inside the Rex, it wasn't an impending snowstorm. If the door was bolted, Zach might be persuaded to leave. If the door was bolted, Max might already be wedged into a threadbare seat. Gloveless, she gripped the metal handle, and gripped. The cold cut into her palm.

'Why haven't you told me this before? I've been trying to find out what's happened to her. To all of them.'

The door to the cinema swung open smoothly-too smoothly. Could someone have oiled the hinges? She slipped inside, Zach followed and shut the door behind them.

'Why haven't you told me?'

'I-'

Laura found herself repeating the account of her first visit, elaborating it, filling in details, drawing attention to each face, each shaky step she'd taken. Though unfeigned, her nervousness served like a magician's practised patter to misdirect Zach from the gaps in her story-those images on the screen. He'd never believe her; she wasn't quite sure she believed it herself. Sometimes it seemed as if she'd hallucinated the whole episode-not the bodies, not that, but she'd been so desperate to find Zach ...

'I don't know, exactly,' she answered. 'I guess I was afraid.'

'Of me?'

When she said nothing, Zach's face darkened. At first she thought he was angry,

and she stepped backwards towards the exit, stepped backwards without, at least, flinching. He lowered the torch, which cast his features into waxen, high-contrast relief. Almost imperceptibly the skin surrounding his eyes took on the tautness of a mask as though she'd said something vicious and hurtful, and then she realised that she had, in her silence even more than in her words. But she didn't know how to explain, and this was hardly the moment for it anyway. An inkling of a disturbing possibility crossed her mind: *was she in some way afraid of Zach?*

'I've been doing a little reading,' he said softly, 'Abuse victims often spend their lives self-destructing, driven by their desires, consumed by them, which are raw and ugly and conjoined to the abuse itself. Is that what I am to you?'

'Zach-' She swallowed, longing for a glass of water. 'Zach, you're the most beautiful thing that's ever happened to me.' She glanced the length of the dark corridor ahead of them, the end of which remained shadowy despite the beam from their torch. She couldn't remember the passage being quite so long. 'Look, we're both on edge, and you're way too whacked to be anywhere except in bed.' Again she searched the corridor. 'I don't like this. Something feels wrong, really wrong. Maybe we ought to leave while we still can.'

'You're absolutely certain everyone was dead? Stella?'

'I didn't imagine it!'

'That's not what I'm suggesting. They could have been drugged or in a coma.'

'They were dead,' she said flatly.

In response Zach took her by the arm, drew her away from the exit, and handed her the torch. Then, to her astonishment, he began to undress.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

He gave her a sardonic grin, Fabio's influence all too apparent. 'We'll celebrate *after* we get Max to safety.' He was already down to his boxers. 'Stay here with my stuff. I want them to see straight off that I'm unarmed. If I'm not back in half an hour, ring for a taxi and go home.'

'Yeah, right. And do what? Make popcorn?'

‘Your dad will probably have to contact the police.’ Now barefoot, he stopped to listen for a short period before laying his hands on her shoulders. ‘I mean it, Laura. No tricks. I’ll hear you if you try to follow.’

‘Then why am I here? As a clothes rack?’

He gazed at her a moment longer. ‘To keep me from giving up halfway across the city.’ This time his grin didn’t quite make it to his lips. ‘I’m nowhere near as brave or as admirable as you conjecture.’

‘But a deal more foolhardy.’

He kissed her, gripping her shoulders tightly. When she ran her fingertips over his tattoo, it felt like a ghastly goodbye. Zach felt it too; he muttered an oath and tore away, leaving her with the torch for scant cheer. She watched while he disappeared through the swing door to the theatre proper. Senses alert, she pulled out her mobile and gave him precisely one minute. She’d planned on waiting two, but the pressure in her chest was threatening to erupt into tattered gasps, lungs like a ripped mainsail flapping futilely in a squall. With as little noise as possible, she let herself out into the night. Once the door was shut, she raced round the building to the other emergency exit, the one she hadn’t mentioned to Zach; the one she’d used for her last escape. Let it be unlocked, a ragged voice chanted in her head, please let it be unlocked. If she were at all religious (or did she mean superstitious?), she’d have taken it as an omen-good or bad yet to be determined-that the building was prepared to re-admit her.

She navigated the corridor without stumbling, a reef of stacked theatre seats the only hazard. It looked as if someone were stripping the cinema. Her eyes fell on an antique steamer trunk bellied and staved like the one her mum had inherited from a stage-magician uncle or great-uncle or something. Flush against the wall and half hidden by the seats, it aroused Laura’s curiosity, particularly in an unlocked building, but she didn’t stop to investigate its contents. As she flitted towards the lobby, a few grisly possibilities crossed her mind, and she wondered whether she’d have had the nerve to lift the lid.

The door to the lobby was gaping, the ornate but dilapidated décor of the cinema reminiscent of an ageing film star with a heavy encrustation of jewellery. And then a memory, as memories will: a gamy, gaping, ghoulish mouth. All her grandmother’s teeth, in her last illness, had been removed along with the tumour.

It had been terrifying to see her yawn, terrifying the required kiss-fleshy gums, the gangplank tongue, the black pit of the throat with its red plushy walls, the lips crimson in a parody of youth and health while the lipstick bled into the surrounding wrinkles, the glistening milky pearls on the sunken neck. But a child's frantic pleading, then sobbing, has no effect on a certain type of mother.

Fury at the years of powerlessness and fear-is that what they mean by courage?

She played the torch about the foyer, shrugging at the cobwebs on the plasterwork but lingering over the dark rise of the staircase to the upper level, lingering too over the magnificent teardrop chandelier which, uselessly, still glittered overhead-grimy but indomitable, refusing to relinquish its stellar role. There was a small amount of light from the street seeping through the crisscross of boards across the main entrance, whose glass was intact in places. A passer-by might catch sight of the beam. After a short hesitation she switched it off and waited while her eyes adjusted.

Max, she thought, if you're here, listen carefully. Zach doesn't believe me, but there's someone who may be able to help us. I don't know if he's a simu or not, I don't even know what he is at all, but he seems to be able to talk inside my head, the only one who ever has, and to appear at strange moments. And it's somehow related to Zach. Call for him, or whatever it is you do. I'm going to picture him as best I can. Maybe that will make it easier for you.

Gingerly she made her way across the lobby to the counter from which drinks and popcorn had once been sold, now listing and buckling like a riprap of pavement slabs under the onslaught of giant roots. The doomers liked to rant on about the claws of wind time and jaws of wolf time wresting the world from its human trespassers. No one took them seriously, yet you couldn't help wondering who would walk the planet in a few thousand years, which was *nothing* in earth time. Likely Fabio had been right: if anybody, it would be the simus. All at once it wasn't difficult to picture a Neanderthal girl falling in love with one of Laura's own distant ancestors, only to be banished from her tribe for her transgression.

Laura laid both torch and mobile on the counter, then removed Max's old water pistol from her pocket. Made of lightweight plastic, it was a fairish replica though unlikely to fool anyone for long, even in the dark. Still, imitation firearms were banned from all public venues for a reason. She was also carrying a keyring pepper spray, which she'd armed herself with after the police attack on

Zach-not much use against more than one person, but she'd seen what Zach could accomplish given the opportunity. One man down was one man less to deal with. If it came to it.

For all Zach's tribal loyalty, simus could be just as unpredictable as the rabble.

She listened attentively but there were no voices and no sounds she could detect, aside from the wind wrestling to invade this once majestic palace-this theatre as absurd as any in which her grandfather preached (and he'd preached in some impressive ones). Resting her forearms on the rickety countertop, she closed her eyes and repeated her message to Max, struggling to intersperse it with an image of that smiling, blue-eyed, crystal-toting figure. Her memory was sketchy at best, for she'd only seen him in brief flashes, but even a well-known face wouldn't have made it any easier. Odd how a person like Zach could be so vivid, so present, so utterly the breath and cell and pulse of you, yet impossible to project onto the screen of your mind.

I don't have a single photo of him, she suddenly thought. And then for one canted moment saw him as she'd first seen him-late for class, leaning into the wind, indifferent to the sheeting rain as if it were no more than planes of grainy light, unsmiling. He lifted his head and his eyes passed over her. 'Look at *that*,' Olivia breathed, clutching Laura's arm. He stopped-she now realised that he must have been able to hear-and regarded them. Olivia preened at the library window, too self-absorbed to catch the sudden lash of sleet in his eyes before the shutter closed.

In the long weeks and weeks to come it would have devastated Laura to see their colour darken almost to crow-black, clouded by pain.

'Still playing with toys?'

Laura cried out and snatched for the water pistol, but only succeeded in knocking her entire arsenal to the floor. As she backed up against the counter, her heartbeat louder than the final clatters, Fabio bent to pick up the scattered objects. He replaced the torch and mobile, weighed Max's toy in the palm of his hand. 'Not even any water,' he intoned mournfully.

'You're supposed to be dead!'

'Is that so?'

Halfway to the pepper spray, she jammed to a halt. Afterwards, she promised herself, once he explains; by then her hands would have stopped shaking. Fabio, however, studied his wrist, made an adjustment, and with predictable insouciance merely smiled, handed her the water pistol, and walked off, apparently expecting her to follow. She stared at his retreating back for a second or two before hissing, 'You're insufferable.' At his low laugh she switched on the torch and waited to see if he'd demur, then stuffed her mobile into a pocket when he continued crossing the lobby without a backward glance, though beckoning over his shoulder.

'Fabio! Where's Max? I'm not moving a step till I know he's OK.'

He took no notice, and with that the last of her fear burst into rage. 'How dare you! How dare you, after losing a brother yourself! Or was that another of your lies, your little games?'

Fabio stopped and slowly turned round. There was no smile on his face now, and the protean silence carried the voice of Mateus, and the ashen voices of Nicola and Eliot, and voices lost, and voices stolen, and above all the one voice which would call to her, and always call, as if nothing ever changed or died, and forever called.

'I think you'd better tell me what's going on,' she said.

Still he gazed at her.

'Are you a simu?'

'No.'

'Then who-or what?'

'It's your Ophelia who says it best: *we know what we are, but know not what we may be.*'

'And I must be madder than Ophelia to expect a reasonable answer from you!'

He stared at her a moment longer, the ghost of a smile beginning to lighten his face.

‘It’s not funny,’ she said severely.

‘No ... no, I suppose you’ll need a few more years to see the black humour in death. The young are so very earnest. It’s one of the first similarities I observed amongst the sentient races.’

Gooseflesh threatening, Laura cracked the lid on first one, then another scenario, not keen to examine any of them closely. She resorted to a familiar stratagem. ‘You’re a very bizarre sort of ghost. Don’t they let jesters and stand-up comedians into the afterworld?’

Fabio laughed softly again, then came back to stand in front of her. ‘Shall I kiss you to prove I’m real? I’ll be happy to oblige once you’ve given me the formula.’

The pepper spray was burning a hole in Laura’s pocket. ‘I take it you know Zach is with me,’ she said. ‘Haven’t you spoken to him?’

‘He’s busy chasing phantoms.’

‘What?’

‘There’s no one here.’

‘Max-?’

‘Your brother’s fine, don’t worry.’

‘But that video ... the simus ...’

‘Simus can act as well as sapiens. Even young ones like Max.’

A short silence.

‘You know about Max?’

‘It’s my job to know. Just as it’s my job to protect them.’ He waved a hand towards the auditorium. ‘So let’s save Zach further anxiety. The formula, please.’

‘Given this little charade, how am I supposed to trust you? You wear fancy togs, you sport fancy gadgets, you drive a fancy car, and from what I’ve heard, you’ve

got a very fancy shot at the top of the corporate food chain.'

For the first time she saw a flash of real anger cross Fabio's face. 'Don't equate me with Fulgur!'

She crossed her arms in a stance which would have reminded herself of her mum, had she been looking. Big Mamas come in all shapes and sizes, and whatever else he was, Fabio was Human Resources, someone who saw himself as both connoisseur and mercurial seer, fundi of high-potential startups. Those green eyes of his began to gleam.

'Where I come from, we don't hurt children,' he said. 'You can trust me because Zach does. Because the point of this exercise is to free the simus from Fulgur's tyranny, eventually to find a workaround for the genetic defect. Because our interests, yours and mine, coincide.'

'Maybe.'

'Laura, it's a rare and wonderful privilege to witness a major paradigm shift. Believe me, right now I wouldn't be anywhere else in the scheme of things.' There was no mistaking the fervour in his voice. 'I would never-never-do anything to endanger a single simu.' The almost manic passion of the man. 'You're very young to be a leading actor, and younger still to be an agent of transformation-a fundamental transformation of human life. But it's what Zach wants.'

She nodded, discomfited by the tightness in her throat, the proximity of tears.

'Perhaps I'd best show you.' He indicated his wrist. 'Be prepared for a shock.'

'More shocking than resurrection from the dead?'

She met and held his gaze. 'You've changed,' he said almost grudgingly.

Annoyed at herself for wanting his approval, she became testy. 'Zach isn't the only person chasing phantoms.' Let him beg a little for it. 'You, dear Fabio, need to reprogram your Ouija board.'

'My what?'

‘Wow. You mean there’s actually something I know that you don’t.’

‘Plenty, I daresay.’

Damn those eyes! ‘Then plug this into your *motherboard*: there’s no serum.’

‘Quite a wicked roll you’re on. Under the circumstances.’

‘I’m not joking.’

He heard out her explanation, then muttered what could only be a colourful phrase in Portuguese. ‘The wily bastard,’ he added.

‘Who?’

‘Your dad. Jesus, it’s always the quiet ones.’

Without further preamble he played his fingers over his wrist, which by now was making her insanely curious. In an instant, however, the present was forgotten, jolted into a sort of retrograde amnesia by the panorama which unfolded before her, a panorama at once utterly alien and achingly familiar, though glimpsed only for a split second at the smouldering ruins. It was as if she were gazing upon a vision of all the selves she was and could have been, laid out in light. Shock didn’t begin to cover it. Nor could she know that this was a baptism very like the immersion Lev would give Zach from a tent in the midst of a blizzard, his however a living singularity in sound.

Later she wouldn’t be able to guess how long she stood there, the narrated self of before and during and after compressed to infinite disorder. Gradually she became aware of Fabio’s voice, at first distant and watery, then growing stronger as she began to surface.

‘Consciousness is fundamental to the cosmos, and indistinguishable from it. It’s always a matter of concern when a sentient race seems bent on self-destruction, as localised as the event may be initially. Your physicists are just beginning to understand the concept of entanglement.’

‘Who are you?’ Laura repeated in a whisper, still awed by a cognitive overload approaching the seizure threshold.

‘In all essentials I’m as human as you. Beyond that there’s no answer I can give you which would make sense, not in your language, not without the mathematics. Sometimes, of course, there have been references to angels and the like.’

‘Please, whatever you do, don’t tell me that my grandfather’s right after all!’

His sultry laugh. ‘Religion is the infancy of self-awareness. What an impatient lot you homo sapiens are.’

‘You mean-‘

‘I mean that Zach, and the simus generally, must be protected, and nurtured, or humans will find themselves in an evolutionary deadend. Not for the first time, need I add, on your world.’

Laura’s disorientation was ebbing. ‘Yeah, we learned about the Neanderthals in school. Some people think they were smarter than us.’

‘Have you seen pictures of those metal branks once used to bridle slaves and heretics and scolds?’

‘A kind of iron mask?’ Laura asked, puzzled by the apparent irrelevance of Fabio’s question.

‘Intelligence takes many forms. Sometimes it can be a cage-a stifling, torturous, inescapable mind cage-just like such primitive devices. Believe me, smart, even brilliant as you sapiens can be, you need the simus. They’re your future.’

‘Then what about Mateus? Was he really your brother?’

There was no answer.

‘Fabio?’

‘Fabio?’

Where had he gone? Her sight now close to normal, Laura caught a glimpse of shadows at the periphery of her vision, caught shadows and whispers, then felt certain she was being watched, but when she shone the torch into every corner

and alcove of the lobby, aim wobbling, pulse jumping, the only oddity she found was a vintage zoetrope, still intact, affixed in a niche not far from the staircase. But no Fabio.

If no one was here, she could call out for Zach.

She didn't call out for Zach.

She did, however, refresh her memory, and for one canted moment saw him as she'd first seen him-late for class, leaning into the wind, indifferent to the sheeting rain as if it were no more than planes of grainy light, unsmiling. He lifted his head and his eyes passed over her. 'Look at *that*,' Olivia breathed, clutching Laura's arm. He stopped-she now realised that he must have been able to hear-and regarded them. Olivia preened at the library window, too self-absorbed to catch the sudden lash of sleet in his eyes before the shutter closed.

In the long Arctic to come it would have devastated Laura to see their colour darken almost to crow-black, clouded by pain.

As she made her way towards the theatre doors, steeling herself for the unlikely, the improbable, surely the impossible, she heard, or thought she'd heard, *keep telling him*-words now so intimate that the threshold between hearing and remembering and confabulating, between herself and the other, seemed as elastic as nilas, that thin, transparent crust of sea ice which bends rather than fractures under pressure. If she repeated the words fast enough, they flowed into one another like frames of a film. Or she could drawl them to a near standstill, so that each sound loosed itself from its auditory moorings. Upon immersion in freezing water a mammal undergoes a powerful autonomic reflex, the diving response. Vital signs-breathing, heartbeat, peripheral blood circulation-diminish to a near-death state.

Keep. Telling. Him.

Her dad had been the one to test the ice on the pond before they were allowed to skate. 'I've seen totally unnecessary fatalities during my stint in A&E,' he'd explained. His ardour for exactitude impelled him to add, 'Sometimes, though, we'd get lucky. If you're young and fit, and especially if you keep your head above water, you can survive hypothermia for up to an hour. Once, a boy's arms froze to the ice, and we managed to resuscitate him. But don't count on it. Usually, you die.'

Zach, do you hear me? I'm not going to let the ice have you. No matter what it takes.

*

Laura couldn't put it off any longer. Her stomach cramping, and her mouth beginning to fill with spit, she placed her ear against the narrow, almost non-existent gap between the double doors. There was nothing she could make out, certainly no murmur of voices. Her own breathing seemed exceptionally loud. With her free hand she patted the bulge in her pocket like a talisman. She'd decided not to go in brandishing a pistol. Keep something back for the last length, Janey always insisted.

Laura swallowed, tightened her sticky grip on the torch, cautiously pushed the right-hand door open no more than a finger's breadth, and listened again. Still only silence. In just such a silence she'd found two rows of corpses lined up like inflatable dolls. In just such a silence the screen had burst forth with an impossible silent movie. In just such a silence a dead Fabio had appeared behind her in the lobby. She would torch this place herself once she and Zach (and Max?) were away.

After a quick glance over her shoulder, she nudged open the door and sidled through, her beam wavering in sync with her qualms. Perhaps it would have been best not to advertise her presence after all. She paused, nervously scanning the rows of seats. As before, the torch fell short of adequate, its light swallowed by the rococo folds of darkness. There was a stale, yeasty smell to the air; a morning-after smell. Her sense of walls breathing, cramped limbs stretching, was very strong, and into her imagination came a brazen rumble of laughter. Told you before, better know what you're doin'. The past, sugar, never lies down meekly.

Laura moved forward towards the top step, the memory of those haunting, silenced faces never more substantial. She'd glimpsed them in dreams, sometimes. Sometimes she'd caught sight of them from the corner of her eye. But over the years she'd become adept at ignoring what she didn't want to think about, didn't want to remember. Sometimes.

Max wouldn't end up like the boy they'd found in the factory.

Perhaps because she was afraid-or just *perhaps*-she was suddenly seized with the

desire to thumb her nose at this stupid theatre and this stupid world and all the stupid, insane, incomprehensible, pointless deaths stretching generation upon generation back to a troupe of flea-bitten apes. She descended several steps, aimed the torch at the blank screen, and with her right hand in the shaft of light, formed a deliciously grotesque shadow puppet.

‘So there!’ She giggled, wagging the hooked nose.

A large bird swooped from above to peck at the nose. It missed and struck Laura’s temple, a hot, sharp, staggering blow. With a cry she dropped the torch, which rolled out of sight. Not that it would be missed: to the stinging slap of a saltwater breeze, the raw smell of gutted fish and rancid blubber, the screen came to terrifying life. *Keep telling him.* In a split second Laura’s thoughts crossed the stimulus barrier to forever, vivid images of Zach flashing before her eyes.

*

They faced each other in the gloom of the projection booth, where Fabio had tracked Zach. Any equipment had been stripped out long ago, leaving truncated cables, split tubing, and jagged holes to attest to haste rather than regard. Despite the observation window, oppressive dark red walls and a low ceiling shrunk the proportions of the room, though it was in fact much larger than standard for a time when cinema owners were anxious to cram in as many viewers as possible into an auditorium. Flakes of paint and chunks of plaster lay in untrodden dust, the way an ancient burial chamber is no longer of interest once plundered. Several times Zach eyed the overhead projector ducts, unable to shake off the feeling of being watched through mammoth binoculars, and made no objection when Fabio switched his pencil torch to full power.

‘Where’s Max?’ Zach asked angrily after hearing out Fabio’s brief explanation.

‘At my flat gorging on pizza and crisps and some arcane delicacies like marshmallow almond-crunch liquorice ice cream, if I’ve got that right. All the stuff his mum won’t buy. I set him loose in the aisles-virtual, mind you-of my favourite online grocery.’

‘You’re out of your fucking skull! There was no reason to stage this farce.’

‘It’s worked, hasn’t it?’ Fabio grinned his grin. ‘Come on, a few hours of anxiety

are a small price to pay for the formula. I wish it could always be this easy.’ He sneezed once, then twice more. ‘Jesus, this room is dusty. And look at you, nearly naked and shivering. Let’s find Laura and get out of here before you catch a chill. Has she got the formula, or have you left it in a pocket?’

Hugging himself, Zach rubbed one bare foot along his calf, but the friction generated little warmth. Of a sudden the streaks of dirt on his leg, the clump of dust hanging from his big toe, the sartorial elegance of his paisley silk boxers-the irony of Fabio’s machinations-struck him as supremely funny, and he thumped his foot to the ground and began to laugh. ‘Formula? What formula?’

‘What do you mean?’ Despite the note of confusion in Fabio’s voice, there was something, the sideways flicker of his eyes, the timing maybe, something Zach couldn’t put a name to, but *something*, which stirred his disquiet. Then he caught the flash of light in the observation window, OK, Fabio had merely seen it first.

‘That’s a torch,’ Fabio said. ‘Laura must be down there.’

They crowded before the dingy pane of glass, almost opaque with dirt and fly specks. Distastefully Fabio brushed the desiccated corpses from the narrow sill. ‘Where do they all come from?’

An instant later he was shoved aside. Zach drew back and made a fist. The glass shattered as much from the impact of his cry as his blow. ‘No! Laura!’ Then, knuckles bleeding, he catapulted from the room. Fabio moved to the broken window and gazed down at the scene below, a smile on his lips. By the time Zach reached the auditorium, the future would have vanished without a trace. And even if he’d glimpsed a figure, he’d have seen what his mind told him to see-an attacker with a large backpack, maybe a cape. Yet no marks or wounds, the kind of puzzle Zach himself might have appreciated under other circumstances. In preparation for an emergency call, Fabio removed his mobile from a pocket and turned to leave. He didn’t want Zach wondering at the delay, though there was really no need to hurry.

*

Laura watches as Zach kneels by her sprawled body. How beautiful he is, those magic eyes, that hair, the tender arc of his back, she finds it hard to breathe. Watches as Fabio comes dashing up. Watches as Zach tries to find a pulse. ‘She’s not breathing. Oh god, she’s not breathing.’ Watches as Fabio shakes his head.

'I'm sorry ... so fucking sorry ... What happened? All I saw was a flash of light.' Watches as he flips open his mobile and keys in a number, touches Zach's shoulder, speaks. Watches as Zach bends to begin artificial respiration.

'Come on, Laura,' Zach says, 'breathe. Just breathe. We're getting help.'

Laura is still watching when she feels the first feathery touch on her face. She holds out an arm. It's beginning to snow, light snowflakes which soon thicken and obscure the screen.

Chapter 48

‘You are here to become that Corvus,’ the birdman says.

Zach shrugs off his hood, the wind slicing through his jaggedly shorn hair as though determined to bareblade him. He misses Stella terribly; get real, she’d have told this creature with an earthy laugh. It’s easy to picture the flash of her scissors, clipping the overzealous wings.

Pani thrusts his chin forward like a stolid little wooden nutcracker, the Christmas ornament sort. ‘Mr Bird,’ he says, ‘what’s an avatar?’

‘Pay no-’ Zach says, but the birdman interrupts. ‘One of your spirit selves. Come, I’ll show you.’ At a flick of his wrist, the dragon pillar reproduces a solemn, mussed-hair, chipped-tooth likeness of Max, vivid as ever despite the amnesiac snow. Zach grabs for Pani, who wriggles free to run across the circle and press his face against the ice. Surprised, ‘It’s not cold at all.’ And then, excitedly, ‘I can hear him!’

‘Pani, don’t,’ Zach says. ‘He’s not real, it’s a trick.’ Moving to draw the boy away, he stops, not at the whisper of a remembered voice, not at the unfurling of wings, not even at the birdman’s raised hand, but at the change in Pani himself.

‘He’s calling me,’ Pani says.

‘No!’ Hastily Zach steps backwards, hoping that this will reverse whatever has been set in motion. But as the air around him glitters, Pani continues to fade. ‘Pani, look at me! Pani!’

For a moment it seems to work. Transparent as frost on glass, Pani throws a glance over his shoulder, then fetches halfway round. Ice can carry sound with astonishing clarity, even over great distances.

Play your music, Zach.

A gust of wind blows loose snow across Zach’s face, obscuring his vision with the dazzle and sting of a prism ground to fine powder. Through a prickle of tears he sees the snow rime to Pani, rendering him as delicate as wind chimes, as fine-

blown as a crystal bauble. Indistinct now except for his fiery, speaking eyes, he makes no attempt to speak, but the supplicating notes of a clarinet tremble in Zach's ear.

'Don't-' Zach breaks off, fearful, as he's always been fearful, of a future riven by fearful symmetry. After a moment he ventures a hesitant 'Pani,' then falters once more. He's right to fear. Pani is shaking his head, colour and texture returning to his skin, while Max, a grieving and lonely and vulnerable Max, is beginning to waver, waver and dim.

Let It Be

'Weigh your choices carefully,' the birdman says.

Oh yes, carefully. Fulgur uploads carefully selected participants in the rehabilitation trials, each a volunteer with full parental consent. All other individuals a facilitator will encounter are modules carefully designed and programmed for verisimilitude.

Zach chooses not to wring the birdman's neck, most carefully. After brushing phantom hair from his eyes with a small, bitter laugh, he scoops up a handful of snow for one last snowball, but the crystals are too cold to compact. Without taking his eyes from Pani, he lets the snow trickle from his hand. He lets it trickle until the boy is gone, leaving only a memory to shimmer against the outspread wings.

*

Zach learned early on that adults wield secrets like swords, a will to power. The real childhood secret, the thing to do, is not to play the game. He reminds himself of this dictum at the sound of wings, the wind plunging its cold steel into his gut as he cranes his head to watch the figures vanish into the clouds. Their spokesman, however, remains behind as if Pani's death-and it certainly feels like a death-is just a practice drill with wasters.

'Not curious what they're up to?' the birdman asks.

'Not particularly.'

'Not even if I tell you they're meeting with Lev?'

‘Not even if you tell me they’re meeting with Laura.’

‘There’s no need for that. You may not believe me, but I’m on your side.’

‘Then prove it. Find her.’

‘Lev didn’t tell you?’

‘Tell me what?’

The birdman spreads his wings, and for a moment Zach thinks that he’s about to take flight, leaving him, Zach, to ... to do what exactly? Wander aimlessly, hopelessly, till he stumbles and falls into a lead and drowns, till he *throws* himself into one, till in any case, and inevitably, the ice gets him. But under the transept of those vaulted wings, the birdman shakes his head in an unmistakable, and possibly universal, signal of denial. ‘I regret-’ His wings flutter, fold, and he begins again. ‘Look, whatever Lev may have said, or not said, no qliworld is deathproof.’

Zach says nothing. The air smells of insomnia, nights and nights of brutal, shivering sleeplessness.

‘Those Levellers.’ The wind makes it difficult for Zach to tell if the birdman has sighed. ‘Though we sometimes cooperate, they have their own agenda.’

‘Everyone has an agenda. At least Lev is no murderer.’

‘We may kill, but we don’t murder.’

‘Oh really? You must have an interesting definition of murder.’

‘What we do, we do for good reason-very good reason.’

‘I’ve already heard your so-called reason for murdering-pardon me, *killing*-Laura. It was, you, wasn’t it, who killed Stella? And six-six, damn you!-of her companions. Was that one reason or seven separate ones?’

‘The derelict cinema.’

‘I promise you, if I ever get the chance, I’ll burn it to the ground.’

‘You’ll get the chance, much sooner than you think, and *I* promise you, you won’t.’ Laura’s chain reappears in the birdman’s hand. He tosses it up a few times, where it catches the light. ‘As I said, we prefer to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Sometimes the well-meaning do great harm. Yes, Stella was a friend of yours, and yes, she was a friend to certain Janus, but ultimately she’d have had no place in her belief system for Corvus.’

‘So you killed her.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the others?’

‘A splinter group in the making.’

‘Nonsense! Simus don’t obstruct each other.’

Now the sigh is audible, deliberately so. ‘Just a few seconds ago you said it yourself: everyone has an agenda. Even cognoscens girls don’t like to be spurned. And especially not for a sapiens.’

‘Jessica? Surely you can’t mean Jessica?’

‘A shame that someone so gifted would chose to manipulate shamelessly. Stella had no idea what was happening.’

‘You should have let me deal with it!’ Zach turns and faces into the wind, its steely edge carving his anger into a monument to his own failings. The birdman seems impervious to the cold.

‘Hardly impervious. There are worlds and worlds on which I shiver.’

‘No ice in your veins? Tell me, what did you do with the bodies?’

‘We’re not barbarians.’ He dangles the pendant, swinging it back and forth, back and forth, almost nervously, almost-if the notion weren’t ridiculous-to calm himself. ‘Look into your own nature, look deep within, before claiming that a cognoscens is incapable of killing.’

The wind flings itself against the crow-embossed column, which rings as though

the ficta were inscribed as accidentals in the ice.

Of course. 'You're cognoscens, aren't you?'

The birdman encloses the pendant in the palm of his hand, then removes his mask and the two of them study each other.

'I'm not ready for wings,' Zach says.

'There are other ways to cross the ice.'

'Which ice?'

'The ice of time?' The birdman's tone is mocking, yet gently so, and Zach is reminded of Pani probing the frozen surface of the polynya with his harpoon.

'Who doesn't regret his terrible mistakes? Who doesn't want to go back and make things right? If your wings can do that, then I'll accept their weight. Only tell me how to find Laura.'

Zach's eyes follow the trajectory of the necklace, flinching at the burst of radiance as it enters the column. On a plain dark, waste, and wild, it would blind him; here in the white forever of the Arctic, he bows his head and shivers; shivers like a sail drawing strength from the wind.

'You have your wings, Corvus.'

*

Ben is chasing fireflies.

Mark and Zadie are arguing.

Sean is whittling a reed.

Stella is kneading bread dough.

Pani is adding a cheeky grin to a snowman.

*

The great wings open to the gathering light. How magnificent they are, how fearsome. What must it be like to soar? Childhood's dream, yet Zach knows that dragons too can fly. He sends his gaze once more out onto the ice. In a last attempt at a warm start, he mutters the abort code. Another bout of trembling accompanies his silent message to Lev. *Play your music*: the voice is Lev's is the birdman's is Laura's is Corvus. There can be no evading this, his diabolus. Without another word he raises the clarinet to his lips. He fills his lungs the way Sean taught him so long ago. Laura, he thinks, or perhaps whispers. If the birdman utters an incantatory phrase, Zach doesn't hear. He is listening for time's torturous tritone. He plays. He plays, and fearing, steps forwards into the column, forwards into the codes beyond code, into that strange and wonderful theatre of living where he feels the first feathery touch on his face. It's beginning to snow, light snowflakes which soon thicken and obscure the ice.

*

Laura refreshes her memory, and for one canted moment sees him as she first saw him-late for class, leaning into the wind, indifferent to the sheeting rain as if it were no more than planes of grainy light, unsmiling. He lifts his head and his eyes pass over her, then he smiles, a slow and dazzling smile, a smile to stop the clockwork of her heart, to blind the watchmaker of the gods, to fibrillate time itself.

'You're wearing the chain.'

'Of course, you know I never take it off.' She glances at the countertop, but it's too late to conceal Max's toy gun. 'Where have you come from? I didn't hear you at all.'

He waves a hand towards the double doors. 'I was checking out the auditorium. You were supposed to stay put.' He points to the gun. 'What are you doing with that silly thing? Do you want to get yourself killed?'

'Have you found them?'

'Only Fabio. But Max is OK, he's not here.'

Laura stares at him in some consternation. 'Zach, you're acting very odd. First the chain, now this. You know Fabio's dead.'

‘No, it was one of his less endearing ruses. It’s a long story ...’

They both look round at the sound of footfalls. Fabio clatters down the staircase from the upper level, brushing a cobweb from his hair. ‘Bah, this place is filthy.’

‘A ghost ought to expect a few spiders,’ Laura says dryly.

‘I see you’ve found her, Corvus,’ Fabio says with his usual infuriating glint.

‘Good. It’s about time.’

*

Corvus ex machina

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