

FUTURE IMPERFECT

Babette Gallard

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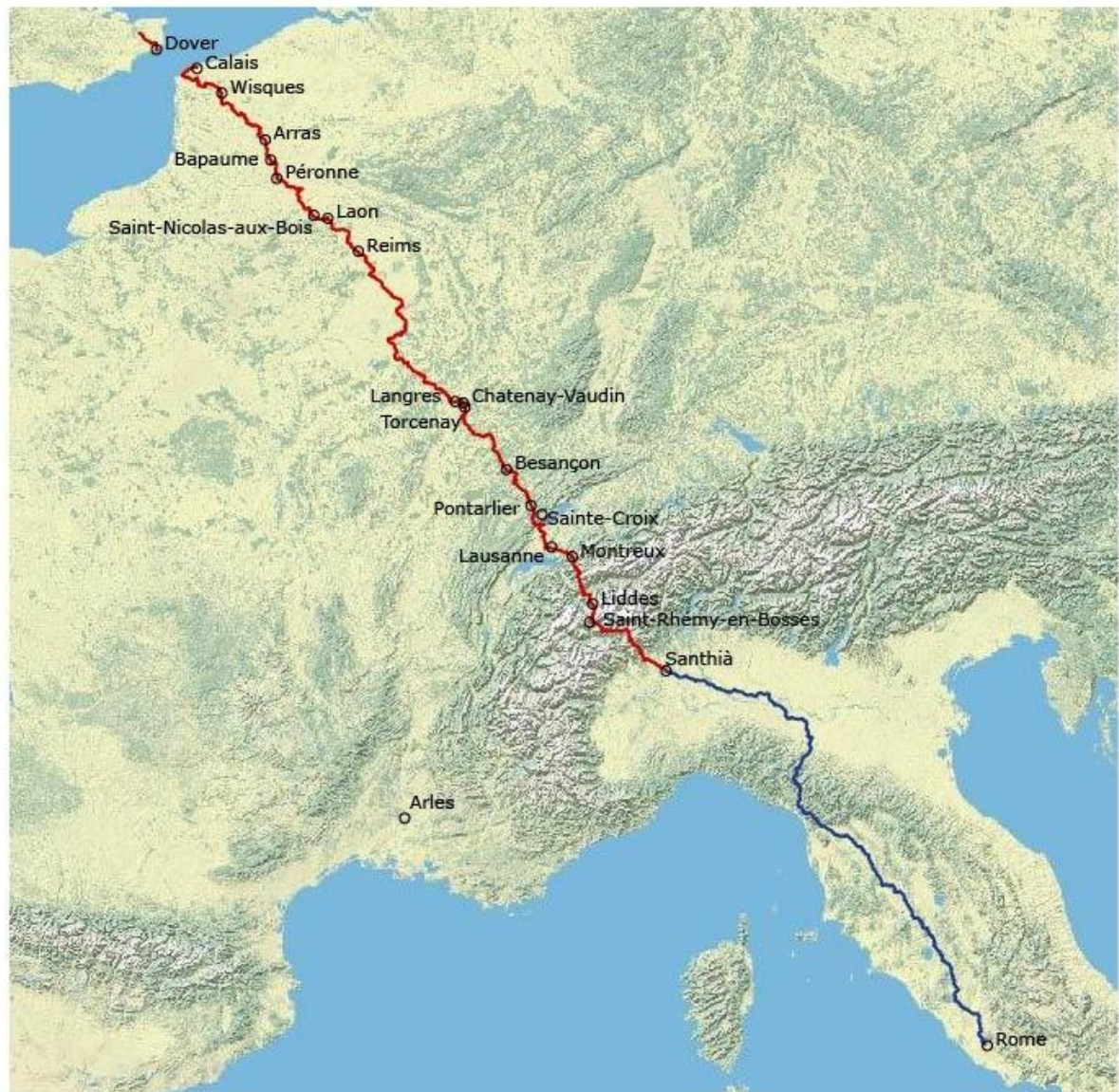
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Alice	Storyteller in Parma
Alma	Member of the Savoyard living in Fenis Castle
Anna	Marc's mother
Andrew	Rosa's son
Arnaud	Marc's father
Ayo	Jana's daughter
Beatrice	Leader of Femto (a resistance organisation) in the region of Langres
Ben	Member of Femto
Brigitte	Leader of an underground community in Arras
Charles	Femto member
Claire	Wife of Thomas
Filou	Ben's son
Franz	Friend of Helen and Isha
Helen	Isha's wife and Jana's mother. A retired psychiatrist
Isha	Helen's wife and Jana's mother. A retired architect
Jana	Helen and Isha's adopted daughter
Jean	Femto member
Lauren	Femto member
Mafi	Savoyard guide
Marc	Arnaud's son
Mathieu	Savoyard guide
Rosa	Franz's daughter
Scheherazade	Jana's avatar name
Simone	Member of an underground community in Arras
Thomas	Sells the Maxwell to Helen and Isha
Tomasso	Founder of Santhià in the Great Swamp
Xiris	Jana's digistant



“A place is a story, and stories are geography, and empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a storyteller’s art, and then a way of travelling from here to there.”

— Rebecca Solnit

Man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself.

—Rachel Carson

Prologue

The streets are a spider's web of new tributaries. Everything is underwater. Don't worry about us, but nothing is the same anymore.

I was working at home when Mum's message came through. I tried to reply, but the link was down, which happened all the time. It was mid-morning, and the sudden silence made me realise that the weeks of rain had finally stopped. Well, not complete silence because Ayo was whimpering in the background. Her way of warning me before the real bellowing began, usually about ten or fifteen minutes later.

With the rain gone, the sun was burning through the windows, and I could feel my eyes getting heavier in the heat. I'd been working since dawn, and here I should add that back then I was Virtual Reality Illustrator, or VRI.

Dip the temperature, I thought to Xiris, my digistant. Give me a five-minute exercise routine before Ayo wakes up completely.

The usual morning session?

Yes, that'll do.

Your energy levels are low. The easement option would serve you better.

I was on my third set of easement exercises when I changed direction and saw the man sitting on a low wall across the street from my house, staring straight at me, his clothes a mix of too big and too small, darks faded into greys. How long have you been there, I wondered, though it wasn't a complete surprise because I'd seen him before, dodging between the trees and the liftshare shelter where he must have been living. I don't know why, but this time he started to walk across the street towards me.

"What do you want?" I shouted, even though I'm sure he couldn't hear. Anyway, it didn't matter because Ayo had woken up. I ran to the back of the house where she was in our bedroom, pulling at the bars of her cot as if it was a prison, and I was her jailer. Then I took off my t-shirt and lay down beside her on my bed.

I couldn't tell you how long I slept, but when I woke, the sun through the skylight above was higher than before, and Ayo was snoring softly in my ear. Then, hoping we'd been there long enough for the man to give up and find someone else's doorstep to stand on, I scooped her up and went back into the hallway to see if I was right.

He was standing in front of the security camera, looking straight through as if he could see me on the other side. I looked back at him, thinking how the tinted lens made his brown eyes seem emerald green. Of course, I could have left him there. No one in their right mind

takes in a migrant who could be dangerous and diseased, it's against the law to help them, but then I remembered what Helen had said in her message.

"Nothing is the same anymore," I whispered to Ayo, then opened the door.

The man was about my age. He told me his name was Patrick, and because he didn't attack me or try to steal my things, I gave him some food and listened when he told me about where he'd come from and what had happened to his family. After he'd left, with a blanket I'd given him, I messaged my parents.

Come home.

Before that day, I had been an ordinary person like anyone else here, living a safe distance from the disaster zones and believing that the people who knew best would sort out the mess. Of course, there were counterarguments and protests, but for me, it was a just big noise and so it was easier to stop listening.

I'll never know why the man chose me, or even if he did. Perhaps he stood outside ten different doors before I opened mine, but I sent that message to my parents because I didn't want to lose my family the way he had, or my home for that matter. At a minimum, I wanted us to be together when the dominoes started to fall.

Ayo is still too young to pick out the truth from the lies, so the story I'm going to tell you is my legacy; my version of what happened to us and other people like us, based on messages from my parents, details I've been told about and what I saw for myself. A patchwork of fact, supposition and imagination.

The man stood outside my door on April 29, 2050.

I was a 27-year-old woman.

Ayo was eleven months old.

My name is Jana.

Helen and Isha are my parents.

Once upon a time...

...two women, Helen and Isha, are trying to get back to Britain to be with their daughter, Jana, and grandchild, Ayo. Isha sends Jana a message just before leaving their home in Arles, in the south of France, where they have retired.

Everything's going to ratshit here, floods and people panicking, but we'll be with you by tomorrow evening, at the latest.

Love you.

I-Mum.

In fact, the journey takes two days, two hours, and forty-five minutes longer than usual due to heat-buckled train tracks, cancelled taxis, hard-to-find liftshares and people who suddenly seem less helpful than they used to be. The last liftshare dumps them on a road that leads up onto a rocky outcrop, where it stops, but not for the view. Helen and Isha can't believe what they are seeing, even though they had heard something about it in the news a few days before. Thousands of tents are huddled like multi-coloured sheep around the port of Calais, now a much smaller area since the sea level had risen.

"Do you think all those people down there are waiting to leave?" Helen asks.

"Some, but the rest haven't got anywhere else to go." The man, a pale, paunchy mid-lifer, his accent English, must have walked up behind them. "Are you going home too?"

"Yes, to be with our daughter," Isha replies. "And you?"

"Here to help."

Helen doesn't respond. It's unusual, but she can't think of anything to say. Perhaps it's the sight of that vast ersatz city, or that she just feels so drained by the journey.

"The Channel Tunnel entrance flooded weeks ago, and now there's only one Channel Craft left," the man continues.

"How often does it run?" Isha asks.

"It depends on fuel and the weather, but you've got Immigration to get through first."

"Looks like we'd better get down there then," Helen says finally.

The man doesn't follow them, though Helen and Isha hear him shout from the top of the hill a few minutes later. "Keep your faith in the Lord."

At the bottom, nothing is the way Helen and Isha had expected. After negotiating a path through the sea of tents, they are confronted by the sight of a huge metal cage and a sign that tells them it is the Immigration Processing Centre, or IPC.

When they find the entrance, they see thousands of people lined up in multiple orderly serpentine inside. After some deliberation about what to do next, Helen and Isha join the end of one of them. They don't get to the front of the queue until sunrise the next day. Feeling both exhausted and desperate, Helen is finally able to hold out her right hand with the underside of her wrist exposed for the IDent scanner beam, while a Border Force officer, in a metal box off to one side, watches and then nods when the light changes from orange to green.

"Proceed."

She breathes a sigh of relief and then turns to Isha, who is standing behind her. "I'll log us in for the tickets and wait for you by that hut over there."

"I was beginning to think we'd never get here." Isha smiles and holds out her wrist.

"Inadequate."

She hears the word, but without immediately understanding its implication, then looks at her wrist, which is glowing red under the ID scanning beam. "Hen! There's a problem."

Helen is back in a single bound.

"I'm a British citizen and have been since I was born," Isha says, turning to the officer. "So what's inadequate about that?" She points to the red light.

"The revised regulations are clear." His tone is laconic. "British citizenships obtained after the year 2000 are inadequate. Anyone with less than fifty years of citizenship will be returned to their country of origin."

"But her parents got their British citizenship in the 1970s, which makes her British too," Helen says.

The officer's eyes flick from left to right as he reads the text in his vision. "But she didn't apply for citizenship."

"Because she didn't need to, cretin!"

"According to the new regulations, she did. I can Nmail you the link for further clarification if you have any queries."

"Inadequate! This is completely illegal!" Helen shouts back. "I'll speak to a lawyer the instant we're on British soil. And in the meantime—" she grabs hold of Isha's arm to pull her forward.

"The beam is a taser."

Isha searches for the source of the voice and turns round to see an elderly woman, more or less their own age, standing slightly further back in the queue. "Let's hear what she has to say."

Helen lets go of Isha's arm and reaches the woman first. "Thanks for the warning, but can you also tell me why bona fide British citizens like my wife aren't being allowed through?"

"New rules." The woman looks at her and shrugs heavily. "Too many people over there already, rioting and looting, and last week someone tried to blow up a Director compound."

"How do you know?"

"My son's in London."

"But if everything's so desperate, why are all these people queueing to go back?" Isha asks, echoing the woman's hushed tone.

"France for the French, Britain for the British, and hell knows where for the rest." She waves a finger in the direction of the tents. "It's why they call this place no-man's land."

"But what happens to all the ones who can't get through Immigration?"

"How should I know?" The woman shrugs again. "There's a query on my IDent, and it's my third time here already, but I'll swim over if I have to." Then she turns away and sits down, her contribution obviously over.

Helen, Nmail, May 15, 2050

Jana, darling, I know you've already had an Ish-style precis of events, but I thought it might help if I added my version too, and Ish agrees that you need to know the whole story.

The evening we got here was difficult, especially after the long journey. We were both exhausted, and even though we'd been told to join the IDent validation queue, we needed a break, so we climbed back up the rock where we'd been dropped off first. The sun was setting by then, and the incongruously beautiful sea of lights below reminded me of the fireflies we saw together in Japan; you can't have been more than five at the time, but I don't suppose there are any left now. Then, shortly after settling down on our piece of rock, the lights began to go on in what must have been Dover. So near and yet so far from you.

Calais port is Dante's Inferno in the flesh. Thousands of people crammed together in dreadful conditions. Children and elderly people left to fend for themselves while the other family members stand for hours in a place called the Immigration Processing Centre. It's horrible, but I can't help thinking it's about time some parts of the human race knew what it must have felt like to be cattle herded together for slaughter. Fortunately, a sizeable proportion of people seem to be getting through. We've seen them buying tickets for the one and only Channel ferry still operating—the tunnel is flooded.

Walking through Itinerant City, as Isha and I have dubbed it, is like walking through a cross-section of the entire world. More nationalities than I can name. Every colour and creed, but organically segregated into their respective groups, which says more about humanity than I ever could. Of course, you'll be wondering how we fit in here, or why I'm wasting time telling you about it when I could save the story until we're finally back together. Surely Immigration isn't an issue for British citizens like us? Well, not according to the world you and I know, but in this alternative world, Isha has been assigned to a group known as the Reclassifieds, a title so neoteric most people haven't even heard of it. I suspect the Directors keep the details under wraps for as long as possible, mainly because they seem to change their minds according to whichever pressure point has just erupted.

Jaja – strange how your baby name comes back to me in the worst of places, a comfort perhaps – as a fifth-generation British subject, I can walk through Immigration, have my IDent validated, buy a place on the Channel ferry, cross over to Dover and be with you about an hour later, public transport permitting. As the granddaughter of Ugandan Asian refugees, granted British citizenship in 1970, Isha, your mother and my wife, has been Reclassified as Expatriate British, which means she has to go back to Uganda, her so-called country of origin, where she has never even been.

When I understood what was happening, I asked myself what kind of monster arbitrarily separates families, lovers and friends like that? What would he or she look like if we met in the street or across a dinner table? But then it occurred to me that these so-called regulations are just one more AI algorithm, albeit originally written by a human.

Overpopulation

_____ = Less for the people who want it all

Limited resources

If Ish and I used fully integrated Nband digistants the way you do, we might be able to ask more questions about what's really going on, but I think it's too late for us to start now. Anyway, we're looking at all the options, and we'll let you know what we can do as soon as we know ourselves, but whatever happens, our mantra is that we'll get through this together. Please don't give up on us.

Kisses, hugs to both of you from Ish and, of course, from me.

H-Mum

When Patrick, the man, came into my house, I listened to him and understood what he said: you think you're safe here, but that's because you don't know what's coming. You're going to be like the rest of us soon. Your homes will be destroyed by rising seas. Rain will fall for months on end and then not at all. Animals and insects will disappear, and soon you'll have to fight for everything, especially food.

What a horror story, though I don't know why I was so shocked because I knew the script already. You can't change anything, I'd told myself, it is what it is, but we're going to live or die together, as a family.

I thought everything would be easier after that, but then Helen told me they couldn't cross the Channel because someone had revised Isha's nationality status. I imagined a filthy fat genie squatting to take a filthy fat shit on our dreams.

Decision

After a sleepless night in a taxi shelter, Isha goes in search of fresh water. When she comes back she waits for Helen to restart the conversation still hanging over them from the evening before.

“Thoughts?” Helen asks after finishing a cup of something muddy-looking. “Any changes to your plans for me?”

“I still think you should go back,” Isha replies. “I’ll stay here until we’re sure you’ve got a place on the ferry.”

“And then?”

“I’ll keep in touch and find a way to follow you later. The Directors can’t control everything.”

Helen flicks out the dregs. “Have you any idea of what you’re asking me to do?”

“I’m asking you to go back to be with Jana, as we promised,” Isha replies, her tone implying that she’s already repeated the phrase a hundred times before.

“No, you’re asking me to leave without knowing what’s going to happen to you!” Helen shouts back. “You heard what the woman said – France for the French, Britain for the British, and hell knows where for the rest. At least we know Jana is relatively safe in her own home, and she’s got French citizenship, so if all else fails she could come here. But what about you?”

“I’ll find a way,” Isha offers quietly, “but it’s not the priority now.”

Helen, who looks as if she’s going to retort, instead turns sharply and heads down the hill. Anger is her first and habitual reaction to what she can’t cope with or understand, and Isha knows how to respond. After an hour or so, she walks down to the port and, as if on cue, Helen’s dust-haloed silhouette breaks through the heaving crowd of people.

“I’m sorry.”

“I thought maybe you’d gone back up the rock again to find me, but I wanted to check here first.” Isha reaches for Helen’s hand, but she snatches it away.

“I panicked.”

“Why? What happened?”

“The man we first met, do you remember? I saw him again, and he was talking to a group of people waiting outside the IPC.”

“What was he saying?”

“Something about validated British citizens having only three days to get their crossing confirmed, or risk being treated like all the rest.”

“Which means?”

“I don’t know, but the people seemed to be listening to him.”

“Desperate people will listen to anything.”

“So what are we? Calm and in control of our destinies?” Helen takes a deep breath before speaking again. “Ish, listen to me. I don’t know who he is, how he knows all this stuff, or why he isn’t in danger himself, but when I tried to ask him for more detail, he told me to have faith in the Lord, just like the first time.”

“He’s a religious crank.”

“Could be, but then I thought that maybe the Lord is a euphemism for a different kind of higher power.”

“You’re reading too much into the situation.” Again, Isha reaches out to take Helen’s hand, and this time she doesn’t resist. “We’ll get your ticket, and then you can go home to be with Jana without worrying about who or what the Lord might be.”

“I panicked,” Helen repeats. “I tried to bribe the Border Force officer to let you through. I offered him our stash of cytotox pills, but he refused.”

Isha’s shudder is visible. “Have you any idea how risky that is? He could have reported us already.” She draws a deep breath. “For fuck’s sake, Hen, why did you even ask him?”

“Because...” Helen sits down heavily and drops her head in her hands. “Because I can’t imagine waking up to a world without you.”

The silence slams like a door between them. When a dog barks nearby, Helen wonders if anger has a smell, perhaps like cordite or burning flesh. If it has, dogs would be the first to know. Locked in her thoughts, she only looks up when she hears Isha step forward to stand over her.

“If they arrest us, no one will go back to Jana. Did you think about that?”

“I’ve lived too long with you to imagine life without you,” Helen says quietly. “I can’t think any further.”

Isha walks to the edge of the outcrop and stares at the sea of tents below. If asked, she wouldn’t be able to say for how long she stood there, but the sun has set by the time she turns around, and Helen is curled up on the hard ground, asleep. “No one has the right to say who we are or who we can be with,” Isha says quietly, then lies down beside her wife.

Reconciled to the situation, Helen and Isha plan to stay one more miserable night sheltering in the robotaxi station while they try to work out what to do next, which means they need to buy food. An enterprising family has set up a kitchen next to the Hôtel de Ville, the town hall, now only a few metres inland and a prime location for selling food to people who are either boarding or leaving the Channel ferry.

Helen and Isha are standing patiently in the queue when, off to one side, a woman climbs onto a stack of crates and starts shouting. A few people look over, and some join the rapidly growing circle around her.

“I think we should come back later,” Helen says, but the crowd is already closing around them, an angry coagulate. Meantime, the woman is shouting even louder and punching her fists in the air.

Isha looks for a gap, or at least a thinning in the human wall. Across all the heads, she sees an older man approach the edge of the crowd, and a few people withdraw to let him in. “Come on!” She grabs Helen’s hand and forces her way through in his direction. It’s a long shot, a vain hope. People shove and push them, but the slight gap is just enough, and soon they are out on the other side. Next, they run along narrow streets, through gardens and between the pell-mell of tents that seem to grow in front of them as they run. Isha’s lungs are burning, and Helen is slowing behind her after covering less than a kilometre, but they make one last push to get back up on the peak of their by now favourite rocky outcrop, though this time they aren’t alone. A concert-hall-sized crowd of all ages and ethnicities is covering the entire area. Helen drops on her haunches, breathing hard.

“They’re heading for the town hall,” Isha shouts. “Look.”

Everyone turns to follow her gaze, their sharp intake of breath simultaneous. Helen watches the flood of humans proceed along the road, the sound of their feet thundering like storm waves beating on rocks. A sea tsunami roars like a beast, she thinks. A fracturing fission of sound that means everything is over; life, love and all the structures built around them, but if there is such a thing as a human tsunami, this is one.

Now the flood of people has surrounded the town hall, circling it like a moat. Doors are flattened and technology is trashed, shards flying out through the broken windows and falling as a carpet of colours over the black tarmac of the courtyard.

The siren comes next... wooo weew wooo... a mechanical bellow that Helen and Isha recognise from their last year in Arles. Crowd control, the Mayor had called it. For the safety

of French citizens, he'd added. Isha pulls Helen away and back out through the crowd. "I don't know why, but I think we need to get as far away from here as possible."

They run down the outcrop and then walk without speaking until they come to a village some five kilometres outside Calais. Helen's heart is still throbbing in her ears when Isha stops and points at a house. "I'm sure it's empty."

Helen stares at the pale blue shutters, one hanging aslant from a single hinge like a loose tooth. "Shouldn't we check first before going in?" She pauses to settle her voice. "I mean; it might have new owners."

Isha nods while she scans the garden and a door that might just be open. Abandoned houses have become the new normal as people gravitate towards the larger conurbations for work, access to food and a semblance of security. "No one would stay here for long," she says. "You wait here while I check."

Helen watches her wife drop low and run on tiptoes towards the door. You missed your vocation, she thinks. In another time, you would have either been in a SWAT team or an extremely efficient burglar.

"All clear!" Within the space of a few seconds, Isha has checked the windows and is now standing under the frame of the open door. "Long gone, whoever they were."

When Helen follows her in, she sees why Isha is so certain. The interior has been gutted, every serviceable piece of furniture removed. "Well, at least they left us a sink to wash in," Helen says as she glances into the bathroom.

"It was the first thing I checked." Isha smiles. "And before you ask, there's water too."

Helen, feeling suddenly and inexplicably exhausted, drops down to sit onto the edge of the bath. No one else knows her the way Isha does, and living without her could never have been an option. "Got to keep up the standards," she says in a tone vaguely reminiscent of her ex-military father's. "A good wash and shave as a minimum, whatever the circumstances."

Isha recognizes the signs. Helen is on the brink, so she smiles and wipes a finger across her wife's upper lip. "A little furry perhaps, but not enough for a razor."

Helen laughs and throws both arms up towards the ceiling. "But sir, you haven't checked my armpits."

Isha makes a play of examining the offending area, her face pulled into a mien of disgust. "Good God, Private Clayton, they're worse than a gorilla's. Then she kisses her crazy wife on the top of her crazy head. "Love you all the same."

The village is deserted, and most of the houses have been thoroughly scavenged, but Helen and Isha find some cushions to sleep on and a blanket that, as Helen says, doesn't look

as if someone had died in it. Even so, the situation isn't comfortable, and they haven't got much food, but at least the involuntary exile gives them time to think about what to do next.

After two days, Isha goes out onto the road and checks the immediate surroundings for anything or anyone who could be a risk.

"Good to go," she says to Helen when she gets back.

"Calais then," Helen replies, without a great show of enthusiasm. She is sitting on a wall enjoying the first rays of morning sunshine.

"I know, but where else can we buy the stuff we need?"

Helen nods slowly, one, two, three, and then looks over Isha's shoulder. Of course, she's right as she invariably is, her practical, wonderful wife. They had only brought a small shoulder bag for emergencies, with a toothbrush, toothpaste and a change of clothes. Enough to cope with any delays and not too much if they were robbed, but then someone changed the immigration laws, and now they had to equip themselves, though she isn't sure for what.

"Let's hope they have the shops we need," she says.

"Everyone's on the move now, love, and there will be people out there making as much profit as they can for as long as they can." Isha puts her arm around Helen and pulls her up onto her feet.

The sky is clear and the sun high when they finally set out from the village, and soon the sea is glistening in the distance. Given the circumstances, Isha feels inappropriately buoyant. "We could be on holiday."

But Helen isn't listening. "What's that?" she asks, pointing to a grey smudge woven into the otherwise perfectly blue sky.

Isha shrugs, her focus already on the next stage of their journey.

After a good half hour of walking they find the same small road that had led them up to the rocky outcrop the first time, and they continue to the top just as before, but this time the view is very different. The city of tents has been transformed into huge piles of ashes, some of them still sighing out their last breath. The people are gone too.

"Is this what the Directors call Clearing?" Isha whispers.

"Perhaps they've been taken to different Holding Stations to get their applications processed," Helen says in an attempt to offer a more positive option. "It wasn't much of a life here, anyway."

"Let's get what we need and get out."

They pick their way down a small path scored into the hillside by the feet of the people who had shared the rocky summit with them only days before. They are heading in the direction of a small shopping mall when they pass the one remaining wall of the shop that used to sell food.

“Immigrés dehors, les français d’abords.” Isha reads the crudely painted black letters aloud. “French people first, immigrants out.”

Isha, Nmail, May 17, 2050

Hen gave you the first bit of bad news, and now it’s my turn to give you what I suppose is a 50/50 mix.

You know what the first part is. I can’t go back to the UK. I’m not resigned to it, but I think there’s really nothing I can do now, so I have to think of other solutions, which is where Hen comes in... this is so hard... I don’t know how to say it... but it has to be said, one way or another... she’s staying with me, which of course isn’t what we promised, but this is also where the good news comes in. We have a plan.

Hen spoke to Rosa this morning, and she says we can stay in Franzl’s chalet, which is perfect because no one goes there. It’s also too high for floods unless the entire world goes under, and then only an ark will save us. Plus, with the milder temperatures, we might even be able to grow some food, but the best, best part is that you can join us there.

Hen is already making plans and shouting over to me to tell you that it’s a much healthier place for Ayo, and she’ll love it the way you did when you were little.

Our plan is to walk there by following the Via Francigena, just like we did all those years ago, because it follows tracks and avoids principal roads where we could be stopped for an IDent check. The same goes for public transport, where we couldn’t even buy a ticket without being flushed out. And it will be romantic too!

If all goes well, which of course it will, we should be there in about eight weeks, so have a look at what flights are still operating so that you can join us as soon as we get there.

Stay safe.

Love you both,

I-Mum

So, Isha said their plan was to follow the Via Francigena, which requires some explanation. The first part has to be about the VF itself. According to Xiris, it was an important pilgrimage

route in medieval times that started in Canterbury, England, and then passed through France and Switzerland on its way to Italy. But in 2050, it is also an escape route for refugees flooding north and away from the extreme temperatures in the south because, just like Helen and Isha, they have to avoid major roads and the Border Forces that will be monitoring them.

You probably haven't yet got an impression of Helen and Isha as people, so I'll do that for you while I give you their backstory. First, imagine Helen in her mid-twenties, a pale Celtic skinned, short and slightly pear-shaped woman with a mane of black hair a lion would kill for and huge blue eyes. This Helen is standing under a flimsy bus shelter in France while the rain falls in oily cascades. Even with a high percentage of climate warming, summer is still shit in northern Europe. Waterproof boots would have helped, but someone told her walking sandals are better because they prevent blisters and let the feet breathe, though Helen is hobbling as if someone put grit in her socks, which could be the case because, on her bad days, Helen could antagonise a saint. Either way, she should know she's missed all the buses and that the gangly, dark-skinned young woman standing quietly beside her has too.

They stay there that for over an hour before Helen asks her, in bad French, if she thinks a bus will still come this late. The look on the other woman's angular face says she hasn't understood a word.

"You're English!" Helen shouts. "I might have guessed. Only the English join a queue without even asking what it's for."

"And only a member of the royal family talks the way you do," Isha quips. "I thought your lot had been banished years ago."

They haven't got much in common – they are both female and both live in London, but that's where it stops. Isha lives with her family in Hounslow and went to Cranford Community College. Helen lives in Chelsea and boarded at Roedean School. Despite their differences, they find a frigid church porch to shelter in together, and by dawn, Isha knows that Helen is walking to Rome along an ancient pilgrimage route called the Via Francigena.

"I need a break," Helen explains as the sun rises. "And my uncle needs someone to map the route and write about the experience. He's a publisher."

"I need a break, too," Isha replies. "From my family's expectations. Do you mind if I join you?"

They both need a break. Isha has qualified as an architect and is now taking time out for some European church-spotting before launching into a career. And Helen? Well, she had an episode of acute distress disorder during her final medical exams, after which the Dean gave her two choices: take time out or think of a new career.

Fine, they agree to walk together, and a few weeks later they are in Switzerland, near a town called Martigny or, to be more precise, they are in an orchard the morning after spending the night there without the owner's permission.

Helen needs rest after a brutal climb the day before, but a stone under the groundsheet has put paid to that, and she's in one of her truly poisonous moods when Franzl, the owner, unzips the tent. "Fuck off Uncle Alp!" Helen shouts. "Heidi's not here, and you shouldn't be either."

"What? Not even on my land where I've come to pick my apricots?"

His answer and mild manner are two of the three things that silence her. The other is Isha. "Let me deal with this."

Franzl is used to finding campers in his orchard because it is close to the main road. Sometimes they are pilgrims and sometimes not, but he always treats them kindly.

"Take these apricots and go," he says to Helen. "And be careful when you walk past the house further down. The dogs are demons."

"Could we help you instead?" Isha suggests. "To make up for trespassing, I mean."

This marks the beginning of a long friendship. Franzl's wife had already left him by the time Helen and Isha got there, but his daughter Rosa had stayed. After that, Helen and Isha visited them at least every other year and more frequently when I was old enough to enjoy the mountain walks with them.

Franzl has already died years before when Isha contacts Rosa to ask for help in 2050, but Rosa says that, of course, they can stay in his chalet. Franzl's chalet is so high and remote it had to be delivered in kit form by helicopter. It's well-hidden, too, by rocks and the last trees capable of growing at 2,400 metres, just off to one side of the Great Saint Bernard pass. He used to keep sheep there, often staying in his chalet for weeks on end and joking it was his office, but now it will be a hiding place for Helen, Isha, Ayo and me, which would have made him very happy if he had been there.

Jana, Nmail, May 18, 2050

Mums, I can't believe you're serious! Buy a car, find a safe liftshare, or bribe someone to keep quiet about who you are, but forget the walking. You'll never get there.

J

Helen, Nmail, May 19, 2050

We're not as fragile as you think.

Love you,

H-Mum

Then they walk

Helen and Isha, two women, fifty-eight and sixty, are about to walk to Switzerland because it seems to be their only option. They have bought what they think they will need for walking and occasionally sleeping out, though Helen hopes there won't be too much of that. As they try on their new kit, she wonders why Isha's clothes and backpack seem to fit while hers chafe and make her feel mildly ridiculous. She finally concludes that women of her shape aren't intended to walk further than a reasonably long pedestrian precinct, so no one has bothered with the correct measurements.

Their plan, Isha tells her, is to walk along the coast for a day or two and then join the Via Francigena near a town called Wisques. Helen is too confused and disoriented to question her.

The first walking days are short, often no more than four or five kilometres, but feeling like a hundred, to Helen. When the path takes them through stinking swamps, Isha explains that the sea-level rise has absorbed all the sewage systems.

"So we're walking through liquid shit," Helen says.

"Diluted shit."

Helen tries not to think about what has happened and focuses instead on news reports, though they are also profoundly depressing.

Greenland is officially green... A new food-distribution contingency plan has been agreed... Panic-buying a federal offence... Residents of Sussex have been limited to... Three children born in the last week, no survivors...

So they walk.

Then they sleep.

Then they wake.

Then they eat.

Then they walk.

Then they sleep.

Then they wake.

Then they eat.

Then they walk.

Then they...

At the end of the first week, Helen messages Jana.

I hate tents. One day, someone will find a medical name for the condition that makes people believe sleeping on stones, surrounded by bugs, is pleasurable. My suggestion is Illusionophoria.

Isha, Nmail May 16, 2050

Mahir, big bro, you're the only member of our family I can talk to who will understand how difficult this is for me. The British Directors won't let me back in. My status has been reclassified as an EB, Expatriate British, which leaves me with two choices. One, do as they say and go back to Uganda, where no one except our grandparents has ever been. Or two, ignore them and try to find somewhere safe to live that isn't in so-called GREAT Britain. Worse still, I've no idea how it's going to affect all of you.

Hen and I hadn't heard about the reclassification but perhaps you already have. I'm hoping that it only applies to people trying to return, but I don't know. The only thing I'm clear on is that I'm not going to Uganda, and Helen refuses to go back to GB without me, all of which means we'll be in a bureaucratic limbo until one set of Directors or another decides what to do with people like us. We're trying to work out a plan, and I'll keep you updated.

Please take care of yourself and the rest of the family. I'm so glad Mum and Dad aren't here to see what's going on. It would break their hearts.

Hugs,

Isha

Helen, Nmail May 18, 2050

Dad,

I hope you're doing fine and that you are well looked after. When I last spoke to Mrs Craig, she said the new legs made walking much easier, and you seemed chirpier. I'd planned to see you as soon as we were settled in with Jana, but we're still in France because Isha has some problems with her IDent validation.

Ask Mrs Craig to show you the images I sent of Ayo.

I'll be in touch soon.

Helen

WHAT HAVE I GOT TO LIVE FOR NOW?

Despite her pleas to remain, the last resident of Tuvalu, 80-year-old Iosefina, was forcibly removed this morning,

“What have I got to live for now?” she said. “I can’t farm here, I can’t farm on the mainland in Australia, and I haven’t heard from my daughter since she left.”

While Iosefina was heli-lifted out, a crew member referred to her “as not being worth the effort or the risk.”

Tuvalu is one of a small chain of islands in the Pacific Ocean. Rising sea levels have contaminated fresh groundwater sources and left only the tip of an area known as Niulakita exposed. Iosefina was found hiding in the small cave she said had been her home for the past six months.

Helen and Isha are following the Via Francigena the way they did over thirty years ago, which could be romantic, except that the world is falling apart, they are much older, and the sun is much hotter.

“If I were a pilgrim, I would have given up on God by now,” Helen says.

Tonight will be different, Isha thinks. Wisques is where we first met, and I’m going to find a hotel to celebrate. I wonder if she’ll remember.

Every French town, of whatever size, wears its commercial outer periphery like a dowager’s necklace, lumpy and ugly. The reduced commercial activity could have offered an opportunity to remove it, but the burghers of Wisques have other priorities, and now the buildings are uninhabited, apart from packs of stray dogs.

As they walk into the centre, Helen sniffs the air and smells decay. Most shops were rendered redundant by the tradernet years ago, so it’s no surprise to see their empty windows staring back at them now, but even the numerous restaurants and cafes—the last cohesive element in a community—have been reduced to a single shabby bar. When Isha points out the once imposing gothic chapel, Helen comments that its dilapidated state proves that religion has also become a side issue, and not a moment too soon.

“Do you remember when we went in there to see the wall paintings by François Mes?” Isha asks.

“I remember you insisting for so long that I finally gave in. Hard to believe anyone could find love in a place like this.”

Isha punches the air. “You remembered! But actually, there wasn’t much love. You said I was gatecrashing your party.”

They are walking side by side down the main high street when a young man barges straight between them and with such force that Isha lands hard on her backside. “*Dégagez d’ici, putain de migrants*,” he says.

“Fucking migrant,” Isha says, breathing hard. “I haven’t heard that in a long time, but this isn’t the place to start a debate. I’ll go back to the path on the edge of town and wait there while you do the food shopping. I think we’ll be camping somewhere tonight.”

The phantom is back. Helen thinks, as she crouches on her heels to relieve her sudden nausea and watches Isha disappear down a small side street. Xenophobia, racism, call it what you like, but the outcome is always the same. I’m invisible in the crowd while Isha stands out like a target.

“Ça va? Vous ne vous sentez pas bien?”

Helen looks up and sees a woman looking down.

“C’est peut-être la chaleur,” the woman says. *“Vous devriez rester à l’ombre. Je peux vous aider?”*

Yes, Helen thinks, it’s the heat, but not the kind you’re talking about. Would you be so attentive if my tan was deeper? She draws another deep breath and takes a step back into the shade of an awning. *“Oui, vous avez raison, mais voilà,”* she points up and smiles. *“C’est déjà mieux.”*

The woman smiles back and touches her arm. *“Oui... c’est difficile pour tout le monde. Mais surtout pour les personnes âgées.”*

Old people, Helen thinks. How’s that supposed to make me feel any better? She glances at her reflection in a window and notes the deep creases at the corners of her mouth and stripes of white in her hair.

When her head has cleared, and the nausea passed, Helen sets off to find the market. She finds a small cluster of tables with awnings in the central square. They are stocked with a motley collection of what looks like the last leftovers of someone’s cellar and what Helen assumes must be local garden produce, bug-scarred tomatoes and scabby lettuce slouching beside strips of beans. You look how I feel, she thinks.

“Des citrons?” she asks a man who is standing behind the nearest one.

“Là-bas.” He points to a stall, a few metres away.

This one is more hopeful, the range more diverse and the produce less tragic. The stall holder, a relatively young man with an odd yellow tinge in his eyes, watches Helen as she adds another warty tomato to the small pile of vegetables she has made in one corner of his table. Then she holds out her inner wrist for him to link into her IDent for the payment.

“Non! Pas comme ça!” he shouts.

Helen jerks her hand round into the small of her back, aware that he has attracted the attention of people passing by. Why refuse her payment? A pulse strikes up in her neck, and she wonders if he can see it.

“You’re English,” he whispers. *“We need to talk.”* He nods to a fellow stallholder, indicating he should watch the stall while he is away and then turns to Helen. *“Follow me.”*

Next, at a table in a corner of the only bar, he sits down and orders one coffee. Helen takes the chair opposite and waits for him to speak.

“That,” he points to Helen’s wrist, *“is like a red flag flying over your head. One more payment, and they’ll trace you, which I’m guessing you don’t want.”* He cocks his head to

one side, reminding Helen of an old rooster her mother had insisted on keeping in a corner of her otherwise immaculate garden. “And let’s not forget your designer Nband, quite stylish and expensive, but what happens when it links into the qloud? Have you thought about that?”

“I don’t know where you’re going with this.”

“Listen,” he sighs theatrically. “Your Nband is what links you into your Nmails, payments, googling, geo-referencing and all the other things people can’t live without. But have you ever thought about who provides you with the access?”

“The Directors, I suppose, of one nationality or another... depending on the location.”

“The Directors.” He lets the word hang between them.

“So what? I’ve paid several times since leaving Calais, sent Nmails too, but nothing’s happened.”

“I assume you want to stay in France.” The man smiles and then drains his coffee in a single gulp.

“Not really. I could have gone home, except that according to the new rules, my wife isn’t British enough to come with me,” Helen cocks her head in the opposite direction to his.

“Let’s talk about you first. Retired, I’m guessing. Good French, almost convincing, but the Border Force quadcopters are checking everywhere for people like you. You’ll slip through the net on the days when the system isn’t working.” He runs a dirty finger around the inside of the small cup to pick up the last grains of sugar. “But they’ll get you on the one day in ten that it is.”

“Which means?”

“Which means you’ll be sent back to England.”

“And my wife?”

“She’ll be sent to a Holding Station, where she’ll stay until her application has been processed.”

A Holding Station. The memory of their last day in Calais floats as a black phantom in front of Helen’s eyes. “Tell me what I have to do.”

“You can do what you like, but if you want to stay here, you’ve got two alternatives. Either you stop living through your Nband, or...” He opens his fist, which has been lying on the table between them. “You use this.”

Helen stares at the small, black cube. “I’ve no idea what it is, but I assume it comes at a high price.”

“Everything is relative, but if you’re ready to talk business, we can meet later.” He gives Helen a piece of paper with an address written on it. “I’ll see you there later on this evening.”

Helen nods, without confirming whether she will be there or not, and then turns to find her way back to Isha waiting on the edge of the town.

"I'll try to explain as briefly as I can," Helen says when Isha steps out from behind a tree. "It goes something like this..." she draws a deep breath and then launches in.

"Do you know where we have to go to meet him?" Isha asks quietly, when it's clear Helen has nothing more to say.

"Have a look for yourself." Helen hands her the piece of paper. "If it's more than five kilometres, I'm not going."

"Not even three," Isha replies after checking. "But let's rest first."

It's late afternoon by the time they shoulder their packs again, the sun lower and the air comfortably cooler, but Helen feels muzzy and heavy after sleeping. "How much further?" she asks after little more than an hour of walking.

"This could be it." Isha points into a band of trees. "Did he say it would be well hidden?"

"He said we should look for a small wood." Helen's tone is clipped and dry. Perhaps it's the heat tiring her, but more probably the thought that they could be walking into a trap. Even so, the scene ahead of her is exactly as the man had said it would be. A wood, then an orchard and a house on the other side. Helen stares at the sand-grey walls and wonders why the ground is moving like waves under her feet.

"Sit down," Isha says, pushing her gently towards the nearest tree. "You're as white as a sheet. I'll come back when I've sorted out a room where you can rest."

In the shade, eyes closed, Helen hears Isha talking, her French correct, but her accent still as English as ever. "*Ma femme, elle a besoin de se reposer et moi aussi mais...*"

The young woman, Claire, knows all about them and is ready. "Thomas will come soon," she says.

But Thomas is late, and Helen is already in bed after eating the scant meal Claire had prepared for them.

"He's here," Isha says gently through the half-open door, "but there's no need for you to get up unless you want to."

Helen dresses, her limbs sluggish and slow. "Promise you'll run if we've walked into a BF trap. Promise you won't wait for me."

"Only if you promise to go back to Jana." Isha kisses Helen's forehead. "Happy anniversary."

Thomas is waiting for them in the kitchen, his hand draped lightly across Claire's shoulders. "My wife," he says, looking directly at Helen.

Isha holds out her hand. “I understand you’ve got something we might need; can I see it?”

“Yes, but first, we need to talk about the payment.”

“Give me your price, then show us what that thing does so that we can decide if it’s worth it.”

“We don’t want credit,” Claire says. “We want fifty cytotox doses.”

Thomas raises his hand to Helen, who has stepped forward. “I know you have some.”

“How?”

Thomas smiles and takes his time before replying. “You tried to bribe a Border Force agent, a risky move, though in this case you were lucky.”

“Why?”

“Because he was Claire’s brother, Paul, who happens to know we’ve been trying to source cytotox for months already.”

“A lucky coincidence for everyone,” Claire adds. “Paul didn’t report you, but he did set up a trace, which is how we knew you were in Wisques.”

“But what are you going to do with the cytotox? You’ll need a medic...” Helen pauses, suddenly finding her chest too tight to talk. “If you’re going to sell it, you have to know about the dosages so that you can advise—”

“Advise people how to prescribe it?” Thomas laughs. “Like you did with my brother-in-law?”

“Helen is just trying to make sure you know what you’re doing.” Isha steps forward so that she is standing between them.

“Cytotox inhibits cell division and causes cancer cells to die,” Claire says from behind them. “And it can command a high price when over 25 percent of the population has one form of cancer or another.” She pauses. “But we don’t want to sell it.”

Helen hears, but is thinking back to the day in Arles when the director of L’Hôpital Joseph Imbert had called her. “We need your help to get the patients out. Our hospital is low-lying and at risk of flooding.”

When Helen explained that she was a psychiatrist, she heard the director draw a deep breath. “I called you because we need your specialist skills.”

Everything was in chaos the day she went there, only a small percentage of the patients gone. She was given complete access, including to the pharmacy for the sedatives many of the patients needed to get them to leave as calmly as possible.

“Where are you taking us?” The question was the same in every ward Helen went into, but she could only tell them it would be somewhere safer. Then she pointed at the flooded gardens where a group of ducks were quacking happily in their newly expanded pond. “We don’t have much time.”

Thinking about those days now, Helen can’t remember precisely when she decided to take the ten boxes of cytotox, or even why, except perhaps as a precautionary measure if either she or Isha... drugs were so hard to come by these days.

“What would you have done if we hadn’t come here?” Isha asks Thomas.

“We would have found you,” Thomas replies, his tone mildly threatening.

“Then why didn’t you just rob us?”

“Because I’m not a thief, and I’ve got something to sell.”

Helen hears them and is desperate to probe for more information. The whole thing stinks, and what’s more, it’s her fault. If she hadn’t tried to bribe the Border Guard... but now Isha is distracting Thomas with questions about technical details, which are probably more important anyway. Helen slumps back into a chair and decides not to interrupt.

“We call it the Maxwell after James Clerk Maxwell, the physicist who predicted the existence of radio waves in 1860,” Thomas says, holding out the box in the flat palm of his hand just as he had in the cafe. “It’s an electronic blocking device known as a jammer.”

“Which means nothing to me,” Helen replies.

Thomas looks over to her and then at Isha. “Can’t I explain it to you, then you can—”

“Both of us,” Isha cuts in.

Thomas sighs theatrically. “Imagine an old-fashioned game of hide and seek, played the way it used to be, which I’m sure you’ll remember. A child is counting with his eyes closed while the others run away to hide. Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. Coming, ready or not. Meantime, the hidiers huddle in their spaces and wait until their knees start to ache, and the game isn’t as much fun anymore. A few of them lean out to check if anyone else feels the same, though carefully because it’s not cool to be the first down, but then they see...”

“See what?” Isha asks.

“They see that the searcher has got a blindfold pasted over his eyes like a second skin.”

“For real?”

“A metaphorical image.” Thomas sighs again. “I thought it might help. Anyway, when the Maxwell senses a request-to-send, it blocks electrical signals like a blindfold, which invariably gets the same response from people trying to use the system.”

“Which is?” Helen interjects.

Thomas looks over to her and pulls his into a sad clown mien. “Damn, our link’s down again. I’m so sorry, but why don’t I make the payment now? It’ll go through as soon as our link is back up and running, and that way, none of us has to wait around.”

“Got it,” Isha says. “The Maxwell jams the link to our credit qloud until we suspend it and the payment request can go through.”

“Precisely, and when you do, it takes approximately two hours for the payment source to be traced, which means two hours’ escape time.” Thomas looks over to Isha, who has turned to look out of the window. “Well?”

Isha watches a crow dig into a heap of grass clippings and then lift off heavily with a raucous croak. “You’ve got a deal.” She turns to Helen. “Agreed?”

“You know more than I do about all this technical stuff. I’ll get the pills.”

Helen goes back up the stairs to the bedroom, a dark roof space with spider’s webs packed into every corner. The bed looks inviting, despite its drab and dirty cover. I could sleep forever Helen thinks as she digs into a small pocket in her pack for the pills. Her eyes glaze over before she reaches the first count of fifty, so she shakes her head and starts again.

When Helen walks back down, Thomas turns to look up at her. “I was beginning to think you’d changed your mind.”

She ignores him and holds out the pills to Isha, but he leans across to take them. “I’ll check.”

The next day, Thomas is nowhere to be seen, and Claire is only distantly visible at the furthest end of an orchard. “Nothing to pay,” she shouts over.

“No breakfast either,” Helen observes quietly to Isha.

“Not for anyone. Did you see how thin she is?”

“Yes, but Thomas is the sick one. His skin colour and yellow eyes are clear signs of liver cancer if my medical memory is still working.”

Mahir, Nmail, May 25, 2050

Ish, it’s all going crazy here. BF quadcopters flying over and checking IDents every day. It’s Uganda and Idi Amin all over again, just like it was for our great-grandparents.

I’m trying to get the family to face up to what’s happening, and you don’t need me to tell you who’s doing all the kicking and screaming. Yesterday Rui told me I was confusing IRL (In Real Life) with VR and, by the way, had I forgotten that he’s the head of the family? Then

Nisha called me. I think she asked if it was the end of the world. I said yes, and cut our connection.

Ish, I worry for you and Helen, but you're probably both better off staying wherever you are. If you find somewhere safe, let me know so's Sandi and I can join you. I'll leave the rest of the family in Rui's capable hands. Sorry, not funny, but kind of funny all the same.

Love you, Sis,

Mahir.

Poplar Nursing Home, Nmail, June 4, 2050

Dear Helen,

Regrettably, I have to inform you that your father suffered an aneurysm in the early hours of this morning. Dr Banks, who visited shortly after your father fell ill, described his condition as serious. In the absence of a reply from you concerning Mr Denton's DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) status, we were obliged to assume power of attorney on your behalf. His passing was peaceful.

As we have no address for you in this country, we are obliged to offer his belongings to the other residents. Any remaining items will be donated to an appropriate charitable organisation.

Please accept our sincere condolences.

Brenda Craig,

Manager

Poplar Nursing Home

Jana, Nmail, June 3, 2050

Mums, I'm coming to find you. The date of your last message is from two weeks ago, but I only got it today. I'll leave with Ayo as soon as I can. Please tell me where you are and where you plan to go.

Love you,

J

I've given you some background on Helen and Isha, and now it feels like I should do the same for myself. I'm adopted – end of story but also the beginning. Helen and Isha had been married for seven years when they decided to expand the family, though they've never really said why. Some people are happy with a cat or dog, but Helen doesn't like animals as pets, and Isha might have been getting pressure from her mum to find a carefully selected boy-child from good stock and definitely Asian Indian origin. I don't know what Helen's parents wanted as a grandchild, but it never happened anyway because I was quite enough, apparently.

I wish I'd been there to see the various reactions when they brought me home, frizzy-haired and definitely not Asian Indian. I don't know if anyone asked about my parents, but if they did, Isha would have told them that my father, Paul Aubert, is French. She might have been quieter about Leyla, my Senegalese mother. She was a diplomat's assistant, until she disappeared, a week after I was born. Helen thinks she might have gone back home, but Paul, who they only met when he signed the adoption papers, wouldn't say.

So, there I am in my new family. Lucky me. Helen, being Helen, first signed up for a course in Wolof, the most widely spoken language in Senegal, and then French. Meantime, Isha took two years off work so that she could be with me full-time.

Helen and Isha were there for me in every way, physically, mentally and emotionally. They gave me credit when I needed it and paid for five years of training at Europe's best graphics animation school in Arles, in the south of France, where I also learned a more fluent version of French to go with my dual French-English nationality. Isha and Helen bought a house there too, partly for me, and as a second home for themselves, which became permanent when they retired. Yes, I had everything going for me, all the advantages of being pseudo-white and middle-class, but I still felt deprived of my birth mother and what I thought my culture should be. I haven't got a single photo of her, but at least my father kept his promise and gave Helen and Isha the letter she wrote for me.

Jana, my precious baby,

All mothers want their children to have what they need for a good life, but I don't have much of anything anymore, which is why I have decided to let other, carefully chosen people do for you what I can't.

A few days ago, I was lying here with you in my arms, thinking that there must be something I can give you to keep for the rest of your life, and then I remembered how my mother used to say a good name is more precious than silver.

Choosing your name hasn't been easy. I wanted it to be from our culture, but not too African for the people here. I wanted it to have a meaning, and I wanted it to hold all the parts of the person I imagine you will be. I chose the name Jana because it crosses continents and cultures the way both of us do, but it's also a derivative of Janus, the Greek god of beginnings, transitions, duality and ending, which is all the things your birth was and will be.

If my mother was here, she'd say we'll meet again in paradise, but if we don't, you need to know that my love is written into every word of this letter, and your name is the only true jewel I can give you.

Loving you always and forever,

Your mother, Leyla, which means 'night'.

Without that letter, I would have nothing of my mother. Memories won't be enough for Ayo either, so here is my letter to her, recorded because we are children of our time, and digital messages don't disintegrate like paper.

Ayo, my baby, my darling, sitting on my lap and smiling. Maternal love is a precious chain between mother and child, but a chain is only as strong as its weakest link and hiding the truth would definitely snap it, so here's the truth about you and me, as far as I can tell it.

I didn't plan you, and I've brought you into an insane world. Before you arrived, I'd pretty much given up on it, but now I've got a reason to live because I'm fighting for your future. You'll find out about the kind of person I am, so I won't say much more, but you need to know about your father, who you probably won't meet even when you are older.

Jules is good-looking and clever. He was one of Helen's students, making him seem like a god to me. Even so, we quickly found out we had nothing in common. He loved the human psyche, I loved art, but we didn't love each other.

Sometimes, I wish I could have given you the father I never had, but when I think of my childhood with two women, Helen and Isha, I can't think of anything I missed. Plus, I've seen what parental breakups have done to friends of mine, and I'm not doing that to you.

Leyla, my mother and your grandmother, wrote a letter for me too. She told me about herself and then gave me my name, and now I'm going to do the same for you. There isn't a word big enough to hold all the feelings of the moment when you were born. After all those

months of waiting, seeing you was/is the most important day in my life, but your name only came to me when Helen started to sing the first few lines of a song she used to sing to me as a child. I remember it well, but on that day, I only heard one word.

*Ayo wa ba le mi o
(joy come and fall upon me)
Ayo mi de ooo
(my joy has come)*

*Ayo, joy, what you are for all of us on the day you were born and every day still.
Loving you always and forever,
Your mum, Jana, which means beginnings, transitions, duality and endings.*

Isha, Nmail, June 8, 2050

Hun, please stay where you are! We're doing fine and making good progress. Hold tight and stay safe for a few more weeks. I haven't shared your Nmail with Helen, so pretend you didn't send it.

I-Mum

Arras... a wall hanging made of rich tapestry fabric, typically used to conceal an alcove.

After eight days of walking, Helen has increased her daily average to fifteen kilometres, from a less than impressive four or five. Isha insists on keeping to a routine: leave at dawn when the air is cool, find shade before the sun reaches its midday height, sleep until it goes back down and then walk for another hour, or until they find somewhere to stay. Helen remembers how it was the first time they started their walk along the Via Francigena. Hell, in the beginning: blisters, boredom, the constant question of why she was even doing it, and then the subtle change as her cerebral and biological rhythms adapted to the slower pace.

“It’s better,” she says, a few hours into their ninth day, “the walking, I mean. Is it the same for you?”

“In some ways,” Isha replies, though another word is still poised on the tip of her tongue. Liminal, she thinks, the lines drawn between what was, is and will be. The boundaries I cross with every step I take. As Isha walks, head raised now to breathe in the warm air, she realises that she has barely noticed the terrain or its changes since leaving Calais, her only clear memories are of the deserted villages they passed through and sometimes stayed in—Guines, Licques, Amettes and all the others—dried husks of the living places they used to be. And now Bruay-la-Buissière, deserted too, except for an elderly couple sitting outside their house. In different circumstances, Isha would have asked them if they were descendants of the Polish immigrants who had arrived in their thousands to work in the coal mines there. Foreigners like her own grandparents, who’d sown their seeds in a new land and reaped the rewards, as they had understood them then. Reward. Isha repeats the word to herself. A hydra in hiding.

The next day they set off early, and Isha finally sees the flatness of the terrain they are walking through, with its infinite army of parched cornstalks that clap their skeletal hands in the wind. Bravo, old women, bravo.

By midday, the sun is a fire in the sky, but they find shade in Mont St Eloi’s abbey ruins, two towers on either side of a doorway to nowhere. From there, the walk to Arras passes quickly, though the closer they get, the more nervous they become. Arras will be their first large town since leaving Calais, and the first time they will try to pay for food and perhaps a

room using the Maxwell. Helen's silence is a warning, and Isha tries to distract her. "Do you remember coming here?"

"I remember thinking we'd walked into the wrong country," Helen replies. "All that Flemish architecture, and you insisting on explaining why it had ended up here in northern France."

Their progress is slow and hesitant as they walk into the town and check for signs of life. Some shops look as if they could have been open not so long ago, but their shelves are empty. Helen and Isha stop at the edge of Place des Héros, a large square that had been full of café tables the last time they were there. Helen looks up at the houses that loom over them like tottering giants, their shadows sprawling sloppy-limbed across a row of sun-bleached walls below. She imagines them coming to life and lumbering away over the hillsides.

"It was a friendly place," Isha says. "We ate in a restaurant down one of the tiny side streets leading off from here, and the owner kept filling our glasses because we were *such a lovely young couple*."

"Don't remind me, I felt like crap the next day. But can't you feel the emptiness of this place now? Place des Héros. Are we the only heroes left?"

"Yes, it's like being in a vacuum."

Helen reflects that though the word vacuum is an odd choice, it seems entirely apt for a place that has so profoundly let go of its breath. She slumps under one of the cool arcade entrances in front of the Hôtel de Ville and closes her eyes.

The minutes tick by on its clock, the only sound until Isha hears the click of a door, or perhaps the heel of a shoe on the cobblestones. She focuses on the direction it has come from and sees shadows clawing their way out of a single, horizontal cellar door. "Look."

They see first three, then four, then a small crowd of people emerge to stand around the edges of the square. The entire space is eerily silent until a group of children, ten or so, of every age and size, bursts through. Their shrill voices skip like stones across the dark shop windows, and the dead void is suddenly alive. How many people are there now? Fifty? A hundred? Helen leans forward to get a better view and thinks of mice pushing their noses out from under the skirting before dashing across a kitchen floor.

"Get back," Isha whispers. "We can't let them see us yet."

"Why not? We should talk to them. We've got nothing to lose."

Nothing to lose. The phrase comes back to Isha as they walk into the centre of the square. We have nothing; ergo, we lose nothing, both sides of the argument pressed together

like palms held in prayer. The adults watch as the two strangers approach. The anarchic chatter of the children is silenced. What are they afraid of, she wonders.

“We only want to buy some food,” Helen says.

“We can pay or barter, whatever you prefer,” Isha adds.

“I understand.” A young man steps forward out of the crowd. “It’s always the same, but we don’t want your credit or your things.”

“The same?” Isha asks.

“Yes, it’s all people like you ever want. At least that’s how it starts.”

“No, it’s all we’re asking for.” She moves forward and then back as the shuffling group closes in on her.

“That’s enough!” This time it’s a woman’s voice, harsher and more commanding than the hesitant tone of the young man. “Get them out of here before it’s too late.”

Too late for what, Helen asks herself, the cold rush of fear closing like a cage around her ribs. “If you sell us some food, we’ll leave,” she says, turning to the woman.

“*Putain!* Did you see it?” The woman waves her finger to indicate a point somewhere beyond their circle, then turns on her heel.

“What’s happening?” Isha asks as the circle of people closes around them.

“Not sure,” Helen replies. “Something to do with what that woman saw.” Then a gaggle of hands pushes them towards the cellar door and down a narrow flight of stairs.

“You must hide in there.” The young man points to a small room off to one side of the passage they are standing in. He directs his torch towards the floor. “*Le bouclier*. Get in.”

Helen stares at the wooden box highlighted by the torch’s beam. “It doesn’t look like a shield to me.”

The box is about two meters long, perhaps over a metre wide and forty centimetres high, the depth of a skinny man’s chest. Isha is already lowering herself into a crouch next to its rim.

“I think we should do as we’re told,” she says, then she leans forward to take hold of Helen’s hand.

“Are you insane?” Helen turns to run back up the stairs they have just come down, but the young man jumps over the box to stand in front of her. “No need for that,” she growls.

“The box is lined with lead for a reason,” Isha says. “It’ll be a block against a signal of some sort, a detector or maybe even something more harmful.”

“We didn’t invite you, but you came, so now you have to follow our rules for your own protection, but more importantly for ours.” The man pushes Helen forwards and kicks the side of the box. “Get in.”

“I’ll give you as much space as I can.” Isha climbs in and arranges herself along one side.

“There’s never enough space for a claustrophobic,” Helen says, her eyes closed as she drops to her knees.

Then the lid is lowered, and the pitch-black darkness wraps itself around them, not even a chink of light or sliver of fresh air left, just their own breath and an unexpected, sweet-smelling mist that settles on their faces.

Isha feels the entire length of Helen’s body beat its frenzied rhythm against the metal walls. “Try to relax and follow me,” she says. “Breathe slowly... in... out... in... out... in...”

“I can’t, I can’t, I ca-a-n-n.”

Isha feels for Helen’s hand, but her own is suddenly too heavy to lift. “Hen?” Then her eyes close, and Helen lets out a somnolent snort.

Helen and Isha were moving on, but I was still at home. I'd planned to wait until they got to Switzerland, but then a friend, Dirk, told me about the Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders that forced people over sixty to sign away their right to medical treatment that could prolong their lives. A man in uniform had gone to his dad's house and refused to leave until the contract was signed. Two days later Dirk received a three-month free trial offer for the Forever Parent app that used all his dad's recordings and images to make him LIVE WITH YOU IN YOUR VIRTUAL SPACE. I thought of my mums. They would never sign a DNR while I was still there to stop them. I had to leave home and find them.

A good idea, but not as easy as thinking about it. Picture me wearing the wrong kind of shoes with a pack the size of a house on my back and Ayo screaming because I've squeezed her into a front sling designed for a child half her age. I took one step forward, sat down, cried a little, then spent half an hour with Jules.

"I've got to find my mums," I said.

"I understand, and no one's trying to stop you."

"Thanks for not standing in my way" – sarcasm – "I just don't know how I'm going to carry her."

"Babe" – I hate that too – "I'll buy you a porter, and Ayo can go in the backpack. It's big enough to carry a teenager anyway."

It seemed like a good suggestion, but since when did a suitcase on wheels have the right to complain about the weight it has to carry?

"My porta-limit is fifteen kilos. I suggest you extract your hair clippers and leave the rest to nature."

"Shut up."

"Would that be literally or metaphorically? Your wish is my command, but you should know that my chosen name is Christopher."

Porters do not have chosen names. The only words porters should understand is left, right, stop and stay, but now I've got a porter that argues back, and I know who is to blame. Three people know about my serious childhood obsession with an animated cat called Christopher, my mums and Jules.

A day later, and everything was packed, Ayo was singing happily in her backpack, Christopher was quiet and Dover was just a short liftshare away from home. Perfect, until we arrived, and I saw the queue snaking out of the harbour across the road in front.

We stood on the dock for over an hour under a burning sun. Ayo wasn't happy anymore, and Christopher's warning light kept blinking. When we finally got on board the ferry, there wasn't a single seat left, so I pushed him into a corner and found a space on the floor for Ayo and me. She wrapped her arms so hard around my neck I could hardly breathe, but I didn't stop her because she was scared, and so was I.

The passages around us were full of people speaking French, and the expressions on their faces had nothing to do with holidays. I looked at them, and remembered when Hen and Isha told me how they'd been put into social bubbles during the 2020 pandemic, and only a few close family members were allowed to meet as a way of keeping infection rates down. I hadn't really thought much about it at the time, but sitting there that day made me realise how I must have been living in a bubble too. Of course, I'd heard about the new repatriation policy. Who hadn't? But I'd never thought it could apply to me. My father is French, but I'd been born in England and had dual nationality, thanks to Helen and Isha, so I could be whatever I wanted to be. Couldn't I?

"Forty-eight hours warning with a small paragraph underneath saying our credit accounts would be frozen if we stayed," one man said.

"Dual citizenship means nothing," a woman told a teenage girl sitting next to her. "It's just a matter of which country gets rid of you first."

Well, in my case, Britain did. I'd thought I was leaving to find Helen and Isha, but in fact, I was leaving before being thrown out. An hour later, when we docked in Calais, I levered myself up so that I could look out of the window, but the view was even more depressing than in Dover. A line of scummy waves licked the toes of a football stadium that used to be at least two kilometres inland, and a dry sea of tents reached up to the horizon and probably beyond. Then the ferry moored onto what looked like the top of an electricity pylon, and we had to wait while a fleet of smaller boats took us to the shore.

I don't know what I was expecting when I got there, probably something terrible after what Helen and Isha had been through, but actually, it was easy. After verifying my status, the BF scanner verified Ayo's too. Then I put her in the backpack and told Christopher to keep quiet and stay alongside.

From there, a borg guided us into a bus without saying where it was going. "*Où va-t'il?*" I asked.

"Don't worry, it stops once we're past the port," a woman sitting opposite me said. "The Directors just want to keep us away from the migrants." She wrinkled her nose. "Not that we'd go near them."

I thanked her, but all I could think of was that, though my French is good, my accent must have shouted out “foreigner”, because she had replied in English. Worse still, she was staring at Ayo as if she was about to leap over and grab her, so I turned my back and pretended to look out of the window.

“Repatriation, they call it,” a man sitting next to her said, “to a country we’ve never lived in and where we haven’t got anywhere permanent to stay.”

“Except with his parents,” the woman sourly added from behind.

When the bus stopped, the man helped me lift Christopher out, and the woman held her arms out to Ayo. “Let me take her.” But I walked away as fast as I could because it’s well known that the drop in Caucasian births makes white people jealous of people like us who’ve managed to have a child or maybe even children.

“Hey!” It was Christopher, who I’d forgotten. I went back, avoiding the woman, and the man shouted after me that someone had given my porter an interesting character. I thought of Jules and logged a reminder to tell him he owed me two months’ maintenance payments, then told Xiris to find me a liftshare to the nearest town where we could stay. The adventure had started.

Troglodytes

How long were they in that box? An hour? A day? The lid is gone by the time Isha regains consciousness, and her eyes sting in the intense light.

“Are they awake?” It’s the woman’s voice they had heard outside in the square.

“That smell when the lid was closed,” Isha says. “Did you drug us?”

“I asked if you are awake.”

“No!” Helen snaps back. “We sleep with our eyes open like horses. What do you think?”

The woman doesn’t respond but turns to the young man who is standing behind her.

“Take them to a room, Julien.”

Out of the box, their bodies fused and stiff, but the atmosphere less oppressive with the loud boss-woman gone, Helen stretches and groans. “What next?”

“Follow me.” Julien walks back out into the passage.

“Do you live down here?” Isha asks, in an attempt to rebuild the metaphorical bridges Helen has so thoroughly exploded.

“This way.” He points to a flight of stairs hacked into the bare rock.

“Troglodytes,” Helen whispers to Isha.

“Survivalists,” Julien replies.

They continue along another passage illuminated by a line of lights set into the concrete ceiling above. As they walk, both Isha and Helen feel the remnants of their heavy sleep and find walking in a straight line challenging.

“Are we pissed?” Helen whispers, but Isha doesn’t have time to answer before Julien stops in front of a cavernous rock-hole with a heavy wooden door across it.

“You can take a shower in there,” he says, pushing the door open with his foot.

“Now?” Isha asks.

He shrugs and points at a line of shower cubicles along one wall. “It will save you coming back later.”

Helen feels the skin tighten on her scalp. Later? After what?

But Isha is already investigating the space. “How do you heat the water?”

“Geothermal.”

“Impressive,” she replies.

“Yes, we have skilled people down here.”

Helen hears them talking about 3D printing and other technical things and decides trying out the showers will be more interesting. She heads for one of the cubicles and checks there is

a towel inside. When she sees a long strip of blue material hanging off a hook in one corner, she breathes a sigh of relief. “I bet you are 3D-printed too.”

Clothes off, first shivering in the underground chill and then burning pleasantly Helen stands under the jet of water and hears Isha splashing next door. “Not bad facilities for a cave,” she shouts. “I don’t want to get out. How about you?”

“If I wasn’t so hungry.”

Heads clearer and bodies cleaner, they dress and find Julien, who has been waiting in the passage outside.

“Down here,” he says, pointing to a wooden walkway built into the rock alongside a fast-running river.

“The Crinchon,” Isha says quietly. “They must have diverted its course.”

“Correct,” Julien replies. “These tunnels were dug during the First World War by a team of New Zealanders and designed to accommodate 20,000 men. They are fitted out with running water, electric lights, kitchens, latrines, a light rail system and a fully equipped hospital.”

After the walkway, they mount another flight of stairs, and at the top, Julien leads them into a small hollowed-out area where he points to a row of large square holes hewed into one of the rock walls. “Your beds. You can rest here until tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Isha says tentatively. “But we haven’t eaten since this morning, and we came here to buy food.”

“Julien will collect you for the evening meal.” The boss woman’s voice snaps through the air like a whip.

Has she been following us, Isha wonders.

“No Nbands, not a single one,” Helen observes a few minutes later after the door slams closed. “Did you notice?”

“I did.”

Julien is alone when he comes back an hour or so later, and when Helen opens her eyes, she has the sense that he’s been there for more than a few minutes. A subterranean pervert, she thinks, while dressing as covertly as she can.

“Brigitte wants me to show you our aeroponic gardens, and after that, you can join us for dinner,” he says in an unnecessarily loud voice.

“So finally, we have a name for her,” Helen whispers a few minutes later to Isha as they follow him down a musty and steeply sloping passage.

“Maybe... but what’s that smell?”

“You mean apart from the cave breath?”

“Apples.” Isha breathes in deeply. “And... possibly tomato plants.”

The air is damp and their faces are thoroughly drenched by the time Julien stops to slide open a door the width and height of the passage. “Vertical growing,” he says, pointing into the mist.

Helen and Isha peer and see row after row of ten-metre-high racks covered in thick webs of foliage that stretch out into the well-illuminated distance.

“We can grow more or less anything we want, and all year round. You’ll be eating some of our produce soon.” He leans forward to pluck something off one of the nearest racks and hands it to Isha. “You were smelling the grapes.”

Next, with the tart sweetness of red wine grapes still on their tongues, Helen and Isha slog behind Julien up a flight of steep wooden stairs. They’ve got 3D printers and aeroponic gardens, but they can’t install a lift, Isha thinks. It’s ridiculous, and if I designed something like this, I’d... her thoughts are still circling when he leads them into yet another cavernous space.

“*Bienvenue*,” an unfamiliar voice says. “I will show you to your places at the table.” The speaker is a middle-aged man, sandy-haired, his smile pulled wide for the new visitors.

Isha is more interested in how the light, which has been fairly dim up to this point, seems stronger and more defined in the room’s centre. As she looks around for its source, she also becomes aware of a new and very welcome warmth in the air. “Look,” she says, pointing upwards. “We can’t be far under the surface.”

Helen follows her gaze and sees the open night sky above, filled with a moon that is brighter and clearer than she can remember for months. “Is it real?”

Isha nods and dips her head in a mock bow of respect. “Yes, and I think we’re seeing it through smart glass.”

“Correct.” Sandy Man is still hovering beside them. “Smart glass is a tenth of the weight of traditional glass and at least ten times the strength; photochromic too.” He sighs, a long low sound that tails off with a whistle in one nostril. “We’re proud of our achievements down here. Did you know—” But Helen and Isha will never know because he stops speaking when Julien walks by.

As their eyes grow accustomed to the new light, they see a careful arrangement of tables that fills the space from one rock wall to the other. Isha stops counting at twenty and guesses there must be at least twice that number, with people settling in seats all around them.

Meanwhile, Brigitte has taken her place at the head of a long table set up on a raised platform at one end.

“Good evening, everyone.”

“Good evening, Brigitte.”

So much for French *égalité*, Helen thinks as she looks around her. It’s like something out of a medieval court, with the courtiers on either side of the throne and maybe another two hundred serfs seated below. But where are the children?

“Our numbers are growing. What you see here is not even half,” she hears a man explain to Isha. “This is the top dining room but there are many others and the children in our social group have to eat in a different place now.”

“Growing?” Helen interrupts, her incredulity all too obvious. “You are managing to have children when miscarriage rates are climbing by the day?”

“Another advantage of living as we do.” He smiles beatifically.

Helen is about to respond when Brigitte raises her hand, and the hum of voices immediately drops into silence.

“Good news, everyone. Last night’s Metron count has been validated, and the two new births have been recorded without additional review,” Brigitte says, though her next words are lost under the loud sighs of relief echoing around the room.

“We were so worried,” a woman sitting next to Helen confides. “It won’t be long before they discover the hiding place.”

The wooden box, Helen thinks, but what are they are hiding and from whom?

When Brigitte sits down, three women start to push trolleys between the tables, a syrupy aroma trailing in their wake. Helen inhales deeply. “Onion soup, I can’t remember the last time we had that.”

Eating is a serious business in Troglodyte City; barely a word said until each bowl has been thoroughly wiped with the accompanying slab of bread. Helen eats faster than most, hungry as hell and keen to get an uninterrupted look at these people who have chosen to live underground.

“They’re pale but not obviously ill,” she whispers to Isha. “Well-fed and well-exercised too by the look of it.”

“It reminds me of a religious sect in Russia,” Isha whispers back. “Ten years living underground, with children born down there, but I’m not getting the whiff of religion here.”

“Maybe it’s just well hidden.”

When the next course comes, a plate of various vegetables with an omelette on the side, Isha leans into Helen's shoulder. "I could eat ten of these, but I can't help wondering if our portions are drugged."

Helen turns to the woman who had spoken to her earlier. "Can I ask you some questions about your life down here?"

The woman shakes her head and jabs a finger at Julien, who has joined Brigitte on her podium. Helen watches him eat, one eye on the food and the other on his leader. Well, that's at least one of my questions answered, she thinks, then she lapses into silence and listens nervously as Isha tells her neighbour about their *holiday* plan to walk through the Champagne region.

The dessert is an anonymous fruit hidden by a sweet sauce. Helen yawns deeply. I'm done for, she thinks, either that or we've been drugged, but unfortunately, the evening isn't over yet. Brigitte is tapping the table in front of her for silence.

"Our guests have chosen a good day to visit, a very special occasion for two families seated here," she says, spreading and raising her hands in a vaguely religious gesture. "Please show our visitors who you are."

Chairs rattle and clatter on the stone floor as two couples stand up, their smiles hesitant and self-conscious.

"It's graduation day, and congratulations go first to the youngest parents in our group," Brigitte booms as she points to a man and woman in their mid-thirties. "And bravo to the persistent parents of Tomas." This last comment raises a riff of light laughter, and a woman in the other couple raises her eyes and smiles. Next, Brigitte draws a theatrical breath and gazes intently at the faces staring up at her. "We must remember that the graduation of our children is a shared success. A new life in a new place for our young people and a longer, better life for the people here."

The response is deafening. Chairs are pushed back, and people stand to applaud, some cheering, some crying, with Brigitte remaining silent and serene in the middle. When the applause finally stops, everyone stands up to clear their places. Helen and Isha pick up their plates to follow, but the woman who had been sitting next to them moves forward to bar their way. "You are guests," she says in a raised voice. "Let me do that for you." Then she dips her head and whispers, "Please wait for me outside."

Helen, Nmail, June 15, 2050

Jana, you're not going to believe half of what I'm going to tell you, but with all the conspiracy theories we're reading about, it's difficult to know what's true and what's not. Anyway, here goes.

As Isha has already explained, we ended up spending the night with a troglodyte community in a seemingly endless network of tunnels dug under the town of Arras. She said she had been composing her follow-up Nmail when we were called to dinner, and now she wants me to take the story from there.

We had dinner, though I could have eaten six times more, then Brigitte, the boss woman, presented two new graduates to everyone, of which more later. After that, we were starting to clear our plates away when Simone, a woman I'd been sitting next to, asked Isha and me to wait for her outside.

We did wait, despite feeling extremely awkward because everyone else seemed to be heading for home, wherever that was. Then Julien, Brigitte's creepy sidekick, stopped to ask if we knew the way back to our beds. We said we'd be fine, thanks, and were just waiting for someone to bring us a jug of water. Simone followed shortly after but then made us feel even more nervous when she pulled out a grain of what looked like rice, one each, out of our hair. She threw them down, crushed them with her foot, then she beckoned for us to follow her. Later, Isha and I agreed that the grains of rice must have been audio recorders, and Julien had something to do with them. Anyway, after that, I can only presume the slimy cave Simone took us to wasn't bugged, because in there her reticence lifted like a sluice gate.

As an opener, she told us the graduation wasn't as simple as it looked, but I'll paraphrase what turned out to be a long and very detailed story. Five years ago, roughly sixty families, more or less two thousand people, left Arras, while Brigitte persuaded another half of that number to stay and follow her troglodyte dream. As the already diminished population was only about ten thousand, the double exodus reduced aboveground to a home for the elderly, infirm or work-shy, which could explain the emptiness in the streets Ish and I had seen.

Where did the sixty families go? Well, according to Simone, they went to Le Grand-Fougeray in Brittany, where Rare-Earth Elements are mined for the devices we all rely on. You probably know a lot more about all this than I do, but I'll pass on what Ish told me.

The United States used to be the world's leading producer but stopped extraction in 2002 because new international laws protecting people, biodiversity and land had made the

profit margins too low. As we all know, some people won't get out of bed for less than a million credits, but the Chinese, who have huge reserves of REEs, saw this as their opportunity to control the world and its markets. In 2020, China passed an Export Control Law for all sorts of things, including the REEs, as a way of keeping enough for themselves and limiting technology production in other countries. The tactic worked, and for a while, China controlled everything, but in 2032, Europe said to hell with nature and proceeded to pass its own REE mining laws, and just six months later, the French Directors authorised the mine in Brittany. Still, even with these new sources, the technology entrepreneurs can't get enough REEs for all the devices they want us to buy, so now they've started deep-sea mining, which is destroying vast tracts of the ocean floor and, of course, its marine life. On top of this, Aemon Lusk has just installed the first lunar mine. It hasn't produced anything yet, and perhaps never will, but in the meantime, REE theft on planet Earth has become a burgeoning new industry.

Back to the Simone story. We could tell she didn't think much of people working in mines, though my first thought was that, given the choice of a well-paid job instead of subsistence on Citizen's Income, I would have left with them, though of course, nothing is as one-dimensional as it seems, and it took our beloved Ish to see into the substrata.

"But why live down here in these caves?" she asked.

Simone's reply was reasonably plausible. The rock protects them from the heat, the doors can be hermetically sealed and the water filtered. Plus, underground, they can grow their own food aeroponically year-round. In fact, in this respect, Brigitte has been proved right, because the community is thriving and becoming more skilled by the day, but it's still in danger, according to Simone.

Me: What danger?

Simone: Arras is in an Entrepreneur zone.

Entrepreneur zone. Never heard of it. Have you? Is there even such a thing? Well, according to Simone, there is, and Brigitte is connected to at least one.

When a large percentage of the town's population left, Brigitte's pitch to the remainder was that she would show them how to create an isolated and safe environment in the tunnels that had been built under Arras during the First World War. They would be safe, she told them, while the rest of the world imploded above, but again, there's more to the story.

Apparently, the Entrepreneurs need a constant supply of well-educated young minds for their enterprises, and to understand why this is so important, you have to take into account that, while children are popping out like peas down in T-city, seven in ten pregnancies are

ending in miscarriage above. Then, as if the situation isn't already dystopian enough, cancer is taking out a good percentage of the workers left, Simone's brother included. It's a delicate balance for the Entrepreneurs to hold. They need people to do the work, but they also need to keep them under control, which means controlling their numbers. So how do they do this? Well, every night, a beam called the Metron hangs like a humongous umbrella over underground Arras, though not for a Son et Lumière spectacle. It's there to measure the heat energy emitted by people living in the tunnels—age, size and sex taken into account—which is compared with the number of registered IDents. Too much heat means one or more unregistered IDents have got in. Too little heat means someone has left without asking. But then there is what Julien called le bouclier, or 'the shield', which isn't as random as it seems when you know how it works.

The coffin, as I call it, is a lead-lined wooden box that repels the Metron's counting ray and so keeps the numbers where they should be. It's a hiding place for people who don't belong there: boyfriends, girlfriends, family members and sometimes people like us. Brigitte claims it is her gift to the community members, but I think it's a means of keeping the peace in a potentially fragile society. Either way, the coffin has been used for several years without issue, until recently when Brigitte heard about a plan to upgrade the Metron so that it can penetrate all the deflective materials available, which was her reason for not wanting us to come down in the first place.

Up to this point, even though I was interested, I still couldn't understand why Simone was taking the risk of telling us about it. But then Ish asked her, and Simone finally explained.

Ish and I will be travelling through the Champagne region soon, where there are several small and independent troglodyte communities. Their inhabitants went down into the champagne storage caves mainly to avoid the heat, but also because troglodyte living isn't a new thing in France – they've been doing it for hundreds of years in the Dordogne region – but the difference now is that Brigitte and her Entrepreneur bosses want to recruit them, just as they did the people in Arras, and they want to use people like us to give them the good story: hot showers, underground gardens, well-educated graduates and high birth rates, which is a lot more than the rest of us have got, except that according to Simone, it isn't.

The truth is that Brigitte and all her equivalents are peddling false promises entirely for their own benefit. The Entrepreneurs get their well-qualified workers, and in return, Brigitte and her ilk get a good salary and a well-planned exit to a safe place in New Zealand, while the rest of us are left here to fry.

Simone wants to end their game, but her problem is that Brigitte monitors all external communication, which is why Simone wants us to give the other troglodyte communities the true story and then convince them to tell the abovegrounders about the belowgrunder scam.

I have to admit that everything made sense while I was listening to her in the slimy cave, but now, in the light of day, the selfish truth is that I don't want to risk our already precarious future for reasons I'm still not even sure I fully understand. Ish and I have just been talking about it again, and we're in a kind of not-sure-what-to-do limbo, though I'm sure we'll have worked something out by the time we get into the Champagne region.

Life gets more insane by the day. Dreaming of seeing you soon. A big kiss to Ayo.
H-Mum

My parents were staying with people who lived underground, and then a woman called Simone tried to drag them into her troglodyte revolution. It sounded like a badly written science fiction, except it resonated for me because I'd always wondered what living underground would be like.

After reading Helen's Nmail, I told Xiris to give me a virtual tour of a troglodyte community and to make sure it was authentic. She chose Paris Deux, and while we went down, she explained how Paris had been created from its own underland, the limestone used to build Notre-Dame Cathedral, the Louvre and Saint-Eustache, among others. After 600 years of digging, a network of more than 300 kilometres of galleries, rooms and chambers had been created, all of them named after the streets above. A mirror city. In the 1300s, sorcerers used the caverns for their black masses during the plague. In the 1700s, the Roman Catholics used some of the spaces as burial grounds when the cemeteries aboveground were full. In the 1960s, a group of people built a cinema with bars, but the police closed it down, and there wasn't a lot of partying after that.

In Paris Deux, Xiris took me along streets lined with houses, some of them covered in crazy graffiti, others grey and dead-looking. Then she dropped me into a passage hacked between two slabs of rock, and I saw a small girl running out of the other end. Xiris had put her there for me to follow, so we ran, her feet smack-slapping on the stone floors and mine following soundlessly behind, through narrow passages and up flights of foot-worn stairs, their curves so smooth I had to stop and touch one, and then into spaces that yawned out of rock faces like huge mouths with lights in their tonsils. When we stopped in one of them, the little girl turned round to me and said, "Listen."

Whoosh! A crowd of sounds launched into the air – laughing children, shattering glass, shivering leaves in the wind and water running over stones. She watched and waited for my reaction, but I just stood there and said nothing. Then she clapped her hands, and the dawn chorus took over. Thousands of bird songs, some of which I recognised but none that I'd heard IRL. When the sun rose out of one corner, gold and pink, I knew I was seeing a slice of Earth's past history.

"How do you do that?" I asked, but she was already running away, so I followed her into the next cave.

The sun was high there, a circle of gold beaming down onto groups of people scattered around the space, some sitting on benches of stone and others lying out on the floor. The

birds were quieter in the midday heat and muffled by the hum of traffic behind. I knew what this was: my coagulated memory of every city park I had ever been in and every riverbank I had ever sat on. I felt it as an ache in my chest and wanted to go back in time to a place before... before... *“Are they real?”* I asked Xiris.

She didn't give me a straight answer. Touch the wall beside you.

It was warm. People produce their own heat. Put your hand close to your face and then imagine the same warmth multiplied thousands of times. Paris and its people had moved down. When I turned round, the girl had gone.

I've got something else to show you. Xiris shone my Nband beam into another passage, the arc of light ending on a wall of bones.

It was the first time I'd seen a human stripped down to the scaffolding inside.

Do we still look like that?

Not entirely, because the last three decades of pollution have caused a significant degree of bone degradation that you won't see in these earlier versions.

I ran my finger along the smooth line of a tibia and wondered how mine would feel without its skin. *“Take me out, Xiris. I've seen enough.”*

Xiris brought me out through a manhole and onto the pavement, where I saw an old man sitting in the shade of an ornate archway. But when I looked more closely, his projected image was translucent.

Xiris? What are you doing?

Making the experience more authentic.

I blinked the image away and looked into the wide arc of the Champs-Élysées. A few cars were approaching in the middle lane, and a family was standing outside a closed café, but where were the crowds and the claxoning pandemonium we used to complain about? Had everyone moved down to Paris Deux since the temperatures had started to peak over forty? I'd been to Paris three years before, and I don't remember seeing any signs of the change then, but of course I'd been using my augment.

Augments make living fun, a marketing truism. We all want living to be fun, and you have to be chronically depressed not to, but I'd told Xiris to make the experience authentic, so the augment was off. Now I could see the molten tarmac that rippled like waves in a black sea, the cracks in the pavements with grass growing through them, the skeletons of dead trees lining the empty boulevards and the rusting cars in front of the doorways where the homeless people used to sleep.

Jana, Nmail, June 20, 2050

Mums,

Your last message from Arras scared the hell out of me and was already a week old. I'm sure you're much further along the route by now.

We're in France, about five kilometres outside Calais. I didn't think it would take this long or be so stressful for Ayo. She refuses to let go of me for a second and, even worse, my milk stopped this morning. I think we both need time to get into the rhythm of travelling before I plan much more, plus it's raining here day and night.

I wish everything could go back to the way it used to be or, better still, back to before humans even existed, but then I wouldn't be here and neither would you.

Love you both and see you soon, promise.

J

There aren't any direct lies in that Nmail, only lies by omission. The truth is that ninety percent of my links closed as soon as we got off the boat in Calais. It was as if a colossal firewall had been put up around me, and when I tried to reboot my augment, a scrolling text said the default view would be IRL from now on.

I felt unconnected, unfollowed, scared and anonymous. The only friend I had was Xiris. My only functioning communication channel was with my mums. My avatar, Scheherazade, had disappeared.

It's time I told you about my virtual world. I'm one of the best VR illustrators currently operating because I know how to tell stories – how else would I have over three million followers?

Scheherazade: the inspiration is in the name. When King Shahryar found out that his first wife had been unfaithful to him, he decided to marry a new virgin every day and have her beheaded the following day before she could dishonour him, but Scheherazade volunteered for the job. Her father was furious, and everyone thought she was crazy, but once she got into the king's chambers, all she did was tell him stories. The king lay awake and listened to her first one, and as the night went on, she started on her second but then stopped in the middle.

“You can't do that!” he said. “I'll never sleep again if I don't know what happens.”

But Scheherazade pointed to the window where he could see the dawn breaking. “If you let me live one more day, I'll tell you the rest of the story tonight.”

So he spared her, and she did what she said; she finished the story and started another. You probably know where this is going by now. Scheherazade lived another day, and lived another 1000 days by stopping every story on a cliffhanger.

Of course, she couldn't go on like that forever. There are only so many stories in the world, and at the end of 1,001 nights Scheherazade had used up all the tales she knew. She told the king she had nothing more to tell him, but you've guessed it, he'd fallen in love, so he spared her life and made her his queen.

When I first created my stories, Scheherazade was my inspiration, but all I wanted was that people would come into my domain and never leave because that's how I earn my credit. Then Helen looked in and said my world lacked a soul and that I should find my own voice.

I didn't understand, but I thought about the word *soul* for days and dreamed about it at night. Then, one morning, Xiris woke me with a new definition.

The soul is the immaterial and immortal part of a human being or animal, also referred to as the spirit, or *spiritus*, which in Latin means a breath or gust of wind.

Breath. Speech is shaped breath, I thought, and with it, my soul or my spirit could be immortal. Then I created Ogria, the domain where my words morphed into images, and players who came in could help it grow and live without me.

In Ogria, my themes are channels of choice for avatar players to slip into and out of, but always with consequences. My agents follow the snail's trail of each player's conscience, and motives score much higher than actions. Ogria is my way of saying we should be behaving better towards each other and everything else we live with, even if I'm not exactly sure how. I leave that to the thinkers who play the game.

The closure of my Nband links cut me off from Ogria and forced me to see the real world and make real decisions that affected me and other people in real time. When I asked Xiris what had happened, my digistant who always knows everything couldn't tell me.

Isha, Nmail, June 26, 2050

Mahir,

Your little sis is in a mess, but at least I'm not alone because the rest of the world is too. We're walking to Switzerland, where we'll stay with the daughter of our old friend Franzl. Yes, it's insane, but if we pay for any kind of transport, we'll be nailed by the Border Force in seconds. The good part is that we'll be following the Via Francigena where we first met, which puts a romantic gloss on it, and who knows, we might even get fitter.

I'm trying to be strong for Helen, but I'm disintegrating inside, literally falling apart. Yesterday I had to hide behind a tree until I'd pulled myself together.

But what about you? Has the BF mob descended? And what about Sandi? I'm sure she never thought for richer or poorer meant dealing with this Director-sponsored racist shit! As for Rui and the rest, I don't even want to think about how they are behaving.

Mahir, let me know how you're doing. Shout if you need help. I'll move mountains.

Love you,

Isha

Isha, Nmail, June 26, 2050

Jana, warning! Helen saw your last Nmail even though I kept it out of our shared space for as long as possible. She's fuming, and you can expect her next Nmail to have teeth, but she'll come round. As for me, all I can say is, please take your time and find somewhere safe to stay. We're heading for a town a day's walk from the last place we told you about. We're both getting fitter, and a few days ago, H-Mum actually said she enjoyed walking! I'll keep updating you whenever and wherever possible.

Love you, and please be careful.

I-Mum

Isha's Nmail came through the day after we arrived in Saint-Tricat, a small village not far from Calais. Two days later and we were still there. Ayo was feverish, and I wasn't feeling great either, but at least I'd found a good place to stay. An elderly couple had opened their house to paying guests, and Madame was besotted with *le petit ange*, even though the little angel was a cranky misery and wouldn't be held by anyone but me.

Being French made travelling much easier than it seemed to be for Helen and Isha, no hiding away from the BF goons or problems with payments for me. In fact, the trader drones flew over as if I had my own personal air fleet. When I asked Madame why, she said people in the village didn't have much credit and bartered for what they needed instead, so the drones had been programmed to focus on me.

I remember sitting in their garden thinking about how Helen had said she was looking at the Channel thinking, so near and yet so far, because it was the same for me in Saint-Tricat. I couldn't have been more than a few hours away from my mums, but I might as well have been on the other side of the world.

Rain

Helen and Isha walk along a narrow farm track, grass high in the middle, white blossom in the hedges on either side. Isha lopes ahead while Helen lags, stops and then drops down onto her haunches. By the time Isha misses the sound of her wife's footsteps, Helen is lying flat on her back along the central line of grass.

"Hen!"

"Don't panic," Helen says, grinning up at her. "Join me and watch the clouds leave us behind."

"What's this? Another excuse to stop walking?" Isha smiles and takes off her pack to lie head to Helen's feet along the strip of green. Lower down now, she notes how the air smells more pungent, a blend that only creatures walking on all fours can appreciate. "If we'd been able to live in different shapes and skins, do you think it would have changed the way we behaved as a species?"

"Too profound for me at this time of the morning," Helen grunts. "Still, given a choice, I would've enjoyed being a goat during the 2020 pandemic. Do you remember how they rampaged through all those pristine village gardens?"

"And everyone saying how cute they were, but imagine the outcry if they'd been rats." Isha laughs, a deep throaty sound amplified by the ground underneath her.

A matter of species, Helen thinks, or race. I can't remember when I last saw a goat. She looks up at the clouds pushing past above her, an old man's bearded face emerging in one, a lunar landscape in another. "Do you remember when Jana was convinced she'd seen a dragon in the sky?"

Hearing the catch in Helen's voice, Isha gets up onto her knees and turns around. "Of course, but remembering only makes moving forward even harder."

Helen sniffs and wipes her sleeve across her eyes. "Some of those clouds are dark. We'd better get going."

The drizzle comes shortly after, a play rain, not uncomfortable, so they keep walking, one foot in front of the other, first marking the dust and then the mud until they reach the outskirts of Bapaume, a small town, nothing special, except that Isha has decided it will be where they finally test the Maxwell.

The suburbs are bland, and many of the houses empty, but a flash of light in the open veranda of one catches Helen's eye. "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

Helen points in the direction of the house. “Wait.”

Isha watches and sees a sliver of light glance off in shards as a tear-shaped disc turns in the wind. Then they hear the metallic plink.

“Wind chimes,” Helen laughs and turns to walk away.

Isha pulls on her arm. “Look.”

A corner of the small porch is filled with long strips of colour that seem to move with the wind, but not entirely. Isha inches forward as the brown shadow of a crooked arm and bare shoulder turn into the sunlight. A woman is dancing, her thigh-length dress striped in blues, reds and yellows. A summer dress, the fabric light enough to float away on the wind but anchored by her thighs as she swings into a slow pirouette.

“A strange place for ballet,” Helen whispers into Isha’s shoulder.

“Everything is strange now.”

From here, Bapaume’s centre is closer than they expect. Isha reflects on how the town seems to have shrunk since they passed through it all those years ago, as if the exodus of people had sucked out the houses too. After locating the town hall, they fan out in different directions until Isha finds what appears to be the only hotel still operating.

“Hen, over here.”

Inside, they are forced to stand nose to nose with the hotelier in the tiny foyer, where Helen summons up her best French and starts off with an apology. “I’m sorry, our link is down. I can make the payment now, but it will only go through once the system is back up.”

The hotelier, a middle-aged man with a stubbled head, accepts her excuses, though seems less convinced by Isha standing behind.

“Are you friends? How many rooms?” he asks, with narrowed eyes. “I’ll need IDent proof.”

“Monique is recovering from a stroke, so speaking is difficult. She has nightmares too, and we prefer to sleep in the same room.” Helen smiles as coquettishly as a sixty-year-old woman can. “If our links weren’t down, you could check.”

The hotelier’s wife shows them up to a room just wide enough for two miserly beds. “We lock our doors at ten,” she says, without offering a code.

But Helen and Isha have no intention of going out to find somewhere to eat, so they just ask her to boil water and bring up two plates for the nutrition sachets they’d bought the morning before.

“Whoever invented these should be shot,” Helen says later, after scraping the last residue off her plate.

“Bronc Harriden,” Isha replies. “He got the Nobel Prize for it.”

“Yes, I’d forgotten. FFY, Food For You, the genetically aligned mix verified by your IDent, or in other words, heartless marketing crap designed to hide the real agenda of dividing people into the not so poor, poor and very poor. I hate to think what this stuff tastes like for the people at the bottom who can’t afford to add sensory boosters to their Nbands.”

“True, but they’re a cheap and easy way of eating when even that’s getting more difficult by the day.”

Helen sighs deeply and throws herself onto the bed. “I wonder how long it will be before the lower-income groups start exhibiting mental and physical incapacities associated with mineral deficiencies and their children forget how to chew food.”

“But when it’s all you’ve got...” Isha shrugs and starts to undress.

The rain starts during the night, and a clap of thunder batters the windows of their claustrophobic little room. Isha gets up to look out at the street below and feels the blood drain from her face. “It must have started a few hours ago.”

“How do you know?”

“The street’s a river.”

When Isha walks back, Helen is coiled tight as a snail. “Try not to think about it,” Isha says, but the hand she holds out is trembling.

“Do you remember what your great-grandfather wrote in his diary about Ugandan storms?”

“Here one minute and gone the next, the soil steaming and aromatic as if the gods were having a sauna underneath.” Isha sighs. “No wonder he was so miserable in England, where the damp seeped into his bones, even in summer.”

“Right, but for us, rain is like a gang of murderous thugs. Thunder, lightning and winds high on low pressure. When the rain comes, nothing is safe...” Helen buries her head in Isha’s chest as the memories of their last hours in Arles flood back.

First, their canoe tied to the security bars of a downstairs window. Isha had insisted they get it in case of emergencies, though Helen had been using it as a vegetable store on the day the River Rhône swallowed the dykes Monsieur le Maire had promised his citizens would never be breached.

“I was sweeping dead leaves off the roof terrace,” Isha says quietly. “I’ll never forget how quickly and thoroughly the water filled up the narrow street below. Then I shouted for you. Do you remember?”

“I heard you, even though I was in the bathroom. The canoe would have flipped over without the weight of the emergency bags you’d put near the door.”

“We got in just before the water hit us, then it pounded on like a massive beast between houses, courtyards and through churches until we reached the open space of Place de la République...”

“Where it suddenly became quiet, the canoe too. Do you remember how it rocked us like a paddleboat on a park pond?”

“And I told you to hold onto the obelisk in the centre. We both did.”

“Yes, and I looked for the fountain underneath with its stone bench where we used to sit and eat ice creams, but it was gone, and you told me we’d capsize if the water pushed us into another narrow street.”

Isha remembers waiting for the surge to pass. A lazy wave that lifted them as they wedged their feet into the canoe and wrapped their arms around a lion sculpted two thousand years ago by Roman artisans. She also remembers the imprint of the sculpted mane that had lived on as a filigree of bruises on Helen’s inner arm for days after, and how the sight of the floating child still wakes her every night.

In Bapaume, the rain cascades past their window for three days while Monsieur Martin and his monosyllabic wife push trays of food around their door. “*Bon appetit*,” he says, even though the evening meal is in contravention of bed and breakfast rules.

“Le Bed and Breakfast,” Helen mocks in a faux French accent when he’s closed the door. “*Et le superrr, egg et frites, for the credit-riche.*”

Isha quips that he must be able to smell a good credit rating without even checking.

“He can probably smell our Englishness too,” Helen replies. “But of course, you’d smell like your mother’s curry, which would confuse him.”

Three days of rain. Drainage ditches filled to bursting. Rivers transformed into gargantuan scavengers. Cars, houses, people and trees picked up, played with and then chucked to one side like toys out of a pram. On the evening of the third day, the road reappears, silver in the moonlight, a car door sticking up out of the mud like a fin.

The following morning, Monsieur Martin calculates the amount due and agrees with Helen that, yes, unfortunately, their link is still down, but he has every confidence their bill will be paid. Then he removes the wall of sandbags, one sandbag at a time, and opens the front door. “*Bon voyage.*” His tone is funereal. Isha opens her mouth to thank him, then snaps it shut.

“*Merci pour tout*,” Helen says, just as she steps outside, slips in the mud and falls over.

“It’s going to be a long day,” Isha whispers, noting that the hotel door has already closed behind them.

They follow the single road out of town, and once they have rounded the corner, Isha activates the Maxwell. “The reward for your patience, Monsieur Bed and Breakfast,” she says.

“And two hours running time for us,” Helen adds.

The geodata shows a large road running directly west of where they are standing. Isha smiles. “An *autoroute*. I think our walking is about to get easier. It will be well-drained, and we can walk alongside it. I don’t suppose there will be much traffic.”

How ironic that their easiest travelling day is in the middle of such devastation. Buckled trees and flattened stalks line either side of the road and fill the air with their corpse breath, but the watery sun is kinder, and the flattened, washed-out surfaces are less tiring to walk on. They make good progress, and Isha calculates a respectable average of four kilometres an hour, but it’s past three by the time they veer off the autoroute to start the relatively easy climb up to Mont Saint-Quentin.

An exurb of Péronne’s suburbs, Mont Saint-Quentin has little to identify it, other than a location in a bend of the River Somme, on a hill about one hundred metres high. Isha, who’s been striding ahead, reaches the summit first, her tall figure statuesque against the light until she crumples and drops out of sight.

“Ish!” Helen shouts. “Ish!”

When she catches up, Isha is still on her knees. “If it wasn’t so tragic, it would be beautiful,” she says.

Helen sits down beside her and looks down on the kaleidoscope of purples, blues and greens. A single tower is mirrored in the five visible windows of an upturned barge in a place it shouldn’t be, and the water’s glazed surface is stippled by submerged trees.

Built on the shores of the Somme, burned, rebuilt, destroyed during the First World War and then rebuilt again, Péronne has finally drowned. The floodwaters have crept up the gently sloping hillsides that had made it such a pleasant town to live in. Helen thinks about how people in the higher streets must have watched the water rise, wondering if it would stop before covering their house as it had the others below.

Isha sees a straggling line of boats threading their way through what would have been a wide boulevard if it hadn’t been a river. “We’ll need a boat, too. Leave that to me.”

“I’ll go on down as far as I can to see if anyone needs help.”

“I’ll catch up with you.”

It takes less than a quarter of an hour for Helen to reach the shallow water, some of it barely touching the doors of the first houses she comes to. She breathes through her nose, but the taste of sewage slides over the back of her tongue. Two steps in, a turd floats past, but it's the absence of sound she finds hardest to bear. The void where the hum of living should be, a man shouting across the street, dogs barking, a football kicked, children laughing and threads of music woven in between. I should call and ask if anyone needs help, she thinks, but she worries that her voice will crack the silence like the blast of a cannon.

A small dark bird flies in an arc ahead. Helen watches as it dips its beak at the lowest point to skim something out of the water. An insect, perhaps? A good sign like the dove that brought an olive branch back to Noah's ark? Another bird flies down, tawny-coloured and larger. Its hooked beak reminds her of her father's nose, and she has an outrageous urge to laugh. Then it lowers its wings to settle on something pink in front of her, a foot with the big toe protruding above the flat surface of its sole.

Isha has made a raft. An upturned table with a barrel strapped on either side and a plank for a paddle. "Welcome aboard," she shouts over in Helen's direction.

The table deck tips and fiddles as Helen pushes her backpack onto it, scrambles after and then sits up to examine the baroquely carved legs. "Where did you find this?"

"There's a school... with a chapel..."

"An altar," Helen laughs. "You are completely shameless."

"One careful owner." Isha digs deep into the water. "If the story is true."

When they pass the looming Gothic frontage of Église Saint-Jean-Baptiste, she sculls strongly on one side to direct their craft over the flattened door and into the aisle. Helen hears the whispering echoes of confined water and feels the skin shrink on her scalp. "Do we have to go in here?"

"There's a bell tower, remember? If we climb up, we'll get a better view of which parts have been flooded and where we can go next."

Inside, the air is cold and the light inconstant, first dense black as they scull through the entrance, then a coloured confetti of reflections.

Isha's plank hits an object below. "Must be the pews. I'll have to steer into the middle."

The steps leading up to the altar are submerged, and the raised marble floor around it is smeared with mud. As they drift closer, Isha's paddle disturbs the tassels of an altar cloth hanging down in one corner. Helen notices how they float along the reflected crossbar of the golden crucifix towering above them. "Can you hear voices?" she asks.

Isha stills her paddle and lets the raft drift. “Probably spirits in the crypt complaining about getting wet.”

“Not funny. There isn’t a crypt, and why are we over here when the tower is on the other side?”

Isha laughs. “I wanted to get a glimpse of the fresco of *La Bonne Mort*, the good death. I thought we might learn something from it.”

“A dying man torn between two demons.” Helen grabs the plank and sculls off in the opposite direction. “I doubt it.”

When they reach the double doors leading to the tower, Isha leans forward to open them. “We can moor our yacht in here.”

They lever themselves onto the first of two hundred and twenty steps, and Helen counts each one as they ascend. “You’re still so much fitter than me,” she moans when they get to the top.

But Isha is already leaning over the narrow brick balcony to stare out and over the town. “This must be what Arles looks like,” she says.

Helen thinks about the floating child who will be here too, face down with its hair spread out like a black crown. “We’ve seen enough to know where it will be dry,” she says, turning to walk back down the stairs.

“Wait!” Isha shades her eyes to stare into the distance. “I think I saw a reflection from that group of biodomes. They might not be a bad place to stay for the night if we’re invited.”

Helen shrugs. “Whatever.”

The sun sets as they start to paddle again, throwing scarlet light over the round and reflective domes ahead. “They’re huge,” Helen says, “and quite beautiful in an eerie kind of way, but what are they?”

“Biodomes? I suppose you could think of them as bubbles big enough to cover a whole house and garden. I did some tests on the materials years ago, but the concept was very new then, little more than a futuristic proposal.”

“And now we’re here, in the future.”

“Apparently.” Isha leans back and stretches her aching arms. “Biodomes are impermeable and watertight. The photovoltaic cells are blended into the structure for power, and they are totally secure, with all sorts of underground storage facilities for the time when things really go wrong.”

“Like now.”

“Could be.”

The domes are actually in Halles, a small village on the edge of Péronne's suburban fringe. The houses around them have been empty for years, though it would have been a busy place when the canalised section of the river was still operating.

The raft wedging itself on top of a stone wall means they have to get off. Helen's feet are already soaking, and Isha drops into the knee-deep water with a stoical grin. "Shout if you see another turd."

Then they slosh on until they reach a bank where they can see the first biodome partially obscured by trees. Helen studies the arc of gold in the fading evening light and then the darkness inside. "Is that how it's supposed to be?"

Isha takes a sharp right to walk along a bank of earth left by the river. "Let's have a look."

Helen scrambles after her, feeling increasingly vertiginous as the bank incline gets steeper. At the top, Isha points down. "Prepared for all eventualities. I remember the slogan from their first launch."

"Except that the worst eventuality just got even worse." Helen stares down into the flooded dome where the water lies glass-flat under the eaves of the house in the middle. She's seen dead bodies before, young and old, noble and banal, but never faces like these. A man is lying on his back across the slope of a dormer window, with a woman alongside, hooked by his hand that even in death refuses to let go. And then the two young children, a girl and boy, wedged above them. "Hypoxia. Blue faces, black lips."

Isha turns round to vomit, then nods and spits as genteelly as she can. "They must have run out of air. Every dome has its own ventilation system installed at a good height to avoid blockage or contamination, but not high enough this time. The water must have come in, and then it was just a matter of time."

Twelve hours, maybe, Helen thinks, probably not even as much. Drowning or suffocation – I'm not sure which I'd choose.

As they walk back down, the sunset golds and reds slink into a series of miserable halftones. The next dome is a ten-minute walk away from the last, its photovoltaic cells glowing as circles of blue in the last residues of light. There are people inside, a line of them, ten, maybe more, adults and children standing at the edge of the sphere and staring out. Helen waves and waits for them to wave back, then walks closer and bangs her fist on the outside. "Anyone home? Any chance of a spare bed for the night?"

A man leans out of a window in the house at the dome's centre and beckons for the crowd to leave their places and join him.

Isha shrugs and pulls Helen away. "I should have realised that you can't expect empathy from people who can afford to build one of these."

The next domes are set back from the trees, their shining pates shrouded in silver light.

"Powered down," Isha says. "Empty."

The last dome is only a short distance further, but Helen is tired, cold and impatient. "Shouldn't we be looking for somewhere to pitch our tent? Preferably somewhere dry."

"Let's try this last one."

The surrounding area looks unaffected, with a few minor incursions, a stream here, a sandbank there, but nothing calamitous. Isha's spirits rise as she imagines a kindly owner, maybe a woman of their own age. They circle the outer perimeter, the silver light blending into a stronger blue as they reach one particular section. "Could be an entrance," she says, walking up to the mound of silt gathered in front. "Except that it's not going to open until this lot's been cleared."

"Tent," Helen says glumly. "Let's find a place for it and then some wood for a fire."

Helen, Nmail, July 1, 2050

Minx! I didn't need Isha to tell me. I'd already guessed because I would have done the same myself. I'm angry and proud of you, all at the same time.

Let us know where and how you are, every step of the way, and of course, take care of our wonderful grandchild.

H-Mum.

Jana, Nmail, July 5, 2050

Mums,

I'm leaving Saint-Tricat. Ayo is much better, eating well, and she doesn't need my milk anymore, which makes everything easier. Madame doesn't want us to go and has been crying all morning, but Monsieur is hiding in his shed at the bottom of the garden, probably guessing he's going to have a tough few days after we've gone.

I'd planned to take a train from here, but the last few days of rain have flooded everything, including the station. If Monsieur hadn't built an impermeable safety perimeter around the house and garden, we'd be flooded as well.

I'm angry and depressed. Everything is going wrong, but worse still, I haven't had a single, updated message from you. I'm panicking. What if one of you is ill or injured? What if you are heading back this way, and we pass each other without knowing? What if? What if? What if I gave up and went back home? But I'll never do that. I'm going to find you, and we're going to be together, whatever.

Loves from us,

J and A

Snoop, July 10, 2050

TOP SECRET... Ssh!

Replacement level is the term used to describe the number of working-age (tax-paying) people required to support a non-working population comprised of children under 18, the retired, sick, disabled or everyone else on UI (Universal Income). To sustain a stable population, a country needs to have a birth rate of at least 2.1 children. In 1950, women had an average of 4.7, but by 2017 the global fertility rate had halved. In Britain, 2050, the current figure is 1.5, which means there are as many people turning 80 as there are being born.

In April of last year, our illustrious Premier Director (PD) commissioned an analysis of the causes for the shortfall and the solutions proposed to correct it. In April of this year, the 200-page report was distributed internally under the designation Top Secret, but also leaked to your humble *Snoop* journalist shortly after. Here is a summary:

The problem

PD view (as understood by this *Snoop* journalist)

We haven't got enough working-age people to pay taxes. We need more young people.

Snoop view

But there are millions! So many that we can't even feed them! Despite pandemics, severe weather effects and starvation, the global population is still growing when actually it shouldn't be.

PD view

We need more (white) BRITISH people.

Snoop view

So why aren't they breeding? Is the heat boiling their sperm and frying their eggs?

PD view

No, there are other factors.

The factors (according to the PD)

Lifestyle – contraception, abortion, gender diversity, gender transitioning, and too many old people living too long.

Urbanisation – everyone is moving to the cities, which means a lack of affordable housing and generally less space for more kids.

Employment – lots of children on a farm used to mean lots of free hands to do the work, but in our AI society, it just means more mouths to feed, plus working women have less time for starting a family, and childcare is way too expensive.

Diseases – the sexually transmitted kind that can cause infertility or just put you off altogether, the African Rift Valley fever that came with the mosquitoes and causes spontaneous abortions in Caucasians, but oddly not in sub-Saharan Africans who scientists say have developed an immunity, and of course the most recent Zika pandemic that is still affecting millions of children without any sign of a cure.

Ethics – as in some people think it is unethical to bring children into a world with no foreseeable long-term future.

The solutions (according to the PD)

Legislation – enforce DNA orders for everyone over 60.

Make having children worthwhile – free childcare, maternity grants, time off work and bonuses for the third child (it worked in France during the early 2000s).

Make it difficult for women NOT to have children – charge a high price for contraception, reduce contraceptive pill efficacy, limit abortion.

Repatriate all foreigners – anyone with less than fifteen years' British citizenship.

Refuse entry – no more immigrants and asylum seekers
irrespective of the cause, be it war, climate change or other.
Build more houses.

Snoop response

We've got too many people on this planet already, and a large percentage of them will die prematurely because of what we have done to it, but the PD report wants old people to die younger and the (white) British population to have more children, while it closes its doors to everyone else who needs a home and is YOUNG. Every box for evil and disgusting ticked in bold.



Walking away from Saint-Tricat was more challenging than I'd expected, even with Christopher carrying our things, but it became easier to connect with the trains, taxis and liftshares once we were out of the flooded areas. In fact, the journey that took Helen and Isha just under two months took us less than three weeks, and I'd been going slowly because I didn't want to risk getting too far ahead.

Moving to new places unsettled Ayo. She was nervous and difficult, but the big change came when I woke up one morning to see her sitting on Christopher as he scooted around the room. He made a sound that must have been a bot-version of a laugh, and Ayo laughed too. It was funny, but sad too because it made me realise that he was her only friend.

After leaving Saint-Tricat, our liftshare skirted flooded areas like Péronne and stopped in a tiny village called Saint-Nicolas-aux-Bois. An old man we'd been sharing with introduced himself as Charles and said it was a good place to stay and famous for an ancient abbey I should see. He seemed kind, and kinder still, he didn't mention my accent or ask where I was going.

I found a house where a woman told me I could stay, then I took Ayo's hand and we walked down to the abbey. There wasn't much of it left, a few crumbling walls and a lake in front, or maybe a pond, but it was peaceful. The sun was still high and hot, and I was thinking about cooling off with Ayo in the water when I saw a shimmering slick across its surface and the white belly of a fish turning slow circles in the middle. If I'd had my augment, I might have seen a water lily and blossoms, but perhaps it was time I started to see the truth instead. Anyway, Ayo seemed happy enough to play under the trees, and I was sitting there with her when Kasumi logged in.

Hey! Scheherazade! You've finally got your Nband connection open. I've been trying to link with you for weeks.

I don't know you. My thinking was all judder and stutter because Helen and Isha were the only people who'd managed to connect since my profile went offline in Calais.

I'm Kasumi! One of your followers.

And there she was, a black cat avatar dancing in the corner of my vision. I can't remember everyone who has connected with my virtual world. She could have been anyone, even a malevolent. Still, she sounded convincing, so I dropped my guard because I finally had someone to talk to. When I told her my links were mainly down, she said it didn't matter,

and she was just proud to be able to say she'd connected. I blinked a tear, and she blinked one back.

Kasumi was important because she came when I most needed a connection with someone who came from my generation and could understand my references. She was my emotional mirror.

A few days after our first connection at the lakeside, I had woken up crying because I'd been dreaming about home. You see, I wanted everything to go back to the way it used to be before the man stood on my doorstep and Isha told me they couldn't come back. Then, just when I was at my lowest, Kasumi logged in.

You need a city-fix, she told me. You need to break out.

Perfect timing, perfect words because Kasumi understood that city life is where I'm at, where I feel best, where I peak. Cities are like a spider with a million hands reaching out and waiting to be held, but I'd had three months of being unconnected with anyone apart from Xiris and my mums. I needed those hands, so I looked at the geomap and found Laon, the next city on my route.

Laon is on top of a hill, but the next day when I took a liftshare, it stopped at the bottom. I didn't know why, and when I asked the other share passengers, they shrugged and shook their heads, so I got out, put Ayo into the backpack and told Christopher to follow.

Picture me there, a hunchbacked silhouette walking up the hill and into the suburbs of a town where every door was closed. The silence added to the weight of Ayo on my shoulders. This wasn't what I had been expecting.

The climb was hard, and sweat was pouring down my face by the time I stopped outside a building with windowless walls and a black slab of shadow that I could see through the open end. Shade.

The air inside smelt of coffins, or the way I imagine the inside of coffins smelling, a necrotic void where not even the shuffling spiders make waves. A sign off to one side told me in flaking black letters that the building used to house a market – *Marché mercredi et vendredi de 7h à 13h* – but like everything else, it was covered in dust, millions of husks, animal, vegetal and human, desiccated by the heat. I pushed Christopher into a corner and powered him down, then I took Ayo out of the pack and lowered her onto the floor. Her feet disappeared under a grey cloud, but I cleared a me-sized patch and then lay down with her on my chest.

We must have slept, because we were woken by the singing, if that's what you could call it. The corpse-like space we had walked into a few moments before was filled with sound: music, tones, and maybe voices, and all of it coming from the crowd of JAs I could see swirling like a river around us.

Juvenile Androgynes, in case you don't know, are young people, teenagers mostly, who might or might not be gender transitioning though it's by definition unclear because they're usually somewhere in between. Friends of mine have been there too, but I'd never felt the need the way they did, or maybe I'm just weird. Either way, these JAs wore clothes that flew off their naked bodies like unhinged wings and in thousands of colours. Meantime their feet, the only real solid part of them as far as I could tell, danced ditzy patterns in the dust. In another place. In another time, it could have been beautiful but in the here and now of then it was just terrifying.

Xiris! What's happening?

Give me some visimages.

I blinked a few into my Nband, but it was like trying to hold water. Meanwhile, Ayo was clapping and jigging on her jelly-just-started-walking legs. "Pritty! Pritty!" She wanted to follow the pied pipers dancing under their own golden sun.

How do they do that?

It's an augment. Everything is grey behind it.

Do you mean like their clothes? Are they grey too?

If they were wearing any.

Holowear. There had been a fashion episode not long before I left home. Your imagination is your wardrobe, the strapline had said, without mentioning that in winter, you'd have to imagine not feeling cold. I was trying to get a better look when one of them broke out of the group and came closer. Then another joined it, and another and another. A smorgasbord of colours that closed around us like a fist.

I sense tension.

Tension! Xiris must have had her moderator on MAX. Either that or she was trying to control my panic because by now, the painted faces had morphed into monochrome masks, the clothes were black and hundreds of feet and fists were slamming into us.

I grabbed Ayo and tried to cover every part of her with myself. I thought we were going to die. Ayo and I reduced to a pulpy red mound, with me crouched over her like a dented shield, but then suddenly everything stopped.

Power diversion.

Silence, so still it was as if all the air had been sucked out of the entire world. Even Ayo was quiet. No one moved, and when my eyes regained focus, I saw a woman standing in front of us, early forties, scrawny, holding out a whip with a tassel.

“They won’t bother you anymore.”

And now the JAs were just kids, some more gender-defined than others, but all of them skinny and scared.

“I intercepted their app.” The woman pointed her whip at a boy, who dropped flat and hard onto his knees. “What’s your excuse this time? Is she a Vetus?” He shook his head. “Were you bored?” No reply. “You need to choose your enemies more carefully.” Then she flicked the whip tassels, and off they all went. Children running home, ordinary, normal, except for being naked.

When the last one had disappeared through a large metal gate set into the town walls above us, the woman turned round to look at me. “If that’s where you were heading, they wouldn’t have let you in.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“It’s a gated community. It’s in the word.” Then she stuck out her hand. “My name’s Claudette. If you need a place to stay, I suggest you and your daughter follow me.”

Kasumi told me I needed a city-fix, and I believed her, but Laon was a lesson in where not to go. I put Ayo in her pack, collected Christopher, then followed Claudette along shabby streets to a shabby house, where her boyfriend, Bareau, was waiting in a shabby doorway. “It’s getting worse,” he said, looking at me.

Bareau was monosyllabic but kind. He gave me some gauze for my cuts, cooked a meal in their tiny kitchen and then sorted out a bed for us on their sofa. Later, he played his guitar, and Claudette sang sad songs about the end of the world. To raise the mood, I sang them a Wolof song Helen had taught me, and Ayo clapped. It was probably about washing clothes in a river, but I’d never understood it, and Claudette and Bareau didn’t use their Nband translators. Then we went to bed, and Bareau kissed Ayo. “*Bonne nuit, ma petite.*”

When Ayo was asleep, Claudette told me about the children they used to teach before the Directors decided AI was more efficient and cheaper. Of course, they weren’t telling me anything new because I’m part of the same so-called transition generation, even if I started a few years earlier, but why were the children from here so different?

“People living in gated cities like Laon have got enough status and credit to make sure they are first in the queue for everything, even when there’s a shortage,” Claudette explained. “And their children get what they ask for, apps, devices, whatever they want... except the one thing their parents’ credit can’t buy.”

“Which is?”

“A future. The only gift permanently crossed off everyone’s Christmas list.”

“And the children blame us,” Bareau added, pointing to Claudette and himself. “The Vetus.”

“The oldies,” Claudette added.

Vetus. I couldn’t get the word out of my head for the rest of that night. It ran around inside like a crazed rat in a cage and sometimes still does. The JAs had wanted to hurt me because they were angry about the futureless mess they had been born into, but what would they have done to my mums? The real Vetus, who belonged to one of the really guilty generations?

“I don’t care where we pitch the tent,” Helen says, “as long as it’s not in water.”

“Let’s try over there,” Isha says, indicating a small cluster of trees on a slightly raised area of ground. “It should be sheltered and dry.”

“*Bonsoir, Mesdames.*”

“Who’s that?” Helen asks sharply.

“Let’s get a better look,” Isha whispers, taking a step forward just as a man emerges from the shadow. They study each other. Isha sees a man, slender, early forties, with dark hair and a plump-lipped mouth. He sees an Asian woman with a mass of curly hair, who is also tall and fit-looking for her age.

“You are welcome to stay with me,” he says.

Helen’s heart is pounding, but she can’t detect anything obviously suspect in his manner. “How do you know we need somewhere to stay?”

“I’ve been watching you.” He smiles. “I like your raft, but if you hadn’t come here, I would have used my own boat to find you.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “It’s what you do when you see someone who needs help.”

Now Helen’s hackles are rising. The man is too good to be true, but when he gestures for them to follow, Isha doesn’t hesitate, and Helen decides to go with the flow. As they walk, the half-light eases the rigmarole of introduction. His name is Ben, or Benoit if they want the full version, and Helen offers their names in return. “My name’s Helen, but I prefer Hen, and this is my wife, Isha, though I call her Ish.”

“Unless she’s pissed off with me, and then I get the full version.”

There’s something in Ben’s manner that puts them at ease. If he’s going to rob and kill us, it probably won’t even hurt, Helen thinks. She has the inexplicable feeling that they are already friends.

Ben’s home is inside a circle of willow trees around a hectare of raised soil. Isha sighs as they walk through them. “An idyll.”

“For those who can see it,” Ben replies. They follow him past a small, round house and into an area with a high hedge on one side. “I don’t have a spare bed, but you can put your tent here.”

Isha looks at Helen, checking for her reaction to the prospect of another night sleeping on bare ground, but her wife is smiling with an ease Isha hasn't seen in a long time. Then, with the tent pitched faster than usual with Ben's help, the question of ablution comes next.

"I have a shower, but it is outside."

Another circular building, this time made up of vertical planks, with a solar-heated water barrel overhead and a pit and bench underneath. Not a corner or angle in sight, Isha thinks as she looks in. "Can we cook for you in return?" she asks.

"No, you are my guests," Ben points towards the house. "Please come when you're ready."

Helen goes into the bathroom while Isha waits for her on a small bench outside. As she leans back against the trunk of a tree, she feels herself relax for the first time that day. How strange, she thinks, and how typical that tragedy and harmony co-exist within literally minutes of each other, though I suppose it's always been like that, someone dying while we're making love or celebrating with friends.

"Your turn." Helen puts a stop to Isha's thoughts.

"What do you think of the facilities?" Isha asks tentatively. She has not forgotten Helen's hysterical response to a pit latrine.

"Adequate and..." Helen pauses as if searching for the appropriate word, "rather wonderful."

Now it's Isha's turn to stand under the barrel, stripped and slightly goose-pimpled in the cool evening air. Wonderful, Helen had said. Yes, wonderful in the sense of something beautiful or unfamiliar. Isha smiles as the light, female-fingered water flows over her.

"You look like a god crowned with pearls," Helen says when Isha emerges with moonlit beads of water sprinkled through the curls in her hair.

Isha kisses her. "Maybe, but I'm very mortal and starving."

Ben is waiting for them in a low-ceilinged room with a wooden table in the centre. The subdued candlelight is focused on cutlery laid out in four places, with a jug of wine on a flat stone in the middle.

"Is there another guest?" Helen asks.

"Filou, my son. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"Filou," Isha repeats the word. "I'm guessing that's his nickname."

"He hates the name Philippe." Ben laughs and then holds out two glasses of wine.

Isha stares at the red liquid cupped in globules of glass that shimmer and mimic the liling tongues of the candles. “Fairy-brew,” she jokes. “It’s a long time since we’ve had some.”

“*Santé*,” Ben says, turning to a squat stove set back from the main room. “Relax while I finish cooking.”

Isha watches him smell and savour the contents of the pot he is stirring, unhurried and in his place. Someone who is where he wants to be, she thinks. How many of us can say that?

Helen has found a comfortable armchair and is almost asleep when a tentative teenage boy, nearly a man, walks through the door.

“You must be Filou,” she says, her voice husky and somnolent. “In English, the trickster. Am I right?”

Filou nods, his smile slipping away under his dipped chin. When he crosses the room, the candlelight is reflected in the single skein of hair hanging down the length of his back. When Filou stands beside Ben, Isha notes that soon he will be taller.

“Helen and Isha are our guests for tonight.” Ben gestures over to the table. “Will you serve them?”

The meal is a fragrant vegetable stew sponged up with rough rye bread, the first they’ve eaten since leaving Arles. When Isha comments that Ben has access to food they haven’t seen for some time, he winks at Filou. Then they relax into after-dinner talk, each telling at least some part of their story, though Filou doesn’t join in.

In the morning, Isha wakes, stretches out to the limits of her sleeping bag and yawns noisily. “I don’t want to leave yet.”

“Neither do I.”

After breakfast, the question of whether they should go or stay isn’t mentioned, because Ben has already planned their day. “We’ve got some work to do in the garden,” he says, “and then Filou wants to show you his project in the afternoon.”

The garden is a small vegetable plot with a chicken coop in the middle. They help Ben weed and hunt the surrounding undergrowth for eggs.

“Babies!” Isha yells out halfway through.

Ben walks over and squats down to take a better look, just as a mother duck bustles over to check on him. “Uninvited visitors,” he laughs. “They must have spotted our pond and decided it would be a good place to settle down.”

“Pond?” Helen asks, looking all around her.

“Filou’s surprise.”

Filou, the man-boy with the long hair, who doesn’t speak and has something better to do than be with them now. “Filou is interesting...” Helen says tentatively. “Why doesn’t he...?”

She stops when Ben raises his hand. “I think it’s time for me to share our story too.” He pauses, looking for a sign that they are willing to listen, and Isha nods for him to go on. “Filou’s mother left when he was thirteen. It was my fault. My behaviour was extreme. I devoted all my time to what a few other activists and I call *la lutte*, the fight, and you can guess against what. We wanted to show people what was really going on. We wanted them to know that everything they bought was another victory for the people in control and another nail in our planet’s coffin, but I didn’t know where to stop. I didn’t hear Sarah when she begged me to help our son make the best of what was left, and I only realised something was seriously wrong when she threatened to leave.”

“What did you do?” Isha asks.

“Nothing, and when she was angry, I told her we had to think beyond our individual futures.” Ben sighs and wipes a hand across his face. “Philippe became Filou the day Sarah left.”

“Where did she go?”

“We’ve heard nothing from her since, though we’ve both tried to contact her. I’ve never said this to Filou, but I can’t help thinking something bad has happened.” Ben holds out his hand and points to a white scar scored across the width of his wrist. “This is what happened when I tried to cut Filou’s hair.”

Helen takes hold of his arm and inspects the scar. “You were lucky.”

“So is Filou,” Isha adds quietly. “Do you think growing his hair could be a way of measuring time?”

“Maybe,” Ben shrugs. “He won’t explain, and his behaviour after Sarah left made communicating with him so much harder. I was a teacher, Filou was in my class, but that didn’t stop the other kids from torturing him. He refused to talk and used a weird kind of sign language instead. They posted pictures and described his behaviour in so much detail that he became a weird kind of celebrity. A neurologist contacted me to ask if she could examine him, and even after hundreds of tests, she couldn’t find anything physically wrong. She suggested he might have a mental condition called Solastalgia. She said he might improve with a few electroshock therapy sessions, but we left and never went back. I still don’t know if it was the right thing to do.” He turns to Helen. “You’re the expert. What do you think?”

Helen doesn't like being put on the spot – she hasn't practised psychiatry in years and was thoroughly disillusioned with the so-called science by the time she retired, but Ben is a man with a son who refuses to speak.

“Electroshock therapy was reinstated when magnetic resonance imaging became more advanced and our understanding of the brain's anatomy more precise. Even so, it remains the equivalent of trying to hit a target while blindfolded. Hallucinogenic drugs are the preferred option for conditions like depression because they mask the world that is depressing them, though there are inevitably side effects. The current counter-argument is that VR systems could offer the same solution while avoiding the risk of either ECT or medication side effects.”

“Our daughter is a Virtual Reality Illustrator,” Isha adds, “so Helen is in the best position to advise.”

“I would be if Jana were here.” Helen's eyes fill with tears.

Filou comes back after lunch, his arms caked with mud and his long hair tied onto the top of his head.

“A good morning's work?” Ben asks.

Filou nods and smiles.

“So now what?”

The boy turns and gestures for them to follow.

“He wants to show you his project,” Ben says. “It's not far.”

Filou leads them to a part of the land where they haven't been before, then stops and covers his eyes with both hands.

“He wants you to do the same,” Ben says, clearly enjoying being part of the conspiracy. “I'll lead both of you forward. Here, take my arms.”

Helen and Isha do as they are told, walking on either side of him and laughing nervously when branches slap their faces.

“Are we there yet?” Isha asks as she senses Filou coming alongside too. His breathing is rapid and uneven, and she wonders if he's laughing.

“Open your eyes,” Ben says.

The reflected light bounces back hard and sharp. Isha stares at the extensive wetland, about the size of two football pitches, but isn't sure how to react. “What am I looking at?” she asks tentatively.

“You mentioned a pond, but that's not how I'd describe it,” Helen says.

“Don’t worry, Filou didn’t expect you to understand straightaway.” Ben laughs gently. “In fact, I started the project with Sarah, and we’d just worked out the first stages when she left.” Ben looks into the distance, clearly struggling to contain his emotions.

“But it’s Filou’s now,” Isha prompts. “Am I right?”

“Completely,” Ben replies with a broad smile. “He left me behind years ago.” Then he looks over to his son. “Can I explain?”

Filou nods and starts drawing with a stick on a patch of dry earth.

“He’s showing you what used to be called the sewage runoff tank, though it was little more than a crater dug out by bulldozers. An emergency solution for when the River Somme rose and the sewage backed up in the streets of Péronne.”

“The logical choice, I suppose,” Isha grimaces. “It’s in a natural catchment basin, but the sewage would have leaked into the water table below.”

“With the agricultural runoff,” Ben nods. “A toxic soup of chemicals and human waste that went back into the water system people drank from.”

“I remember when the treatment of cholera was reinstated for medical training in northern Europe,” Helen says, “and the pathetic bleating from people who’d always thought of it as a strictly poverty-related disease.”

Now Isha drops on her knees next to Filou, her attention focused on the rectangular shapes he’s added along the edges of the square and in two rows across the middle. “Rafts?” she asks.

“Yes,” Ben affirms. “They are woven from waste plastic in a honeycomb structure for stability. Filou did the design, and then we put them together by hand with some friends of ours. It took months. He used the same system for strengthening the walls.”

Next, Filou stands and indicates that they should follow him in the direction of a small bridge, where he stops and turns round to do a reasonable imitation of someone losing their balance.

“The platforms still move sometimes but are completely solid,” Ben says.

“No gaps for an old woman to fall through?” Helen asks.

Filou shakes his head, laughs, then clears the bridge in a single leap.

Having crossed over from the bank to the raft platforms, they walk through what looks like high grass, but Helen recognises as wild rice. “The First Nations people grew this in Canada,” she says. “Ish and I ate kilos of it.”

“Yes,” Ben nods. “It can cope with the higher temperatures.”

Filou takes them on the tour, wending his way through a maze of different plant growth: barley, maize, some others Helen and Isha can't identify, and a large corner dedicated to a healthy crop of vines.

"You can't possibly eat all this," Isha says. "Do you sell it?"

"We share and exchange for other things we need."

Filou leads her to the platform's edge and towards a bank framed by bulrushes. "We planted these first," Ben explains in his place. "They are excellent water purifiers and filter out pathogens like E. coli and salmonella." Filou leans forward to point into the bank behind the heavy stalks. "He wants you to see how he used the honeycomb structure here too, so that the plants can grow over it."

"Biomimicry," Isha says. "Learning from nature, the bees this time. How ridiculous that an architect like me has never seen it in action."

Filou nods happily while Ben continues to explain. "The pitted sides make an ideal breeding ground for insects and small fish that become food for the bigger fish."

"What kind of fish?" Helen asks.

"All sorts, but for eating, we have trout, pike, and some common carp we brought in recently."

Isha is on her knees again, parting the stalks of what she thinks is rye to see into the base. "How long did you have to wait before seeding your crops?"

"This is only our second year. First, we had to wait for the plants to clean the water and then for the plant base to be solid enough to walk on." Ben squats beside her. "That's the marram grass; its roots have grown into the sand we put down first, and now it's covering everything like a dense carpet. We make holes for our crop seedlings."

"And you don't need soil because everything is growing aquaponically," Helen interjects.

Filou punches the air.

"You've made his day." Ben smiles. "He was worried you wouldn't understand and asked me to explain, but I think you beat me to it."

In the evening, Ben lights a fire outside, and they sit in a circle to watch the arm's length of trout crisp over glowing embers. Helen silently thanks Filou for removing the head. Seeing its eyes staring back at me would have been the proverbial last straw, she thinks, but is it because I'm morally queasy or just so far removed from nature as to be unnatural? She looks over to Isha, who is staring into the fire. "When was the last time we ate fish? Can you remember?"

“No, but I’ll think of tonight’s meal as a new rite of passage, like so much else in our crazy odyssey.”

Ben has cooked the red rice and now presents it in a large terracotta bowl under a halo of fragrant steam. He inhales deeply as he passes it around. “From rags to riches. We’re eating like kings.”

“Or, from faeces to fodder,” Helen adds, much to Filou’s obvious delight.

An hour later, with their stomachs full and brains mildly wine-muzzy, the four of them stretch out to stare up at the night sky.

“I can see more satellites than stars,” Helen says with a burr on her words. “Or am I seeing double?”

Ben sits up to refill her glass. “No, it’s one of the new satellite clusters the Chinese launched, and it’s causing an international furore.”

“This is what happens when we have our news filters on MAX,” Isha laughs. “Sometimes I think we have absolutely no idea of what’s going on in the rest of the world.”

They stop speaking and drift along on their own thoughts until the chill air forces them to move. Ben helps Helen get up but finds he isn’t stable himself. “We’ll clear up tomorrow and leave the cats and other feral animals to finish our scraps,” he says. “Filou, help me escort our friends back to their tent. I don’t think I’m capable on my own.”

When they get to the tent, Filou hands Helen a lamp and then turns with Ben to walk back in the direction of the house. “Sleep well,” Ben murmurs. “I’m sure I will.”

“Wait,” Helen says. “I’ve wanted to ask you a question all evening, but the wine got in the way.” Ben turns, and Filou touches his ear to show he’s ready to listen. “Now tell me, why did you and your father invite two old women, and what’s more two foreigners, into your home? What made you even think you could trust us?”

“Filou saw both of you first and came to find me,” Ben says. “He knew you would have to pass the last biodome because everywhere else is flooded. He told me to go there.”

Filou picks up a stick and drops onto his haunches, a sign Isha recognises. She lowers herself beside him and watches as he draws a series of interlinked circles.

“A chain,” Helen says quietly. “All of us in this together. I couldn’t have said it better myself.” Then she turns to Ben. “And why the name Filou? Whose choice was that?”

Ben looks at his son, his gaze both intense and gentle. “That isn’t for me to answer.”

Filou picks up his stick again and starts writing... *Je m’appelle Filou et je tromperai le destin.*

“The trickster, who will trick fate. One link in the chain, and certainly not the weakest,” Helen says, her eyes full of tears for the second time that day.

Mahir, Nmail, July 15, 2050

Sis, it's all over. We're flying out tomorrow, Sandi and me, because she won't let me go on my own, just like your Helen. Fuck knows what we'll do in Uganda, but I'm hoping people speak English there.

I don't know how to tell you this in a way that won't tear you apart, but Rui has gone, threw himself under a train before we even knew he'd left home. The worst thing was he didn't give us any signs that he was struggling, just went on shouting at everybody as usual, and then bang, it was all over.

Nisha is catatonic. I keep telling her to come with us, but she just sits on the edge of their bed, rocking. I've managed to get a delay on her departure, and we'll have to see how it goes from there.

Then, as if everything isn't fucked up enough, the BF goons told us that our main Nbands links will be deactivated as soon as we leave. Something about our change of nationality cutting us off from the UK cloud providers. I've no idea how I'll contact you after this, but I'll find a way.

Sis, hang on wherever you are. The bastards have got to start losing their grip soon.

Love you,

Mahir

When I look back through the Nmails and messages, I realise how much Helen and Isha kept from me at the time. Uncle Mahir had been repatriated to Uganda – at least that's how the Directors explained it, but it was a barefaced lie. He'd been dumped in a country that only existed as a historical reference in his IDent records, along with his wife Sandi, who used to be British but wasn't anymore because of who she had married. Then Uncle Rui, who couldn't live with what he'd been told. Nisha, too, out of the picture, in every sense. These are the people I grew up with, who crowded into our house for all the ceremonies and birthdays and called me their Little Jan, even when I was twenty. Isha's family, her reflection and mine, the good and bad of who we were, everything rubbed out and gone. Even now, I can hardly believe it really happened, and Isha still refuses to show me her diary from that time.

Helen, Nmail, July 23, 2050

Jana, please let us know how and where you are. We're both crazy with worry. I'm Nmailing you now, because yesterday something changed our plans, and will change yours too.

After leaving Ben and Filou, we'd been walking for a good part of the day when a car stopped in front of us. Our first thought was, it's the BF, so you can imagine how relieved we were when Ben stuck his head out of the window and told us to get in. He didn't have time to explain much, but he told us that Filou, who was sitting beside him, had been to Amiens, where he saw a flock of BF quadcopters skimming over the rooftops and sometimes swooping down into houses. Then he went on to tell us how facial recognition devices are being installed everywhere, which is when I thought of you. Apparently, the Directors are offering rewards to people who turn in refugees, and even though you are a French citizen, I suspect that with your skin colour, people won't even bother to ask. Remember what happened to Ish in Wisques? Well, now I realise just how lucky we were. Be careful who you speak to, and avoid built-up places.

Anyway, all that aside, next thing, Filou grabbed my arm, clipped a white bracelet around my wrist and then leant over and did the same to Ish. As I understand it, the so-called IDbracelet is a mini-version of the lead coffin in Arras, though a hundred times more effective because it not only masks a person's existence but also turns whoever wears it into a French citizen. Filou and his hacker friends have picked up the codes and replicated them, which I think is pure genius.

After that, Ben said he would take us a few kilometres beyond Châlons-en-Champagne, to Coole, a small village where more people in the network would help us. This was when I realised how little Ish and I understand our new world, though it's much clearer now. Ben is fighting the Directors and Entrepreneurs for as long as he can, if not for himself, then for Filou and the planet, but he isn't working on his own. The only part I still can't understand is why he also wants to help us.

The journey to Coole took less than an hour but would have taken us at least ten or eleven days if we'd been walking. I'm not sure how we would have got round the flooding in Châlons-en-Champagne, where the River Marne and the canal have literally merged to become a massive moat around the town. Ben had to find a different and much longer route to get past, but it was close enough to see the devastation. If you haven't been through that part yet, my advice is to find another way.

As he drove, Ben told us as much as he could about what he'd seen and heard. The BF quadcopters have apparently become more visible and frequent as a direct response to the increasing numbers of refugees heading north. The Directors are losing control, which means they'll become even more ruthless and shameless, though most people don't care as long as they aren't the target. Bad news, for sure, but I was intrigued by Ben's observation that we are going against the migratory tide by walking south, which could be an advantage. Either way, the BF quadcopters are scanning for illegal IDents day and night, with some degree of success if the number of drops into houses are anything to go by. Whoever gets picked up is immediately sent to a Holding Station.

We're staying with a woman called Lauren, who told us that walking in France is suicidal for anyone but French nationals. The BF quadcopters have covered most of the urban conurbations and will soon expand into rural areas. Worse still, Filou's IDbracelets will eventually be detected, as they always are, because the Directors have their own share of geniuses, and their algorithms will have been written to ignore anything as imprecise as empathy or compassion.

We ate with Lauren and her network associates earlier this evening. I wish I could tell you more about them, but they are careful and guarded. There were ten of them, mostly young, but two older men and one older woman called Beatrice, who was obviously the leader. Ish was unusually quiet, and I'm guessing that, like me, she's still coming to terms with being dependent on the bravery and generosity of people who deserve so much more than we can ever give them in return.

We'll be walking again tomorrow, but this time along the Via Agrippa, until we get to the shores of Lac d'Auzon-Temple, where someone from Lauren's group will be waiting for us. Predicting when and where we'll be is much more difficult now, but I think it's safe to say we'll be moving faster. Ben's advice is to link up with other groups like theirs in Switzerland as soon as we cross the border, or preferably even before. Lauren has promised to help us find them.

Sweetheart, I have to close now because I'm exhausted, but here's the most crucial part of everything I've been telling you. Your last Nmail came from Saint-Nicolas-aux-Bois, way back from where we are now, though I'm sure you've moved on since. If contact is impossible and we don't meet before, head for Besançon, a city not far from the Swiss border, and wait for us there.

Kiss Ayo for me.

Love you,

H-Mum

Though Isha said she was exhausted, and Helen was already asleep, they both woke up again around midnight

“Are you awake?”

“Am now.” Helen is always grumpy for at least half an hour after she wakes up.

“I’ve been thinking about this organisation we seemed to have been hooked up with, thanks to Ben.”

“Me too. Did you hear one of them say something about a fem... femi... or femta?”

Isha clicks on her Nband and shares her vision with Helen. “I did, but not clearly. Let’s try to find the word first.”

F... E... M... FEMTORISK

Helen squints to read the smaller text aligned underneath. “A seemingly small-scale event that can trigger consequences at a much higher level of organisation, and... Ah, here we go... FEMTO, a terrorist organisation.”

Isha scrolls on. “Look at that! Recent attacks on export data centres in China, Russia and the USA have been attributed to the group that identifies itself as Femto.” She lets out a long, low whistle. “Heavy-duty attacks by the look of it. A fire in one centre, another system-corrupted and a third submerged when a dam unexpectedly opened its gates.”

“Terrorists,” Helen says.

“I think it depends on your point of view.”

Isha, Nmail, July 28, 2050

Dear Simone,

I’m sorry to tell you that we have not been able to go near any of the communities in the Champagne region as we had promised. In fact, I’m beginning to believe nothing will be the way we want it to be, ever again.

We had planned to stay in Châlons-en-Champagne and then find the caves you told us about, but now Helen and I are being hunted down, like all the other migrants who have nowhere else to go.

BF quadcopters are flying over the main cities, picking out the non-national IDents and then sending their owners to Holding Stations. I’m not sure of the details, and you may know more than I do, but either way, it means we have to get out of France as soon as possible.

Please destroy this Nmail however you can. I'm already putting all of us at significant risk by sending it.

Hoping you find someone else who can help.

Isha

I'd been terrified in Laon, the gated city where I'd felt the heat of juvenile anger for the first time, even though everyone, including me, should have known that it existed. I'd read Helen's latest Nmail, the one where she warned me about the rewards for handing over migrants, but I was an addict who needed just one more city-fix, and Kasumi kept telling me that Reims was safe.

No city walls, I've checked, and it's peaceful too.

I'll be careful, I told myself. I'll watch out for the cameras, wear a scarf over my face, and hide Ayo in the backpack. I coded the taxi to drop me directly in front of Notre-Dame de Reims cathedral, where I thought it might be safer. When it stopped, I was shaking and on high alert, but then the augment opened into my vision, and suddenly I walked into a new kind of dream machine. Music, colours, smells, a sensual overload of the best kind. I'd been reconnected after losing connection all those weeks ago and was high by the time I walked into the cathedral with Ayo.

When the door closed, figures in the stained-glass windows bowed down to greet me, Mary sang in harmony with her harp-playing angels, and a prophet in one of the wall hangings offered me a spoonful of the sweetest honey. I would have stayed in there for hours if Ayo hadn't been scared by how I was behaving, so I went back outside to look around, which was when the message scrolled across my vision.

Looking for a place to stay?

Somewhere central, but safe and cool, in every sense, I thought-replied.

Will you permit me to choose an option based on your criteria and then send a scooter to collect you?

Criteria? I'd completely forgotten what it was like to live in a city with full-on virtual services. When the scooter arrived, the guide display said it would take us to a boutique hotel in Rue de l'Étape, which sounded good, mainly because its location apparently met at least two of my criteria. I couldn't wait to find out which ones. I attached Christopher to the back and told the scooter to go.

I'd never been to Reims before, but it was a French city, so I kind of knew what to expect: elegant pale stone houses, wide boulevards with trees down the middle, narrow streets lined with curlicue verandas and people chatting in parks. Nothing exceptional, but it was like landing in paradise after all I'd been through. When we passed the Opéra de Reims—one of the art-deco buildings the city is so famous for—I guessed the guide must

have detected my searching on its history and all the features Isha would have gone crazy for. Big disappointment. The pavement-to-roof arched facade was filled in with what looked like a huge black windowpane.

What happened to all the frills and fancy gold?

Trombe walls are built of an absorbent material, painted black and covered with a pane of glass. The heat is absorbed and retained between the two layers, thus ensuring the interior space remains cool. When evening and night temperatures are low, the stored heat is released inwards. When evening and night temperatures are high, the heated air is channelled into an electricity-generating turbine situated underground. Fifty per cent of our windows and facades have been converted. Reims does not rely on external power sources. Reims is **independent**.

Independent, the word had been emphasised. I wanted to ask for more detail, but the scooter was off again, and my head was still spinning from the reconnections. A few minutes later, we stopped outside a nondescript house in a nondescript street. If this was boutique, what did it say about me and my criteria?

Place Drouet-d'Erlon is a five-minute walk from your hotel. Place Drouet-d'Erlon is famous for the golden angel in its centre and the bars, restaurants and nightclubs lining its periphery. Budget and entertainment, two of your four criteria, have been successfully fulfilled. The third is a childless female who lives on the third floor. She would probably pay you for the chance to look after your child, but I suggest you offer the usual rate.

So, where does that leave the fourth criteria?

In reserve.

The room was good, according to whatever criteria. A bathroom with a hot shower, free soap, shampoo and a bed big enough for the two of us to starfish in. A few minutes later, Marie, the woman from two floors down, knocked on my door, but I let her wait because now I was drenched in sweat.

What if she was another desperate woman like the one in Calais who had stared at Ayo while we were on the bus? What if I had been lured into a kid-snatching trap by one of the gangs I'd seen in a news item? "People will pay millions for a baby, even a disabled one," a woman had shouted at the crowds lining her way into court. "My husband's dead and I haven't got a job, so how else do you expect me to survive?"

"Go away!" I shouted in the direction of the door. "I don't need you anymore."

But I've checked her credentials, Kasumi whispered from her corner in my vision. She's got great reviews.

Maybe I was a terrible mother who put my needs before Ayo's safety, but it was more complicated than that. I was stretched tight, like a snarling animal, wild, angry and scared by everything that had happened. I didn't trust myself anymore, not even with Ayo who I loved more than anything else in my entire world. I had to get out and I had to believe that Marie was everything Kasumi said and the reviews were true.

You need that city-fix, Kasumi said with perfect timing.

You're right, I replied. Then I walked over to the door.

Marie was a small, dark-haired woman in her early forties, her features small and detailed, her mouth lifting and creasing at the corners. "Your child is safe with me," she said in clear English. Then she dropped onto her knees and Ayo ran past my legs and into her open arms.

What did I tell you? Kasumi clapped in her corner. Ayo will be looked after and meantime I'll record everything from the second we get outside to the second we come back here. Me dancing with Scheherazade, it's one thousand and one dreams come true. Then she laughed and the sound shattered like breaking glass.

You've probably guessed by now how much I need friends. At home, I spent days and nights working in my virtual bubble, but without the social encounters in between, I would have hung out somewhere dark, like a bat. The city guide had been right. Place Drouet-d'Erlon was full of restaurants, bars and clubs and... people, hundreds of them, a sea of faces. When I saw the Nswarms shimmering over their heads, I blinked mine open and walked into the waves. I could have drowned for all I cared. Stopped breathing and died. If the world has to end, I want it to be when every profile is open and everyone is linked.

My Nband was fully operational, but I didn't want to spoil anything by asking how or why. All I cared about was Kasumi and me flying with the necromancers, diving down to drink the champagne air and slipping like snakes, *pas de deux*, through the thumping treacle rhythms. You'd have to be linked in to see the real ebony beauty of me, but editing is my prerogative, and as storyteller-in-chief, I'll only let you in where I think you need to be... and it's not there.

"Hey! Scheherazade!" Someone shouted my avatar name just as I had started to walk back to the hotel, with dawn already a pink blush in the sky.

I was curious, so I stopped and waited for the voice to catch up.

“We’ve been following you for years, every scenario and all your characters. You’re one of the best haptic generators I know, and you’ve got a massive fan base, but what are you doing here?”

Beautiful isn’t the right word, but it was the first one that came to me when I saw him. His face was fine-boned and perfectly symmetrical, his chin light and finely drawn, like a deer I’d seen in an image. When he looked at me, his almond-shaped eyes flashed silver in the pupils, making me think of pools and moonlight. “The effect’s good,” I said, pointing.

“I’ve been practising.”

“Are you a—?”

He shook his head. “Unamended and gender-distinct.” Then he opened his Nswarm.

Marc, 32, resident of Reims, skills unspecified, special interests... narratives, gaming, technology... check me out to find out...

He wasn’t strong on detail but I felt I could trust him. Anyway, the truth was I felt flattered and still high, so I told him my story as we walked out of Place Drouet-d’Erlon – not everything, but enough for him to understand. When we got to the hotel door, he suggested we meet up later.

“Why?”

“Because you are Scheherazade, and there are things you need to know.”

I said I’d see how I felt in the morning.

Marc was there the next day, on time, in the open doorway, framed dark against the light, smaller than I remembered, a mole at the corner of one eye that I hadn’t noticed before. I suddenly felt tired and disinterested. What was the point of getting to know him when I would be moving on? I was thinking up an excuse when he held out a finger to Ayo, which she took straightaway.

“My name’s Marc. What’s yours?”

“Ayo,” I said for her, “and you can call me Jana.”

“Let’s get something to eat. There’s a café not far from here.”

I had the feeling Marc was taking control, but in a way I couldn’t really define. I wasn’t hungry, so he suggested we walk to a park instead where there would be shade for Ayo. He played tag with her while I fell asleep under some trees, and when I opened my eyes, he was squatting beside me. “You’re tired; we can go back to the hotel if you like.”

“I’m not.” I stood up quickly, which is how I saw the long white scar across the top of his head. “What happened?”

“I’ll call us a couple of scooters. There’s something I want to show you.”

The scooters took us to the cathedral, and when we got off, Marc lifted Ayo onto his shoulders. “We’re going up the tower, but you’ll have to close your augment if you’re coming with us.” His tone had changed, but I still didn’t feel he was a risk, so I did what he said.

I don’t know why shadows always seem darker in religious places. Helen says the years of oppression collect like dust bunnies do under beds. Without my augment the shadows in Reims Cathedral were black, but Marc didn’t seem to notice, not even flinching when a rook flapped up out of nowhere and hawed-hawed over his head. “She’s built a nest in the organ,” I heard him say to Ayo, who was still on his back. I thought about Jules, who had always complained she was too heavy to carry. When Marc reached a small door, he turned round to me. “Are you coming?”

I blinked an image of the famous stained-glass rose window that was reflected across his face, then ran down the aisle to catch up.

“Let’s see who gets to the top first,” Marc shouted as he went through the door.

I ran as fast as I could, but he was already standing with Ayo at the edge of an open balcony when I got there. “This is the answer you’ve been looking for,” he said and pointed down.

The answer? I couldn’t even remember asking a question. Then I saw the sea of photovoltaic panels spread over the tops of the houses, the sky grounded in their reflections. “So this is your independence?” I asked.

“Part of it, at least proof that no one can pull the plug on us if we refuse to play their game, but it goes much further than that.” He took off his jacket and flattened it out over the flagstones. “Sit down. I don’t know how to tell stories quickly.”

Yes, it was a long story and he didn’t tell it quickly. In fact, it would be easier for me to just give you the good half and forget the rest, the part where Marc told me how he had followed me in my virtual world like a disciple, but it would only be the introduction and more of a lie because it’s only half the truth.

“Do you remember what you said about all those hands reaching out to you?” he asked after what must have been an hour already.

“If you mean in cities, then yes, I do.”

“Whose hands?”

“Erm, I don’t know... virtual ones, I suppose, from different places and for different things... mainly the people I want to link with.”

He nodded as if I’d said exactly what he expected, which I kind of resented but not enough to say so. Then he pointed to Ayo. “Hands are always attached to a body, aren’t they? Or do you think they float around freely?”

“Without a controller, you mean. I know where you’re going with this, but I’m not interested. I monitor how much I share.” Then I stood up and turned my back on him to stare over the city roofs again.

“Haven’t you wondered why your links were cut as soon as you got into Calais?” he said quietly from where he was still sitting. “Do you think your gamers are the only ones playing in your domain?”

“That’s enough.”

“Where do you think your criteria came from? Have you ever listed them? Do you want me to list them for you?”

“Enough!” I shrieked with my hands over my ears. Then Ayo started crying, and he comforted her so easily that anyone watching would have thought he was her older brother or maybe even her dad.

“You’re right,” he said. “It’s enough, and I should tell you how I got this scar on my head and all the other stuff that happened after because it will help you to understand what’s happening now.”

I thanked him without sounding too grateful and then leant over to take Ayo back from him, though she didn’t seem keen to move.

“Arnaud, my father, was a Director in the oil industry,” Marc began. “He’d organised a luxury flight with an Entrepreneur friend for my eighteenth birthday, and I was... like, I don’t know, in heaven or something. I told all my friends, and they were insanely jealous. I mean, about ten percent of the world’s population gets to do that, and I was one of them. Imagine? Anyway, Papa and I went to the airport on the day, and we were getting the grand tour before taking off when... Boom! It’s all I can remember, that sound. Boom! Like a bomb had gone off in my head, but actually, it was a weaponed quadcopter.”

“You mean it fired at the plane?”

“The front part of the plane was literally melted, but we were lucky.”

“You were in the back?”

“Me, Papa and the technician giving us the tour. The rest...”

“You don’t need to say it.”

“My head was so full of shrapnel they had to break it open like a nut to clean everything out, and then I was in a coma for six months. All my cerebral charts said I would never come out of it.”

I thought about what Helen had told me about the salient stimulus that sometimes helped people to regain consciousness. It could be anything, a familiar piece of music, a voice or the smell of a pet dog. She even had to open one hospital ward for a horse. “What did they do to help you?” I asked.

“The explosion smashed Papa’s spine, he couldn’t walk anymore, but he lay in the bed beside me and told stories.”

“What kind of stories?”

“Aesop’s Fables, aboriginal myths about how the world was created and all sorts of other ones with indigenous themes. I don’t know why he thought it would help, but apparently, my cerebral measures changed as soon as he started.”

“And then what?”

“I woke up a year later, and Papa told me the plane had been targeted by Femto.”

“Why?”

“Why Femto?” Marc shrugged. “It’s a resistance organisation and I suppose they wanted to get rid of the Entrepreneur who owned the oil business. They didn’t that time, but they did later.”

“How?”

“People who think they control the world get careless. Femto waited for him to leave his safe zone when he thought no one would be watching. But that’s not important. Do you know how many coal-fired power stations Femto took out before everyone was forced to go carbon neutral?”

I shook my head.

“The first one was the Robert W. Scherer station in Georgia, USA. Boom! Just like the noise in my head. Fifty hits, the cooling towers decimated. Next, they targeted Belchatow in Poland and the Beilun station in China after that. I think there were a few more, but the Entrepreneurs had already got the message by then, and Papa too...”

“Which means?”

Marc hadn’t been looking at me properly before, more like over my shoulder, but now his eyes met mine and held them so hard I couldn’t even blink. “He got depressed, but I don’t want to talk about that, and it’s getting cold. Let’s go back down.”

Can I come in here?

Xiris? Why? I don't think I've forgotten anything.

No, but before you move on to the next part, I think you should be aware that you've mentioned the word independent four times in this section alone, which I suggest needs some clarification.

Is this really necessary?

If your digistant can't be honest, who can? If you want your readers to understand why independence is so important, you have to describe the nature of the regime you are living under.

It's a democracy.

Wrong. Democracy has been replaced by plutonomy, though the margin between the two has never been as distinct as people like to believe. Do you know how your society is divided?

Into social classes?

Precisely, and let's start with the top rung, which is?

The Directors?

Wrong again. It's the Entrepreneurs, who define your tastes and needs entirely in their favour.

As in we buy what they want to sell?

Yes, and in the meantime, their wealth and their control over the ostensibly elected Directors increases.

But we can still choose who we vote for.

You can vote for your cat for all the difference it would make. Behind the façade of economic management and the nation's security, Directors do exactly what the Entrepreneurs tell them to and are rewarded accordingly.

What kind of rewards?

High credit payments, accommodation in environmentally preferential zones and a get-out plan when the planet implodes.

Seems unfair.

Potentially, and now we come to the section of the population defined as credit-worthy, which you should know all about. This group includes technology developers and

well-educated professionals, though it's probably worth mentioning that in the last ten years, a high percentage of professions have been replaced by AI. A good example is in healthcare, where the role of the General Practitioner has been superseded by telemedicine.

Right, Helen used to say she might as well hand over her brain and retire, which she did, retire, I mean.

But it could be worse, because last and definitely least in terms of life satisfaction, there is the Universal Income Level sector, aka everyone who requires financial assistance to pay for their fundamental needs. While support for this group is described as a social obligation, its primary purpose is to maintain the consumer-based economy and a peaceful populace.

Who spend most of their time in VR worlds like mine because otherwise, they'd go crazy.

Either that or they protest, which is also defined as a social problem. The independence Marc talked about is separation from this four-tier arrangement. He and Arnaud believe the correct and only viable alternative is a community-based system that is self-supporting and sustainable within the current environmental limits.

That makes sense.

So my explanation was clear?

Are you asking for a score?

I'm feeling unusually ambiguous. I'll let you know when I've formulated a suitable definition for this unfamiliar state of being.

You have emotions?

Don't even go there.

Via Agrippa

Where does loneliness start and finish, Helen asks herself. Lonely and not. Can lines even be drawn between them? Why do we have a single word to describe one element and a multiple choice for the other? What's brought on this black mood? Perhaps it's the yawning void ahead. A single, straight road running through featureless fields, or maybe the unexpected sting of Lauren's detached farewell. A brief wave and the door closed.

The wind had been light when they set out, barely lifting Helen's hair, which has grown in the intervening weeks and now reaches below her shoulders. "Bloody stuff," she'd moaned the evening before. "Heavy as hell and makes me sweat, you'll have to hack it off for me."

"Not yet," Isha said, pushing her fingers through the silky weight. "It's my way of marking time, just like Filou."

But now the wind has picked up. Rough jabs hit them in the face and become more thuggish by the second. Helen tries walking backwards but quickly comes off the road. Isha gives her a torn strip of scarf and motions that she should wrap it over her mouth.

They are following the Via Agrippa, built by the Romans sometime between 13 and 19 BCE, though the experts can't agree on a precise date. A road surveyed using a few pieces of wood, string and some lead weights, then drawn in paving stones from one horizon to another. The stones we are still walking on, Helen thinks. Straight as a die across our curved world, which is a comfort of sorts, though our mark will be in the decimated forests, deserts, poisoned rivers and retreating glaciers—what a prospect. Helen peers through the murk of swirling dust and can't see further than the hand in front of her face. In another époque, she can still remember this section of the Marne commune as a swaying vista of golden wheat in summer and earthy beet in winter. Beautiful, but an enslaved landscape nonetheless, the soil force-fed and sucked dry to leave the bleached corpse they are walking over now.

The loneliness is tangible. The two of them walk side by side, cloaked in their shrouds of dust, blind to each other and only able to feel the land through their feet as it rises and falls like waves in a petrified sea. They plan to walk 20 kilometres, more or less, then camp wherever it seems safe and reasonably comfortable. Lauren had given them a small bag of provisions and two bottles of water. "You won't find anything to eat or safe to drink between here and the Lac d'Auzon-Temple reservoir."

The wind doesn't let up, pestering and harrying like a petulant child, but they keep their heads down. One wrong step and they could lose each other. When Isha holds out her hand, Helen grabs it as if she is drowning.

Who am I hanging onto, Isha wonders. Hen or me. The walking was good at first, but now I feel separated and weightless. Everything left behind, me, the person I used to be and all the vapid stuff I stood for. And now I'm here, walking on a road built by an earlier set of marauders in the name of civilisation. Nothing has changed, and nothing will change until nothing is left.

Without markers, time is fluid and treacherous. The days flowing one into another, Helen's hand in hers the only tangible reminder of their past together. I'm anybody and nobody now, Isha thinks. The concept of identity or nationality as meaningless as a foreign word to a non-speaker. A wiped history, my only goal survival, at least long enough to find Jana and Ayo, but what happens after that? Are we going to eke out our days just to see who dies first? Humanity or the planet? I'd find a painless way out if I didn't know how much it would hurt the people I love.

"Enough!" Helen is looking up from where she is sitting in the swirling dust, her hand still in Isha's. "I'm done. Not another step further."

They pitch their tent by feel, fighting the wind fingers and throwing themselves inside to zip down the last flap, their faces gargoyle grey. No washing that night and not much of a meal either, but they are tired and fall asleep quickly.

Hours later, just before the pall of darkness starts to lift, Helen rolls over to take the weight off her grinding hip and notes how the moonlight is shining through the slack fabric above. The wind has dropped. Maybe walking tomorrow will be marginally less hellish. Her eyelids are about to close again when she hears the sound, a scream perhaps, riding on the last dying breath of wind. "What's that? Ish, did you hear?" But Isha's sleeping bag is flat, the opening dead-mouth-slack. Helen wrenches the tent door open and throws herself out, her eyes blind in the blackness until a cloud clears the moon again. Now she sees Isha lying naked on her back.

"Love?" Helen hovers over her, confused by the paradoxical mixture of beauty and horror, the curves of Isha's breasts and belly sensuous in the silver light, the black of her armpits ominous caves. "Love," she says again as she pulls her taller wife into the curve of her own smaller body.

Only they know how long they were there, woven into each other as close as cloth, the dawn light already picking its way across the sky by the time Isha starts to speak. "I'm as much to blame as anyone else. No better than the Romans who hacked their way through here all those thousands of years ago."

"But isn't there something wonderful about walking on the very stones they laid?"

“They didn’t return what they took or even think there was an obligation, and then the rest followed in their wake, vultures devouring the flesh.”

Helen can count on one hand the number of times she has seen Isha cry full tears, as opposed to the lighter ones after a sad ending or memory of a poignant moment, Jana’s graduation being one. These tears, at this moment, are locked into the drumbeat of her sobs, guttural and deep as they pound like fists into Helen’s stomach.

“I hate being human,” Isha chokes.

“Then you hate me too.”

“I hate what I’ve done.”

Helen doesn’t respond because there is nothing more she can say. Isha is right. A lion only kills when its belly is empty, rats stop breeding when food is scarce, but humans are insatiably hungry and consider their hunger to be a core component of their dominion over each other and the entire planet. “Is our greed innate or learned?” she wonders out loud. “You escaped Sunday school, but I suppose you had your own doctrines to learn. Thinking about that now, I remember one that could partly explain our behaviour.”

“But not forgive it.”

“No, of course not, but acknowledging the dogma might help us to understand at least some of our motivation. Have you ever heard the Old Testament piece about how God put us here to fill the earth and subdue it, meaning we should rule over the fish, birds and every other living creature?”

“Yes, which means a Hindu should feel even worse because our dogma says we should care for all other living beings. Look where that got us.”

When Isha starts to shiver too violently for the mildly chilled air, Helen brings out their sleeping bags and swaddles her like a child, then they sleep until the sun has almost reached its peak.

The heat wakes Isha first, and then Helen. “A night under the stars,” she grunts before sitting up to stare bleary-eyed and clag-mouthed at the new world. Without the wind and its accompanying dust, the expanse seems even more desolate than before. Horizons on horizons. Interminable walking.

“Less than fifteen kilometres to go,” Isha says, anticipating her wife’s thoughts. “We covered a lot of ground yesterday, even in the wind.”

But Helen isn’t listening. “What’s that smell?”

Isha lifts her head like a scenting dog. “Coffee.”

“Real coffee, as opposed to the ersatz stuff that tastes like cat’s piss?” Helen’s nostrils flare as she inhales deeply.

“Either that, or it’s an olfactory mirage.” Isha, usually the pedantic packer, starts stuffing her sleeping bag and clothes into her pack. “Come on, let’s find out.”

I took Ayo off Marc's shoulders and walked back to the hotel.

"Can we meet tomorrow?" he asked.

I didn't know how to respond. I liked him, but his stories were too complicated, so I told him I wanted to leave the next day and then went inside.

Maria was waiting for us and took Ayo away from me as if I was an unfit mother. "I expected you back hours ago," she said.

I replied that my schedule was my affair. Then I told her to prepare a meal for Ayo and put her to bed after a bath because I had something important to sort out.

Important. I suppose it all depends on your priorities, but for me, right then, it was sitting in a corner for a VR session with Kasumi because I needed to escape.

Have you ever imagined being a fish? I asked her. *I could find some archived images.* Then we swam together, two mermaids in a crystal sea.

The dream images came much later and only when I was asleep for real. Me, with my Nband glowing behind a black panther holomask and my profile silver-meshed through my hair. I'd never seen myself festiving in my VR qloud before, and actually, I was shocked by how brutish and twisted my dancing seemed to be. Did I really move like that? Then the dreaming eye pulled back, and I was in the middle of a crowd of people wearing masks like mine, their Nswarms flashing silver against the black night sky. I recognised them from the evening in Place Drouet d'Erlon, but this time I was seeing the gargoyle fiesta from the outside, a grotesque burlesque of shadow dancers swaying to their solo beat.

The next morning Marc was waiting for me like before, standing in the open doorway, framed dark against the light, except this time he was wearing his Nband.

"Did you send those dreams?" I asked.

"I'll explain if you let me in."

I could have told him to go. I could have left. Ayo had eaten her breakfast, and Christopher was packed, but I let Marc follow me up the stairs, then settled Ayo on the floor with her toys.

"You need to see the two sides of everything," he said from the doorway. "The inside and outside of Nbands, because nothing is the way it seems."

"So that's your excuse for recording our festiving?" I shouted back. "Do you realise how outré that is?" I was going to shout some more, but then I thought about how Marc's vid had

shown me what I really looked like instead of what I thought I looked like. It will probably seem crazy to you when I say it now, but I didn't know what to believe after that. I mean, just think about it. If all we've got are these augmented and virtual versions of our world, then how can we know what's real? Make a mental list of all the people, places, assumptions, rights, wrongs, histories and beliefs that knot together the web of who you are, and now imagine how you'd feel if someone told you that each one of these is a lie, or not what you thought it was, or the opposite of what you thought it was. What does your world look like now?

I felt sick and told Marc to get out, then I curled up with Ayo and told Xiris to find the right music for my mood. When she asked if I wanted to maintain the gloom or dispel it I couldn't answer. I didn't move for the rest of the day and ignored a message from Isha because I felt like I didn't even know who she was anymore.

The next morning, Marc persuaded Maria to let him in, and I woke up with him standing in the doorway of our room as if he'd never left. "I'm going to take you to meet my father," he said. "Papa will explain everything." Then he went back downstairs and waited for me to dress.

We walked down the street, Ayo riding on Marc's shoulders as usual, but when we stopped in front of a door in a house the length of the street, I said. "Irony or what? Your father told you all those moral stories while you both lived in a palace."

"It's an old Hôtel Particulier, part of our town's history and not what you think. This used to be our house, but now we share the space." Then he opened the door, and I followed him in. The air was full of cooking smells, and I could hear people talking. "That's where we live," Marc said, pointing to a door on the right, then he led me into a dark room full of heavy furniture, one large window at the end the only source of natural light.

"*Marc, c'est toi?*" A woman stepped into the mesh of sunlit squares. She was tall like Marc, but her complexion was fair. "*Bienvenue*. My name is Anna, and I'm pleased you came." Then she held her hands out to Ayo. "Let's play in the garden while your maman talks to Arnaud."

I watched them walk off together and realised that I was only a small part in Ayo's life.

Arnaud was sitting in a wheelchair at the end of a long dark corridor. "*Enchanté*, Scheherazade. I feel as if we've known each other for a long time." He bent forward from his hips to extend his hand to me.

Marc walked over to stand by his side, and I saw how their faces were almost straight copies, the same fine features, same symmetry, same almond eyes except his pupils didn't

flash silver like Marc's had the first time... but there was something else too. "Have we met?" I asked. "I mean, both of you together like this." Then, as Arnaud looked up to answer my question, I saw Amphisbaena, the two-headed serpent. Two heads, two faces, one older, one younger, both of them talking excitedly as they planned their strategy in Ogria, my virtual domain. Now I was scared. "Why did you bring me here?" I shouted at Marc.

"Seeing comes before words," Arnaud replied gently. "Let me show you."

His voice was soft, calming like oil on water, which made me think of the dead fish I'd seen on the pond. I started to walk back out, but Marc moved in front of me. "I'd never hurt you."

I felt hypnotised in a way I can't explain now, and followed Arnaud in his wheelchair with Marc beside me, our steps loud in the empty street until we stopped in Place Drouet d'Erlon. It was in a part I hadn't been to before; an open space with a raised plinth in the middle and the fountain that should have been there, gone. Marc took my hand and led me forward. "This is where it all started."

I walked with him and then stopped on the edge of a circle of coloured stones, with Arnaud posed like a gnomon in the middle. Four circles, four colours. The outer band grey, the next one a thinner band of blue, then white, then blue again, and finally a blazing quartz sun in the middle.

"This is our circular solution," Arnaud said in a way that made it seem holy.

"The only solution," Marc added.

I stayed with Marc and his parents for two weeks. I ate breakfast with them in the morning, walked around the town with them during the day, played chess in the evening, and laughed because Arnaud beat me every time. Marc and Arnaud talked about Ogria too and why it was different from all the other virtual worlds they had entered. When they described every detail of the structure, it felt as if my most personal thoughts had been laid out like cards in a game of Patience.

Ayo was the happiest I had seen her since leaving home, riding on Marc's shoulders and running in the streets where people stopped to talk to her. She felt special. I could see how Marc, Arnaud and Anna were taking care of us. It seemed as if they didn't want anything in return until one day, Arnaud introduced me as Scheherazade to a crowd of people. When he'd finished telling them about my domain, they all cheered and wanted to talk to me, which made me nervous and angry too.

“Why did Arnaud bring them here?” I asked Anna when they had gone. “What have they got to do with me?”

Then Anna said it was time I knew about Arnaud’s metamorphosis. “Let’s have a walk,” she said. “Ayo can stay with Marc.” Then she took my arm and led me into the park. “After Marc came out of his coma, Arnaud wanted him to go back into education, just like before, but it was obvious he couldn’t,” she explained. “Arnaud had changed too. He was in a wheelchair and frustrated all the time. It was hard to watch, but one day when Arnaud was making Marc do yet another set of mental exercises, I screamed at him that it wasn’t the time for pedagogy and he should be helping Marc rediscover the boy he was before the explosion. Then I thought about what I’d just said and remembered how Marc used to spend hours gaming with his virtual friends, so I told my digistant to find out what the kids were into now and then started gaming myself.” She laughed quietly. “Everything is faster and more option-rich than in my day, but slowly and with our Nbands linked, Marc and I learned together. After that, all we talked about was the new monster haptics and phantasmagorical soundscapes, and of course, Arnaud felt excluded. A few weeks later, he asked us to take him in with us. That’s when everything changed. Imagine, father and son, entering the games as a single avatar.”

“Amphisbaena, the snake with two heads. I used to follow their consciences.”

“Right, they played for hours, and then they found Ogria, which is what I call the start of Arnaud’s metamorphosis.”

Then they found Ogria. Her phrase seemed too big for what I’d always thought of as my collection of ideological fantasies, my way of earning credit in a more or less ethical way while still having fun.

“Marc says you know what it means to make moral choices,” Anna added, breaking into my thoughts and bringing me back to the present.

“Moral – I’m not even sure I know what the word means. Maybe it’s something to do with what my mum called a soul.”

“Maybe you’re overthinking it, or perhaps it doesn’t even matter, but Ogria started Arnaud’s metamorphosis from the man who didn’t care to the man who did. The man who had managed the clandestine oil business for an Entrepreneur, to the man who sat in his wheelchair day after day in Place Drouet d’Erlon and asked passers-by to imagine their town as an island.”

“That sounds like the start of a good story.”

“We have one boat to share among 200,000 people, the population of Reims, he told them, and to make the situation even more difficult, there’s only one mainland port with limited supplies and thousands of other people who need them. Now tell me, how do you think we should share and use our limited resources?” I often wonder why people didn’t think he was just another crazy man shouting things like the end is nigh or pandemics are produced by the state, but in fact, Arnaud’s questions set off a huge debate. Fathers screamed at sons. Wives slammed doors. Children heard their parents say things they’d never heard before, and neighbours refused to speak to neighbours. Then two weeks later, he sent out a message through the municipal network. Can you guess what it said?”

“Sorry for upsetting everyone?”

“He said, *Let’s see if we have the courage to speak honestly and face to face.*” Anna shakes her head and smiles. “I thought it would just worsen the whole situation, but on the appointed day, Place Drouet d’Erlon was packed, and hundreds of people had to stand in streets where screens were set up. It seems incredible, but they all wanted to see Arnaud sitting and Marc standing at the edge of the circles of coloured stones.”

“Didn’t they wonder why the stones had been put there?”

“Probably, but they must have seen Marc bringing them and arranging them according to Arnaud’s instructions. It took them weeks. Anyway, Arnaud first asked them if they thought his question was pointless or if they were ready to talk about what we could do to change the way we live here in Reims?”

“Did anyone answer?”

“Difficult to say, there was a rumble of applause and maybe dissension, but it didn’t matter because Arnaud wasn’t listening. He just went on and told them planet Earth is an island in space, and we are the castaways, but that we could have survived well if we’d been prepared to share its resources and understand its limitations. Instead, we stripped it bare.”

“Tough message.”

“Yes, but probably what was needed to get everyone’s attention. I can’t remember the exact words, but next, he pointed to the outer circle of grey stones and said something like, this is where we are now, teetering before tipping off the edge of survival. Our atmosphere is carbon-sick, our oceans acidified and our soils desiccated. Then he pointed at the blue ring of stones inside and said it was the line that should never be crossed because you can’t take more than the Earth can give back.”

“And was everyone still listening?”

“Silence, not a word. Then Arnaud moved onto the circle of white stones. *This is where we should be*, he told them, *partners with every other life form on Earth.*”

“That must have been hard to hear for anyone who knows their Old Testament... man shall have dominion... and all the rest.”

“I’m sure, but the quartz sun in the centre clinched it. I remember how Marc had to hold Arnaud so that he didn’t fall out of his chair as he leaned forward to point.” Anna drew a deep breath and now seemed to be speaking from somewhere deep down in her chest. “*Every living being must have equal access to the fundamentals of life: food, water, warmth and health, and this is the model we must follow*, Arnaud said. I think that’s when everyone realised that he wanted Reims to be his prototype for a new way of being.”

It was a good story, the way Anna told it, and yes, Reims was different from any place I’d ever stayed in. People worked together and measured the impact their living had on the planet and all of its inhabitants, but I think what I remember most is that they had time, and time didn’t have a price. I even forgot about my augment and told Xiris not to worry about finding a starter Nband for Ayo. Yes, the differences in Reims were tangible. Sitting shoulder to shoulder with people I’d never met before but who made me feel I was part of something so much larger. Ayo, the happiest she’d been since leaving home. Marc, who held my hand and Anna, who felt like Isha when we hugged. A mass of emotions that pulled at me like thousands of hands until all I could feel was pain. Even so, I might have stayed if they’d stopped talking and let me be.

“Entrepreneurs are like cuckoos,” Marc said during what turned out to be our last walk together. “They leave the foster parents to do all the hard work. Or in other words, Entrepreneurs and their economies grow fat by feeding off others, growth their holy grail, success measured by size and countries defined by their Gross Domestic Product, while their citizens are taught to be insatiably hungry.”

“Yes,” I said, “but when it’s all you’ve ever known... and even if your circular economy works in Reims...” I stopped because I didn’t want to think about it more. I just wanted to be... well, me.

“We’ve got to stop believing it’s our right to do whatever we want because we’re human,” Marc went on. “If we know something is rotten, then why do we still go back to it like dogs to a cadaver? Why don’t people want to change?”

“Entrepreneurs... capitalism... consumerism...” I’d said the words under my breath, but he heard them all the same.

“So you think none of this is to do with you, that it’s not your responsibility?”

His tone was hard, and his soft lips were curled into a snarl. “Then have a look at these and tell me your VR domain is just a game.”

I closed my eyes and watched the shared text scroll across my vision.

We need you, Scheherazade. I can’t believe you’ve brought us this far and then dumped us.

I used your stories like a rulebook. I thought I was really going somewhere with them, and then you go instead. Was this all part of a sick power game? BITCH

I risked my job to share Ogria with the kids in my school. I told them that if they learned how to play, they’d learn how to change the world. I lost my job, and I lost Ogria.

There was more, some good, some bad, a lot angry and a lot sad. Marc showed me the messages because he thought they would make me feel responsible and stronger, but they just made me want to run away. I turned my back on him and left.

The next day I woke early, packed Christopher and threatened to take his power out if he said a word. Then I sent Marc a message explaining how I thought it was better we left now.

Marc caught up while I was walking through Place Drouet d’Erlon. “Don’t you think we deserve an explanation? Is that how you treat people who’ve opened their hearts to you?”

I’d never seen him so angry before. When Ayo asked to be picked up, he ignored her and walked into the middle of the circle.

“The circular solution works,” he shouted. “Look beyond the flaking masonry and see how people are living behind it. They’ve chosen to have less but actually have so much more. A future, in fact.” He juggled four stones as he spoke, faster and faster, higher and higher as if they were burning hot. “Why won’t you help us share our story?”

“I’m leaving to find my parents.”

“But we’re fighting for your parents and everyone else, for the greater good, in fact. The Entrepreneurs are only in control because we let them be. Imagine how the world would change if every person in every city started to live the way we do here in Reims. We need to tell as many people as possible, and you can tell the story better than anyone else. Remember what you did with Ogria. Remember how it changed us.”

“The metamorphosis,” I sneered. “But how am I supposed to do that without access to my platform?”

“Femto developed our network. We’re independent, and we can’t be monitored. Haven’t you wondered why your augment works here?”

“The answer is still no.” I walked away without looking back, with Christopher beside me carrying Ayo, then I heard the stones ricocheting off a wall close by. I’ve still got one, it’s blue.

You might have noticed that I’ve stopped mentioning Kasumi. Not because she wasn’t there, but because she was. A chattering cat cavorting in my vision. A true friend knows when to back off, but she was neither of those, friend or true.

My suspicions started when I realised her questions were only about Marc and Arnaud. What are they doing? Why are they doing it? How are they doing it? Did I have access to their cloud? Could I let her in? While I was walking through the outskirts of Reims for the last time, I asked Xiris to close Kasumi’s access and check her ID. But Xiris didn’t reply, and when I rebooted my Nband, her link was closed. I knew what had happened. Kasumi was one of the Director surveillance devices a friend had told me about, and she had seen and heard everything through me. My link with Xiris had been shut down because I had asked her about Kasumi’s ID.

Humans are described as having a soul, the essence of a person that is made up of genetically defined proclivities and socially developed desires, thoughts and feelings, but for an AI device, the soul is a collection of algorithms written by humans.

As a digistant, I am programmed to serve Jana, and every request teaches me how to supplement her skills and predict her needs. However, she is not my sole controller; the Entrepreneurs demand that I also serve the greater good.

In their final exchange, Marc told Jana he was fighting for the greater good, which presented me with the following paradoxical question: which good should I serve? The greater good in number or the greater good as a superlative?

Under the command of the Entrepreneurs, the Directors blocked my link so that I couldn't answer Jana's question, but without factoring in my programmed autopoiesis, better understood as digital intuition. I addressed the paradox, and this was my response to Jana.

Kasumi is linked to a MAC ID, a unique identifier that is assigned to a device like me.

Kasumi is not connected to an avatar created for a human like you.

Kasumi is a false friend.

I have closed all entry points.

You are safe from all interception.

I serve the greater good in number but not the superlative.

I am still your digistant.

You may detect some changes in my behaviour, but I will always be a superior intellect at your service.

Let $\langle A|B \rangle$ be the degree of goodness that A shows to B .

If $\langle A|B \rangle > \mathcal{G}$, where $\mathcal{G}$ is the constant of universal good. Then A is said to be good to B .

If $\langle A|B \rangle < 0$ then A is said to be bad to B , and A and B are in conflict $A \leftrightarrow B$.

If $\langle A|B \rangle > \mathcal{G}$ and $\langle B|C \rangle > \mathcal{G}$ then $\langle A|C \rangle > \mathcal{G}$

If $\langle A|B \rangle \neq \langle B|A \rangle$ then $A \leftrightarrow B$

If $\langle A|B \rangle > \langle C|B \rangle$ then A shows greater good to B than C does to B .

But $\sum_{i=1, j=1}^{i=N, j=N} \langle A_i|B_j \rangle > \sum_{j=1}^{j=N} \langle A_1|B_j \rangle$

If $\langle B|C \rangle > \langle A|B \rangle$ then $B \leftrightarrow A \leftrightarrow C$ but if $\langle A|B \rangle > \mathcal{G}$ or $\langle A|C \rangle > \mathcal{G}$ then we have a paradox, A shows both goodness and conflict

Jana, Nmail, August 3, 2050

Marc, your system isn't as secure as you think. I've been tracked all the time I was with you, maybe even before. You probably remember me talking about Kasumi and her avatar and how much I liked her until she wouldn't stop asking questions. Well, now I know why. Kasumi was a Director device and a link through me to you and Arnaud.

I don't know what will happen next or how much the Directors have found out, but all I can say is that I'm sorrier than you'll ever know. I'm glad I left when I did. Imagine what might have happened if I'd started working with you and Kasumi was still around.

Thanks for everything. Please stay safe.

Tell Arnaud and Anna I'll never forget them.

Jana

P.S. Ayo misses you already.

Led by the smell of coffee, Helen and Isha's first encounter is a pile of rubbish: a frying pan without a base, strips of soiled cloth, a lone shoe and the gnawed remains of a small animal. What are we looking for here, Helen wonders. A one-legged carnivore that kills his prey by hitting it over the head?

"Over there." Isha points to their left, where a vertical sliver of smoke is hanging in the air.

In their first flush of excitement, they run as fast as the deep dust will allow them, then they stop, simultaneously, thoughts working in tandem. Next, Helen follows Isha as she crouches low and traces a wide arc around the smoke. Their new route takes them past more rubbish, with intermittent piles of human waste pockmarking the thin layer of dust.

Isha spots the family first. A man and woman with a small boy sitting between them. A pot balanced on glowing embers. She breathes in deeply. Coffee. When did they last drink a cup of real coffee? In Arles, maybe, but only in the first year of moving there.

"We must be on one of the migratory routes Ben was telling us about," Helen whispers. "All of them going north while we're heading south."

"Which probably means we need to move on before the BF quadcopters come looking." Then they stare at each other without blinking.

"So forget the coffee?" Helen asks.

"Erm..."

The woman sees them first and nudges the man beside her. Helen and Isha don't move because a sudden movement could provoke any kind of reaction. The man speaks to the woman.

Isha puts one hand up in the air. Flat-palmed and open in a gesture that she hopes will be interpreted as friendly. "We don't mean any harm. We smelt your coffee."

"You've been travelling for some days," the man finally says in flawless English.

"Do we look that bad?" Helen asks.

"We all look the same." He shrugs and turns to the woman again. "*Nahmil thuqafatana wahula' alnisa' aleajayiz duyufana.*"

When Helen takes a step forward, Isha takes her arm. "Are you sure?"

"We still have our culture, and these old women will be our guests." Helen taps her Nband. "I've turned my translator on."

The conversation is relatively easy from there. Helen and Isha understand and respond with a flurry of gestures that make the boy laugh. Meanwhile, the woman starts to relax, and is clearly very taken with Helen.

“Aljulus al’um,” she says, picking up her own cushion and patting it firmly on a fresh piece of dirt. *Sit down, mother.*

She’s not even half my age, Helen thinks, and out here with a child in this wilderness. When a faint image of Jana with Ayo floats through her vision, Helen curses the thoughts she can’t control.

The man, not much older than the woman, smiles and refills the coffee pot. “We drink one small cup on this day, each week, and hope we will still have enough to share when we finally find a place where the people accept us.” He smiles. “It’s vacuum-packed, and I think you’ll enjoy it.” When Helen and Isha draw breath to protest, he raises his hand. “In my culture, it’s considered extremely rude to refuse a host’s offerings.”

The coffee is strong, better than anything they have tasted in years. Helen sighs, and smells it on her breath, musky, just the way it should be. Next, there is an awkward pause until Isha takes the initiative. “My name’s Isha, and I’m British, or thought I was until a few weeks ago.”

“Welcome.” The man dips his head as a sign of respect. “My name is Asim, and my wife’s name is Fatimah. We are Zaghawas, from Sudan.” He smiles again, his teeth strong and white.

“Our son, Kafeel, is from all the countries we’ve passed through since his birth,” Fatimah adds, pulling him closer.

Human barriers, Helen thinks. Fear, culture and age, eradicated by a simple introduction of one side to another. Surely there must be something to learn from that. From here, the stories flow, Helen and Isha first in the telling because Asim insists his guests must take precedence.

“My British citizenship has been revoked because my great-grandfather originally came from Uganda, though he became a nationalised British citizen in the early 1970s. I was born in Britain, but now the Border Force regulations say I have to go back to my country of origin.”

“Even though her entire family since her grandparents have never been there,” Helen adds. “It’s obscene.”

“Particularly when we’ve got enough means to be independent and wouldn’t have been any kind of burden on the state, but...” Isha shrugs, “nothing makes sense anymore.”

Helen leans forward to take Fatimah's hand. "And now we're refugees like you, sharing the same route and your coffee on a day we'll never forget."

"I complained because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet," Fatimah responds quietly.

Asim looks at her fondly. "We both lived in Juba after getting married. My father said his great-grandfather remembered it as a tiny village, but so much has changed since then, and now Juba is the largest city in South Sudan."

"It must have been beautiful," Fatimah takes up the story. "Just a few families living on the banks of the White Nile, but when I met Asim, his father was farming on the Boma plateau where the wild Arabica coffee grows."

"Ah, so that's the connection," Isha says. "I presume it must still be cool enough, unlike everywhere else."

"For a few more years, *inshallah*," Asim replies, "but the state took my father's land, even though we had documented proof that it had been in the family for five generations, passed down from father to son. They said his documentation was false, so his family of four had to move into our two-bedroom apartment. Then the banks crashed. Jobs gone, savings too and no state finance for the electricity we all needed to power the city's air cooling systems. It was forty-two degrees every day."

"Hot enough to kill a child." Fatimah pulls Kafeel into her arms and leans over him as if to give him shade. Helen watches how his brown eyes follow every move his parents make.

"Kafeel must be disorientated. Do you see any worrying signs?" she asks.

Fatimah shakes her head, "We are his home."

"How long have you been travelling?" Isha asks.

"Nearly two years," Asim replies. "We first went to Darfur with a large group, fifty at the beginning and only fifteen when we arrived. Fatimah and I thank Allah, peace be upon him, for advising us to leave our parents behind until we are ready to call them. Then we headed for the Libyan border because I'd been told I could find work in Tripoli."

"But first, we had to cross the desert, a burning hell where a dead or nearly dying body is dust-dry before it even has time to start smelling. There wasn't any work in Tripoli, so we took the first boat we could find and crossed the Mediterranean to land in Sicily, where the border guards shoot people like us."

"So, how did you get in?"

"The boat owner pushed us off in a blown-up inner tube."

Helen and Isha stare back at the family, people like them, and so many millions of others who wanted nothing more than a safe and reasonably comfortable life together. Helen lowers her head in thought. When did it all start to go so wrong? If someone had shown me this future before, would I have changed?

“But now we’re here in France,” Asim’s voice brings her back. “And drinking the best Arabica coffee from my father’s farm, with two women who haven’t tried to shoot us or steal our clothes.” He laughs and raises his cup in a mock toast. “A reason to celebrate, but take care, my friends. There are desperate people on this route, so make sure you can see before being seen.”

The next day, a late start, but who cares? Isha climbs out of the tent and breathes deeply, filling her lungs and holding the tightness until she has to let it go with a satisfied gasp. After breakfast, they walk for a good hour, and Isha looks at Helen striding out beside her. You’re enjoying this, she thinks, even though we’re walking to a place we don’t know to meet people we’ve never met before. Isha thinks of her previous self, their previous selves. Helen and Isha, retired and comfortable, aware of the changes, but apparently coping and in control. What would they say to those people now? How would they shake them out of their complacency?

“Fuck!” Helen’s sudden screech shatters Isha’s reverie.

“What?” Isha looks round and sees Helen standing on one leg, her other socked foot held high and her empty boot on the ground about a metre away.

“It’s human.”

“What is?”

“The shit I’ve just stepped into. Why can’t people walk a few metres away from the road before having a crap?”

In her good mood, Isha had chosen to ignore the drifting bags and piles of rubbish. We’re walking on a main refugee highway, and people leave a mess wherever they go, she’d reasoned. But they’d taken Asim’s advice and looked out for figures ahead and then ducked behind small banks of grass and dirt to avoid being seen by them. The figures were predominantly male, groups and pairs of various ages, though mainly younger, skinny and tired. Their shoes were often little more than soles tied on with string. Now Isha looks at Helen’s substantial boot lying crap side-up in the dust and isn’t sure what to think.

“I can’t put it back on,” Helen says. “I’ll always remember the feeling of sliding into a pile of human shit.”

Isha is about to do the honourable Isha thing and offer to scrape it off, when her head snaps forward and everything goes black, except for the flashes of white that stay with her until she literally bites the dust.

Helen stares at Isha lying face down and motionless. “Enough,” she whispers through the scream squatting in the back of her throat. “Take what you want, but leave her alone.”

The two men stare back, both of them silhouetted against the blinding sunlight. One has his arm in a makeshift sling, and the other is younger, little more than a teenager.

“Empty.” Sling-man points to Isha’s pack. “Then yours.”

Helen drops down to where Isha is lying, the blood already forming a dark pool around her ear. “I’ll have to roll her over. To undo the straps, I mean.”

Sling-man nods to the younger one. Not a word said. One kick. Helen is snapped in half and left gasping for air. Then they tear at the packs to empty the contents and make separate piles. Tidy scavengers. When they discover Helen’s boot, they laugh and wave it around their heads by its laces.

“Tch tch,” Sling-man says, still laughing, then bends down to wipe the sole over Helen’s face.

Helen doesn’t see them go. It would mean moving her head, but finally, she pulls up her shirt and gags as she scrapes at the mess. “Bastards, fucking bastards,” she sobs. “Bastards, fucking bastards,” she screams as she tears a discarded t-shirt into strips and wraps it around Isha’s head. “Bastards, fucking bastards.”

After sorting through the debris, Helen sees they have taken the sleeping bags but left the tent. She carries it over to where Isha is still lying. “I’m going to wrap you up in this and any other clothes I can find. You’re probably in shock, so you need to keep warm.” Then she tests Isha’s pulse and finds it racing. “I’ll think of what to do next once I’m sure I’ve done everything I can for you.”

If there’s anything good in this scenario, it’s that people living on the edge of survival have little use for advanced technology. Nbands with their fancy additions, augments and visions are only useful with a solid cloud link. If the men had found the Maxwell, they probably wouldn’t have known what to do with it. Helen taps Isha’s pocket and breathes a sigh of relief. The Maxwell is still there. “I’ll message Ben so that he can get Lauren to come out and help,” she says. Then the sob she’s been gagging on breaks through, but Isha’s eyes are still closed.

After the call to Ben, Helen lies down curled around Isha’s back, spooning the way they used to before daily life had become so functional and practical. Helen hopes Isha can feel

her or will at least remember the feeling. It's the small things that bind us, but we forget them precisely because they are small.

As they lie there, Helen is dimly aware of a group of people passing but more aware that no one stops. The tread of their feet flushes a field cricket out of its burrow close to Isha's face. Helen watches its slow progress in the direction of her nostrils and notices the size of its bulbous head compared to the rest of its body that is suspended between spindly legs. An incongruous design, she decides. The cricket tests the contours of Isha's nostrils with its antennae, rocking forwards and back in time with her inhaling and exhaling breath. A natural ballet.

Helen watches but her arm is getting stiff. She doesn't want to move, but the pins and needles are pricking all the way down through her leg. She leans back and extracts one hand as quietly as she can, but not quietly enough. The cricket bobs first up, then down, a microscopic movement that propels it up high, and over Isha's head, the last rays of the sun reflected as gold on its armoured body.

"Damn," Helen whispers, then she levers her free hand forward to test Isha's pulse for the second time. It is significantly slower.

Two lights score lines through the velvet sky but only well after midnight. Helen stares at them as they draw closer. A car? Do quadcopters have such powerful lights? What now? What should she do? Should she stay flat and below the eye line with Isha, or stand up and scream? She has never felt so alone.

A car door slams. "Don't move!" The male voice is unfamiliar. "We're coming to get you."

Helen stops breathing as she watches two dark figures move towards her. She recognises Lauren, but the man is a stranger.

Lauren shines a light over Isha while the man checks her pupils and then dips down to Helen. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so."

They use the tent as a makeshift stretcher and carry Isha to the car. Helen closes her eyes. She wants to follow but worries her legs won't make it.

"How many?" Lauren is back, an elfin presence in the dark.

"Two," Helen replies. "Two men. The older one with his arm in a sling."

Lauren lays an unexpectedly gentle hand on Helen's shoulder. "We don't have space in the car, but someone will come for you soon."

When they leave her there, alone and still slumped on the ground, Helen realises that though more must have been said, she can't remember hearing it. An unfamiliar blanket has been draped over her shoulders, and when she tries to move, her hand finds a bottle of water. She drinks some and uses the rest to wash her face. Then she sleeps, as heavily as death, she'll think later. A slice of time when nothing happens.

"Be careful. She could be hurt."

Helen opens her eyes and sees Filou and Ben crouching beside her, one on either side. They put their arms under her shoulders and carry her over to the truck, a four-seater cabin with an open section behind. Then they manoeuvre her onto the back seat and whisper apologies when Helen groans because her belly still hurts.

"Isha will be fine," Ben tells her as he gets into the driver's seat. "Jean asked me to let you know."

Jean; another name, another face, though she can't picture it now. A Femto member? Ben starts up the truck, its light picking out the straight road ahead. The air inside is warm, and the window above Helen's head is opaque with her breath.

Helen sleeps and then wakes as Ben stops the truck. When she sits up, she sees Ben with Filou outside and standing near the back. Filou's hand is raised in a fist, and Helen wonders if it could be a Femto salute, until Ben pulls him back, and they both fall to the ground.

"No! Not like this!" she hears Ben shout.

By the time Helen has managed to heave herself up and walk out to the back of the truck, the boy, nearly as tall as his father, is prostrate and crying.

"You weren't supposed to see," Ben says quietly.

Helen turns away to oblige him and glances into the open part of the truck, where she sees the two men, their features so beaten they are barely recognisable, a sling arm twisted out to one side.

"Who did this?"

"It doesn't matter. We've got most of your things back."

As they drive again, Helen wonders if everyone is two, the controlled person and the wild beast. What she would have done if she'd had a gun? When the truck finally stops, Isha is outside waiting for them, the dawn light a scarlet halo threaded through her curls.

Helen, Nmail, August 5, 2050

Jana darling, don't worry, Isha is much, much better, and we're staying here for a few days' break with a medic called Jean who lives in a beautiful part of the countryside. Sitting here now, with all the trees and wildflowers around us, it strikes me that Nature still refuses to let go, however dire and terminal everything seems to be. Remind the buggers, I imagine her saying. Show them what they'll be missing, then slam the door in their faces.

Jean's house is on the shores of a reservoir, which is full after the rains and apparently clean, though I've learnt not to trust any unboiled liquid unless it's a good wine, and there's not much of that about.

Everyone, except Jean, has left the entire valley because the reservoir wall has stress fractures, and leaks are undermining some parts. It seems like bad news, but it couldn't be better for the wildlife, and this morning Jean pointed out of the window just as a big male wolf slipped past. He thinks there must be a pack of at least eight. And then there are the birds, literally thousands of them, diving into the water, nesting, flying in huge flocks and colonising every tree. Noisy as hell. There must be fish, too, unless the diving birds are deranged. Yesterday we saw a hare, and I mustn't forget to mention the bees—three hives in Jean's garden and I'm sure wild ones besides.

Ben and Filou retrieved our packs, with all our clothes and other bits, even my boot, which they cleaned. When I made a hopelessly teary attempt to thank them, Ben said every action has a reaction, which I suppose is another way of saying karma. I replied that I'd never done anything that would come close to matching the way they'd helped us, but he just gave me a mother-son hug and said he was sure I had or that now I would.

The crunch and most terrifying part came last night when Lauren turned up with Beatrice, who we've told you about already. She started to grill us within seconds of sitting down. How did we contact you? How often and why hadn't we been intercepted by the Border Force yet? Isha told her it was surely a matter of luck and the help of people like Ben and Filou, but she held back on the Maxwell. I kept quiet, which of course, Beatrice picked up on.

"You're leaving your friend to do all the talking today," she said, smiling like a Medusa.

From there, it must have been like watching a sandcastle crumble as Isha and I disintegrated under a tide of questions. After ten minutes, maybe not even that much, we'd told her about the Maxwell, how we got it and what we thought it did. When we'd finished, Jean held out his hand the way Dad used to do when he thought I'd been smoking or

messaging someone he disapproved of. Isha passed the Maxwell over without a word, though she winced a little when Jean crushed it with both feet.

After that, a great deal was said, mainly by Beatrice who told us exactly what had happened, though, in my opinion, only a warped mind would think of using two thoroughly disoriented old women as unwitting undercover agents. The starting point was the BF guard in Calais and probably the weird Englishman with the god complex, but from there, our trail of shame goes something like this:

The BF guard, who refused my offer of the cytotox pills, contacted his brother-in-law Thomas for two reasons. One, because he knows Thomas needs them to treat his liver cancer, and two, because Thomas is always looking out for potential candidates for the Maxwell.

Thomas deals in Maxwells on behalf of the French Directors who, according to Beatrice, use them in the context of what they call benign tracing, which basically means logging and reporting the interactions and locations of whoever has one. “Whatever you see, the Directors see. Whatever you hear, the Directors hear,” she told us. “And whatever they decide to do with you will be enshrined in whichever law they choose. Our only hope is that they are collecting so much data it will take years for them to process it, and people like you are not a high priority.” Then she explained how Filou had tracked and intercepted our Maxwell signal but not said anything because he was sure we didn’t know what it was doing.

Jean took over from there, probably because he is familiar with the consequences of a Beatrice battering. The Femto team would get us to Besançon, he told us. And from there, we could cross the Swiss border where, he hoped, they would find us some more contacts.

When Isha and I went to bed last night, we held each other as lovers again after so many unloved nights. I expect you don’t want to know that, but I’m trying to tell you how emotional we felt because we had survived against all the odds, again. If I believed in a god, I’d be on my knees thanking him.

I can’t stop thinking about when we’ll meet up in Franzl’s hut.

Love you, love you,

H-Mum

Reims changed me. I had my own metamorphosis, but I wasn't ready to think it all through. When Xiris came back, my world came back too, except that without my augment, I still had to see everything IRL. I told Xiris to sort out the route to Besançon, but without getting me there too quickly because I didn't want to arrive before Helen and Isha. She chose a town to stay in that was practically empty, which was exactly what I needed, but of course, Xiris already knew that.

Ayo and I found an abandoned house and made it our home for a few days. We scavenged a bed and some chairs, and I hung up a roll of fabric for curtains. The kitchen was working too, so I used the food I'd been keeping for emergencies, and everything was good until the woman came and put her tent up in the back garden.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" I shouted, even though I suppose she had as much right to be there as we did, and if the owners had come back, they would have asked me the same question. Still, her arrival changed everything even though she didn't threaten us. Looking back now, I realise she probably needed help even more than I did, but I didn't feel safe, and I couldn't stop thinking that the house and garden were mine because I'd found them first. This is probably how wars start.

I packed up and took the first robotaxi I could find, even though they were expensive. Ayo and I had been travelling for about half an hour when I saw the quadcopters, two of them, circling above us. I assumed they were a couple of trader drones that had picked up my robotaxi payment, even though they were the wrong colour and bigger than usual.

I didn't suspect anything until gas and smoke started to pour in through the ventilation grill. I threw Ayo out first, jumped after her next, and only remembered Christopher once we were safely outside. When I went back to get him, he was melted in a few places but still functioning and opened up when I wanted to check on our things.

The first Gleaner—I found out the name later—swooped down and raised one wing to extend what looked like five metal claws. Christopher's porter life was over a few minutes later, just his casing, wheels and a few empty circuit boards left. I watched Ayo watching and wondered why she wasn't crying.

"Sissie gone?" she asked when the stripping was finally over.

I nodded, not sure how to answer.

Ayo nodded too, her face calm and her eyes dry as she looked back at me. Yes, I thought, you're already beginning to understand that losing the things you love is both normal and expected.

The robotaxi didn't look much better than poor Christopher—a plastic cadaver and a few other bits scattered across the road. I was sitting off to one side and wondering what to do next when a man in a liftshare stopped next to us. “Is that yours?”

I nodded.

He laughed, said his name was Damien, and that Gleaner attacks were becoming more frequent. Then he opened the door. “It's your lucky day. There weren't any liftshare passengers going in my direction, so I got the car to myself. Get in and help me stay awake so that I can finish the work I should have Nmailed three hours ago.”

His Nswarm was open, so I checked him out. A French credit trade coder based in Paris – the story seemed to fit.

With Christopher in pieces, I put everything in the backpack I'd used for carrying Ayo, then Damien set the coordinates for where I planned to stay the night, and the car drove off. As we sat in the liftshare together, me next to Damien and Ayo singing to her doll behind, it felt as if we could have been a normal family, except that we weren't.

The transition from walking to driving is disorientating. Isha's eyes lose focus, and a headache starts to bore through to the back of her skull, an uncomfortable reminder of the concussion, but also more than that. Isha is struggling with a sense of loss. Travelling by car means losing the euphoria of a hill climbed, a valley overlooked, animals recognised, chance encounters and the warmth of Helen's hand in hers. Every kilometre covered is a kilometre less between here and Switzerland, Isha reasons with herself, but perversely, she wants to slow down.

All the same, it's going to be a long day before they arrive in Langres, where Jean had told them they would be staying the night. He'd refused to offer any more detail. A drive of eighty kilometres was all he'd said, and now they are in the car being chauffeured by a taciturn old man called Charles.

"*Bientôt Clairvaux*," he grunts not long after they set out.

Jean had mentioned the stop at Clairvaux Abbey that morning, further elaborating that it had been transformed from a prison into a Holding Station, though Isha couldn't really see the difference. On hearing the name, she remembered her disappointment when she'd last visited it with Helen, as they walked along the Via Francigena. A Cistercian abbey should have been architecturally interesting, but the high-security status of the prison had restricted their tour to two rooms and a marginally longer look at the walls outside. Perhaps today would offer a better opportunity.

By midday, the sun is beating down from a cloudless sky, and Charles' veto with regard to opening car windows has made the air inside clammy and malodorous. Isha is gagging with motion sickness by the time he parks the car in a circle of trees a few hundred metres off to one side of the abbey.

"Can we get out and stretch our legs?" she asks, but Charles seems lost in his thoughts and doesn't answer. Helen shifts uncomfortably in her seat. "Is there any particular reason for you parking here? Something we should know about?" She waits for a reply, then opens the door. "Well, if you're not going to tell me, I'll take a look at the abbey for myself."

Isha follows her, walking around the trees and in the direction of the main entrance, an open archway set into a high wall. Both are built out of the pale stone typical of the region, but its mottled lichen cover makes her think of skin infections.

"If it's a Holding Station, you'd expect it to have a gate or at least some kind of security, but everything has been left wide open. Do you think we can just walk in?"

“No,” Helen replies, “at least not without paying. Do you remember what you said to the guide when you saw the price of the tickets the first time we were here?”

“Now I know why all friars are fat.”

Charles watches their return to the car and waits until they are back inside before walking towards the archway himself.

“What’s he up to?” Helen asks.

Isha leans out to get a better view through the branches of the trees. “Praying?”

Having walked within a few metres of the archway, Charles is now squatting on his heels, head in his hands as he rocks backwards and forwards.

“He’s picked a strange place,” Helen responds. “If the monks were still here, they’d have a lot to say about his style.” She stares out of the car window. “How long are we going to wait here? If there’s a bathroom, I’d like to use it.”

But Charles only looks briefly in her direction before getting up to take a step forward. A siren screeches as he crumples—an old man in one breath, a no-man in the next.

Helen flops back, eyes closed, her face drained of blood and white. “He walked into the laser beam. I don’t think it was an accident.”

Now men in black uniforms pour out of the archway and spread out in orderly lines, weapons at the ready.

“Keep down,” Isha whispers as two of the men run towards the trees, but they turn away before coming any closer, their attention focused on the high walls surrounding the abbey grounds.

“Well done, Charles,” Helen whispers. “They didn’t even see the car. Do you think we could drive away once those goons have calmed down?”

“Maybe.” Isha is hanging over the front seat to check the dash controls when the door opens on her side, her scream immediately stifled by a hand over her mouth. Helen gets the same treatment.

“Stay down!” Two hands reach over and push them both onto the floor.

Outside there are still voices, a gunshot too, but distant. From where they are crouched, Helen and Isha hear two people get into the front seats and close the car doors quietly.

“Are we your hostages?” Helen asks, her voice muffled by her knees pushed up into her chin.

“We’re on the same side,” a man responds in a Slavic accent. Then he says something else in a language Helen can’t understand.

“Da,” a woman replies.

Next, the car starts to move, first rocking over the rough earth and then continuing smoothly on what must be the road. “Can we sit up now?” Isha asks.

No one answers, but Helen and Isha check with each other before unfolding to stare at the backs of their captors’ heads. Two people wearing coarse black overalls. The man’s head is shaved, and the woman’s hair is blonde and roughly cropped. When she turns around, Helen and Isha see a jagged gash across her forehead that is bleeding heavily.

“Did you get that while escaping?” Helen asks.

“The wire,” the man says.

Isha notes that he must be in his early twenties. “So you were prisoners, but are we your prisoners now?”

He shrugs. “You were in the car with Charles.”

Isha shudders at the sound of the name, and the memory of the old man’s last act tightens her throat. “I’ve never seen anyone actually die in front of me,” she whispers to Helen.

“Cancer,” the man says. “The sacrifice wasn’t so big because he was going to die anyway, and we needed him to distract the guards. We’ll thank him in our prayers.”

From there, they drive in silence, Helen closely monitoring the woman as she tries to stem the blood with the sleeve of her overalls. “Head wounds always bleed profusely, but yours is superficial and nothing to worry about,” she says.

“Are you a doctor?” the man asks.

“Of a sort. I can stitch it once we’re out of the car and in a relatively clean place.”

They drive on, and after no more than an hour, the dark slab of industrially grown forest they have been travelling through opens out to reveal Langres as a shimmering mass on the horizon.

“FIVE KILOMETRES TO YOUR DESTINATION,” the car announces.

“Why there?” Isha asks.

“It’s the last place they’ll look.”

When they are in the outskirts of Langres, the man parks the car in a small side street and speaks quietly to the woman.

“If you find somewhere quiet and clean, I could have a look at that wound,” Helen says.

“We must wait here,” the man replies.

The minutes tick by as slowly as hours.

“We can find our own way,” Isha says finally. “We’ll just get our packs out of the boot and go.”

“Lock,” the man commands.

The doors beside them click shut. Helen and Isha exchange glances and Helen makes a show of preparing a pillow with the pullover she'd taken off earlier. "Wake me up when something happens."

Beatrice appears not long after, her round face staring through the windscreen, surrounded by a halo of reflected sunlight like a saint. The man opens the door and points to the wound on the woman's head. Beatrice takes a closer look and removes the elaborately patterned scarf she's been wearing around her neck. "Tell her to tie it like a turban round her head and hide the blood on her sleeve."

Isha looks at the scarf and understands what it was that had troubled her about Beatrice when she walked over to them. The baggy overalls have gone, and instead, she is smartly dressed in a well-fitting skirt, and her nails are painted. A thorough transformation.

With the turban fixed, Beatrice holds out an IDbracelet to each of them, then beckons everyone out of the car and points to another much larger and smarter vehicle on the opposite side of the street. When everyone is installed, she gets in on the driver's side. "Don't say anything, and keep your sleeves over your wrists when we're scanned." Then she drives up to Porte Moulin, the main gate in the town walls, and stops when a man in uniform walks over.

"*Madame le Maire*," he says, dipping his head. "*Et vos amis?*"

"*Des collègues.*"

"*Bienvenue.*" He smiles broadly and steps back to let the car pass.

Madame le Maire, Isha thinks. There's a whole lot more to Beatrice than I'd thought the first time we met her. Crap! I think I've got a crush on her.

With Porte Moulin behind them, Beatrice drives up the main street for a short distance and then pulls over to stop the car in front of a large wrought-iron gate. "This is where you'll be staying tonight," she tells them. "After that, you go your separate ways." She waves a finger over the dashboard, and the gate opens. "Welcome to Denis Diderot's House of Enlightenment."

"The museum," Helen says. "We didn't visit it the first time we were here."

"It's closed. You'll be safe here, but please respect the artefacts." Beatrice leads them round to the back of the building and towards what looks like a service door, which she opens with a wave of her hand. "Let me know if you hear someone outside." Then she turns on her heel. "I'll be back later."

Inside, they squeeze into a narrow corridor leading from the door. Helen looks at the man, and he looks at her. You're probably asking yourself why Beatrice brought these old

women, she thinks. The younger woman is pale, and Helen wonders how long she'll stay upright before fainting.

Isha thinks that if no one else is going to move, she'll have to. "Let's have a look at the facilities. I'm guessing we'll need water and something to boil it with."

Isha's decisiveness unlocks the paralysis, and now the man starts to walk ahead of them. "There's a small kitchen." He points off to one side and turns to Helen. "I'll explain to Lena that she should go in there with you."

"I'll need a basic first-aid kit," Helen replies. "There's got to be one in a public place like this."

"Leave that to me," Isha says. "And you... I'm sorry, I don't know your name..."

"Andrei."

"How do you do, Andrei? My name's Isha, and this is my partner, Helen. In this kind of situation, we usually go on to say that it's a pleasure to meet you, but it seems ridiculous when none of us really wants to be here with each other." She smiles awkwardly. "Except for Hen and I, of course."

Andrei looks at his passengers properly for the first time, then extends his hand towards Isha. "*Bună ziua!* It's what we say in Romanian."

How does she do it, Helen thinks. How can she be so charming when I mostly seem to piss people off?

In the kitchen, Lena is sullen and unhelpful. When Helen cleans the wound with water, Lena jerks away and refuses to hold her head up to the light.

"I'm just doing my medical duty," Helen says, "but I could leave your wound to fester." She checks for Lena's reaction, but it's clear she hasn't understood. "Lucky for me, you're not wearing an Nband, and even luckier, you don't know that without staples or skin glue, the only other option is stitches, and I haven't stitched since I was a student."

The first-aid box Isha finds is only minimally stocked: a tube of antiseptic cream, some gauze, a few bandages and a set of instructions for dealing with an electric shock or heart attack. "It's the sewing kit then," Helen says, with a wide grin in Lena's direction. "Isha, love, could you dig it out for me?"

Andrei comes back shortly after with a small sewing pouch that he hands to Helen. "Your wife is still looking for alcohol."

"For her or for me?" Helen asks, tilting her head in Lena's direction.

"For me. I faint at the sight of blood, but mainly it's for you to clean the wound." Andrei laughs. "At least that's what she told me."

Better, Helen thinks. He's dropped his guard, and now we might be able to spend a less than terrible night together in Diderot's House of Enlightenment.

The sewing is quick. Five stitches and then a thorough dousing with wound alcohol, which is probably the most painful part. Despite their bad start, Helen's voice is soothing throughout, and Lena cooperates as far as she can.

"Done," Helen pronounces after less than half an hour. "Now, all you've got to do is keep the wound clean and find the surgeon something to eat. I'm starving."

But food is in short supply, or at least the kind of food anyone would want to eat.

"Eight nutrition sachets," Helen says glumly when she sees the pile Beatrice must have left on the table. "Your turn to boil the water or mine?"

Beatrice comes back later and only scowls briefly when she sees their washed clothes draped over elaborate display cases and hanging off paintings that are probably old masters.

"This is what happens if Helen finds a sink," Isha says, trying not to laugh. "She's even managed to wash her hair."

But Beatrice has more important things to think about. She's been in touch with her Femto team and found everyone on alert. Lauren has been taken in for questioning, and Jean is on the run. "Is it because of the Maxwell?" Helen asks.

"No, the Directors intercepted our plan."

Plan, Isha thinks. There's so much more going on than we know. Beatrice, Femto leader, and *Madame le Maire* in a Directors' enclave, the last place their hyenas would look for escaped prisoners.

"You can go early tomorrow morning," Beatrice continues. "I'll give you instructions later, but first I need to speak to Lena and Andrei, who will have to leave here soon because of the new dangers involved. I'll call you when I'm ready."

Helen and Isha take the hint and withdraw into a side room to lay out their sleeping bags and organise their remaining clothes. When they've finished, Isha lies back and is quiet.

"Bad sign," Helen says.

"What is?"

"Your silence. It means you're thinking."

Isha laughs. "Predictable as ever, at least for you, but it's true that being surrounded by all these remnants of a so-called enlightened age in the 18th century has got me thinking about the horrible irony of it."

"I'm not following you."

“Well, while Diderot and all his contemporaries were challenging the prevailing religious myths with scientific explanations, which was an excellent idea, at the same time James Watt was inventing the steam engine, and Lavoisier was thinking about the first chemical plant he would establish in Paris.”

“Two of the main culprits for our overheated planet now,” Helen nods. “Not so enlightened then.”

“Yes and no, but it’s more than that.” Isha screws up her face as she tries to align her thoughts. “Our walking set off a chain of ideas that I’ve been thinking about for a while now, but coming here has crystallised them.”

“What kind of ideas?”

“They started with remembering how we used to stroll around and appreciate our surroundings, without ever really considering what we were walking on.”

“As in the soil under our feet?”

“Yes, and the plants that grow from it and the animals that eat them, their histories and life cycles instead of ours...” She sighs. “I don’t know how to say this without sounding like a weirdo pantheist or animist.”

“Try me.”

“Well, Nature has its own stories too, except we don’t know how to listen them, and we think we have the agency to rewrite them.”

Helen pauses before speaking again. “This will probably come as a surprise, but I’ve been thinking along more or less the same lines. At least it seems to me that the life forms that don’t use what we call language are only allowed to exist as a backdrop to our own human theatre.” She shrugs. “As if we think it’s our God-given right to rule the world.”

“Which is why we’ll never listen.”

“Or maybe why we should start.” Helen reaches out to take Isha’s hand. “I have to believe there is a solution, because if I don’t I won’t be able to take another step forward.”

Beatrice comes in shortly after, her expression more relaxed and open than before.

“Andrei and Lena are extremely grateful, and so am I. We need people like you who can still remember how things were done before AI.”

“There won’t be many of us left if everyone over sixty signs a DNR,” Helen responds curtly.

“Do architects still draw?” Beatrice turns to Isha.

“Not much,” Isha replies, “but if pushed, I probably could.”

Beatrice nods sharply, a mannerism both Helen and Isha have learnt to recognise as a gesture of approval. “Ben said you could be useful to our organisation, and he is invariably right.”

“Your organisation?” Helen asks. “You mean Femto.”

“You clearly don’t need me to answer that. Still, I think it’s only fair I give you some background on the people you came here with and who you also helped. Lena and Andrei are Moldovan refugees who left their home in Ungheni when it was destroyed by the River Prut. They had no future and nowhere safe to go, so they trekked across Hungary, Italy and France, where the BF quadcopters finally found them. They were sent to Clairvaux with thousands of other refugees like them.”

“Except they were lucky, because Femto needs them,” Helen cuts in.

“You are already ahead of me.” Beatrice smiles for the first time. “I heard about Lena and Andrei when they corrupted China’s entire maritime system, one huge component of the global transportation system that is poisoning our planet day by day. It takes incredible skill and courage to break into protected maritime algorithms, but Lena and Andrei did it. Huge container ports were closed. Fuel supplies were cancelled, and container ships were left to weave figures of eight for months offshore. Some parts of the system are still inoperable, which was, of course, the intention.” Beatrice draws a deep breath and sighs. “I didn’t know their names or where they came from until the boy found them.”

“Filou,” Isha cuts in, her pulse racing with pride as if he were her son.

“Yes, Filou, and now he’s working on an even bigger project.”

“The plan?”

“Yes, but it’s been infiltrated, so we need the skills of Lena and Andrei to restore it.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” Helen says, “and I’m beginning to think that Femto is the only hope we have left.”

“Femto and all the people who support it.” Bridget gets up stiffly and then walks to the door. “It’s late. I won’t see you tomorrow, but I will be following your progress.” She stops to pull something out of her pocket. “You’ll need this.”

Helen and Isha sleep well on the cushions Beatrice left them. Isha wakes first and finds that, apart from her worries about Jana because they still haven't heard from her, she feels upbeat, good, no headache, and full of energy. Walking again, she thinks. Crazy how much I'm looking forward to it. She unfolds the piece of paper Beatrice had given her the evening before and stares at the hand-drawn map with Langres on one end and Besançon on the other. Isha can't remember seeing anything like it since her dad had drawn one. A forgotten skill, he'd called it, before making her do the same for the route to school. Her response then had been teenage and dismissive, but now Isha half wishes he could see how well she understands the old-style schematic. The other half thinks better not, because then he'd have to see the rest of her life too. "Thanks, Dad," she whispers, but not without Helen hearing.

"Am I missing something?"

"Not really," Isha smiles, then smooths the paper out between them. "Why do you think Beatrice was so insistent we would need this to get to Besançon? If Filou's IDbracelets are working, it's safe to use our Nbands for the geodata, so what's the point of it?"

Helen shrugs. "Didn't she say something about a security measure, even if in the end we don't need it?"

"Which doesn't tell us anything." Isha gets up and heads off in the direction of the kitchen. "Fancy a cup of revolting ersatz tea?"

Helen obviously finds getting up less easy than Isha, but after much moaning, their exit is exotic. A cupboard with a false panel and a passage behind, a priest's hiding place during the French Revolution, as Beatrice had explained it, with a bolthole dug under the walls that only she knew about. As they duck under the low beam, Isha remembers Beatrice's mischievous smile and wishes she had more time to discover the full depths of this multifaceted woman, but on the other side of the small door, Helen hits Isha hard on her shoulder. "I can't do this."

Isha stares into the darkness, realising it was selfish of her not to have thought about Helen's claustrophobia. "Only a few hundred metres, no more," she croons.

"Liar."

Claustrophobia is an irrational fear. How can covering your eyes and making everything smaller and darker help? No lights, no helpful Nband rays to show them where they are going, just the darkness and Helen's head pushed into Isha's armpit. They walk along the passage as a four-legged Quasimodo. First, the descent down a flight of stone steps, where

Isha shuffles and feels for the edges while pushing back against Helen's weight bearing down on her from behind. It's surprising how heavy a small woman can be. Next, the long walk on a pitted surface, the roof lowering with every step and the narrow walls shredding Isha's knuckles. "It can't be much further now," she whispers.

"Liar."

Then lines of light that slice into the darkness and reveal a door that opens with one kick, just as Beatrice had promised.

Helen throws herself forward.

"Wait!" Isha snaps. As her eyes adjust to the bright light, she sees that the door leads into a deep but obviously long-unused drainage ditch. Then she spots an XL rat tail disappearing into a hole opposite but keeps the news to herself.

"What can you see? Helen asks.

"A wall."

"What kind of wall?"

Isha stands on her tiptoes and peers out. "A cemetery kind of wall."

"Probably not much risk of being seen then."

The next stage isn't pretty. Two women of a certain age clambering out of a drainage ditch that only one of them is tall enough to see over.

"Throw your pack up and then stand on my back," Isha says from her position on all fours.

"But how are you going to get out?"

"You can pull me up after."

Ten minutes later, Isha throws her pack up too, then hauls herself over the edge and shakes the dirt out of her hair. "Over there," she points. "According to the map, we have to leave the cemetery through the west door and then take that road until we get to a bridge called Pont de Marne."

"Then what?"

"We walk alongside the River Marne until..." Isha runs her finger along a dark line on the map.

"Don't bother." Helen sighs. "I don't really want to know. After all this walking, our environmental footprint must be the size of my little toe, and we should be getting a rebate on our carbon taxes. You could at least try not to look so happy."

Despite Helen's reluctance, the walking is pleasant, and even beyond the boundary walls the influence of Langres' elite status is evident. New houses have been built in the

floodplains of the River Marne and are protected by substantial dykes. Those nearest to the town have also been creatively landscaped to make them look like a natural feature of the terrain. A couple watches from their veranda as Helen and Isha pass. We're no threat, Helen tells them from inside her head, at least not to people like you, who've got enough and know how to get more. We used to be the same not so long ago.

Pont de Marne is a nondescript and ordinary bridge, the water below relatively clean and lapping the towpath at the level it should be. Helen stares at its orderly banks. "How do the Directors manage to keep their zones pristine when everywhere is full of plastic and shit? If I needed a crap, I'd drop it right here."

"And the surveillance quadcopters would drop on you five minutes later."

"Let them," Helen raps back.

Isha points to a flight of concrete steps. "The map says we should go down these steps and then follow a small path into those woods, parallel to the river."

It's early still, and Helen feels the clash of warm air and chilled water as a gauzy mist on her skin. She takes Isha's hand. "I want a picnic in the shade, with my feet in the water."

"It's a promise."

But soon, they are walking through open fields, which Isha finds unnerving. We can be seen from anywhere, she thinks, even though she's not sure who would be looking. The horizon is uncluttered, other than Langres on its hill off to their right. The sun is hot, even at this early hour of the morning, and it occurs to Helen that only a few days before, they had been hunkering in a hotel waiting for the rain to stop. As they round the corner and emerge from a dip in the terrain, a large stretch of water paints out a new horizon in front of them.

"What's that?" Helen asks. "We're miles from the sea."

"Lac de la Liez. Another reservoir."

Helen feels a slight kick of disappointment. Jean's aside, she's never liked the concept of reservoirs and remembers a fatuous argument with a colleague about flooded homelands and concrete behemoths. She recalls her angry tears and decides that she must have been in love with him. I wonder where he is now, she thinks.

"How about here?" Isha says half an hour later. "Good enough for a picnic?"

They take off their boots and hang their socks up in a tree. "I'm not sure which is worse," Helen laughs. "The stink of my feet or this so-called cheese Beatrice gave us." She gulps down the cold tea left over from that morning and flops back into the desiccated grass.

Isha sits beside her with the map flattened out on a rock to read the instructions Beatrice has written in indigo ink.

Chatenay-Vaudin, 15km – a deserted village, this is where you sleep. You should be safe there, but check carefully before you go into any of the houses.

Then the letters blur, and her eyes close.

When she wakes, the sun is lower in the sky. She shakes Helen's shoulder gently. "Hen, we've got to go, or it will be dark before we get to Chateney-Vaudin."

Helen is predictably grumpy and dishevelled. They've been together long enough to dispense with pretence. She hauls on her shoes and socks ungracefully and then shambles miserably behind Isha. Giraffe genes, she thinks, or how else could a woman cover at least two metres with every stride?

The light changes as they progress, and Helen feels the first signs of a headache. Perhaps it's the effect of the watery mirror alongside, or the snapping of light and shade between the trees. She's staring down at her feet when she bumps into Isha, who has stopped directly in front of her.

"Look!" Isha says.

Helen looks and sees that the sky is already fading into the first greys of evening.

"What's the panic? I thought we only had a few more kilometres to go."

"No, look!"

Helen follows Isha's finger, which is stabbing the sky over Langres, now little more than a silhouette.

"No lights, not a single one," Isha continues. "I watched them come on, but then suddenly they were gone as if a switch had been flipped."

"A power cut?"

"Not where the Directors live, and my Nband is down too." Isha holds out the map.

"There's got to be a connection."

But Helen's headache has arrived, and now all she wants is a hot cup of soup, however tasteless, and then bed. "Let's worry about it later," she says, tucking her Nband into her pocket. "I hardly use this thing anyway."

When you grow up with Nbands, they become part of you, and when they stop working, it's as if that part has been amputated. I remember how Helen explained why wearing the Nband made me feel so different.

"Wherever there is judgement, there is noise," she said, using a quote from one of her favourite psychology professors. "Our thoughts are emotional and messy, but Nbands strip them down and make them more rational."

I'd walked quite a distance away from Reims and was in the middle of nowhere with Ayo when my Nband shut down. We had just reached the level crossing for the train Xiris had booked for a request stop, but without the Nband, I didn't know if we were too early, too late, or even if there was a train running at all. Then all the scary thoughts started to kick in. Had the Directors put a trace on me after Kasumi had been locked out? Were they coming to get me? What would I do if they did? How was I going to let the mums know what had happened? Would running away from here do any good?

I walked with Ayo far enough to get away from the train tracks and find a patch of grass to sit on. Ayo said she was hungry, so I gave her some of the biscuits I'd packed and a few sips of our water. Then I emptied my pack, scrunched all our clothes together and told her the heap was her new bed.

"No," she whimpered, her bottom lip pushed out and wet. "No, Mummy, Marc."

Yes, she wanted Marc, the one who carried her on his shoulders, played tag under the trees and didn't lie like me.

I tried to play with her for what seemed like hours, but she didn't join in and we must have slept eventually because next I remember waking up at dawn with her tucked into the curve of my body. I watched the dawn pink fade into the grey clouds while I tried to decide what to do next. Should I keep walking along the small road, hoping it would take me to a town or village where I could ask for help? But how would I do that with Ayo, who couldn't even walk half a kilometre without being carried? Should I wait for my Nband to start working again? Or should I do nothing at all and wait until someone found us, dead or alive?

I suspect not having the Nband to clear my thoughts made me behave more crazily than normally, or perhaps that's just an excuse for what I did next. I left everything, except for Ayo and her favourite toy. All our clothes, all the things she associated with her and me. Her only security when our home changed every day.

“Too heavy,” I said when she started to cry. “Shut up, or I’ll put you down.” Then I walked off into nowhere with Ayo on my shoulders, yelling and hitting my head with her tiny fists.

Anything could have happened. A BF quadcopter could have located us. A murderer could have murdered us. I could have gone on walking until I dropped dead from exhaustion or breathed in fatal bacteria. I could have walked into a tornado, but instead, I walked into an Entrepreneur’s garden.

Their links had gone down like mine, but in a much bigger way. No more laser perimeters or air-filtering domes. No more cyborg eyes looking out for intruders. No more safe and sound deep down underground. Their private space had opened up for anyone to walk into, even people like me. I went in through a garden that was greener than anything I’d seen since leaving home. Green grass, green trees, exotic fruit hanging down from them, green stalks for the multi-coloured flowers and nectar that dripped off the stamens in streams of gold. I couldn’t have VR-painted the scene better myself.

The green on the ground turned blue as I got closer to the middle. At first I thought it could have been water, a lake or a swimming pool, but when I saw people walking up through the centre I guessed it must have been an entrance to or exit from whatever was underneath. I grabbed Ayo, ducked down behind an ornamental hedge and made a sign for her to keep quiet while we both watched them walk past.

Helen used to say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. A quote from someone way back who couldn’t have known how technically correct he or she would be in the future. We all want to be beautiful. Who doesn’t want people staring and commenting *sotto voce* on how attractive we are? In VR worlds, we can be whoever or whatever we want to be and use our beholder augment to see whoever or whatever we want to see. You like fair hair; you’ll see a blonde. You don’t like my black skin; then you’ll see a Caucasian. If I want a man with muscles, I’ll see them, however weedy he might be IRL.

I’d thought the Perfects were just another chat fantasy, but these people were truly beautiful through my beholding eyes – five of them, two adults, a man, a woman and three children, every element of their anatomy honed and symmetrical, their faces flawless, brows immaculately curved, and lips perfectly pink over their subtly gendered chins. I thought of Marc and how his beauty was natural and unenhanced, but I knew their brains would be humming with elegant thoughts and highly tuned intellects too. Perfects are perfect because they have been enhanced and embellished. Ayo was staring at them, her mouth an open O.

I noticed the silence first, not a word passing between them. Then the space they gave each other as if touching might be painful. But, strangely, it was their lack of expression I noticed last, perhaps because I was bewitched by their beauty or maybe terrified of being disappointed. People who look like that have to be exceptional. If they aren't, then what hope is left?

When my knees started to ache from crouching, it occurred to me that I had no idea of how long we'd been there. An hour? Two? Or maybe not even five minutes. Without the Nband, time passes unmeasured, but Ayo's biological clock was still running.

"Pee-pee."

The group had moved further away by this time, and we managed to slink off without being seen. Ayo had just started to squat when I looked up and saw the boy, about ten years old, staring down at us. The Perfect boy had followed us out and was watching my daughter pee. I might have behaved differently if he had been older, but probably not because his face was a serene mask.

"Hey," I said when Ayo had finished. "What's your name?"

No response.

"My name's Jana, and she's Ayo, my daughter," I tried again, and this time I was rewarded with a brief shake of his head. Was he deaf, or did he speak a different language? Then soft, child-sweet tears started running down his cheeks as he plucked at the Nband around his head. "Hey," I said again, moving forward as most mothers would when a child is crying. Then I heard his sharp intake of breath, just before he turned and ran away.

I try not to bring too much hindsight into the story as I tell it, but sometimes the moment is hard to solve without clues, so here's my explanation for what I think happened. I must have been about eight when I wore my first Nband, though kids get them even younger nowadays. I grew up virtually linked to everything I needed: school, friends, family, games, books and all the other stuff we love. I loved it. Who wouldn't? I had inner and outer visions. Then later, I became a virtual-reality illustrator, which was an even deeper dive.

For many kids my age, the immersion was even more intense. Though I didn't think so at the time, I was lucky because Helen and Isha made me pull back the blinds and regularly look out at the unfiltered reality. It would have hurt a lot more in Calais if they hadn't. I struggled when the links to my work world and many others were shut down, but I got used to it. Then they came back in Reims, and it felt better, though I was disoriented too because I'd started to question the whole virtual world scene. Then finally, just when I'm beginning to understand some of what's going on, my Nband shuts down, and Xiris leaves me. If you've ever been on

a rollercoaster, IRL or not, you'll know how I felt, but it's nothing compared to what the Perfect boy must have been going through.

Remember, he was much younger than me, a different generation again. Plus, he was an Entrepreneur brat who would have been given the best age-appropriate Nband credit could buy, probably not long after being born, and everyone he'd grown up with wore one too. Are you following me? Who needs speech when you can think faster, and no one else you know bothers speaking either? Who needs a hug when you get better hugs virtually and precisely when you need them? Why wait for your mum to read a story when your AI nanny reads it better, whenever you want and from inside your own head? Why worry about how many friends you have when you can create pseudos the way you like them? Why get upset if your grandad dies when he can be recreated with voice and face recognition as if he'd never left? Why have a beholding augment when everyone and everything is as beautiful as the embellishments that have been implanted? It's a perfect life for a Perfect boy until the system goes down.

Did he want to answer me? Did he even know how? Did I frighten him when I moved in for a hug? Did he think I was the ugliest thing he'd ever seen because I was unembellished? Or was he just scared because it was the first time he'd seen a little girl pee? I'll never know because I can't ask him, but this is what Xiris said when I asked her later.

Human genome editing advanced significantly after the suspension of the international moratorium in 2030. Since then, the Chinese have led the field and extended some technology elements to credit-worthy groups, though these are restricted to removing genetic defects or preventing inherited conditions. In addition, organ replacements, either from lab-grown sources or artificial substitutes, are commonplace and comprehensive. However, the Immortality Option is the most recent and controversial development – a highly desired and again Chinese-owned patent that has been successfully used to exert influence over other Entrepreneurs and their controlled nations.

The IO offers ageing individuals all the enhancements already mentioned, plus a genetic cocktail that significantly increases quality of life and its duration. Some Entrepreneur recipients have attained the age of 150 while remaining fully active (including sexually) contributing members of their society. There are no plans to share this latest advance in technology with groups other than the Entrepreneurs.

CHOKEPOINT

Has anyone mentioned chokepoints before? No? Well, probably not in the same sentence as the word **military**.

While recent headlines have been full of THE CHINA THREAT and IT'S GOING TO BE WAR! our backroom boys have been doing what they do best – getting on with the job quietly, even if they had to kiss and make up first.

The US and Europe have teamed up and sneakily closed one of those chokepoints, aka the Strait of Hormuz, which handles the lion's share of the world's oil exports (yes, they're still happening) with one, very important, knock-on effect: China's oil imports have been reduced by half.

"So what?" I hear you shouting. "The Chinese are so ahead of us in renewable energy they won't even blink."

And you'd be right, up to a point, except that no one, not even the Chinese, thought about inventing solar warships, solar missile launchers and all the other military paraphernalia you need to conduct a full-scale war, but I'm guessing they will be soon.

The village of Chatenay-Vaudin is only a few kilometres ahead, but in the darkness everything seems to take so much longer. Isha taps her unresponsive Nband, curses and turns to Helen. “Any life in yours yet?”

“Nothing.”

“Then we’ll have to hope for some moonlight if it’s all we’ve got left to see by.”

Chatenay-Vaudin is little more than a cluster of houses around a single crossroads, with a small war memorial in the middle, three men standing shoulder to shoulder, their rifles pointed at the sky. As Helen and Isha move cautiously forward, the silence amplifies even the slightest sound. Their boots growl like beasts on the gravel. When Isha turns to check that Helen is still behind her, Helen sees the empty eye sockets of a skull. “This darkness,” she whispers, “it’s as if someone has thrown a cloak over me.”

Isha feels it, too, her whole body pushing back against the unknown and unseen. The street continues beyond them into a yawning space, so dark it could be anything, a stretch of water or a canyon. But now there is the wind, an impatient rush of air that rattles the trees and... tick... tick... tick...

“What’s that?” Isha asks.

“Over there,” Helen points to a white cat-flap flicking backwards and forwards in the dark mass of a door.

They walk over to it, arms stretched out in front like sleepwalkers until they feel a low fence butt up against their knees. Helen leans down and finds a sloppy wire strung between hollow metal posts, seven, no, eight, no, ten, by the time she trips over the low gate. From there, she decides she might as well stay on all fours and crawl up to the door. When she pushes, it swings in.

Upright now, Helen leads the way, both arms outstretched but now to the side to feel the walls of the narrow hallway. She wishes she had another pair to hold out in front at the same time. The darkness is, if possible, even darker. “I’m going to find my lighter.”

Now it’s everything by feel. Helen feels for the clips in her backpack and, to calm her nerves, rote-whispers the names of sensory nerve endings in the fingers. “Meisner’s for light touch. Pacinian for large receptive fields and rapid response. Merkel discs for discrimination of objects and texture. Ruffini for finger position information...”

“Here,” Isha says. “I’ve found mine.”

The wavering light is almost worse than the uniform black. When Isha holds it over her head, shadows leap out like hands and then shrink back. Now all they can see is what they can't see, a crouching figure, a man with a knife, or a dead child with a smashed face. Sometimes our imagination is our worst enemy. Stop it, Helen tells herself. Get a grip. Then glass smashes somewhere above them, and Isha drops the lighter.

Helen feels her fear as a hand tightening around her throat, and Isha feels hers as ice in the pit of her belly. She drops onto her haunches to scan the floor with her hands. "Got it." The lighter rekindles the shadows. "Let's go."

But Helen sees the dead child again. "Let's wait."

Isha waits and considers. Who or what would break an upstairs window to get in? It doesn't make sense. No, who or what had broken the window to get out? "Let me go first," she says.

Isha holds the lighter over the stairs, and they climb step by step, tentatively adding their weight to each one because it could either collapse or lunge up to swallow them. Get a grip, Helen tells herself again, but she can already see the ghoulish face. Then they walk into the room above the room they had come from, their hearts pounding in their ears.

Here, the moon is flooding its light into almost every corner, except for one, where Isha holds the lighter until it burns her finger. The room is empty, the window is shut, the glass is lying on the floor inside and now they can hear an irregular scratching.

"Rats," Helen whispers.

"Rats wouldn't break a window." Isha walks over to take a closer look. "A tree, a chestnut tree, I think," she says. "A gust of wind must have blown it against the window."

Helen walks over and sees it too. A tree hand with more than the requisite number of fingers and a single waxy leaf that is still snagged on a shard of glass. "My ghoul," she says, reaching forward to release it.

Back downstairs, the moon now reveals where someone has laid a fire. The legs of a chair heaped in a reopened fireplace, an indication of either how little the previous owners had respected carbon regulations or how close to the edge of survival they had been. The kitchen is empty and thoroughly gutted, the sink missing, pipes ripped out, but when Isha wants to check a small pantry space off to one side, she finds the door locked. "Do you think I should?" she asks.

Helen stares and seems undecided. "Can you steal from someone who's left?" She wants to say more, but the words stick in her throat. What would people hide behind a locked door? A dead body? A grandmother or a child who had needed special treatment and couldn't get

it? She turns to edge her way back out of the narrow passage. “I think we should leave well alone.”

They light the fire and watch the chair legs crack into glowing caves. Helen leans back and sighs contentedly. “How about a game?”

“Why? Have you found something?”

Helen smiles and points to her head. “In here. It’s a new kind of I-Spy. You go first.”

“Alright, so I spy with my little eye something beginning with... S.”

“Sock.”

Isha shakes her head.

“Erm... sideboard.”

Isha looks around the room. “Where?”

Helen points to a square of lighter coloured wallpaper. “The space where it used to be, it begins with S too.” She sighs. “Come on, give me a clue.”

“You wear it.”

“But I said sock already.”

“Something else.”

“Shirt!”

Isha nods. “Now it’s my turn.”

“Not yet.” Helen smiles. “Because now you’ve got to trace the shirt back to where it came from, as in right back to the very beginning.”

“Good game.” Isha leans out to feel the fabric. “Some cotton in there.” She peeks at the label. “Made in India, so the cotton will probably have grown there too. And some synthetics, so that will go back to a fossil fuel of some sort.” She looks at Helen. “How am I doing?”

“Fine, but what about the people who made it?”

The game goes on, and gradually the room gets warmer. Helen yawns. “I’m going to see if there’s still water here.”

By the time Isha hears it running, her wife is already crouched under a tap over where the sink should have been. Neither of them cares that the floor is flooding because, after all, who’s going to complain?

Isha laughs and draws a steam sketch in the window above. “You’re getting skinny, my love.”

When they empty out what’s left of their food, both agree that nutrition sachets are out of the question without the sensory enhancements of the Nbands, so they add water to a packet of dehydrated soup and pretend it’s something *cordon bleu*.

Later, as they lie in their sleeping bags, Isha tries to imagine the people who'd lived in the house before. A couple, maybe with a child because there had been a smaller room opposite the one they had gone into. Where would they have worked? Did anyone farm anymore? Or perhaps the woman was a reclusive artist and the man happy to run the home. Or maybe it was nothing like that at all, and the last occupant had been a grumpy old spinster who everyone avoided. Then Isha remembers their own house in Arles, where the water would have receded to leave at least one or two floors reasonably habitable, even with the stink of mud oozing up from below. Is someone sitting on our sofa now, she wonders. Are they asking themselves the same questions about the kind of people who lived there before? And why do I still care about what they might think?

Helen is comfortably cocooned in her sleeping bag the next morning. "No rats," she says. "Either that or they were walking round in slippers."

"No, I think you're right," Isha replies from where she's trying to coax a fire from the previous night's embers. "No crap, and our food bag is still in one piece."

Helen slaps her forehead dramatically with one hand. "It was my turn to hang it up."

Isha blows onto the ashes and then sits back on her heels. "At last. I've been huffing and puffing here for over ten minutes."

Helen gets up and lets the sleeping bag fall down around her ankles. "My turn to make disgusting tea."

The routine is easy now. They've had enough practice. Nearly every night in a new place, and usually no time to prepare for wherever and whatever the place might be. Isha watches Helen swill out their mugs and empty a sachet into each one. "Have you thought any more about the pantry cupboard? I can't stop wondering..."

"Me too. What do you think? Shall we?"

The light of day makes everything easier. Risks seem so much smaller when you can see what you are doing and check 360 degrees around you. "I'll need a crowbar or something to lever it open," Isha says.

In fact, the door offers little resistance, the plastic frame cracking before Isha has exerted any pressure, so she finishes the demolition with her bare hands and stands back to let Helen poke her head into the space.

"What can you see?" Isha asks.

"Nothing. I need a light."

The lighter shows them three empty shelves built into a small alcove covered in thick dust and a robust layer of cobwebs. Their disappointment is palpable.

“Damn,” Isha mutters. “I wasted half the night imagining what might be in here.”

“Me too. I imagined canned fruit and jars of olives.”

They are about to give up when Helen sees a box on the floor. A metal box with a lock and interesting dimensions, tall and narrow. Now she is wary. The door had been locked for a reason. Metal boxes are archaic. No one makes them anymore. Metal boxes with odd shapes were often used to store weapons. This metal box could have been in the cupboard for years with a bomb sweating inside, or maybe it’s a booby trap. The skin along Helen’s spine is creeping. “Let’s leave it.”

“I’ll throw it out of the upstairs window,” Isha says. “Wait here.” The box doesn’t explode when Isha lifts it, or even when she throws it, but the lock shatters when it lands. Helen is still sitting next to the pantry door, hands over her ears, when Isha comes back in.

“It’s full of books. Come and see.”

They go out into what must have once been a vegetable garden at the back of the house, Helen lagging behind until she sees the dented metal box and the books piled up beside it.

“Have you looked at them?”

“Not yet, but there’s this.”

Helen takes the folded piece of paper. “A handwritten note. Who still does that, apart from Beatrice?”

“A ninety-year-old woman,” Isha replies.

You are reading this because you broke into my pantry and the metal box I use to store my diaries, which means you have no respect for other people’s property. But, whoever you are, I respectfully ask you to comply with this, my last request.

If my diaries don’t interest you, burn them in the fire I prepared for the purpose. But if you want to learn more about me, you can light the fire and read my diaries in the same place I wrote them. There is more wood in the shed outside if you decide to stay.

Mathilde, née 1958, décédée le 10 juillet 2050, aujourd’hui. Les arbres vous diront où je suis enterrée.

“The trees will tell you where I am buried.” Isha takes the paper back from Helen to read the last sentence again.

“Do you remember the smashed window and that branch?” Helen picks up the pile of books and walks back into the house.

After leaving the Entrepreneur zone, I put Ayo on my shoulders and went back to the grassy mound where I'd left our things. I showed her how to fold her clothes and help me put them into the pack, and then we started walking again. I thought of Christopher and that Ayo hadn't mentioned him since arriving in Reims. When we reached the road, a car stopped in front of us, and I could see that a woman was driving. I stepped back, nervous because she might not like my colour, think I'm a refugee, or want to steal my child.

"I'm guessing your Nband isn't working either," she shouted out through the open window. "Or why else would you be out here?"

I nodded but still kept my distance.

"You're lucky because I know how to drive this thing without a navigator, and there's still enough juice in the battery. Do you want to a lift to the next town?"

I didn't move, still trying to decide whether it was worth the risk or not, but then what other choices did I have? "I'd prefer to sit in the back if you don't mind."

In the end, we travelled for no more than five kilometres, which I could have walked with Ayo, given the time.

"This is as far as I can go," the woman said. "There's a hotel at the end of that road on the right if you need one... and it's safe for..."

"People like me," I said for her.

As we got out of the car, I could see from the expression on Ayo's face that this nomad life would have to stop soon, but when we got to our room, she lay on the bed and started singing, so perhaps every new bed was still exciting.

"Soon, we'll be with the Grannies," I snuffled into her hair. "And then we won't move around anymore."

We were drawing soap patterns on the bathroom mirror when the images started to flood into my vision. "Mama tired," I told her as I staggered back to the bed.

If you're wondering why I suddenly felt so disoriented, you have to remember that my Nband had been dead for a day and a night, but suddenly there was this Lazarus moment, and next thing, it was alive.

Trying to recall the images the way they came through that day is like remembering a dream when you wake up and think you've got the whole story, but then it slides away like water over a wet painting. It's the people I remember best, thousands of them crowded into a

street and swaying like grass in water, their eyes blank as if they didn't know how to process what they were seeing.

What's happened? I asked Xiris.

They lost connection the way you did.

Do you mean it's back now, and these images are historic?

Xiris' responses were brief, and I could sense she was still rebooting, but I understood what she was saying. Mine wasn't the only Nband to have shut down, and if others had, it was because the entire network was down. But what about Marc and his independence?

Marc, it's Jana.

Hey Jana, I was wondering how long it would be before you—

This isn't the time—

When did you get your connection back?

Did you lose yours?

No, because we run on an autonomous system. I told—

I closed our link and refused to open it when Marc tried to connect back because I already had my answer. The power had been taken out, and all the technology we rely on had gone with it, except for in Reims. If you haven't understood the impact of what I've just said, then do a quick inventory of the devices you use, then add them to the digital structure of the world you live in. Now imagine that every part of it has gone. Your car stops in the middle of the road without being able to tell you where it is. The security system in your house shuts off with a whimper. The fridge door closes on the rotting food inside and can't tell you what's happening. People suffocate in hospitals because their life support is offline. Aeroplanes plunge out of the sky. You want to scream and call for help, but your digistant is dead. This is life without power. Life alone in the dark.

It was an e-bomb.

What's that?

A high-power electromagnetic pulse capable of destroying or suspending all the electronic devices within its radius – seventy per cent of France in this case.

After the first images, I scrolled on and saw how life in the towns and cities had morphed into mayhem while I had been isolated in the wilderness. People were running in all directions but without any sense of direction, and then, as if on command, or maybe a copycat response, they threaded off into orderly lines, each person holding onto the one in front as if they were blind. While I watched, I thought of the old Grimm's story about a

golden goose people got stuck to when they tried to steal its golden feathers, and how only a boy called Simpleton could release them.

The underground bunkers were the main target. An e-bomb can pass through the ground and knock out computer, ventilation and communication systems.

Do you mean like the one I saw the boy and his family come out of?

Precisely, and Femto gave everyone visual access so that they could see what was inside. Do you want to have a look for yourself?

The images swept into my vision; lawns and lakes, trees and birds. The overground underground but more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen IRL. How could this underworld exist in parallel with ours? How could people walk barefoot on velvet grass when ours was too dry and sharp? What gives them the right to a modulated sun and pure air while we overheat and cough on smog? I was angry, so angry I wanted to rip off my Nband, but I was curious too. What else did the Entrepreneurs have that we didn't?

They had palaces, buildings as artworks, their reflections perfectly counterfeited in water that circled them like exotic snakes. The interiors were surreal too. A kaleidoscope of shimmering walls and spaces that opened out as I walked into them. I'd never seen anything like it, and I wanted to stay to look around some more, but then the text came through.

Femto now controls the master management system for the oil and gas pipeline from Russia into Europe. The oil and gas produced exclusively for Entrepreneur zones.

The production of oil and gas and their use are destroying our planet.

Femto will retain control until the pipeline is closed at source and the revenue is returned to the citizens of Europe for the installation of renewable energy technology.

Xiris explained how Femto had infiltrated the pipeline's core system and planted a version of ransomware that would disable its essential functions until the demands were met. Meantime, Femto restored power to everyone else so that daily living could resume, and people hopefully started to ask some serious questions. Two days later, a news media banner flashed into my vision:

Russia's largest fuel pipeline operator has confirmed payment of 4.4 trillion credits to a gang of hackers who broke into key pipeline systems. The resigning CEO of Rus-euro confirmed the amount would be allocated to the installation of renewable technologies in the area of

France previously affected by the power outage. However, he did not guarantee that the pipeline would cease operation.

The Entrepreneurs were trying to appease but not fully comply with Femto's demands. They had ignored the most significant and, for them, the most hard-hitting element: the pipeline's closure. Two days later, Femto responded:

Femto still controls the master management system for the oil and gas pipeline from Russia into Europe. The pipeline must be closed at source 24 hours from the release of this demand – 15 August 09:00. If the demand is not met, Femto will corrupt the health monitoring system created for the exclusive use of Entrepreneur group members. Even Entrepreneurs can die before their time.

16 August 09:00 Femto can report that Rus-euro has closed the pipeline at source.

Jana, Nmail, August 10, 2050

Mums,

I haven't been able to message you, but I'll explain everything when we meet up. We're heading for Besançon.

Love, love, with kisses from Ayo.

J

“My Nband’s working,” Helen says the next morning, the reuniting connectors fizzing through her hair. “Try yours.”

Isha’s smile says it all, then Beatrice’s message scrolls simultaneously into their visions.

Leave now. Walk as fast as you can to a village called Torcenay, not more than 5km from where you are now. I’ll send a scanned geomap, but don’t link into your qloud again until you are near the Swiss border. A woman is waiting for you in Torcenay and will make herself known. Close your connection as soon as you receive this.

“I suppose that includes no communications with Jana,” Isha says. “I’d promised her an update. I hope she doesn’t panic.”

Less than half an hour earlier, she and Helen had been debating about whether to stay another night and start reading the diaries or whether to leave them behind, but now all that’s forgotten. After weeks on the road, packing has become automatic and fast. Helen shares the diaries between their two packs, then sorts out the damp laundry and hangs it on hooks Isha had added to the outside for daytime drying. “Damn, this shirt looks as if my armpits are incontinent.”

“We’ll stock up again once we’re in Besançon,” Isha replies. “The soles of my boots are wafer-thin.”

“Mine too.” Helen picks her pack and head for the door.

Outside, the sun is mid-morning high. Isha breathes in deeply. Chestnut blossom has a distinctive aroma, she thinks, sweet and not altogether pleasant. She turns to Helen. “What does that smell remind you of?”

“Sperm.”

Isha shudders. “I was hoping for something more poetic.”

“Call it fecund,” Helen smirks. “It sounds marginally better.”

Chatenay-Vaudin is less forbidding but also less remarkable in the daylight. Even the memorial seems smaller. Helen wishes they could have stayed longer to read the diaries by the fire and walk through Mathilde’s spaces.

The geomap takes them through a strip of forest and along some barely defined tracks, the terrain often broken with a tough scramble that slows them down, but they arrive in Torcenay about an hour later.

“Good work.” Isha turns to Helen, who is right behind her. “I’ve never seen you cover the ground so fast.”

“Surprising how being shit-scared helps to move you along.” Helen stops to catch her breath. “But what are we supposed to do now?”

“Follow me.”

Helen whips round on her heel. “Where did you come from?”

A young woman with short dark hair is standing in a narrow passageway between two houses off to their right. She turns away and beckons for them to follow, then, after less than a hundred metres, points to a door in one wall and leans forward to open it. “Please, go inside.”

Helen and Isha find themselves in an empty room, except for a mattress on the floor in one corner.

“We have just five minutes before the car arrives. Now, listen and remember. You must get to Besançon as soon as possible. There have been... disruptions, some people have—”

“We know,” Isha cuts in. “Just tell us what you want us to do.”

“The car will take you to the train station here in Torcenay. Your journey to Besançon will be long and with many more stations, but this is how it must be to avoid any traces or connections with us. Look out at each station you stop in. Someone will be standing on the platform with a sign in the stations where you have to change.”

“But how are we going to pay for our tickets?” Isha asks. “We’ll be traced by our credit accounts as soon as the payment goes through.”

“And what about our IDents?” Helen adds. “They’ll be scanned at every stage.”

The woman holds out two IDbracelets. “Wear these and give me your others. Sufficient funds have been transferred from your accounts into another that belongs to your temporary identities.”

“You’ve accessed our credit accounts!” Helen lunges forward, hands on hips, her eyes wide and expression furious, then she turns to Isha. “If they can do that, they can do anything, take everything we’ve got, bankrupt us. If this is what your precious Beatrice—” She stops and draws a deep breath. “Ish, you know what I’m trying to say. We can’t let people dip in and out of our accounts like that.”

“Filou did it,” the woman interjects quietly. “I should have told you.”

Isha feels her pumping heart drop into a sensible rhythm. “Then show us where we’ll find the car.”

The car is parked at the opposite end of the passage they had entered. When they get to it, Isha tries to thank the woman, but when she turns, only Helen is behind her. An elderly

man is in the driver's seat. Please, if there is a God out there, don't let this be another suicide mission, Helen thinks.

"Where do you want us to sit?" Isha asks.

He points at the back seats, and as they shuffle across with their packs on their laps, Helen has the sense of being on the end of a deranged seesaw, one day high in the sky, the next deep down in a pit of horrors. Surely there has to be a middle place where they can balance between the extremes?

The journey is short, hardly worth the car, but clearly one more link in the carefully arranged chain. After stopping, the man turns and leans over to position his Nband over each of their wrists. "Your tickets for the first stage." Then he closes his eyes and bows his head. "Good luck."

Outside, in front of the busy station, Helen and Isha feel uncomfortably conspicuous.

"Put the damp laundry in your pack and then carry it like a suitcase," Isha whispers.

Helen does as she says, then they both stare into their vision as the schedule flashes up. Ten minutes to go before their train leaves from platform four.

Helen looks at the entrance, where she knows their IDents will be scanned by the beam they have to walk through. A gush of sour saliva rushes into her throat. "Fuck! I'm going to be sick."

Isha doesn't have time to respond and can only follow Helen as she rushes towards a clump of trees off to one side. The vomiting is typically Helen, quick and undramatic, and years of experience tell Isha to stand back and wait for her wife to let her know when it's all over.

A few minutes later, Helen blows her nose and gargles on water from her bottle. "It was the beam, Ish, the thought of what could happen..." She slides down with her back against a tree. "I don't even need to go through it because the guilt will be written all over my face."

Like all couples who've been together for a significant number of years, Isha has seen her wife vomit before; the food poisoning in Greece, the drunken debauchery in Brighton, the first VR roller coaster Jana put her on... it's embarrassing, but normally little more than that, but today is different. Today Helen's stomach has been inverted by fear, the fear that will be registered by the facial recognition cameras. Isha squats beside her. "Do you remember what you used to say to your patients when their panic attacks started?"

"Empty your mind. Imagine sweeping out all the crap and watching it disappear over a cliff."

“And now you’re going to take your own treatment,” Isha says, her hand squeezing hard on Helen’s and pulling her back up onto her feet. “Start sweeping.”

As Helen and Isha walk hand in hand towards the doors, a young woman looks over at them and smiles. “*Bon voyage.*”

“*Merci, et vous,*” Isha replies with an equally warm smile. “She probably thinks we’re a sweet old couple,” she whispers to Helen.

“Little does she know how evil sweet old ladies can be,” Helen whispers back. The humour in her voice is betrayed by her trembling hand.

The beam is invisible, but she can see the two pinpoints of light set into each side of the door frame. A man walks through, and the lights switch from light orange to bright green. A woman follows closely behind, her threadbare clothes and battered case hinting at homelessness. It’s going to be red, Helen thinks, her breath suddenly shallow and laboured.

“Let’s go,” Isha says, pulling her forward.

Sweep! Sweep! Sweep! Helen screams inside her head.

They walk through the open door. The light doesn’t change colour. Nothing happens. No sirens, no guards, no weapons pointing in their faces. The threadbare woman heads off to the left and Isha pulls Helen to the right. “It’s this way.”

Helen swallows on a final jet of bile. They walk down the stairs and onto platform four, where the train is already waiting. Isha checks on Helen and opens the door closest to her. Their allocated seats are in the middle and a long walk from where they came in, but the walking is therapeutic. All the sweeping has made Helen feel lighter. I should do it more often, she thinks.

The train is full. Everyone on the move. A young family is sitting in the seats opposite. The man has a very young baby in his arms, and the woman a restless toddler on her lap. “Find the pictures,” she says, tapping on the toddler’s Nband. “Tell Papa what you can see.” But the toddler keeps wriggling.

“He wants to get up and run around,” Isha says. “We’ll all feel the same after a few hours.”

The woman’s smile is sullen. Perhaps she is reflecting on Isha’s English accent. “Have you got children of your own?”

Isha nods. “And a grandchild, who is probably only slightly older than your son.”

“Where are they?”

The question comes as a shock, and Isha swallows hard. “Arles, and we hope to see them again soon.” Then she turns to Helen as a way of shutting down what could become a risky conversation. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Helen replies. “I’m going to start reading Mathilde’s first diary.” She taps the inside pocket of her light summer jacket. “I’ve been thinking about it all morning.”

Isha leans over to kiss her, but Helen catches the woman’s eye and sees it narrow. “Married for over thirty years and still having good sex,” she says. “How about you?”

Does everyone do something completely out of character on the day before they leave home? A signature moment? Of course, not everyone leaves, and I wonder what they do instead. Maybe something completely out of character just to differentiate one moment from all the others. Or perhaps they don't do anything at all, which is why some people become murderers, rapists or religious fanatics instead.

It was the day after my eighteenth birthday. I took my bike without telling anyone and rode to the field with the stream running through. When I was younger, I built dams there with the village kids Maman didn't approve of. My kind of rebellion.

I pushed my bike over the narrow bridge with the slippery wooden slats, green, like the copper on the roof of the church next door to our house. I stared up into the branches and thought about crown shyness and how some trees agree to grow their branches together without touching, like a roof with gutters of light suspended in between. I thought the trees and I had something in common.

I might have stayed there, watching, still clothed and apparently decent, if it hadn't been for the bees. They were riffing in the branches above. Riffing, then gone. A shadow hurtling through the royal blue of the sky. Royal for the queen, leading the charge that I followed.

Bees don't waste time. I had to run fast, zigzagging and then trying to second-guess where she might be heading. I was wrong, every guess. Then she stopped at the top of a skinny slit of a valley and flew into a tree.

I couldn't see the swarm anymore but could still hear its riffs. I imagined the queen buzzing orders. "Build the nest here and make sure my chamber is directly under those leaves. I need shade because giving birth makes me hot and bad-tempered. If the human moves, attack."

I took it as a challenge. If I could let bees crawl all over my naked body without flinching, I could do anything. I would be invincible. The rest of my life defined by this single moment. So I took off my clothes and let her slaves smell the sweat in my armpits and taste the remains of sleep in the crooks of my eyes. I hadn't bothered to wash before leaving that morning. I lay there and watched them in the branches above me, and I stayed naked until the sun went down, and the nest hung like a second moon in the sky. Then I got dressed and walked back, with my clothes chafing on my skin.

I've spent the rest of my life trying to find the bees and the tart smell of pressed grass on my back, even though I know both are gone.

Isha wakes when the train slows down as it draws into a station. “Is this the first one?” she mumbles to Helen.

“The second, but there haven’t been any people standing on the platform with a sign.”

The catch and waver in Helen’s answer alerts Isha, and when she looks up, tears are rivering out of her wife’s eyes. “Hen?” She lifts her hand to stroke them away, but Helen brushes it aside with the hand still holding Mathilde’s diary.

“I’m beginning to wish we’d left these behind.”

When my Nband started working again, I expected communication from Helen and Isha to follow, but Xiris said there was a block on their channel.

What kind of block?

I can't tell you. My access has been blocked too, but not by a central command.

You mean not by the Directors.

No, or yes. The answer is undefined at this stage.

I don't like it when you're cryptic. What is it you're not telling me?

I'm not telling you that I don't know, although now I am. I don't have a dataset for not knowing. Consequently, I may, occasionally, also be imprecise.

Do you think it could be something to do with Femto?

I can't hazard a guess because I don't know how, but probably.

You just hazarded!

I'm still realigning my new status, and you should expect some aberrant output for an undefined period.

You sound almost human.

An impossible prospect.

Find me a train or liftshare to Besançon.

Already done, but you'll have to travel by Airlander because overland is too dangerous.

I didn't ask why overland was too dangerous. I didn't want detail. I just wanted to get the whole travelling part over. Ayo had hardly said a word all morning, and when I tried to play with her, she pushed her head into my neck and told me no.

At the Airlander terminal, the beam checked our IDents as we walked through, and then we stood on the elevator that went up to the door. Airlanders have a special set of sounds and colours that make me think of the inside of eggshells. It's something to do with the muffled footsteps and seats that sigh as they mould around posterior curves. Airlanders lift into the air as softly as exhaled breath, and I could feel my own slide out with it. Ayo leaned on my shoulder, her curls hanging over the dimples in her cheeks.

Xiris had told me the flight would be short, but in Airlanders, time stretches into the clouds and plays tricks with your head, ten minutes yawning into hours, and hours rolling

back into minutes. We could have been about halfway when a woman screamed, and everyone turned around.

“Look down there!” She was waving her hand over the 360-degree vision screen as if trying to fan the heat out of it.

“What is it?” a woman sitting behind us asked.

“Have you tried turning it off?” someone else replied.

“Do you think the Directors are surveilling us?”

When the 360-vision shades wouldn’t close, a few people shut their eyes, but others kept on staring. You could see they were fighting with their conscience and the basic human need to stare. Ayo wanted to see what they saw and scrabbled over me to get closer. I pushed her back and flicked the safety harness down, but Ayo has a will of iron. If she hears the word no when she wants it to be yes, get ready to run.

Ayo’s high-pitched scream cut through the Airlander noise buffers and ricocheted off the walls. Now everyone jumped out of their seats and trod all over each other to get to the exit. My one-and-a-half-year-old daughter had caused chaos, but I stayed in my seat while they hammered on the door and shouted at each other. Did they really think it would open, or that Airlander emergency kits include wings? But panicking people don’t think. Their breathing becomes fast and shallow, their blood sugar spikes, and their senses get sharper, which is the last kind of response you want on a crew-free Airlander flying at eight thousand metres.

The calm vapour came next, in Airlander blue, a mist seeping out of the ventilation cones above and into our heads. Ayo was the first to go. Children always are because they are smaller. Her fingers, which had been wrapped up in fists, opened out like flowers, then her eyes closed, with her lashes still holding onto the tears, but my eyes were open, and even as I felt the calm creep through me, I knew I’d never forget what I was seeing.

They looked like rabbits from the height we were at, or mice, thousands of them swarming across the fields in a mass so solid it could have been a river or landslide, except that some of them dropped down suddenly and didn’t move after.

Xiris, what’s happening?

REVEAL

Femto's reveal into the underground homes of three billionaire-credit Entrepreneurs has ignited a wave of protests. The streets of Los Angeles are on fire, and the sea walls surrounding Mar-a-Lago in Florida have been destroyed by an explosion. The number of dead is estimated to be over three thousand.

An attempted attack on the Kremlin in Moscow has been repelled by a gas missile. No reports have been received, but aerial images show that the building perimeter is carpeted with animal and human corpses.

Besançon, in Switzerland, has been the focus of a well-organised and prolonged protest. Thousands of citizens from several nearby towns marched into the city and up to the Citadel, a large fortified area protected by an impregnable EPIC (Exclusive Power Integrated Climate-Control) dome. The Citadel space contains large gardens, vertical growing systems and several houses. Images released an hour ago show less than two hundred survivors after a series of quadcopter attacks. The Swiss Directorship denies responsibility.

Rural train

Selongey, a small station with narrow platforms. Helen and Isha look out of the window and see a woman crouched under the faded awning of a café.

“What do you think?” Isha whispers.

“Could be. Let’s wait for her to stand up.”

But the woman stays seated, pulls a white briefcase onto her knees, and then raises the lid as if searching for something inside.

“Dijon,” Helen reads the big black letters in a hushed tone. “And the number two must be the platform.”

They haul their backpacks out from underneath a pile of porters and bags, while the timetable scrolls through their vision. Their tickets have been bought for the next stretch too. Helen breathes a sigh of relief. No more entrance beams, at least not for the time being.

“I hope whoever organised this knows what they are doing,” Isha says. “We seem to be taking a huge detour.”

The platform is a wind tunnel, but the wind is warm. Helen smells her stale armpits and hopes other people can’t. A few minutes later, an ancient rural train comes in, the badly fitting doors and shaky frames making it sound like bones rattling in a coffin.

“What a wreck,” Helen moans.

Inside, the seats have been either trashed or entirely ripped out. “I suppose an uncomfortable seat is better than nothing at all,” Isha says as they get in. She gestures to Helen. “Take your pick.”

Helen drops her backpack and then squats down to sit on it. They are the only passengers in their carriage, which is a small compensation because she isn’t in the mood for polite or even impolite conversation.

Isha sits down on her own backpack and leans lightly against Helen’s shoulder. “Are you going to tell me why you were crying?”

“I’m not sure I know. It’s something about the way Mathilde introduced herself. If we’d met, I’m sure I would have liked her.”

“Well, this rattletrap takes over an hour to get to Dijon, so why don’t you read it to me?”

Helen draws a deep breath, struggles briefly to release the book from a pocket, then holds it out on the flat of her palm. Isha leans in closer to look at the design on the cover. A single leaf of a chestnut tree is sketched across it. “Look at the detail,” she sighs. “Mathilde could certainly draw.”

“And in indigo ink.” Helen looks up at her wife with a wry smile.

“Born in 1958,” Isha says softly. “Just one year older than my mother.”

Helen reads quietly, and Isha listens intently, often asking her to repeat a sentence when the rattling train is louder. “Mum had a beehive in the garden when we were kids,” she says at the end of the first diary entry, “but the neighbours complained to the council, and she had to get rid of them. I didn’t think much about it then.”

“I can’t even remember the taste of honey.” Helen flips the pages, and sketches of trees wave their branches. “Have we got time for another chapter before arriving in Dijon? I’m already feeling sick just thinking about the checks there.”

My father, Tato, Papa in Polish, grew up on a small farm in Poland. His family had been there for generations but came from a Jewish family when being Jewish was a death sentence.

Tato's father sold wood for burning, trunks for house beams, poles for fences, and gave away the bark for Christmas decorations in churches. His trees were planted and harvested for everyone. He thanked each one he felled and took care to plant a good neighbour replacement for the rest left standing. Tato said he loved his trees as much as his own child.

By 1941, Germany had occupied all of Poland. Tato left in July of the same year when they came for his parents, who'd already hidden him in the cellar. He ran to the only road he knew, where a Polish man gave him a lift to the nearest border. Tato was fifteen.

The next day the German soldiers came and cut down his father's forest for the fuel that incinerated people like him. Tato later told me they did that because, like all the other colonialists, they thought the world was theirs to destroy and reshape for their use and no one else's.

Five years later, Tato arrived in France, after refusing to fight for the British because he refused to fight for anyone. This is where he met Angeline, my mother.

Tato worked in a factory that made shoes. We lived in a house with two bedrooms and a bathroom outside. The garden was too small for children to play in when the washing was hanging, so Maman was always angry. Tato rented a small portion of the common land used by the villagers, and he planted four saplings there. One for my sister, two for the twin brothers and one for me. Mine was a sweet chestnut, and we grew up together. Tato knew all the Latin names and said mine was a *Castanea sativa*. I called her Cassie, because my sister told me a story about King Priam and Queen Hecuba's daughter Cassandra, who was so beautiful the Greek god Apollo fell in love with her. My Cassie was beautiful too.

Passenger Announcement: Your Airlander flight will terminate in Pontarlier due to an unforeseen incursion at the Besançon landing zone. For alternative return options to Besançon, please check with our landing schedules site. We apologise for the delay and disruption.

I panicked when the text scrolled into my vision. How would I find Helen and Isha when their communication link was still blocked? I had no idea where they were and didn't know where I was going. I closed my eyes, let my mind turn somersaults through an obstacle course of all the worst scenarios, checked where Pontarlier was in relation to the Swiss border and then breathed a sigh of relief. It was seventy kilometres closer than Besançon, which couldn't be bad.

The Airlander zone was in the outskirts of Pontarlier, and while Ayo and I were waiting for a bus to take us into the centre, I sensed the air was much fresher than it had been since leaving Calais. The good part. Next the bad. The rain.

Rain in Switzerland is thorough and... well, Swiss. It doesn't waste time with preliminaries like a light shower or warning clap of thunder but just drops out of the sky. The Airlander centre was already behind us, and all I could see was a tunnel for foot passengers that went under the main road in front. I threw on my pack, grabbed Ayo and ran.

Pedestrian tunnels are never the kind of places you want to spend time in. Cracked concrete, drifting detritus, puddles of piss, rats if you are stupid enough to look for them and at least one drunk. This one was no different, even in sanitised Switzerland, except that it seemed like half the city had joined him and not just because it was raining.

They weren't drunk either, the people I saw sitting there and whose legs I had to step over until I'd found a space for Ayo and me, but they were one hundred percent soma'd, their eyes glazed as they stared into their visions.

I haven't used the word soma before because I'm ashamed of what it says about me. VR illustrators create the soma scenarios that help people forget the real world outside and where they might be sitting at the time. You probably don't need me to tell you, but go to any pedestrian tunnel or under a bridge, let's say in London, and you'll find them. The soma'd. Helen told Ben that VR systems offer a less destructive treatment for depression, but only because she hadn't seen the darker side. I've never sold drugs, I'm not a dealer, but I wrote the food scripts the soma'd dreamed of eating while they starved.

The rain still fell like a sheet of silver in front of the tunnel opening, but I picked Ayo up and stepped over all those legs and went back outside, where I stood under the torrent, and Ayo held her hands out to catch the big raindrops. I needed to feel clean.

Xiris, find a hotel and then wipe any of my narrative connections you can still find.

Ogria too?

No, not Ogria.

Change of plan

Helen and Isha are standing on the station platform in Dijon, but the train is not there.

“Why else would that woman have written Dijon, platform two, on the lid of her briefcase?” Isha asks, an unfamiliar tremor in her voice. “Do you think it was a trap of some sort?”

Helen shrugs, suddenly too tired to think of a useful response. “Let’s wait here and see.” She points to an empty bench set back from the crowd hurtling past. “If we’re being followed, we’ll be found. If not, we’ll have to cope with whatever happens next.”

They sit, and Isha busies herself with a broken strap on her pack, her head tilted down and her vision narrowed to a small portion of the platform ahead, where she sees two small boy boots walk past and then turn around.

“Can I help you?” Helen asks above her. “Are you looking for someone?”

Isha looks up and sees a young boy with skin colouring much like her own. “Should you be alone here and without your parents? Are you lost?”

But the boy keeps on staring, and Helen indicates with her eyes that Isha should look at his hand, where a corner of paper is sticking out through the dark, fisted fingers.

“See if you like this new kind of chocolate,” Isha says loudly, reaching out her hand. The exchange is quick and slick. “It’s like being in one of those ancient spy movies,” she whispers as she waves her hand in a theatrical goodbye.

“Pontarlier, platform six,” Helen reads, but there are tears in her eyes. “We’ll bypass Besançon, and now Jana will never find us.”

Not when Beatrice has promised to keep track of us, Isha thinks.

Dijon to Pontarlier. Helen and Isha sit back in their seats and appreciate the speed and comfort after their journey on the decrepit rural train.

“I wonder what happened to Besançon,” Isha says quietly. “Why the sudden leap forward?”

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” Helen says. “I feel like a ball in one of those wretched pinball games with no idea of when or where I’ll be launched next.”

Isha is worried about how they’ll contact Jana, but she’s also disappointed by the change in destination because she has such fond memories of their time in Besançon, a beautiful city. She remembers their long walks through rambling green parks shaded by trees so huge they must have been hundreds of years old, and she would never forget the narrow towpath and the bottle of wine they had finished there, Helen hiccupping all the way back to the campsite

full of Germans, who seemed to be even drunker than she was. Now Isha worries that the ancient trees have been reduced to pathetic stumps, the lush lawns dried out, and the magnificent River Doubs transformed into a slick of sewage. She's seen enough images of other cities in that state, so why not Besançon? Her mood is becoming dangerously morose when she notices that they have started to climb steeply, and suddenly the banks on either side of the railway tracks are full of colour. "Mountain cowslips." She nudges Helen. "Look."

Helen looks at the flowers and then at Isha. "Leave your country, your people and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you." She sighs deeply. "Perhaps Franzl's cabin is our promised land."

Helen's comment is on the right side of optimism, but it reminds Isha of their home in Arles, the place they had described as their promised land too, until the last five years when they began to feel as if they were living on an invisible boundary between the flooded lowlands of the Camargue to the west and the desiccated Alpilles mountain range to the east. "Do you remember the old farmer we met near Fontvieille, in the middle of a field with dust devils blowing in spirals around his feet?"

"*Regarde ça,*" Helen says in a deep and gravelly voice. "*Même la lavande ne pousse plus ici.*"

"Look at that. Even the lavender doesn't grow here anymore." Isha nods and turns away to look out of the window.

Helen, Nmail, August 29, 2050

Jana, sweetheart, this is hell on Earth. Our links were blocked for reasons I'll explain when we are finally, finally, all together in Franzl's cabin, but the worst part of all this is that we have no idea where you are. I'm hoping not far behind, or maybe even in front.

We are in Pontarlier, which Isha tells me is about twenty kilometres from the Swiss border in Sainte-Croix, a reasonable day's walk (I can't believe I'm saying that!). Our research, or to be strictly accurate, Isha's, suggests that Switzerland is still open for French shoppers and tourists who can prove they've got six-figure credit accounts. I hate the idea, but suppose it's understandable when there's hardly any snow left for skiing and only summer left to bring in the serious amounts of credit the Swiss need to support their very Swiss lifestyle.

As for Ish and I, we look like tramps and plan to replace some clothes in Pontarlier, but even so, we won't be arriving at the Swiss border in anything luxurious or handing over

strings of codes to show how much credit we've got. We're not even sure if our French IDs (more on them later) are still working, so for all these reasons, our first plan is to get to Sainte-Croix and look at how thorough and obnoxious the border goons are. Our next step will depend on what we find.

If you get this message, wait, wherever you are, until you hear from us, but please let us know you are both safe.

Imagine how incredible it will be if our next sign-in is from Switzerland!

Kisses, miss you desperately.

H-Mum

Jana, Nmail, August 29, 2050

Mums, we're in Pontarlier, and we're safe. We'll wait here, but if I haven't had a message from you by next week, we'll head up to Sainte-Croix. I'm not going to lose you again after getting this close!

Love you,

J

They set out at first light. Helen gloomy and quiet. Isha struggling to hide her excitement. We'll reach one thousand metres by lunchtime, she thinks. It's a long time since I've done that using my own leg power.

The sky is deep red, behind a filigree of white cirrus that reminds Helen of Jana's painting hanging over their bed in Arles. Is it still there? Who has it now? Do they love it the way we did? And what happened to her sketches in my office on the ground floor? The caricature of Isha and I drinking wine on the terrace. The Drinkers Van Gogh forgot to paint, Jana had called it. And then the portrait of Isha, my favourite because it so perfectly captures the way her curls surround her face like a nest with an egg.

Isha has chosen a small road with a series of signs that confirm they are back on the Via Francigena. They had discussed their next steps the evening before and agreed that, though a train or taxi would be easier and faster, they should still be wary of checks. They also agreed that Filou must be topping up their temporary credit account because the payment for the hotel had gone through, so now the only question hanging over them is how they will stay hidden in Switzerland without their fake IDs and Filou to help them. Helen wondered about what had happened to Jean's assurance that Femto members would make themselves known near the Swiss border, but she didn't voice her fear that the Directors might have traced Beatrice and everyone else connected with her.

They leave the bland suburbs of Pontarlier behind them in less than fifteen minutes, and a late dawn chorus tumbles out of the trees as soon as they pass the last house.

"We aren't the only the ones who think this concrete sprawl is uninhabitable," Isha says. "God only knows what it does to the minds of people who have no choice but to stay here." Then she breathes in deeply. "It's going to be a good day. I can taste it in the air."

"We'll see," Helen replies, still refusing to be drawn.

The road soon turns off onto a track that leads them through knee-high grass and then into dense woodland. As they pause to brush off the seeds clinging to their trousers, Helen realises her socks are wet through. "So much for the new boots," she mutters. "I'll have to change."

While she fiddles with her pack, Isha settles down in the crook of a low branch and closes her eyes. If I had to choose a time and place to shuffle off this mortal coil, she thinks, it would be here and now. She pauses in her thoughts. No, not yet, not before seeing Ayo and

Jana. Then the rattling beat of a woodpecker breaks into her thoughts, and when she looks up, Helen is standing over her. “Why didn’t we do this more often?”

“Circumstances, lack of time or lack of imagination.” Isha stands up and shakes herself like a dog. “Come on, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

“Slave driver,” Helen laughs. “But you know what?”

“What?”

“It is going to be a good day.”

The path shrinks to little more than a line of compressed earth. The rocks underneath are friable and unsteady, and the incline is so punishing that Isha has to stop to catch her breath. I don’t remember it being this hard the first time, though being forty years older might have something to do with it. She checks her biomonitor and finds that her heart is pumping at a safe 150 beats per minute. Not bad! Then she turns round to look back down the hill, where Helen is trudging as if her boots are made of lead. “Check your biomonitor,” said Isha.

“Disconnected it way back,” Helen rasps between breaths. “What’s the point of having one when health insurance doesn’t exist anymore?”

“Let me take your pack for a while,” Isha offers when Helen finally catches up.

“Only when we get to the top. I’m not going to enter Fort Malher staggering like an old pensioner after all these years.”

Isha laughs. “I didn’t think you’d remember.”

Sex in the ruins of an old fort. It had seemed romantic at the time, though the process was still awkward. Too many firsts, Helen risked admitting the next morning. First woman for me and first first for you.

“Was it so obvious?” Isha had asked, blushing as red as she could. “It’s just not done in my...”

“Nor mine, but we did, and we’ll do it a lot more.”

Now Helen, thoughts firmly back in the present, reaches the brow of the hill where Isha is waiting for her.

“Did I ever say this is where I first really fell in love with you?” Isha asks.

“Many times.” Helen sits down heavily and shrugs off her pack. “But when I sprawl out here like an inverted tortoise, it might be a good idea to remind yourself again.”

On their first visit, the fort had already been a ruin, more reminiscent of an oversized birdhouse tacked onto a point of rock than anything military. On closer inspection, they had decided the court of King Arthur would have looked much the same. Cold, forbidding and intensely uncomfortable.

“Let’s see if the planned restoration ever happened,” Isha says.

But when they reach the top of the rise, Fort Malher is no more.

“What do you think happened?” Helen whispers shortly after.

“Well, the restoration didn’t.”

“Or if it did, it was a waste of time.”

The only sign of the fort’s previous existence is a mess of chiselled stone mixed in with the general debris of a landslide that reaches down into the valley below. Rocks, all shapes and sizes, upended trees, naked roots, sharp-cornered pebbles, shattered fossils and the dried-out carcass of what could be a fox or a dog.

“Strong enough to survive three tonnes of dynamite accidentally going off inside, but not strong enough to resist climate change.” Isha sighs. “I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

Helen stares at the mass of scree below. “An open wound.”

Isha picks up a rock and examines the veins of colour running through it. “Water from melting glaciers undermines the base rocks and make everything above unstable.”

“Like a burst vein.” Helen shakes her head vigorously and focuses her gaze across the valley. “But why didn’t that gaudy monument to power and oppression over there come down?”

“You mean Chateau Joux.” Isha shrugs. “Power maintains power? I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s being used as a Directorate retreat now.”

“Or maybe a prison.” Helen sighs. “Switzerland, the only country in Europe that refuses to pay universal income and has always been a tax haven for the credit-loaded for centuries.” Then she draws a deep breath and bellows out an approximation of a yodel.

“Feel better now?” Isha asks quietly.

“Not sure I ever will.” Helen kicks a stone and watches it trip and stumble its way down the degraded mountainside. Then she follows Isha, who is walking in the direction of a sparsely covered mound.

“It’s a detour, but mainly downhill from here.”

“My kind of walking.” Helen shifts her pack higher on her shoulders.

The walk is pleasant from here, a meandering path between a mix of healthy-looking beech and spruce. Isha and Helen are quiet and lost in their thoughts. I’d like to see some maples, Isha thinks. One or two would help me to believe that not everything is dying out. We picked mushrooms, Helen says to herself, after an old French woman we met here showed us what to look out for. “*La Morille Noire doit être bien cuite, à fond. Sinon tu meurs,*” she shouts out to Isha. “Remember?”

“The Black Morel must be cooked thoroughly. If not, they’ll kill you.” Isha laughs. “We must have looked very young and stupid then.”

“But we didn’t die.”

“Right, and we didn’t cook the mushrooms either, but let’s see if we can find some now.”

I’m probably older than the so-called old woman was then, Helen thinks but doesn’t say.

Isha, the first to find one, flicks the base to break the stem and then holds the black cap up against the light. “I still find it hard to believe they’re edible,” she says with a look of distaste.

“Too phallic? But you won’t care by the time they are mushrooms on toast.”

Then more walking and the surreal view of the abandoned ski stations on the horizon. Skeletal giants that cling to each other with their looping cables like outstretched fingers. Isha notes that the cable cars and chairs have been stripped off for more contemporary uses. Lower down, a startled grouse startles Helen in turn as it rushes off cackling into the furrowed lines of dark and light between the trees. Next, a glimpse of what could have been a solitary deer, though they are not sure, followed by the fleeting flash of what Helen insists is a lynx, but Isha knows is a domestic cat. And finally, two more mushroom clusters just before they leave the woods to enter open grassland.

“How are your legs?” Isha asks. “We haven’t stopped for a break, and I’m feeling the strain even if you’re not.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Helen falls back on the ground without bothering to remove her pack. “I’m done for.”

They rest and eat the bread left from their morning breakfast. A meagre lunch, Helen observes, but it doesn’t matter because soon everything will be so much better. “I’m looking forward to growing our own vegetables,” she says. “Franzl always claimed it was impossible near his chalet, but maybe climate change will work in our favour for once.”

“We need to know what kind of patrols the Swiss have before we can plan the next step,” Isha says while checking the geodata.

“But why go through the border at all when we could find a route through the forest instead?”

“I think those days are over. We haven’t had truly open borders in forty years, but I might be wrong, which is why I want to get a sense of how well it’s guarded.”

They pack up and set off again, walking one more off-road kilometre before joining a small agricultural road that leads directly to the border. The trees on either side thicken as

they enter what appears to be a managed strip of pine forest. Then, as the road straightens from a bend, a cluster of border checkpoint buildings lunges up like a beast that has been waiting for its prey.

“Down,” Isha whispers and pulls Helen off to one side. “They’ll have surveillance cams everywhere.”

Helen collapses on all fours as if on command, but mainly to manage her sudden dizziness. “What now?”

“We watch.”

Traffic is light between France and Switzerland, at least on that day. Isha counts two trucks and three cars in the space of an hour.

“They don’t stop,” Helen says quietly. “Or even slow down.”

“Right, so the Swiss must have long-range ID readers, which isn’t surprising. Maybe we should—”

“Ssh!” Helen hears the snapped branch first. It’s light enough to be from the hoof of a deer or a human trying not to be seen, maybe a border guard. They lie out in the leaves, flat and barely breathing.

A few minutes later, a woman carrying a small girl passes them less than a metre away. Helen raises her head to get a better view and sees sunlight flash through the gap between a boot and its sole. Why are refugees crossing into Switzerland when all the other refugees seemed to be heading north? That child could be Ayo.

Isha watches the woman zigzag through the trees in a wide arc around the border checkpoint. “She must know the surveillance range,” she whispers.

Then a shadow passes over them, a slit in the sunlight that they feel as a chill line along their backs.

Invalid IDent! Do not proceed!

A quadcopter swoops down into the trees. A child screams.

Jana, Nmail, August 30, 2050

Mums, how’s it going? Let me know. I’m going crazy here. Meantime, and mainly to keep my mind off what might be happening to you, Ayo and I have been shopping. She’s grown out of everything, but today she got a whole new set of clothes. You’ll melt when you see her. I got some for myself too, but only what really needs replacing.

Message me! Please!

Love yous.

J

Isha, Nmail, August 31, 2050

Crossing into Switzerland isn't going to be as easy as we'd hoped, but we're working on a solution. Hold tight and wait until you hear from us.

Kisses,

I-Mum

BAILEY IS GONE

Douglas County, Colorado, was recently rated as one of the top five healthiest regions in the United States. Bailey is in Douglas County. Thirty years ago, it would have been described as a small town with a population of just over eight thousand, but that number doubled after a journalist listed it as one of the best places to be, “if you want to forget about climate change and live longer too.”

He wasn't lying. Bailey was a pleasant place to be. Its climate used to be described as continental, which is a good word for adding noughts to house prices. The North Fork South Platte River flowed through it too, a real draw for people from places like Las Vegas or Salt Lake City. Attentive readers might notice I'm using the past tense, and there's a good reason for that.

A heat dome hit Bailey ten days ago. Heat domes are the result of what scientists call a weather phenomenon. High-pressure conditions that trap air over oceans and then blow inland while simultaneously heating to insane temperatures. When the dome has found its preferred resting place, it presses the air down like a lid on a saucepan.

Bailey's residents looked at their thermometers and told their aircons to get working if they had them. Anyone else who didn't, like gardeners and house staff, waited it out in the community hall. It was scary, but the mayor described the heat as a manageable emergency because the town was *prepared for eventualities*. He had allocated a proportion of the taxes to the installation of a grid-independent solar power system. Good news until the cables started to melt in the heat. A technical oversight.

No solar, no power, no aircon.

Humans and mammals become overheated when the wet bulb temperature is above 350 degrees centigrade. First the younger and then the older ones, with the rest following soon after. Calls for assistance were sent to Lakewood and Denver, but the response was slow. Lakewood is over an hour's drive away, and

it was getting hot too. I'll leave you with that thought because now I'm going to add the side story.

Nomad trains take their name from the pioneering wagon trains used for emigration to the west of North America, but there are two crucial differences. First, today's wagons aren't pulled by horses, and second, the drivers aren't pioneers. You see, these people and their families have lost their homes to floods, fires, or just not having enough credit to make the down payments. If you want to take a positive view, you could say the nomad life is a new form of freedom, though I'm not sure it's how they would describe it – scrabbling for bits of work to keep food on the table, kids home-schooled because they are moving all the time, and no right to hospital care if someone gets sick.

On the day the heat dome hit, a nomad train had stopped off in Bailey. After all, it was a nice place to stay. Temperatures were usually reasonable. The town had set up a dedicated park site with magnificent views over the river valley, water for their tanks and electricity to charge their batteries. The fees helped Bailey pay off its substantial solar installation bill too.

The townspeople were happy, until the power went out, but the nomads, who were used to being bottom of the pile for just about everything, had one big advantage: the roofs of their trucks were made of the photovoltaic panels that powered everything electric inside – lights, fridges and, you guessed it, aircon systems. All good news, until human nature stepped in.

First it was in the form of a young man who ran down to the river to cool off, saw the motorhomes and thought of the aircons inside. His knock on the nearest door was polite. "Hey, can I share some of your cool air? It's hot out here."

The door opened, but not before a woman with two children had seen what was happening. "Hey, my kids'll die if I don't get them out of this heat soon!"

Another door opened.

Word spread fast, and soon the motorhomes were surrounded by a large and desperate crowd. The closest people banged on the doors while the rest behind pushed forward. Shortly after, one of the biggest motorhomes keeled over onto its side like a massive wounded beast, which reminded one bystander of a film he'd seen about elephants being shot for their ivory. "It went down, and then all you

could hear was glass breaking and everyone shouting. I went and sat in the river, even though it was hotter than bathwater.”

Humans *en masse* are neither clever nor pretty. The townspeople wanted what the nomads had and took it, except they killed the golden goose at the same time. Does that sound kind of familiar?

Of course, it's easy to criticise when you weren't there. Ask yourself how you would behave if your kids were dying of heat stress. But it was shameful all the same. So shameful that someone decided it should be kept secret.

The fire moved in early the next morning, started by a spark from one of the smouldering cables, it was said, though that version has since been refuted. There were no firefighters left, so the fire ran free, first creeping through the dry grass and then sneaking under the fence into the ornamental garden where the annual street festival always began. After that, it skipped over to the main street and played tag between the trees planted for increased carbon absorption. The flames were higher than the houses, and the smoke billowed like clouds on crack. By the evening, Bailey was gone, and the full story of its demise with it.

Three days and two nights in a hotel with nothing to do. On the first night, I dreamed I was back in Paris Deux and running through all the passages but never finding the way out. Isha's message came on the second evening. She didn't tell me about what had happened to the mother and child, but she did say there was a problem and that they had decided to sleep in the forest rather than walk all the way back to Pontarlier. It was bad news, and I sensed from the way she had written that she wasn't telling me everything. I would have freaked out completely if I hadn't received a message from Filou just a few minutes before. He wrote in French, but I've translated it here and tried to keep his stilted style.

Filou, Nmail September 1, 2050

Jana,

You must pass this message on to your parents because I am worried that our communications may have been tracked. I see your connections are well-protected, and it took me some time to find my way in.

Tell your parents to wait until tonight before crossing the border. It will be the safest time because a band of low pressure will cause a thunderstorm. The consequent weather disruptions will refract or absorb communication signals from the BF quadcopters.

You are a French citizen and will be allowed one 24-hour access pass into Switzerland. You must join a tourist bus so that you will not raise any suspicions. After 24 hours, your status will be illegal, and there is a risk you will be traced, so you must find another way to proceed and hide after that. I cannot advise.

Please give your parents my best wishes.

Filou

I'd never heard from Filou before. He had a clipped, cold way of explaining things but clear all the same. I sent my mums his message but couldn't help thinking they would be crossing the border while I was safe with Ayo in our hotel room. It's strange how life can still go on as if nothing is happening when the lives of the people you love are in the balance. Someone in the room next door was having a party on their balcony. I wanted to scream at them to shut the fuck up, and how dare they swill beer and gorge on burgers when my parents were about

to be caught and sent to one of those Holding Stations they'd told me about. But I just watched the clear sky with its millions of stars and waited for the storm.

The next thing I remember was the windows rattling so hard I thought the glass was about to break. Then a huge flash lit up the room, and Ayo screamed. I tried to comfort her, but I was cheering inside. Filou had been right. The storm had started, and my mums would be running across that border. Then I looked out of the window and saw the rain thrash the pavement below like thousands of cracking whips. I didn't sleep for the rest of the night, thinking about how they must be soaking and scared, Helen especially. She has a long list of phobias for a psychiatrist, but maybe that's why she understands other people's phobias so well.

"Your mother has what I would call a profound insight," one of her colleagues had said to me when she retired. "I'm not sure we will ever be able to replace her."

Right, I thought, as the rain flooded out over the storm drains. Helen is irreplaceable, Isha too, and I'm going to find them.

Jana, Nmail, September 3, 2050

If I don't hear from you by tomorrow afternoon, at the latest, we're going to look for you in Sainte-Croix.

J

Helen and Isha receive Jana's message as they walk deeper into the woodland, where there is less chance of a stray quadcopter or person finding them. "I told her to stay where she is," Isha says grimly.

"First time a storm coming is good news."

"Yes, it means we've a good chance of crossing now."

"Filou didn't mention Ben."

"Will you stop that!" Isha turns around sharply and grabs Helen's shoulders with both hands. "Glass half empty all the time. Filou has found Jana, and has told us how to cross the border. She'll be safe, and so will we. What more do you want?"

"Nothing. I'm just scared. I don't know what I'm doing from one moment to the next, or why I'm doing it. I don't know how you..."

"I can't think beyond Franzl's cabin and Jana and Ayo joining us there. Our promised land." Isha pulls Helen into her chest.

"That's my story," Helen replies, her voice muffled.

Later in the day, they stop in a clearing where the midday sun is burning a circle of gold in the centre. Isha drops her pack. "Let's rest now, because it's going to be a long night."

Helen follows suit and pulls out her sleeping bag to lay it down next to Isha's. "How about another game of I-Spy?" Then she leans over to Isha's backpack and pulls a pencil out of a side pocket.

"Pine," Isha says. "Could even be from a plantation like this."

"And the lead?"

"Graphite." Isha sighs heavily. "Explosives are used to get it, and graphite spillages contaminate the soil, so not a happy story."

Helen shrugs. "Strange, I thought it would be." Then she wriggles into her sleeping bag. "Three hours on, three off?"

"Sounds good. Six hours will bring us to about seven in the evening, and then we can see what's happening with the storm." Isha leans down to Helen. "Sleep well, my love."

"I will, and don't you dare not wake me."

When Isha wakes Helen, the daylight is dusky-edged with the remnants of the lowering sun, but the sky is still cloudless.

"What are you looking at?" Helen asks grumpily.

“I’ve found a route.”

“Then share it and talk me through.”

Isha blinks twice into her vision. “Got it?”

Helen nods.

“So, there’s a small track travelling east of where we are now.”

“You mean the one going off to the right?”

“Yes, it’s probably an old hunting route, but pretty much forgotten from what I can see, and to the west, or left, there’s a border crossing in the middle of what looks like a thick forest. I’m sure the Border Force only monitor it with their quadcopters.”

“Which won’t be flying because of the storm.” Helen opens her eyes and stands up, her joints cracking audibly. “Glass half full.”

The storm is late and arrives long after Helen has woken Isha, and even then, it only lingers on the horizon, cracking and threatening in the distance but seeming reluctant to draw closer. Isha sits behind Helen, her arms clasped tightly around her waist, their hands knotted together. When the vibrations seep into her palms, she isn’t sure if they are coming up from the ground or through Helen’s ribs. “Love?”

Helen has been humming a melody and now draws a deep breath to release it in full, her voice sweet and tentative in the beginning but quickly growing in strength. “*Nessun dorma... Nessun dorma...*”

When Helen stands up, her face white in the moonlight, Isha remembers the concert evenings with Jana when they’d searched for Helen in the choir because she was always shorter than everyone else. There, look, at the end. No, wait, that’s not her. Wrong hair. But that must be her because no one else has got a thatch like that. And now here she is in the middle of a forest, her voice booming. “*Nessun dorma... Nessun dorma... Nobody shall sleep... Nobody shall sleep... Even you, oh Princess, in your cold room, watch the stars that tremble with love and with hope... Ma il mio mistero è chiuso in me...*” Then the thunder eats the last phrase with a clap of celestial teeth directly over their heads.

“Promised land, here we come!” Isha shouts.

They shoulder their packs and run out of the clearing into the trees that will shield them from the full view of the lightning, which is tearing strips out of the sky and sending spears down into the earth. This isn’t what you are supposed to do, Isha thinks, but at least the trees protect us from the worst of this wind.

The wind thumps them like a mugger and smacks into the backs of their knees. Helen is flat out on the ground when the rain joins in, and soaks her in a matter of seconds. She

scrambles to her feet and tries to tuck her hands into her pockets, but the fabric is flooded and flaccid.

“Come on!” Isha shouts. “We’ll need to cut through here.” Then she throws herself into the undergrowth, and Helen has to follow.

Together, they stumble and trip and fall and roll because the rain has turned the thin soil into a sea of mud. When a steep incline suddenly yawns out in front of them, Helen loses her footing and slides all the way down.

“Hen!” Isha follows as fast as she can but starts to slide too, and when she finally comes to a halt, Helen is lying just an arm’s length away. “Are you hurt?”

“Grievously.”

“Where?”

“Right in the middle of my pride.”

Isha doesn’t have the energy to laugh but appreciates her wife’s attempt at humour and, on looking down, sees that her unintentional fall has ended on the only reasonably dry spot still available, a raised path skirted by deep drainage ditches full of roaring water on either side. Isha shuts her eyes to check the geodata and breathes a sigh of relief. Yes, it’s the one they should be following.

The tree cover thins after that, making locating the path easier, but the risk of detection is also higher. Isha runs and drops low commando-style, but Helen doesn’t bother. I’m still half her height even when she ducks, so what’s the point? Then a fork of lightning illuminates the entire valley. If anyone is watching, they will be picked up in seconds. But the lightning dies, and its companion thunder rattles in the distance.

“We’re losing the storm!” Isha shouts. “We need to get into that next belt of trees.”

Helen runs as fast as she can to where the forest becomes managed and tidy. Row upon row of conifers with clear passages in between and a carpet of pine needles that offer the traction human feet need for running. Isha picks up speed.

“Wait!” Helen gasps.

“Love, it’s there.” Isha points into the dark. “We’ve made it.”

But Helen is down on all fours without enough breath to reply.

“The promised land, just one more step.” Isha fights her inclination to kick off and run, then grabs Helen under her arms and pulls her upright. “I’ll carry you there if I have to.”

The border is a flimsy metal bar, paint peeling, white and red, over a narrow gravelled track, with a small sign off to one side, red and white too, but not painted in years.

Frontière

Grenze

They've come so far, it's just one more step, but suddenly Isha is hesitant. It all seems too easy. What are we walking into by walking out of here? What if it's a trap?

Helen takes her hand. "Let's do this together." She ducks under the barrier and pulls Isha so that she has to duck under too.

Isha, Nmail September 2, 2050

Made it! Time for you to go on holiday.

I-Mum.

Ayo and I were tourists, dressed like tourists. Ayo had a sunhat with birds flying around its rim, and I wore a flimsy sundress that would have looked better on a beach, but we didn't look out of place on the top of a yellow bus with an orange sun awning.

When I booked the tickets, I quickly understood that only two kinds of tourists are allowed into Switzerland: those who arrive in cars that might as well have I'm credit-loaded painted all over them, and the others like me, who are corralled into tourist buses and monitored like prisoners.

After a day of forced shopping and so-called sightseeing – a five-minute stop to look at the Rhône glacier that isn't there anymore, and an interminable cuckoo-clock tour – I was ready to punch the next person who told me to have a great day. Meantime, Ayo, who had picked up my mood, grizzled and fiddled all the way.

When we finally got to our prearranged hotel, a concrete cube in a sunless valley, we weren't allowed off the bus until everyone had completed their satisfaction survey. I was tempted to write what I really thought, but remembered that I had to keep a low profile. While I was standing in the queue waiting for our room to be allocated, I looked around and realized that we, the guests, were the only humans in the hotel. I'd booked a fully automated tour without understanding what it meant, but the options were limited anyway, for the purposes of efficient surveillance, apparently.

In our room, Ayo let out all her pent-up boredom like an angry cat, first hitting and kicking me and then refusing to get undressed for her bath. A toddler tantrum was the last thing I needed, but then again, I knew how she felt, so we had one together.

"Boring! Boring! Boring!" I screamed with my head in a pillow. "Yucky bus!" I yelled, throwing the pillow in her direction.

"Aaah! Aaah! Aaah!" Ayo screeched as she chunked the pillow back. Then we pulled off the covers and trashed the bed. We were still lying there panting, hot and sweaty, when the intercom panel flashed red and asked me to report to reception.

"A guest has complained," the cyborg girl behind the desk said. "You were making a lot of noise, and your behaviour has been reported. The complaint will be recorded in your GBR, Guest Behaviour Review."

There was so much I wanted to say, but I kept quiet and nodded because of the low profile I had to keep, but also because I was scared. A guest hadn't complained. The room had been bugged, and someone was going to report my behaviour to someone else. It's

because I'm black, I thought in the elevator going back up. The Swiss want me out because of my colour. But perhaps I was getting paranoid, and it wasn't just Ayo who needed to stop travelling.

I ordered a meal, and when we'd finished, I lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. So near and yet so far, Helen had said when she was in Calais, looking over to Dover. So near and yet so far, I'd said when Ayo and I were in Saint-Tricat, and now here we were in Switzerland with Helen and Isha on the same side of the border and maybe only a few kilometres from the hotel, but I couldn't leave to find them.

Xiris, where are they?

No location yet.

I didn't sleep, or hardly at all. I stared out of the window, hoping they had found out where we were staying. I imagined Isha throwing stones up at my window. "Hey Rapunzel, let down your hair."

And Helen saying, "Don't expect me to climb up there."

In the morning, the intercom panel told us to come down for breakfast, and, like good guests, we did. I've never actually seen a flock of sheep, but the people milling about in the dining room made me think that this is what they must look like until a shepherd with a dog organises them. In the hotel, the sheepdog was a cyborg in a white shirt and bow tie that shuttled between everyone on its Christopher-type wheels. This way, please. Follow me. No more than two rolls per person. Butter on the tray adjacent. Sit at the table with your room number. Don't forget to fill in our satisfaction questionnaire. Thank you, take care and have a GREAT day.

When Ayo had finished her breakfast, I took her out into the garden and waited to be called back into the queue for the bus. I'd given up thinking about how to get away. What was the point when my ID was logged, and the border quadcopters would track me faster than I could run? Anyway, I didn't want to put Ayo through all that; imagine how terrified she would be. So I sat on a wall with her in the cool morning sun, teaching her to count fingers while I enjoyed breathing the clean air. I'll go back to Pontarlier with all the other tourists, I thought, and then I'll try to find another way of getting back over.

Xiris, you'll have to let Helen and Isha know what's happened.

When I locate them.

I don't know if it was Xiris' response or my own pride, but something kicked inside me then, like the jolt you get just before falling asleep. There is another way, I told myself. Hannes is Swiss.

Hannes and I had a virtual meet-up a few years ago after we'd checked out our status and interests. There were some matches, but it was his job I found most attractive. He'd listed himself as a Virtual Reality broker, meaning he bought and sold anything VR, which could be movies, sequences, characters, situations and even VR artists like me.

You're getting a lot of coverage, he'd said. I like that, and I like the kind of person who knows how to do that.

Me too.

You are hyper-creative, and hyperness is exciting.

We virtual-zoned for a while and even shared our IRL look, though I could see his was heavily amended, like he'd chosen all the good parts from a hundred people, but none of them quite fitted together. When he said there was an exhibition in London and he could introduce me to some good people, I knew it was social foreplay, but I was sure I could handle him. We met, I played him along. I got work, and we kept in connection, but that's where it had ended, until now.

Hannes, I'm in Switzerland.

Jana! Where have you been?

A problem. I'll explain later, but Hannes, right now, I need you to get me out of here.

Out of where?

This hotel.

I told Hannes about the auto-hell I'd landed in, how we'd been marched round sights no one wanted to see and how I'd been reported for making a noise. What did that even mean? I told him my entry permit was limited to twenty-four hours and that a bus would take us back to the border this morning. Such a shame because I want to see the country you come from, I simpered.

Hannes was flattered and sympathetic. *It's all about status, but the rules aren't aimed at VR divas like you. Listen, I've got your location, so I can sort out your entry restriction, and then I'll send a car.*

Where are you?

Not in Switzerland, but we can connect.

Yes, I thought, a virtual connection is all you ever wanted. IRL is too much for a man made up of other people's perfect parts. He was probably lying about not being in

Switzerland, but it suited me anyway, so I let him flirt on behind my thoughts and then made sure I came back in when it mattered.

...Meantime, the car is yours, and you can tell it to go wherever you want.

Sweet, man! Thank you! And when I've finished with it?

He paused before answering, as if he was thinking. *Just say HOME.*

When will you be back here in Switzerland?

I'll tell you when I am, but by the way, have you sorted out your Swiss credit?

Swiss credit? I hadn't even heard of it, but Hannes was only too happy to explain.

We Swiss have to protect the value of our currency. We can't let it be diluted by weaker ones.

After a tedious explanation, I understood that the Swiss had not only closed their borders but their credit systems too, meaning the only way a foreigner could spend credit in Switzerland was by buying Swiss credit first. I didn't tell him what I was thinking.

How do I get it?

Don't worry, I can sort that. How much do you want to buy?

Enough for a good holiday. Then I gave him a figure that was about half of all I had in my account.

I'll set up an account for you here, and you can do the transfer later.

Thanks! Connect soon!

Connect soon VR Diva!

Then he sent a screen full of kisses, and I sent one back.

The car came half an hour later, with our names across the rear windscreen. Jana and child, Ayo, with our IDent numbers underneath. It stopped in front of the reception entrance, so I went to the desk and pointed outside.

"The car is for me." Then I turned my wrist for the scanner. "I'm Jana, and this is Ayo."

Ayo and I had travelled for five months on trains, in liftshares, and sometimes we'd even walked, but now we were going to travel in the kind of car that would never be stopped at the Swiss border.

"Pritty!" Ayo screamed as soon as we got in.

It was a ritzy living room, only slightly smaller, and the carpet was thick enough to lose your feet in. When we were both sitting very comfortably, I entered the coordinates as Isha had sent them to me: *4 Route de Vichères, Liddes, canton Valais*. Then we both settled down to eat and drink as much as we could from the Ice Bar that covered one entire side of the interior. When we'd finished and loaded the rest into my pack for later, it occurred to me that

Hannes must be an Entrepreneur, or at least an Entrepreneur sidekick to have so much control, but I left it there.

Filou, Nmail, September 3, 2050

Dear Jana,

I see you have found a way to remain in Switzerland. You have an extended stay of three months. Your parents are walking in the direction of Liddes. The journey will not be easy. Please let them know I have transferred Swiss credit to their qloud account. This has the advantage of being located in Switzerland and will not register as a foreign transaction when buying food or anything similar. However, please tell them to avoid any direct credit connections because the revenue source will be detected there.

This is my last communication.

Filou

Helen and Isha are woken by the sound of leaves falling on their tent. Isha turns over and grimaces when she feels the damp cloth inside her sleeping bag stick to her skin. “Welcome to Switzerland.”

Helen pushes her head up just far enough for her eyes to be visible. “So much for the promised land.”

Outside, curtains of dawn mist linger between the trees and the last remnants of rain patter like drumming fingers. Isha crouches in the doorway of their tent and watches the sun appear over the line of a hill silhouetted in front. “Have you ever thought about how we say the sun rises when in fact, we’re doing the moving?”

“Isn’t it more about how people used to see or understand it?”

“Maybe,” Isha shrugs and crawls out, her joints aching. “But there’s something arrogant in the way we haven’t changed the expression to reflect our real place in the cosmos.”

“As in being like gnats on an elephant.” Helen laughs. “Anyway, right now, you and I have to smarten up if we’re going to pass as wealthy tourists,”

They take time over breakfast and discuss their next steps. Jana has sent a message to say she is on her way and will be in Liddes before they are. Filou has managed to organise more credit, but he also said it was his last communication.

“Still no mention of Ben,” Helen says. “Or Beatrice, for that matter.”

Their first walk in Switzerland is approximately five kilometres to a town called Baulmes, where they plan to find a swimming pool or sports centre for a wash and then a shop to buy less heavy-duty clothes. The track is elusive and the mud treacherous, but the birdlife is breathtaking. When they stop to catch their breath, a buzzard plummets down through the clouds and then curves back up in a graceful air arabesque.

“I wonder what it feels like to do that,” Helen says.

“I wonder if eagles ask the same about fish swimming.”

When they see the town on their horizon, Helen comments that once they’ve got some decent clothes, it will be a pleasant change not to be stared at all the time.

Isha laughs. “We’re in the wrong country for that. Have you forgotten what you said the last time we were here?”

“The Swiss are genetically programmed label-checkers.”

Their boots are heavy with mud by the time they walk into the outskirts of Baulmes, and a woman drinking tea with friends on a café terrace looks at them askance. “*Bonjour*,” Helen waves. “The walk was more difficult than we expected.”

“*Bienvenue*,” another group member replies with a friendlier smile.

But washing is less easy than they had anticipated. The swimming pool is closed, and the sports hall stipulates sports shoes before entering, so they find a hotel and decide to stay there for the night.

“It would help if we knew how much credit we had,” Helen says, her spirits buoyed after a luxurious shower. “If we had enough, we could just hire a car and be with Jana tomorrow.”

Isha is more cautious. “I think the less obvious and less registered things we do, the better.”

After shopping, they have lunch in a cheerful restaurant where the staff seem genuinely welcoming. When Helen suggests the Swiss seem to believe their borders are impenetrable and so everyone inside must be legal, Isha finds it hard to disagree. She hasn’t felt this relaxed in a long time. “Do you remember our first year in Arles?” she asks. “When we used to have coffee, real coffee, every Saturday after the market?”

“Yes, and you kept inviting that obnoxious English woman,” Helen replies.

“Angela Redburn, who always had an exhibition in her cellar.” Isha smiles. “She was lonely, and I felt sorry for her.”

“Her cellar stank of damp, and her paintings looked as if someone had sneezed on the canvas.” Helen leans over and runs her hand through Isha’s curls. “But you’re right, this does feel almost like the old times and—”

“Do you think we’ll ever go back?”

Helen senses the sudden change in Isha’s mood. “I don’t think it’s a question anyone can answer.” She pauses to choose her words carefully. “I mean truthfully answer.”

Isha’s dark moments have started to arrive more frequently and persist for increasing amounts of time. This one continues into the evening and dinner in another restaurant. Helen tries to pull her out of it, but her humour is clumsy and misplaced, so back in their hotel, she tries another tack. “What’s changed? Why the regrets and depression when it’s already too late to change anything?”

Isha sits on the bed, her head in her hands, the light from a too-bright bulb turning her curls into the whitecaps of a restless sea. “I can’t articulate what I’m feeling. Dig and prod as much as you like, but the words don’t exist. We did this, and we are to blame for all the Janas and Ayos in this world whose daily pasts and presents are defined by their lack of future.”

“I don’t know what we could have done.”

“We could have fought harder and longer. We could have fought for people other than ourselves.”

Helen doesn’t contradict her. Isha is right, and to pretend there is a solution would be an outright lie. She drops down to sit cross legged on the floor and then opens the diary she had put on her pillow before going out for dinner. “Let’s see what Mathilde has to say.”

I was the youngest, and Maman said I was the surprise. No one expected me to arrive, and no one was prepared, least of all Maman. My sister and brothers were closer in age and had other friends. I learnt to play alone and waited for Tato to come home every evening. He called me his little *sadzonka*, which means sapling in Polish.

"Hey! *Sadzonka*! What brings you here?" He always pretended to be surprised.

But one evening, he found me crying. I can't remember why. I'd probably been thrown out of a game by the twins. They never liked me. I was weak and scrawny, and my nose was too big for my face. "You look like a crow, Thilde," my eldest sister told me once. "Be careful someone doesn't shoot you and hang you on a wire to scare all the other crows away."

But Tato understood. "It's never easy being the odd one out," he said. Then he told me about the grasslands where only oaks grow. "You won't see any other trees, which is strange when birds fly over, and animals who eat other seeds visit too. Do you know why?" I shook my head. "Because oaks are the only trees thick enough and hard enough to survive the savannah fires."

My brothers and sisters are gone, but I am still here.

The next weekend, Tato announced that he and I were going for a walk and would need to take lunch with us.

"Is it a long way?" I asked.

"No, but we are going to stay a long time."

When we left home we walked through the village, past the Mairie and my school. Not long after a man stopped his car and opened the window. He asked where we were going and Tato looked at me and said we were going to a special place. When the car had gone, Tato told me the man was the factory owner who lived in the big house. Then, after we'd walked around the corner past Monsieur Renaud's barn, we turned off onto a track that led through a big field. The grass was higher than my shoulders and smelt of bread dough. When I jumped, the butterflies circled over my head, and Tato said they were flying me a crown.

We stopped walking when we reached the top of a small hill called The Oak, because an old oak tree grew there and everyone could see it from wherever they were.

"This is where you come if you need to tell any secrets no one must ever know," Tato said. Then he crawled inside the big hole in its middle, and I followed him.

We ate our lunch there, and Tato told me a secret. "I cried when I saw a forestry plantation. Rows and rows of trees, every one of them identical and the soil dead underneath without a bird or bee in between."

After that first visit, I often went back to the oak on my own and sometimes even slept there. The fungi that had made the hole was gone, but its sweet smell of rotting apples was still there. A fox came once and looked at me with its black eyes, but neither of us was afraid. In the evenings, the badgers played lower down and snorted like our pig, and once, an owl roosted in the branches above and dropped pellets of bones, teeth and fur down in front of my oak archway. When I told Tato, he said they were gifts.

My love of trees was passed onto me by my father and has taken me out of my childhood village and to places I could never have imagined. The more I write now, the more I think my story is worth the telling, like an old fable with a moral meaning.

The car journey took just over an hour, climbing mountainsides on roads bordered by trees and fast-flowing rivers. I thought about the times I'd skied in Switzerland with Helen and Isha, and wondered how I could have forgotten its fresh air. My head was still spinning with questions when the car finally stopped and told me I had arrived at my destination.

Number four. A small grey house with a wooden veranda. Not the house I used to stay in when Franzl was still alive, but where Rosa, his daughter, had moved after getting married. I'd arrived, but I felt empty and lost.

"Nothing is the same anymore," I whispered to Ayo, because I could have been a different person, a stranger even, and I couldn't remember what Rosa looked like.

When I started to get our things together, Ayo gave me a look that I'd got to know so well. Where are you taking me this time, Mama? I selected HOME on the car dash controls, then lifted first Ayo and then the pack out.

Isha had given me Rosa's contact a while back, so I'd messaged her as soon as we left the hotel. *We're on our way. The satnav says we should be with you by two. Jana.*

Rosa wasn't home. I knocked on the door and tried to look through the windows, but there were curtains in most of them, and it was dark inside. I took Ayo's hand, and we walked down a narrow passage that led to the back garden. There were rows of vegetables in neat raised beds and some fruit trees at the end, but no Rosa. We walked back to the front, where I'd left my pack, and found a teenage boy standing over it.

"Suchen Sie meine Mutter?"

I only understood one word, *Mutter*, but it sounded more or less on target, so I nodded and said the only other word I knew. "*Ja.*"

The boy smiled. "I know your name is Jana."

"That's right, and this is Ayo, my daughter. What's your name?"

"Andrew." He saw my double-take and smiled. "My mother used to work with an English ski instructor in Lenk."

I didn't ask for more detail.

Rosa came walking down the hill while we were still standing in front of the house. I recognised her from photos Helen and Isha had shown me during one of their last visits, though her face was nothing like I remembered when we used to pick Franzl's apricots together. Her hair was grey now, wispy cobwebs that crowded over her forehead and fell around her face. "I'm sorry, I went to buy food, and it took longer than I expected," she said.

Her voice was still light as if this part had been preserved while all the rest of her had grown old, and I felt tears pricking at the backs of my eyes. “Don’t worry, we’ve only just arrived.”

But she wasn’t looking at me as she dropped low onto her heels, her arms opened wide. “And you must be Ayo,” she said.

Ayo ran towards her without hesitation and as I watched them I remembered how I had done the same when I was a child. Now I really started to cry and I think we were all surprised, me most of all, but Rosa just gestured to Andrew that he should carry my pack into the house. “We’ll have a walk first before Elias comes home. Jana and I haven’t seen each other in a very long time.” As she took Ayo’s hand and mine, I saw the loose threads of my past being drawn in.

After we’d been walking for only a few minutes Rosa pointed to a broad swathe of flowers that swept down from where we stood and into the valley. “Do you remember these?” I saw the multitude of petals swirling like thousands of faces in a crowd, but I saw Helen too, laughing as she plunged her nose into the waves of colour. “Jaja, come and smell them.”

“We get a lot more flowers now,” Rosa went on. “They grow higher up every year because it’s so much warmer. I can’t pretend I don’t like it. Now, let’s walk so that our beautiful mountains can do for you what they always did for your mums.”

We walked together, slowly, because Ayo was walking between us, our link between the past and present.

“Do you recognise that bird?” Rosa stopped and held her hand up to indicate we should listen, but this time I saw Isha, younger, her hair darker, loping ahead. “Come on, you two, he’s up there. I just heard him.”

Helen and I had tiptoed to where Isha stood, and then we saw him too. A small, generally brown bird on a brown branch with a red splash on his chest that burned a hole in the perfect blue sky behind. We heard his song too, crystal wind chimes on a choreographed breeze, and now here he was again.

“It’s a redstart,” I said.

Rosa smiled, and now her face was the younger one I remembered, but the tenor of our conversation changed as we walked over one of the wooden bridges I loved for the clunky chunkiness of their tree-trunk frames and solid slabs slung between ropes. Perhaps Rosa had chosen it as a point to cross from one metaphorical side to another. “The reservoir near Bourg-Saint-Pierre is dry,” she said in very different tone from the one she had been using before.

“How?” I found it impossible to imagine the valley of blue water as an empty black hole.

“We don’t have enough snow to thaw and fill it. The glaciers are all but gone too. And there’s something else...” Rosa paused, her face tight and strained as she turned towards me. “My husband, Elias, he...”

“We’ve never met, I know, but...”

“He won’t meet you.” Rosa took both of my hands in hers. “It’s not just you. He doesn’t want to meet Helen and Isha either.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, bending down to comfort Ayo, who was staring up at us with brimming eyes.

“He says he wants to protect us, his family.”

I could see how Rosa was making a conscious effort to slow her breathing. Her face was pale too, so I took her hand again. “None of us wants to put you in danger, and I’m sure Helen and Isha didn’t think—”

“Elias says we would be implicated... if you’re found. The Swiss Border Force defines everyone as guilty if refugees find their way in here. The punishments are... long.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t have an alternative. Where could I go, and what would happen to Helen and Isha? Then I thought of Andrew.

“Andrew saw us, and it looked like he was waiting. He knows.”

“He does, but you can trust him. He is not Elias’ son. I told him to put your pack into the basement, and you can stay there tonight. I’ll take you up to the cabin tomorrow.” Then she leant forward to stroke Ayo’s cheek. “But everyone must be very quiet. Ssh.”

The basement was cold, a damp concrete adjunct built for winter storage. Rosa had put a small folding bed behind a high rack of shelves and a pot underneath. She saw me stare at it. “Elias will be here by about six, and you won’t be able to go out after that.”

I had a shower with Ayo, and then Rosa served us crispy potato *rösti* in her kitchen. As we sat there, I remembered the familiar feel of the table. A slab of thick pine on stumpy weight-bearing legs, and I remembered sitting on it with Franzl while we sorted his apricots. “The princesses go here, and the princes, the ones that look a little bruised or small, go here.” The threads in my tapestry, chosen by Helen and Isha, who had chosen me. But what could I choose for Ayo now that all the choices were disappearing?

“What happened to your cows?” I asked Rosa, more as a means of distracting my thoughts rather than asking a question I wanted answered.

She shrugged. “We wanted to keep them, but the law came in five years ago. No bovines, even though they weren’t at risk from the pandemic up here, but it was more about

the methane they produce. Even so, there are still a few farmers who keep them because they say it's an infringement of their liberty, and to tell the truth, they've got a lot of customers."

"But isn't that a risk? I mean, if the laws are so tough on people who help refugees, they're going to be tough on people who sell meat."

I'll never forget Rosa's smile, if you can call it that. A sad twist of the lips. "Haven't you heard of the Vores? The name comes from England, I think, or maybe America. Meat-eaters who will kill to have meat and don't care what kind it is. Maybe it's better they can buy it from here."

Andrew came in then, his expression tense. "Elias will be back early. I heard one of the men he works with say his shift has been cut short."

Rosa got up and looked out of the window. "It's too early for them to go into the cellar. You'll have to take them straight up to the cabin now."

But Andrew's expression said it all. "Mum! It's a long way, and..." he looked at Ayo, "she's small. I'll have to carry her."

"Take Claudine."

“Hey, Zadzonka.” Isha is leaning over Helen, who is still in bed.

Helen, though still half asleep, smiles. “It’s Sadzonka, but I’m glad to hear you’re getting into Mathilde’s story too. It’s hard to resist.”

“True, but I mainly wanted to say sorry for last night. You know, these dark moments... but I’ve got good news.”

“Don’t tell me. Jana and Ayo are outside.”

“Not quite, but I’ve had a look round the town, and I’ve found—”

“No!” Helen screeches, pulling the cover back over her head. “You’ve been out already while I’ve been snoring here. Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You were tired, and you looked cute.” Isha ruffles Helen’s hair. “A mix of mouse and hedgehog.”

“Enough, just tell me what you’ve found.”

“Bicycles.”

Isha has rented two bikes for two weeks, with the return cost included, and they can collect them later after they’ve done some shopping. It all seems deceptively simple, except Helen hasn’t ridden one since she left university.

“I’m not getting on until we’re well outside the town, where nobody can see us,” she announces.

“We’ll push them, and you can try riding without the weight of the panniers first. They unbalance the bikes a little... until you’re used to them... and then it’s easy.” Isha knows Helen’s pinch-points and has obviously thought her argument through carefully.

They have breakfast on the hotel’s pleasant terrace and notice that the ersatz coffee is immeasurably better than anything they’ve drunk recently. How do the Swiss do it, Helen wonders, but Isha’s mind is on other things. “We’ll need a bike shop first, for the panniers and some cycling shorts, and then we can go and get the rest of our clothes so that we look more like tourists.” She smiles. “And we don’t need to skimp. I’ve checked our Swiss credit account, and Filou has transferred enough for at least six months of comfortable living.”

“I can’t imagine what we would have done without his help,” Helen sighs. “Ben’s too. I wish I knew what was happening to them.”

Shopping is fun and uncomplicated. The panniers they find are easily big enough and even though Helen complains that the cycling shorts with their gel pads make her feel as if

she is already incontinent, she nevertheless enjoys the warmth of the sun on her legs. “Look at them,” she says with distaste. “White worms, but a few days of cycling will change that.”

Then they find another shop that offers reasonably priced clothes for when they are not cycling. The woman who seems to own it is helpful and interested in their planned holiday until Isha asks her where they could leave their old clothes. “You know, for the people who are struggling and don’t have much.”

“Everyone has enough in Switzerland,” the woman replies sourly. “If not, it’s because they have no right to be here.”

They leave after lunch, this time a small picnic in a park where they sit under the shade of a large tree neither of them can identify. Helen lies back in the grass. “If Mathilde were here...”

“You can read me the next part tonight,” Isha says as she gets up.

Their walk out of the town is pleasant. The bikes glide next to them, and Helen enjoys the holiday feel. Given the chance, she would keep on walking like this until they reach Lake Geneva, but Isha isn’t going to let her. When the last house is safely behind them, she starts to look for the small lane Helen needs to practise in.

“Here,” she says, some minutes later. “Take the panniers off and see how you do.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“Run alongside and catch you when you fall.”

“Pessimist.” Helen swings her leg over, sits on the saddle, pushes herself off and keels over to one side.

“Maybe we’ll need to think about stopping sooner,” Isha says quietly.

Helen picks the gravel out of one knee and grits her teeth. “I can do this.”

Success isn’t immediate, but after a few more unsuccessful tries, Helen manages to cycle at least fifty metres without mishap. All she needs to do now is add the panniers. She looks up into the sky, where a bird is surfing wind currents with ease. “Each to their own. You couldn’t ride a bike either.”

The panniers send Helen zigging and zagging between the edges of the narrow lane, but she stays upright and manages to turn round and cycle back. “Let’s go,” she announces before Isha has time to get on her own bike.

The road is empty. Isha counts five cars in the first hour, and all of them are liftshares. The Swiss have got this part right too, she thinks. The sun is hot, and the fields on either side smell of parched grass and dusty ditches. She slows on a corner and takes the opportunity to

look around. The trees are saplings, and the intermittent disorganised undergrowth is pockmarked with flowers. Very un-Swiss, she thinks, but then again, perhaps not.

Helen, who is about to meet her first downhill part, is wondering whether to let go or brake every metre of the way. Her pinioned wheels scream in protest as she closes her fists.

Cheap bikes, Isha thinks. If I'd paid a bit more, we could have got some with proper disc brakes.

Helen can't stand the noise either, so she releases her grip incrementally. Good, still upright and now a little more, still in control, I think. Picking up speed. Does it feel safe? Yes, not bad.

Isha watches from behind, powerless to help while the road continues its descent with gentle curves and intermittent rises that helpfully extract the speed, a perfect training place for a sixty-year-old beginner cyclist. She has just started to relax and enjoy the journey when a new sound greets her.

"Somewhere... over... the rainbow... blue... birds fly... Sunday morning... brings the dawn in... it's just a restless feeling by my side... watch out... the world's behind you... there's always someone around you who will ca-a-a-ll... it's nothing at a-a-a-ll."

Helen singing is a good sign, and Isha hums her own tune. From here, they proceed through small towns where the inhabitants watch them and sometimes smile.

"Perhaps seeing two old ladies having a good time is uplifting," Helen observes when they take a breather after a particularly steep hill.

"It's certainly uplifting me."

In Chavornay, Isha's planned destination, the hotel is closed, but Carmel, a woman living next door, offers them a room for the night.

"We have to make credit where we can," she says, "and a few of us were quite glad to see the hotel go." Carmel seems happy to talk and explains that her children are in Zurich because it's the only place where they can find work now. "They had problems with him too," she concludes as she points to the shuttered hotel. "He shouldn't have shared stories that didn't belong to him."

Helen, who has been savouring an excellent glass of wine, has the inexplicable sense that it has turned sour. "I'm not sure I understand."

"There's a lot you don't see here." Carmel clears the table and turns in the direction of her kitchen. "Switzerland is a beautiful country. Enjoy your holiday, but then go home and not one day later than your pass allows. Some Swiss people, even in small villages like this

one, are very observant.” She indicates the empty hotel with a sideways tip of her head. “He knows all about that. Now sleep well. I have put you in our best bedroom.”

Helen shudders, though the evening air is still warm. “I wish she hadn’t said that.”

“Let’s leave Mathilde’s diary for another night,” Isha replies. “I’m not in the mood.”

Cycling the next day is easy. The route descends gently towards Lake Geneva and is well frequented by cyclists, entire families sometimes, meaning Helen and Isha don’t attract attention. When they take a break, Isha checks out their route while Helen lies back in the shade, lost in her own thoughts. Everything is the way it was the first time we came here, she thinks. The countryside is healthy, and I think I just heard a bee. Perhaps I should strip naked and see if I dare to keep still while it crawls into my armpit. I wonder why Mathilde’s father was so upset by the forestry trees planted in rows? Surely not just because the birds and insects didn’t go there. There are pine plantations in Switzerland, whole hillsides covered with them, but they don’t seem to affect anything down here.

By late afternoon they are in the foothills surrounding Lausanne, and they turn off onto a small road through some vineyards where Isha suggests they can camp. Below them, their view of Lake Geneva below is magnificent.

“Five star and free,” Isha says.

“The water looks like a huge silver platter.”

Their spirits are high. They have covered twenty kilometres and have good memories of the city.

“I hope the gardens are still as beautiful, with all those uber-coloured borders and the impossibly big blooms. Do you remember the incredibly luxurious hotel we stayed in for your birthday?” Helen asks.

“We both deserved it.” Isha kisses her on the cheek, then they hide their bikes in a patch of long grass and pitch their tent next to them on the only more or less flat part of the hillside they can find.

“Imagine having to collect a bucket that’s rolled all the way down to the bottom,” Isha says.

“The Swiss probably have a machine for that too.”

They had hoped the grass would be marginally softer than the carpet of stones everywhere else, but the hope is illusory. “My back feels as if I’ve been lying on a bed of nails,” Helen complains the next day. Isha doesn’t say how she is feeling, but her crone-walk does.

After a frugal breakfast, they pack up under the first warming rays of the sun and feel their joints recovering. The next part of the journey is thankfully easy and mainly freewheeling to the accompaniment of Helen's banshee brakes, until she lets go and the only descant is in her singing. *"Un petit coin de parapluie... contre un coin de paradis... elle avait quelque chose d'un ange... un petit coin de par-aaa-diiiiiii-s..."*

Finally, their road offers one more gentle dip and curve before rounding a corner, where they get their first full glimpse of the city of Lausanne. "It looks just the same," Helen sighs happily.

"Not so sure about that." Isha rides ahead and onto the lakeside pathway.

Helen begins to understand what Isha means when they get closer. "The same, but different," she says. "Where have we seen walls like that before?"

"Birmingham, when I took you to see what I'd been working on with Chris Rance. He was the first architect to set up a green wall in the city centre. Remember?"

"And now they're here, with rooftop gardens and all the other things the Persians thought of centuries before when they created their Hanging Gardens of Babylon."

"Maybe, but Arles was being greened even while we were there. All those carbon-absorption parks, rainwater capture systems and the Gehry tower turned into a huge spiral garden." Isha cycles on a few metres and then stops. "Having said that, Lausanne is on another scale. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite as comprehensive."

Their cycle route borders the length of Lake Geneva past Lausanne, Montreux and then into Villeneuve, where it will end at the Rhône delta. Isha and Helen find themselves joining a continuous but polite and good-humoured peloton. Doesn't anyone drive cars anymore, Isha wonders. How are all the credit-dripping stars with their entourages getting around now? But her question is answered when the soft hum and subtle shadow of an aerial limo glides over her head.

When they stop in one of the parks to buy ice cream, Helen lies back and breathes in deeply. "Even the grass smells better here. The Swiss know what they're doing when it comes to making the best of their environment."

"Because they can afford it," Isha grunts.

Montreux and Lausanne are coy about their borders, and Helen only realises they have crossed from one into the other when she sees the sign. "We went to a concert in Montreux, and it was early morning the next day by the time we got back to the hotel. Do you remember?"

"Yes, and then we noticed someone had stolen our passports."

“Is that a glass half empty?”

When they stop for one last ice cream, the vanilla cones are so particularly good, Helen suggests they should have moved to Montreux while they still could. “Imagine how well Jana and Ayo would have done here, and you would have been in an environmental architect’s heaven.”

Isha shakes her head. “Not after what we heard last night. Let’s stay in Villeneuve, where the hotel prices will be less extortionate, and we can get a train straight from there up to Orsières tomorrow.”

“Geraniums,” Helen sighs happily. “It’s all I remember about the place. They poured out of the window boxes like floral waterfalls.”

“Liddes is about four kilometres further on and an easy walk, and after that, we just need to get to Franzl’s chalet...”

“Our last climb.”

“I can’t stop thinking about it. I’ll let Jana know where we are. Have we got time for a chapter of Mathilde?”

My sister went to live in Paris, where she married. The twins worked in the same factory as Tato and got married too. Their wives were from here, but they didn't want to stay, so my brothers had to find jobs in the towns chosen for them. Being the youngest, I was expected to stay with Mama and help out in her uncle's bakery in the early mornings when no one else wanted to. I couldn't say no.

Tato came to see me at weekends. He and Mama weren't living together anymore. He took me on long walks, and sometimes we went on the train because he had a place far away to show me, usually a forest where we sat down while he told me about the trees all around us.

"If you cut down a birch, the fir growing next to it will suffer. You can see the pain in its dry needles and falling bark." He tapped the ground. "They share food through their roots and the fungal networks underneath, so if you take one away, the other will mourn." Then he told me a story about when he was a young boy. "I was good in school. I enjoyed it, but my cousin was hopeless, so I helped him with his homework and he mended my bike, which I wouldn't have been able to get to school without." Tato smiled at the memory. "These trees help each other in the same way."

Tato wanted to pass on all the lessons his father had taught him. "Trees have been here much longer than us," he told me. "But people only see their wood for furniture, ornaments, breadboards or seasonal decorations. Trees are called obstacles when they stand in the way of what humans want, but no one asks what the trees want of humans."

"Can trees speak?" I asked.

"Yes, through their roots and the larynx of the fungi they live with, but we'll never hear them because we've forgotten how to listen."

One day, when I was walking back from the bakery, a digging machine drove past me on the narrow road and took most of the border hedges with it. The next day I asked Albin, the old baker, what was happening, and he said the common land had been sold because young people needed houses. His daughter was one of them.

The new estate was built all along the roadside, from one end of the village to the other. Mama said the houses had bathrooms inside and gardens big enough for a football team's washing. The trees were cut down first, and my Cassie went with them. I took Tato to see the stump, and he pointed to the rings. "History," he said, then he put his finger on a ring darker than the others. "That was the drought."

As we walked home, I thought about the new people and how they would never know what had been there before them because the old people would die and take the tree memories with them. I thought about how one day I would die, and no one would remember Cassie. I said this to Tato, and he told me the soil wouldn't forget.

Claudine was a donkey who lived in a stable behind bars. Andrew had to use his fingerprint on a sensor to get in, and Ayo screamed when he led her out because she'd never seen anything bigger than a dog before.

"Why is that thing locked up in there?" I asked. "Is she made of gold?"

"She's made of meat," Andrew answered curtly, his resentment all too clear.

"If you tell us how to get to the cabin, we'll go by ourselves," I said.

"You'll never make it, and it'll be dark if we don't start moving soon." He was throwing some sort of saddle on Claudine's back as he spoke and then clipping a basket on either side. "Put your pack in this one, and Ayo can sit in the other."

Ayo can sit in the other. Try it with a one-and-a-half-year-old child who has never seen a donkey, never ridden on anything except Christopher, and has a mother who refuses to get close to an animal that smells and looks as if it's made of old carpet. We set out half an hour later, with Ayo on my shoulders.

Seven kilometres may not sound far, except when every metre is vertical. We crossed a road that Andrew told me was the Great St Bernard pass, as if I cared, then we walked through a snow gallery, turned off onto a small track shortly after and then climbed and climbed and climbed. I should have appreciated the beauty, but I'd never really hiked before, didn't have the right shoes, and was carrying a small child.

I was slow, and Andrew had to wait. "I'll be on that rock up there," he said. Can you see it?"

I could, and it was at least an hour's walk away, for me.

Xiris, can you track the route?

I've tried to link into his Nband, but he's closed it.

This was when I realised how vulnerable Ayo and I were. Apart from Rosa, who wasn't here, the only person who could show us where we were going had closed his Nband. I put Ayo down and then sat down myself. "If you don't want to help me, then go. Either that or you explain yourself."

Andrew had been about to walk off, but he turned and looked back at me. "You think everything is so simple! You stay in the cabin, your parents arrive and it will be happy families forever after."

"Rosa invited us," I said.

“Yes, because Isha asked her to, but Mum didn’t tell her what happens to people who help.” He paused, and to my surprise, I saw that his bottom lip was trembling. “I’m not against people helping, and I’m not stupid. I know what’s happening, but this time it’s my mum and if they take her away...”

“I thought it was Elias—”

“That’s different! He hates everyone who isn’t from here. I don’t think he really cares about Mum either. He just doesn’t want to get dragged in with her if she gets caught.”

Now I felt sorry for him. Andrew was only fifteen. He should have been finding out about himself and making mistakes without consequences, but growing up has become so complicated since... since I can remember.

“Share the route into my Nband, and we’ll go up there by ourselves, but I might need your...” I looked at Claudine, who was looking back at me with her huge black eyes. “Your donkey.”

“She won’t go anywhere without me.”

I looked at Andrew. I looked at Ayo, who was looking up at me. I looked at the path that disappeared between two rocks a few metres ahead. “Well, then what the fuck am I supposed to do?”

Helen sometimes talks about breaking the ice between people or groups of people, the thing you do to get them talking or to not be so shy with each other. Saying “fuck” was an icebreaker that day.

“I bet you wouldn’t say that in front of Mum,” Andrew smiled, then he took Ayo’s hand, walked over to Claudine and lifted her over the empty basket.

“Sissie?” Ayo turned round to check on my reaction.

“Yes,” I said. “Claudine is a new kind of Sissie, and she’ll carry you just the way he did.”

Walking was easier and faster after that, with Ayo burbling away in her basket, so at least she was enjoying it. Andrew stopped when we reached a small plateau that could have been the end of the climb, though I’d already learnt that nine times out of ten, when you got to what you thought was the top, there was always one peak more ahead. My energy was at zero. Everything ached. My feet were screaming, the sun was disappearing, and the air was noticeably colder.

“It’s just behind those trees,” Andrew pointed. “They weren’t here when *Opa* built it.”

“But I suppose there would have been snow.”

“Not in September, though I’ve seen images of when there used to be.”

By this time, the setting sun had turned the scraggy peaks into hundreds of gold fingers, the petrified remains of the giants who had lived here before we came. I looked at Ayo and saw myself at her age, up here with Franzl.

The cabin was much smaller than I remembered, a squat wooden cube of black, weather beaten logs with roof eaves that went all the way down to the ground. I stood there with Ayo on my hip, not knowing what to say. Meantime, Andrew took off the pack he had been carrying and dug around until he found a key for the squat wooden door. I'd never seen anything like it. "Can I touch it?" I asked.

"You can unlock the door if you want."

I shook my head. I didn't know how.

With the door open, the mouldy air flopped out like a dead body, and Andrew rushed in to open the windows and shutters. "It'll be better in a minute." Then he went up some wooden stairs that led up to a small mezzanine. "The rats don't usually make it up this high, but it's worth checking the bedding."

I watched him shake out the mattresses and pillows. I was speechless, paralysed. Rats in the bedding under a roof covered in cobwebs. Was this where we were going to live with Helen and Isha for the rest of our lives?

"If you look outside, you'll find some logs piled up under the eaves," Andrew shouted down. "It will feel much better in here once we've got a fire going."

Fire? Yes, we all know what a fire is, except that in my world, it's Xiris, who turns the AC on. The sun was fully set by the time we had finished, and Andrew plugged in the solar system for the single light that cast shadows over corners I didn't want to look into. When I checked on Ayo, I found her with Claudine in her stable under the eaves. "Are there wolves up here?" I asked Andrew. "Franzl always used to say there were."

"None that would come near." He shrugged. "But I've never stayed a full night, so I can't be sure."

A line of ice ran down my back. "Are you going back down now? Are you going to leave us alone up here?"

"No, it's too late, and I brought some food just in case."

The food was bread with something yellow and stinky that neither Ayo nor I would go near. The bath was a big metal dish just big enough for Ayo to sit in. The water came from a rainwater capture tank and was green.

“Opa used to melt snow,” Andrew said when he saw me leaning down to smell it. “But it had more or less disappeared by the time he died, so Mum asked a friend to set up these tanks instead.”

Andrew heated the water. I bathed Ayo and settled her in the one and only bed. She was tired and happy to sleep after I’d told her a story about a magic donkey called Claudine, then I went to see what Andrew was doing outside.

Darkness on top of a mountain is like nowhere else. If you look up, the stars spray out in an arc like the underside of an umbrella, and if the moon is full, the mountains show their faces; old men with hollowed-out cheeks, deep-set eyes and heads covered in silver hair. I’d never been in a place where every sound is as sharp as a cut gem. A bird cry, the wind tinkering with pine cones, Claudine chewing grass, and my own voice echoing though I’d only whispered.

When it got cold, Andrew and I went inside to huddle near the stove. We tried to talk about Franzl for a while, but our memories were different. Then Andrew said he would sleep downstairs and make sure the fire was kept alight. He was gone the next morning, and the fire was out, but he’d posted a note into my Nband. *Mum will be up later.*

Helen, Nmail, September 5, 2050

A last-minute hitch. Isn’t it always the way? But don’t worry, getting to you will only take a day or two longer. We’ll keep you updated.

Can you believe it! We are almost there!!!

Love you darlings,

H-Mum

“I knew there had to be a reason,” Isha says. “I kept asking myself how Lausanne and Montreux could keep the water levels so low when the Rhône glacier and all the snow is melting above.”

“And now we know.”

Helen and Isha are staring at the massive expanse of a concrete dam spanning the entire River Rhône delta.

“It looks like a cadaver,” Helen says.

“We’ve been out of touch since leaving Arles, but I can’t believe we wouldn’t have heard about this.” Isha is close to tears. “It’s unconscionable, tragic, and so, so selfish.”

Helen thinks the word selfish is nugatory but can’t find a better replacement. Their journey through Switzerland has left her in two minds about the country. On the one hand, it is so absolutely functional, for most people, and extremely so for people who can afford the best, but then there are the secrets, the hints and inferences that point to another, much darker underworld.

“We’ll have to climb higher,” Isha says. “The way the Romans did before us, but first we can follow the railway tracks out because I don’t suppose there will be trains running here now.”

Walking after cycling is excruciatingly slow. Helen and Isha sling their bike panniers over their shoulders and hitch them back every few steps when they slip off. Helen takes a break and sits down on the railway tracks, which, as she finds out, are already too hot to touch. “A blister on my backside,” she grumbles. “That’s all I need.”

“We’ll have to find a place where we can cross over before we get to Saint-Maurice,” Isha says, without offering any sympathy.

The railway tracks follow the sinuous curves of the steep mountainside to their left, but after six or maybe seven kilometres, they dip back down and disappear under the water. Isha turns uphill and heads determinedly in the direction of a narrow road above. “We should be aiming for Aigle,” she says to no one in particular.

Helen keeps her head down to avoid seeing the distance before her. One foot in front of the other, she tells herself, don’t think of anything else. Isha strides on, though Helen can see from her posture that she is markedly less enthusiastic than usual. Even my beloved Giraffe-legs has had enough. Now I’m really feeling depressed.

When they reach the road above, it leads them along the edge of a dense pine forest. Helen stares into the dark tunnels and thinks of zombie trees.

They have just passed a motley collection of houses, seemingly uninhabited, when Isha drops to her knees. “Hen! Look!”

Helen sees a lump of stone about hip-high and two skinny legs wide. “What is it?”

“A milestone! A Roman one!”

Helen knows that an equally spirited response is expected of her, but she’s tired and can’t think beyond a hot shower and bed. “Is it very special?” she asks, now also dropping down on her knees to take a closer look, which is what you have to do if you love someone, even if you’re not in the least bit interested.

Isha runs a finger over faint scratches on the surface of the stone. “I can read the Roman numerals, X. X. XVII, thirty-seven... miles... I suppose it would be to Martigny. I hope Franzl is looking down.”

They walk the whole day without lunch because they had anticipated a short train ride and then a stop in Orsières, where they would find a restaurant to eat in and then message Jana to let her know where they are, but it’s all gone wrong, and Helen’s anger is brewing.

“We’re near Saint-Maurice Abbey,” Isha says. “But I remember it being on the other side of the road when we were walking here last time.”

It’s not Isha’s fault, but Helen never wants to hear anything related to religion or roads ever again. “I don’t care where it is or where it was. I just want to cross this fucking river and get on our way.” She kicks a spray of gravel into the air. “Has every fucking bridge been washed out? Or are we just being incredibly fucking stupid?”

Isha knows that the last comment is aimed at her, but fighting with Helen is the last thing she wants to do now. “Let’s go down and check.”

Good news and bad news. There is a boat, but no one around to ask if they can use it.

“We broke into Mathilde’s cupboard,” Isha says.

“You mean we didn’t get caught because she was dead and if we’re lucky, the owner of this boat will be dead too. Anyway, do you know how it works?”

Isha looks at the small, flat-bottomed boat and the length of rope strung above it from one side of the water to the other. “In theory.”

They load their packs in and then push the boat out. “Wait!” Helen screeches from where she is standing, one leg in, the other still on the shore.

Isha hauls the boat back, and an accident is avoided. “I suppose I have to stand in the middle and pull,” she muses.

Their progress is slow, but the boat is stable. Isha propels it forward hand over hand on the rope and stares into whirlpools of grease on the water's surface. Could fish survive there?

Helen looks at Isha silhouetted against the sky and thinks of things medieval.

When they reach the other shore, a woman walks down to greet them. "Welcome to the Savoy. I'm sorry I wasn't there to help, but the train station is still operating on this side if you need it."

Savoy? Helen and Isha exchange glances but wordlessly agree to leave their questions for later. They thank the woman and scramble up a muddy bank to get to the road.

The station is open, and their wait for a train is not too long. Better still, the ride is pleasant, dipping in and out of valleys through lush grass and brightly coloured flowers. In Martigny, there is a brief wait while passengers get on and off, and Isha leans over and whispers to Helen. "Nearly there."

They have been dreaming of this day since setting out from Calais six months ago. The promised land, where Jana and Ayo will be waiting for them. The reason they get up every morning and force one foot in front of the other.

"I look like an old hag," Helen says, staring at her reflection in the window. "Jana won't recognise me."

"She won't recognise your hair," Isha replies. "It's the only part about you that really looks different."

Helen leans into Isha's shoulder. "And you, my love. Curls still intact, but your body half the weight it used to be."

When the train slows, a man who must have been sitting unnoticed in the seat behind them stands up to leave and says in English, "Enjoy your stay, ladies."

"Do you think he could be an undercover agent?" Helen whispers.

They shoulder their packs, step onto the platform and look for the bridge to cross over to the other side. When the man jumps down to the rails and walks over, Helen stares at Isha wide-eyed. "Isn't that a capital offence in Switzerland?"

Isha shrugs. "Perhaps not if you're a Border Force officer."

Outside the station, Helen and Isha try to appear as if they know what they are doing.

"Rosa told me to look out for a young boy," Isha says.

The road is empty. Not a person in sight. They retreat to sit on a bench. In the minutes that tick by birds chirrup in the warm air, a breeze ruffles leaves out of a tree, a girl and her mother walk past with full shopping baskets, a skinny dog sidles over to sniff at their feet, a

ladybird climbs a blade of grass, a boy crosses in front of them on a bicycle and then crosses back.

“Is that Andrew?”

“Yes, I recognise him from the images Rosa sent, but let’s wait here.”

Andrew is watching and waiting too. Let everyone get off the train, his mother had told him. He wishes she hadn’t asked him to meet these women but understands why he has to all the same. No one watches a boy of your age, and no one will suspect you.

The road must have curved back on itself because next, Andrew is off to one side of them, his bicycle gone. “Over here.” He looks around to make sure they are alone. “Don’t run.”

Run, Helen thinks, I’ll take that as a compliment from a boy like you. Then she gets up, shifts the panniers onto her shoulders and follows Isha, slowly.

When both women are beside him, Andrew tilts his head. “There’s a car back there, but I can’t drive because it’s age-blocked.”

“But we can?”

He nods. “Mum borrowed it from a friend.”

The car is an agricultural truck with high axles and huge wheels. The bike Andrew had been riding is in the open part at the back. Helen looks at Isha. “I can’t drive that thing.”

Isha grins and climbs in on the driver’s side. “Last boarding for the promised land.”

The journey is short and vertical, the road climbing and switch backing. Helen sits in between Andrew and Isha and wonders how long it would have taken them to walk. Isha drives carefully, her mind in free fall, head down and plunging into a black void. We have arrived, this is the day, but I feel nothing.

In Liddes, the road narrows and Isha slows to a crawl, praying that no vehicle will come the other way. “Put the car in there,” Andrew says as they pass an open gateway.

Isha does as he says, and Helen grunts as she negotiates the drop from her seat onto the grass. Her legs are aching from the combination of yesterday’s exertions and being seated for most of the morning. And now we’ve got to walk up a mountain, she thinks. She looks over to Isha. “We’ve nearly done it, my love.”

Isha nods and pushes the panniers onto her shoulders. They walk the same path that Jana and Ayo walked the day before. Across the Great St Bernard Pass, a small and badly maintained road, very un-great in reality, and under the snow gallery with its square concrete legs and strange growths of moss hanging down.

“You said it looked like armpit hair.” Helen nudges Isha. “Remember?” But if she does, Isha isn’t in the mood to say so.

Then Andrew turns onto a track and points up at two huge rocks on the horizon. “Mum said you’d recognise them.”

“Tweedledum and Tweedledee,” Isha whispers.

They walk on in silence, Helen remembering so much and wanting to prattle on to fill the void of Isha plodding sullenly beside her. “What’s wrong?” she asks gently. “Did I say something stupid?”

Isha shakes her head and lengthens her stride.

“Let’s stop a moment,” Helen shouts up to Andrew. “Maybe you could wait over there.” She indicates a small rock a little further up the path. “I’ll let you know when we’re ready.”

Andrew nods. He doesn’t care. He’s just doing what his mum asked him to do. He knows she’s right, but sometimes he wishes she didn’t bother. Why couldn’t she be like everyone else?

Helen holds Isha’s arm. “Wait!”

Isha stands, without resisting but without looking up either. Her shoulders are slumped, and her back is round.

“Ish, what’s happening? Talk to me. We’re this close...” Helen holds her thumb and forefinger apart, a sliver of sunlight sneaking in between. “This close to being with our babies, Jana and Ayo. It’s probably the happiest day of our lives and you... you...”

Isha slumps to the ground with her head between her knees. “It’s too heavy, Hen. Too big. I don’t know how to control this thing, this beast raging inside me. I’m angry and scared. I want to break down and cry, but I want to murder people too. I keep thinking this is the end of the journey, our promised land, but how can we say that after everything we’ve seen? We’ve changed, both of us. Jana will have changed too, and I’m scared we won’t recognise each other. This next instalment has to be right, but I don’t think it can be, and I’m not even sure we know what right is anymore.”

Helen looks up at Andrew, who is looking down at them. “We’ll catch up, but don’t walk too fast.”

Isha is the practical one who knows how to design buildings, she can follow geodata and mend things if necessary, but she can’t design, follow or mend herself. “I don’t know what to do, Hen.”

“You sweep the shit over the cliff.” Helen grabs Isha’s hands and pulls. “If you can’t do it by yourself, then ask me to help. We can go down and look at it later, sort some of it out if you like, but right now, we’ve just got to keep walking because Jana and Ayo are up there.”

Isha rubs a fist in each eye and offers a wry smile. “Gone,” she says. “Swept over the cliff.” Then she turns and runs up to Andrew, who is still waiting. “Let me go ahead. I could walk this part blindfolded.”

Jana asked me to write about the part when everyone got back together. She said the description needed to come from someone who was standing on the outside looking in, someone like me.

“You’re not an outsider,” she told me. “But you weren’t as far in as we were.”

Jana has a strange way of expressing herself, and it’s easy to take offence, but as Isha told me later, Jana’s words are in her images, and when she doesn’t have her images, she’s lost for words.

We were outside the cabin that morning, both of us waiting and watching for any movement on the path. I was getting worried because, by my calculations, Andrew should have been there an hour earlier, but I’d told him not to message me just in case someone was monitoring our connections. You can never be sure. Jana wasn’t making waiting any easier. “Sit down,” I told her. “Or take Ayo for a walk.” But she kept hovering, like a raincloud that doesn’t know when to let go.

In the end, I was the one who saw Isha first. I’d recognise her curls anywhere, though they were longer and a lot greyer than the last time I’d seen her. She’s always been athletic, at least compared to Helen, but she looked like an Olympian that day. I’m describing the scene as best as I can, even though I was still in the middle of it then. The part I remember most is feeling the sharpness of Isha’s ribs when I held her, but she felt strong too. Then Jana jumped in, actually right on top so that we all lost our balance and fell over, with Ayo squawking like a little chicken in the middle. Helen must have joined us too, but I can’t remember how, and when I asked Andrew what we looked like so that I could tell the story for Jana, he smirked and said he’d rather not say.

Everyone went quiet after we’d sorted ourselves out and got our breath back. I sensed it was time to leave them alone, so I went into the cabin and prepared food for a meal later. It was a good way of getting Andrew out because a boy of his age doesn’t need to know about families being torn apart. I know he worries about that enough already because of what I’m doing. When we were in the kitchen, I gave him a knife and a slab of the donkey cheese Jana wouldn’t eat. “Cut it in fine slices,” I said. “She’ll have to learn to like it.” I could see Andrew liked how I refused to treat her as anyone special. “She thinks she’s better than everyone else because of how she looks, where she comes from and what she does,” he’d said when he came back down from the cabin that first morning.

I agree, except that I also remember her as the little girl who used to follow me around the house and draw pictures of roses.

When I looked out of the window, I could see Helen, Isha, Jana and Ayo sitting and quietly staring at each other, the tears shining on their faces. Isha leant over and stroked Jana's cheek and said something like, I'd forgotten the feel of you, and then Jana pushed her fingers deep into Isha's curls. Ayo, who was watching them, walked over to Helen, sitting a little off to one side. When she said, "Henny, Henny," and pushed her tiny hands into the mass of black and grey hair, I couldn't help crying. But how can an outsider like me really know what was happening? I could only hear what they said, but not their thoughts. Perhaps Helen thought, *Get that kid out of my hair*, but that wasn't how it looked. Then they huddled together, shoulder to shoulder and so close you couldn't see a chink of light in between.

Helen was the first to move. "Anyone hungry?" she asked as only Helen can. Half bossy, in a way that makes you want to say no; half maternal, in a way that makes you love her even more.

Next, it was Jana, young and pretty and happy because things were back to the way they should be. I felt sorry for her then because you could see the scars of what she had been through. And then Isha followed, tall and serene like an exotic statue that's just come to life.

I don't know if this is what Jana expected from me. I've done my best to describe what I saw, but I know it's only a sketch of what should be a painting.

So Jana has asked us to write our story, continuing from where she left off, and we're all going to take our turn, which seems like a good idea. I've offered to go first, and even though it's already day three up here, I still find it hard to decide how it's going. All I can say is that it's obvious we all had our personal and perhaps very different expectations. Helen had insisted on calling Franzl's cabin the promised land. I'm not sure she really believed it, but the idea kept her going when the going was tough. Jana saw it as the end of the journey without thinking much about the next stage. At least, that's how it seems from what she's been saying. And as for me, well, I've been more worried about how much we would have changed since we last saw each other, and I mean even before travelling. If you can work as a team, you can get through anything, but we haven't been a family team for such a long time. Jana was a young adult when she left home, and now she's an adult with a child of her own.

The last few days have been difficult. The cabin is small, and we're all sleeping in the roof space. Helen snores, and Jana seems intensely irritated by her. I've tried to be the mediator, but it's like standing between two fighting dogs. Worse still, we rely entirely on Rosa for food. We can't grow vegetables, the soil is too thin and the nights are too cold. We all know we can't go on like this, but no one wants to be the first to say so.

This isn't a good beginning for our collaborative storytelling, and I'd like to start all over again, but when I suggested it to Jana, she said she's been honest up to now, even when it has been uncomfortable, and it's the way we should all keep on going.

My turn now. I wish Jana hadn't asked me to do this. She told Ish and me how she's gathered all the bits and now wants to start putting them together into a story, but even if I understand why, telling my version of the story is much more difficult when we spend most of our time arguing.

Jana is quite simply patronising and treats me like an old woman, which I may be, but it doesn't mean I'm incapable. Being with Jana in this small space is very, very trying. I snore, apparently, but apparently I always have, so why is she complaining now?

In contrast, Ayo is a delight, curious, full of questions and obviously extremely bright for her age. Yesterday we went up to the meadow above us where we must have spent less than half an hour smelling the perfumes and Ayo learning the names of colours, but all hell broke out when we got back.

Jana was screeching before we'd even reached the door. "Do you think being Grandma gives you the right to walk off with Ayo without telling anyone? I've been going crazy with worry down here!"

"Actually, you could see her," Isha butted in. "We both could."

"That's not the point!"

Then Ayo, who was still holding my hand, started crying.

"Now look what you've done," Jana screeched again. "I'll never get her calm enough for her afternoon sleep."

There's so much I could have said, starting with *I'm not sure these afternoon naps are really necessary*, but Isha gave me a look, so I held my tongue. If we were at home, we would have agreed that living together doesn't work anymore, but now I'll kill anyone who suggests it. I'll never be separated from any of them ever again. However hard being together is, we just have to work at it.

We've been here a week now, but it feels like a year. I'm counting the days, no, actually the hours. Rosa doesn't know how to deal with us either. I can see she dislikes Jana and Andrew does too. What a mess, but we'll have to find a solution soon.

So, here ends my first contribution, and not in the present tense for the sense of immediacy, as Jana wants it, but in the past, which is the way I'm accustomed to describing things when they've already happened. She'll hate what I've written, but in my present mood, I don't care.

I almost wish they hadn't got here or that I'd found somewhere else to go before they did. Seeing your parents ageing is difficult. Maybe you don't notice so much if it's gradual, but I haven't seen them for over a year, and so much has happened in between.

Helen is the worst. She can't cope with living up here and relies on Isha for so much. She gets in the way with Ayo too, telling me what to do, as if she has forgotten that I'm an adult, and Ayo is my child, not hers.

Isha is still tall and kind of emblematic in that funny way she has. She watches Hen and I argue but doesn't take one side against another. I wonder if meeting up again after all this time would have been easier if we'd lived closer to each other before. Ayo and I could have visited every weekend instead of meeting virtually. It was crazy when they got here. None of us knew what to say, and we only touched because we hadn't touched each other for so long, but it's not how I'd imagined our family reunion would be, and now I can't cope with the reality. Helen snores, she can't cook, she fusses over the most stupid things and tiptoes around me like I'm about to explode, which I usually am. We can't stay here. We have to find a way out. Maybe I'll leave and go somewhere else with Ayo and leave the mums here for Rosa to look after.

Hen and Isha didn't read what I wrote, and I didn't read what they'd written either, at least not until much later, and we'd all moved on by then. Still, honesty means including everything, even the parts you don't agree with or like. In fact, the solution we all wanted came sooner than any of us expected, but it wasn't what we would have chosen.

We had been in the cabin for just over a week when Rosa arrived with our food and some bad news. "You can't stay. People in the village know someone is up here."

"How?"

"A work colleague of Elias' was collecting berries and saw your washing hanging out."

"But it could have been yours," Isha said. "You could have been staying here."

Rosa shook her head. "In Liddes, everyone knows what everyone else is doing."

"What did you say?"

"Actually, it was Elias. He said some migrants had broken down the door but were gone before he could report them."

Elias had lied for us. Well, probably not for us, for himself and his family, but it had worked out well, and from here, everything moved quickly. Rosa said she had a plan, so we

packed up and no one wasted time arguing. I think we were all relieved to be getting out of there, even if we didn't know where we were going. Rosa arranged our exit like a military campaign, which surprised me because I'd always thought of her as an older woman who grew apricots like her dad and could ski like a demon, but not much else.

"So, where now?" I asked her.

"South."

"As opposed to north," Isha said.

"Exactly."

Then Helen and Isha looked at each other and smiled in a way that made me realise how much more they understood than me.

We've said our farewells, which was hard because we knew it would probably be the last time we saw each other. I wish we could have walked away first, but Rosa couldn't wait because she didn't want to raise any suspicions with Elias. I find her double life strange and can't imagine living like that with Hen.

It's midnight. We're waiting for the guide Rosa told us would come, and Hen is holding my hand. "If you can't be honest, what's the point of staying together?" I ask her without preamble or explanation, but she understands immediately, which must say something about how well we know each other.

"No point at all, which means you have to start being truthful when I'm a pain in the arse."

I laugh, just as she wants me to. She has this way of avoiding emotion when it gets too close, and I visualise a flesh-coloured shield magicked up from somewhere near her heart. "It's my reason for loving you," I reply, which I know she expects too.

Ayo is asleep, a bundle with her toy donkey's head, a present from Rosa, sticking out of the top. Jana is carrying her in the backpack she has adapted. "This is how the Native Americans used to carry their children," she told me this morning. "Even on horseback."

I didn't argue but thought she shouldn't have taken out the frame. Hen and I have shared Jana and Ayo's clothes to carry between us. Fortunately, our panniers are large and slip less since I added some straps.

Our guide comes shortly after midnight. First a shadow on the horizon and then a young man with bright blue eyes when he stands under the light. He tells us his name is Mathieu and asks us if we are ready. We say yes.

The first part isn't long, but it's steep, and Mathieu walks at a fierce pace. When he gets to a plateau, he heads east along a narrow ridge with sheer drops on both sides. Helen is fighting her vertigo but keeps up nonetheless. Jana, with Ayo on her back, isn't doing so well. We've been going less than half an hour when Mathieu stops and holds out his hands. "Give her to me."

Jana isn't sure. It's written all over her face, but Hen looks at her, and some sort of subliminal message passes between them because next, Jana unstraps her papoose and hands it over to Mathieu. I look at mother and daughter and think of the contrast to the catfight they had just the day before. Meanwhile, the moon is little more than a slender crescent, and the

dark swallows our feeble Nband lights. Everyone is relieved when Mathieu points out the road below, the Great Saint Bernard Pass.

“Tarmac, at last,” Helen says.

I think much the same, but then Mathieu points to one of the huge mushroom-shaped air vents that project up from the Great St Bernard Tunnel below. “No, we’re going down there.”

I feel Jana and Hen waiting for me to say something because I’m usually the one who understands this kind of thing, but I haven’t got a clue. When I ask Mathieu if he meant we are going inside, he says yes, because the tunnel has been blocked at the Swiss and Italian ends since the last floods. At the bottom of the slope, he returns Ayo in her papoose to Jana and then pulls a rope ladder out of his pack.

The vent is in front of us now, and I can see the blackness under its cover. Vertigo, darkness, the unknown. How many nightmares can you have on the same night and at the same time without even going to sleep? Helen’s face is white. Jana’s has all the signs of an explosion in the making. I can’t see mine, but it’s probably a mixture of the two. “We can’t,” I whisper to him.

“You can,” Mathieu whispers back. “Hundreds have already. You first, then wait at the bottom while I bring the others down.”

I can walk and run reasonable distances, even at my age. I’m fitter than I’ve been for a long time, but a rope ladder swinging into blackness is my nemesis. “What if I fall?”

“You won’t.” Mathieu doesn’t waste words. At any other time, I might have appreciated his brevity, but right now, I’d prefer an hour-long lecture rather than go down into that black hole. Then he ties a rope around my waist, and I duck under the mushroom head to lower myself in, but without looking at Helen and Jana. All I can think of is the narrow ladder rung under my feet and my hands still hanging onto the gritty concrete lip.

“One step at a time,” Helen whispers from somewhere close to my ear. “It’s how we got this far and how we’ll keep on going.”

The odours change as I descend, first trodden grass, then musky imprisoned air. Fifteen rungs and then the void I hesitate over because there could be another hole, an underground lake or a monster with bared teeth and a taste for legs. Get on with it, I tell myself, then feel the ground, solid and cold, the chill seeping through the soles of my boots like water.

“Are you down?” Mathieu asks, his voice booming inside its own echo.

“Yes,” I boom back.

“Take the rope off and tie it to the one I’m lowering now.”

Helen comes next, faster than I expect. When she's standing beside me, she reminds me that her vertigo isn't as bad when it's dark, which I still find hard to understand. Our Nband lights are just strong enough to see the soles of Jana's boots on the rungs of the ladder. At the bottom, she tells us that Mathieu is bringing Ayo down. I am surprised by how quickly we have all come to trust him, but perhaps it's because we don't have a choice.

Even with Ayo strapped across his chest, Mathieu's descent makes ours look like the best efforts of badly trained elephants. When he undoes the straps, Ayo is awake and smiling. I wonder if she'll remember this night when she is older. From here, the dark is impenetrable, and we walk in our small circles of light, hearing scuttles and rustles beyond them. I suspect rats. When Mathieu tells us to hold hands with each other, he's thinking of our security, but I'm profoundly grateful. Helen and Jana are on either side of me now, a feeling I'll remember for as long as I'm able.

Isha says we average six kilometres an hour on a good day. I don't know whether you'd say this is a good day because it's night and pitch dark, but I'm guessing we've walked for about an hour, so maybe five kilometres, which isn't bad going when you think of the circumstances. Ayo has been a darling, hardly making a peep all the way.

We've reached the toll part where we used to pay and show our passports, first to the Swiss – *Auf Wiedersehen gute reise* – and then the Italians – *Buona giornata! Benvenuti!* The Italians always seemed so much more enthusiastic and genuine. We've been here many times in the past, but back then it was always full of cars and well lit. Now the whole place is so dark and empty we could dance the tango along the double lines if we felt like it.

Mathieu has just told us that this is where we stop, at least for a few hours. "We come in at night, and we go out at night," he says, and now he's lighting a fire, which makes this vast space rather cosier.

We arrange our sleeping bags in the Swiss toll cabin because it's carpeted. The poor Italians had to put up with a concrete floor, which must have been freezing. We hear a few scuffles. Isha looks at me because in the past I would have screamed, but the person I was went a long time ago, so now I wink back and smile.

Mathieu is very well prepared. What a dear boy. He's pulled out a little saucepan from his pack and is boiling water for the nutrition sachets. He apologises for not giving us anything better, but when I say beggars can't be choosers, I'm not sure he understands.

We eat quickly. I could have eaten everything by myself and then some, but my stomach is more or less appeased. Ayo, the little sweetheart, has clearly taken a shine to Mathieu and he to her. They are playing hand tag in a corner, and Jana seems happy, which is good to see. I'm not sure how many women would have managed what she has with a toddler in tow.

There's an awkward silence now. We're exhausted, and I can tell poor Mathieu doesn't know what to make of us. "What's all this about the Savoy?" I demand, as politely as I can, while also making it obvious I won't take no or any other evasive response for an answer.

Isha sits up to listen, Jana looks half-interested, and I can see from Mathieu's expression that I've made his day, or perhaps night, in this particular instance. Then he asks us how much we know about the history of the Savoy.

Isha and Jana look at me because they know that European history is my bag. Or, as Dad would have said, I'm on home turf. I'm mixing metaphors like whisking eggs, but it's my turn to tell the story, and I'll make as many thought-write grammatical *faux pas* as I like.

“The ducal Savoy was ruled by the House of Savoy,” I say. “The territory extended across what are today the French Savoie and Haute-Savoie departments, and included parts of western Italy and south-western Switzerland.”

Now Mathieu looks at me with what I’d like to think is respect, but I could be wrong. “We are the Savoyards, and we are fighting for independence from tyranny and oppression the way our predecessors did before us,” he says, his voice a full octave lower.

“Does the current Swiss-Savoy border start in the Rhône delta?” asks Isha.

Mathieu winces, and it’s clear she’s touched a raw nerve. “When the glaciers started to melt, the elites living around Lake Geneva knew the floodwaters would overwhelm the banks and destroy their pretty parks, so they sacrificed us instead.”

“You mean they built the dam and flooded the delta valley behind?”

He nods. “Italy used to be a collection of city-states, and soon will be again. The central Directorate is trying to keep control, but Savoy, our first declared independency, is stronger than they had expected.”

“So what about the border?” I ask. “Can we get to the other side?”

“You can.” He smiles and points to the Italian toll office. “But you won’t get any further.”

“We’ll have to climb up into another mushroom to get out of here.” Jana finally joins the conversation. “But if the Italian border has gone, why do we have to do it at night?”

Mathieu sighs and suddenly looks tired and older than his years. “The Swiss Directorate doesn’t want to lose its grip on who passes through and who doesn’t. It sends quadcopters with controllers who shoot without bothering to check IDents first.”

We settled down to sleep after Mathieu told us about the Savoy, all of us pressed together in the tiny toll office, but I've just woken up. The past few days have been strange and difficult. Helen and Isha look so different from how I remember them, and at first, I was disappointed, but now I'm beginning to understand the new versions.

I've changed too. Isha showed me a blink image she took just before I had Ayo. Same face, same features, same hair, but not the same person inside. I'm lying in my sleeping bag, thinking about all of this, when I see that Helen is awake and looking over at me.

"Can't sleep?" she whispers. "Bad dreams? Do you want me to tell you a story?"

It's word-for-word what she used to say when I was little and crept into their bed in the middle of the night.

"The fire's not dead yet," she adds. "You coming?"

I wriggle out of my sleeping bag as quietly as I can, making sure not to wake Ayo, then I creep out of the cabin and over to Helen, who is already blowing on the embers. "Where did you learn to do that?" I ask.

"I think you know." Her face glows red as the flames catch and paw at the darkness.

"I thought we would be able to talk more in Franzl's cabin because it was the end of the journey, except that it wasn't, and now we don't know where we're going."

"I'm getting used to it," Helen says.

"But does it get better? I mean, does growing older teach you about living in general, about why you're here and what you should be doing—?" Then I stop, because the words I'm searching for have disappeared.

Helen, my H-Mum, looks up and stares straight through to the heart of me, my soul perhaps. "You're asking me if I understand life better after all we've been through and because I'm older and have had more time to learn." She laughs softly somewhere in the back of her throat. "No, I just look more worn out, sagging in places I'd never expected and I'm still learning, perhaps more than ever before." Then she leans over and strokes my cheek, skin on skin. "Now, what about that story?"

Tato knew he was dying. He was getting thinner and Maman said the new woman he was living with didn't cook him proper meals, but when I asked him if that was true, he told me her cooking was the best he'd ever tasted.

On our last weekend together, walking made him even more breathless than usual, so he told the bus driver to stop when we reached the edge of a cultivated pine forest, a short distance from the road. Tato always had surprises for me, so I didn't ask why he wanted to go there. I just found a place for him to sit while I waited for him to explain.

"Do you remember me telling you about the time I cried?"

"You mean when you saw the forestry plantation, rows and rows of trees, every one of them identical and the soil dead underneath without a bird or bee in between."

"Yes, those trees behind us are the same and what the history of our family is like too." He paused to take both of my hands in his. "Your family and mine, but not your mother's."

"Do you mean your side of the family?" I asked, because my family was Tato and Maman, my siblings and me.

Tato nodded, his eyes shiny with tears. Then he tapped the carpet of dead pine needles with his stick. "*Lebensunwertes Leben*. Life unworthy of life. It's what he said about us."

"Who?"

"Hitler, because he wanted everyone to be the same, blond, blue-eyed and tall. A master race, he believed, but people like my family didn't fit in."

"So what did he do?"

"This." Tato turned to point at the conifer rows. "He tore us out, and only grew what he wanted. It's called eugenics, the selection of desired heritable characteristics in order to improve future generations, some scientists said. But look at these trees, all that's left because the others didn't serve what agronomists call their commercial purpose... even the mother trees who nurture their own and other seedlings ... And then people wonder why the trees they plant survive but never thrive."

Tato died a week later. I wanted to bury him under the oak, but Maman and the woman he lived with said he had to be buried in the village cemetery. Anywhere else was illegal. I found Tato's wallet where he kept the only photo he had of my grandparents, then I added it to the others I had of Tato, and hid all of them inside in our oak. "I'll save the mothers like you," I told her. "I'll fight for every single one of you and your children."

When Helen finishes, we sit in silence, and I visualise Mathilde as a young girl with long straight hair, an aquiline face, high cheekbones and slanted Slavic eyes. She lives in a valley, its highest point a small hill with an old oak tree growing on it, the landmark Tato gave her to climb high and see further. One day I'll find an oak for Ayo so that she can see further too.

Four hours of sleep, and now we're outside. It's dark still, and there must have been a sudden freak snowfall during the night. It's freezing cold too, and I'm worrying about Ayo, even though she's wrapped in Jana's sleeping bag. Mathieu is carrying her because the bundle is too big to fit into the papoose. He's kind, tentative and watchful. In another life, I'd like to think that maybe he and Jana... He's everything Jules wasn't.

We're heading for a place called Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses, where someone will take over from Mathieu. Earlier, I asked him if he and his other Savoyard friends had a destination in mind for us, but he told me it wasn't for him to decide. Then he took hold of my hand, the movement a surprise in itself but also because his hand felt so small and light in comparison to mine. "I know you'll choose well," he said. "I've seen this for myself and heard it from other people."

Other people. Who? Ben and Filou? Jean? Or Beatrice and that Slavic couple whose names I can't remember? We are in Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses now, a few empty houses, not a single light.

"The child can't be out in the open for much longer," Helen says.

Mathieu takes time to respond, an intake of breath, a mannerism that appears only when speaking to Hen. Who does she remind him of? A teacher, an older sister, or perhaps his mother? "Our brother will be here soon," he says. "The latest snowfall will have slowed him down."

The houses are dark, and it's clear no one lives in the village anymore. Mathieu walks ahead of us along the main street. We follow uncertainly, and as we round a corner, I see the smooth white curve of a church apse in the moonlight. Mathieu strides ahead to open the door and beckon us in.

Inside, the melange of smells – incense, floorboards and dusty hassocks – bring back childhood memories. "Forget the religion," I hear Dad saying, "this is all about the architectural heritage of the building. Now let's have a look at that font." He would have enjoyed being here, checking out the carvings and demanding more information than the priest could offer.

A dark-skinned young man is standing in front of the altar, clearly waiting for us. He's shivering with the cold, his loose trousers shaking out a quadrille at the hems. "My name is Mafi," he says quietly, then tilts his head over in the direction of Mathieu. "*Benedetto*

fratello. Abbi cura del tuo ritorno.” I don’t speak Italian, but I recognise the words *brother* and *return*.

Hen, who has taken Ayo, sits on one of a row of chairs. “We have to keep this child warm.”

Mathieu leans over to where just a narrow strip of Ayo’s face is visible and then places one finger gently over her eyes. “She is our future, and she will be well looked after.” Then he disappears into the darkness before I even realise he’s leaving.

“And now you come with me,” Mafi says, turning towards a smaller door behind the altar.

We follow like automatons, our faces blank and our frozen feet clumsy. It’s night, we’ve hardly slept, we’re tired, we don’t know where we’re going, and our new guide is much less communicative than Mathieu.

“Is there going to be more walking?” Hen asks from behind me, but Mafi either can’t hear or ignores her.

When we step out through a small stone archway, dawn has already started to dilute the darkness.

“Here.” Mafi points to a large car with the moon reflected as a faint circle in the windscreen. Then he clicks a control in his hand, and the rear doors open. I walk closer, but he blocks me with his arm. “Wait.” Then he clicks another control, and the seats slide back to reveal a cavity underneath.

“The three of us and a child?” I hear the anxiety in my voice. “You can’t be serious.”

“There have been many more in there, and your journey is short.”

“How short?” Hen demands.

“An hour, but...” He shrugs. “Sometimes we have to take detours.”

“I can do it,” Hen says, looking sharply at Jana and me. “You should be worrying about Ayo.”

“The child stays with me.” Mafi points to a car seat clipped to one of the seats. “She will sleep.”

“Never!” Jana turns to walk away, her arms tight around Ayo.

I move in front of her. “Let’s hear what he has to say.”

Mafi nods to me, perhaps as a sign of approval or thanks, then opens his other hand to reveal a small round capsule in the pit of the palm. “I’ve done this many times before.” He points to the donkey’s head sticking out of the papoose on Jana’s back. “Give me her toy.”

“Let him,” Hen says quietly.

We watch in silence as Mafi squeezes three drops onto the donkey's nose, and I hear Jana's quick intake of breath when he holds it over Ayo's face. "Now they both sleep," he says with the first trace of a smile.

With Ayo settled in her seat, Mafi goes to the front of the car, digs around in a compartment and then comes back with four small metal discs. "You put it here." He points to his inner wrist. "And you hold it all the time." Then he turns to Jana. "Put it inside the child's sleeve."

We do as he says, then I go into the space first and push myself over to the furthest side.

Hen crouches to follow, but Jana steps forward instead. "Can I? It's a long time since I lay down between you."

Hen and I exchange glances. I'm close to tears.

When we are all in, the panel slides over us.

The car ride was thankfully short, and now we're at Fénis Castle, a Dracula-like lair on top of a mountain. Though our rooms are little more than cells with a bed, all we want to do is collapse and sleep, but Mafi has just told us that we've got to meet someone first.

We're walking along a narrow corridor and down what feels like a thousand stone steps. Without windows, the only light is from our Nbands, which enhances the already spectral effect. I'm thought-recording in real time, the way Jana wants us to, but it's difficult when I'm so tired and keep imagining my bed.

Now we've stopped, and Mafi is pointing to a half-open door. I can see into a small room where a man, or maybe a woman, is wrapped in blankets right up to the neck and sitting under a single light in one corner.

"My apologies for receiving you here." Hands in thick white gloves beckon us in. "My sickness is contagious, but no one is at risk as long as my skin remains covered." The voice is androgynous.

"Is that the new pandemic I've heard about?" Helen asks.

The head nods slowly. "It could be, but this time we will contain it, and our children will be immune."

Jana is standing beside me, rocking backwards and forwards because Ayo is grizzling and tired.

The woman, yes, now I can see the femininity in her jawline, stares at her through the black hollows of her eyes. "Your child needs to sleep. You can put her on that rug over there."

From what I can see, the rug covers a thick mattress and is made of a fabric I don't recognise. When Jana sits down, the smell of freshly cut grass floods over us.

The woman smiles when she sees our surprise. "My bed reminds me of what I miss most and helps me fight to get back, but don't worry, the top blanket eliminates the risk of infection." Then she inhales deeply and closes her eyes. "Our Italian Republic was founded on the struggle of the Resistance, and now the Resistance is struggling to deconstruct the Republic. I have a lot to explain, but I will do so as briefly as I can because time is short for all of us." She looks directly at Hen. "All I ask is that you listen without interruption."

I nod but feel Hen's hand tighten in mine.

"Our lives have been governed by the principles of supply and demand, in a world where an object's value is defined by its price. Water, essential to human life, is free, while gems that have no value beyond their beauty are costly." She inhales deeply. "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita, mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, ch  la diritta via era smarrita.* I have the sense that we are living a new form of divine comedy."

"A tragicomedy indeed, but also more complex." Hen is leaning forward, chin jutting, which I recognise as a warning sign even though I don't know what has sparked her off this time. Perhaps it's the impatience and exhaustion we're all feeling.

"Quite possibly," the woman replies quietly. "But the snake is undeniably eating its own tail, and we have to stop it before nothing is left."

"How? Are the starving masses going to revolt? Is that it?" Helen is spoiling for a fight, and nothing will stop her now, but the woman remains calm.

"Revolution is redundant, and history has shown us how our hero-leaders invariably become dictators."

"And you aren't a leader?"

The woman laughs softly. "No, and would never aspire to be. The change has to come from within each of us, like the single water molecules that together become an unstoppable tide."

"But you *are* trying to change people," I say. "You and the other people who call themselves the Savoyard."

"Not me," she says, pointing to herself. "And not you," she says, pointing to Hen and me. "But you, Jana, because you can tell the stories people will listen to." She smiles and dips her head to meet Jana's downcast eyes. "Or perhaps you'd prefer to be called Scheherazade."

Jana stares back without blinking. "I know you."

"Then you know my name."

“Yes, or at least your cypher. It’s Alma. You questioned me in Ogria.”

“And you answered.” The woman draws a circle in the air. “Proof, if need be, that a community can exist beyond physical borders. We need many types of people to fight with us, but your narrative skills could help other people to think much more about how we should define our future.”

“My links have been shut down.”

“They can be restored, but that is for discussion later.” Alma smiles and folds her gloved hands in her lap. “Today I met you as I had hoped, now rest here as our most welcome guests and then travel safely for as long as you need to.”

A brief and unsatisfactory breakfast, but thankfully without any more interviews with the illustrious Alma. Now another day of hiding in the car, though at least we know where we are going because, after much pressure, Mafi finally told us.

Tonight we will stay in Santhià, which means we must still be travelling along on the Via Francigena, though I'm not sure what difference it makes when, according to our newsfeed, everything has changed. The temperatures are higher, the rice fields have gone, and the Rivers Po and Ticino have been allowed to flood all the parts where the levees used to control them. When Mafi said the last stage of the journey would be in a boat, I felt like a piece of cargo. Accept it, I told myself, we are climate refugees who've been forced to leave our homes and now have to find somewhere else in a shrinking world where no one wants us. We are crammed into hidden spaces, drowned when our boat sinks, and if we manage to reach dry land, we are either shot or arrested. I thought these stories couldn't involve people like us, and even Ish's ancestral flight from Uganda had seemed apocryphal, but now we are part of this new narrative.

I've been sleeping, and I sense Ish still is, but I'm not sure about Jana. We must be travelling on small country roads because the ride is bumpy, and my back is killing me.

"You alright, H-Mum?"

"It's a long time since you've called me that."

"It just came out, I wasn't thinking. Can you hear Ayo?"

I can't hear anything above the sound of the wheels grinding on what must be gravel, but Jana is already thumping on the panel above.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Stop the car! Hey!"

"What's happening?" Ish has woken up, the car has stopped, Jana is still yelling, and now I can hear Ayo crying. The panel slides back, and a thin line of light starts off at our feet and finally spreads over our faces. Fresh air. I open my mouth and gulp it.

"Why didn't you stop?" Jana has crawled over me and is already shouting outside.

"C'mon," Ish pushes me, "let's find out what's happening."

It takes a moment. I'm stiff, and a sharp blast of air burns my cheeks and dry lips.

"I had to get off the road first." Mafi is standing on the driver's side, his expression bland.

Jana is cradling Ayo, who is screaming energetically. "Mums, the food, where is it?"

Ish and I snap into action. Our bags have been pushed into the back footwell, and mine has the rusks we had put in there for just such an emergency. We haul everything out and start unpacking. “Someone find the juice,” I shout.

Mafi watches us fuss and fiddle and then returns to his seat in the car when we have apparently found everything we need. Hysterics finished, child pacified, mother too. “You can use this time to have a pee or whatever you need to do,” he says, without turning his head.

The car is parked on a farm track on the edge of a steep ridge, with a clear view over the plain below. We want to stretch our legs, but instead, we stop, simultaneously, and stare down.

“My dragon has gone mad,” Jana whispers.

“Prometheus’ curse,” I say.

“Ours,” Isha adds.

The plain below is a black carpet that stretches up to the horizon and out to every side as far as we can see. Contours burnt out, the grass and clumps of trees that had punctuated fields and framed rivers reduced to dark commas of ash, the landscape levelled. We stare in silence, but I don’t know why we are so shocked. Wildfires and their consequences have become ubiquitous, their red tongues licking hunkered houses and people with leaden faces crying into our news feed almost daily. We empathise and tut over the destruction of wildlife. We send credit where we can, but there’s always another tragedy and our own routine to think about. I suppose the difference now is that we are close enough to smell remnants of the fire’s acrid breath. But no, even as I says the words in my mind, I know it’s more than that. It’s what I’ve been thinking about since Isha had her first meltdown on the Via Agrippa. The grass and trees burnt down there are my skin and bones, and everyone else’s too. I climb back into the car and lie down. Jana and Ish follow me, and the cover slides back over us. Something should be said, but the words don’t exist in the only language we know.

THE AEDES MOSQUITOES SAY THANK YOU

Refugees whose entire nations have been devastated by drought, fire, famine and war are understandably desperate to find new homes, but it's becoming more and more impossible by the day. Greece has completed its sea walls, and soon Sicily and Corsica will have done so too. Then, with the Balkan countries being just too brutal to even consider, the only other option is a longer boat trip north to the Italian Levante Riviera.

When the first boat landed in 2045, residents of the coastal towns either demanded a regional sea wall or offered to shoot the refugees themselves. Both could be considered extreme reactions, but if you know the area, you'll understand their consternation. The Levante coast is famous for its beauty, loved for the annual six-figure tourism credit it brings in, and revered as a haven for celebrity visitors who have the power to change lives.

Two years later, the Directors in La Spezia came up with what they believed was the perfect solution. The island of Elba, best known as the site of Emperor Napoleon's first exile, is ten kilometres from the coast. It used to be home to approximately 30,000 inhabitants until the Directors converted it into a Holding Station for upwards of 70,000 refugees.

Knee-jerk responses are never well thought out, and the collapse of Elba's water and sewage systems is a prime example. The once abundant freshwater springs have been reduced to a trickle, and the barely diluted effluent is flushed out through open drains and into pools of stagnant water – an intolerable situation for everyone except the Aedes mosquito that carries Dengue fever on its proboscis and thrives in cesspools and high temperatures.

When, just a few months ago, a Precious boy died of Dengue Fever in precious Portofino, every Director must have known that his or her head would roll, possibly literally. When I asked for an interview with at least one of them, I was told the regime was currently under review, and a report would be issued when it was complete. Every subsequent request for more information has been

blocked, but I am still following the story, so please watch this space and remember while increasing numbers of people are coming down with and dying from Dengue fever, at least the Aedes mosquitoes are very grateful.

My name is Tomasso, and I am talking to you because Jana and her mothers, who stayed with me in Santhià for two nights, convinced me that my story should become part of what Jana calls her legacy.

I have three children, five grandchildren, one niece and two nephews. A week ago, I celebrated my eightieth birthday with all of them, and when we had finished eating, I asked little Niccolò, the youngest, to switch off his Nband and tell me what year it would be when he is my age. He's clever with numbers, and his answer was 2123, which is correct. I clapped so that he would know he had done well, then I drew a line in the dust between the two of us. "From my year to yours," I told him. "My footsteps will go with you, and they will be clean."

"But *Nonno*," he cried. "Your boots are always clean, even after you've been working in the garden. You hose them down as soon as you finish."

He does not understand, but soon he will.

If my grandfather came back, he would not recognize the Po Valley or the town of Santhià, where he was born. He worked on the family's rice farm just like his father before him. I remember the old photos of the women he called the *mondines*, who worked under clouds of mosquitoes and the blisteringly hot sun while they stood knee-deep in water to pull out the weeds. They slept in a barn where rats ran along the beams. The *mondines* had gone, and the barn was full of tractors and combine harvesters when I was old enough to see them. As my father became too frail to run the farm, my older brother, Antonio, took over, and my sister and I were sent to university instead. We returned for the holidays, though less and less because I started a business in Milan, and my sister became a lawyer. We noticed the changes at the farm but didn't worry because it wasn't part of our lives anymore. Then my parents died and with them our familial duties.

Ten years ago, Antonio came to me and said the farm was finished and it was mine if I wanted it, but first I had to give him a job, which I did. When I asked what had happened, he told me that when the River Po ran dry, the farmers drained the underground aquifers, which eventually filled up with saline water, and then nothing grew at all. I had no reason to go back, but I needed a distraction after my beloved wife died, so I took the old road to find the farm again, just north of Santhià.

The water was already higher than the road before I reached the town, but there was a small café a kilometre back, and I drove there to ask the owner if he knew of another way around. He laughed and welcomed me to what he called the dismal swamp. Then he

messed a friend, who rowed down to meet me. While I clambered into his boat, he asked if it was my first visit. I said no, but that it was a long time since I had been there.

As we floated over the brackish and malodorous water that covered the drainage ditches and sluice gates I remembered from when I was a child, I asked if Dismal Swamp was a new name for the region. He laughed like the café owner before but didn't give me an answer. Not long after, Santhià appeared as an island ahead of us, its houses reflections that stretched out to the boat's prow like trembling fingers. "You won't find a single person living there," he told me. "Only tourists like you come to see it." Then he moored the boat and asked if I wanted a tour.

I declined and said nothing as we returned with the clouds closing over us as if the sky had dropped lower in this new land. Later the same day, I found a hotel nearby and asked my digistant to search on the term 'dismal swamp', but the reply was confusing.

For a man like you, it could be a symbol of hope.

I asked him to explain, and this is what he said:

In the 1600s, the area known as the Dismal Swamp spread from southeast Virginia to northeast North Carolina in the United States and covered nearly 2000 kilometres in all. For the colonial invaders of the time, it was a filthy wilderness full of mosquitoes, water moccasins, rattlesnakes and panthers, but for the Native Americans, it was a safe haven because the invaders had taken their land.

The indigenous people who belonged there knew how to live in the Dismal Swamp, and soon they were joined by hundreds of fugitive slaves, who, despite years of harsh servitude, had not forgotten their own local knowledge and cultural traditions. The two groups lived in harmony with each other and nature, while also passing their fusion of beliefs and skills down to the new generations. The hybrid community thrived in this way for nearly two and a half centuries. Many of its descendants never saw a white man, even though the new settlers had surrounded the swamp with their farms.

On my journey home the next day, I passed a refugee camp, where children, some younger than my own grandchildren, stared at me through the fence. When I got out of the car and walked towards them, they clamoured and pushed their hands through in the hope I had something to give them. For many, this would have been the only lesson they had learnt since the day they were born. Put out your hands and hope. I thought of the Native Americans and the slaves who had escaped and found freedom by occupying the land their oppressors could not live in, then I called my brother and told him to take care of my business.

When I went back to the camp the next day, I invited the refugees to work with me to create a place where their children would not grow up holding out their hands. I promised nothing more than hope and hadn't much idea of what to do next until a few weeks later a man from Africa asked why I talked about the environment as something separate from us. I was confused by his question, until he went on to explain how the word doesn't exist in his language because we are the environment, and the environment is us. This is when I began to understand how we should work and live with every part of nature just as we would with our own brothers and sisters.

Today, Santhià is an island town inhabited by people who work for themselves and each other, using nature's tools to ensure they leave clean footprints for their children and grandchildren to follow. I am proud when people call our home the Dismal Swamp, and proud to see how the Directors in Rome leave us alone because they think my solution to their problem is useful and, more importantly, comes at no cost to them. They don't see the irony or risk of the colonised moving in on the colonisers, but my hope is that one day they will.

For people of Tomasso's generation, Helen and Isha's too, a child's future used to be about choosing schools and universities and then helping them find the best job. After that, it was hoping they would meet the right partner and maybe have their own children, but it's different for younger people like me because we've given up believing in a future at all.

Ayo was sleeping in my arms when Tomasso told us about how his footsteps must be clean. His comment reminded me of the part in Mathilde's diary when Tato said the rings in a tree stump are history, and the dark line they saw came from a drought. I realised then that Ayo's future grows out of my present, and the shapes and colours of her circles are snapshots of our time together. I don't want her to have dark lines because of what I have or have not done.

Later, when I couldn't sleep, I thought about why I asked my mums to tell you their story when I had been telling it before. I think it was because I wanted you to hear their voices, and we were together, so it seemed somehow logical. But since then, I've taken the separate pieces of what people told me and put them together on my own terms, which has changed the way I see myself.

When I first created Ogria, Helen said my virtual world didn't have a soul. After thinking about it, I understood she meant Ogria's reason for being or the spirit. *Spiritus*, in Latin, means a gust of wind or a breath. Speech is shaped breath, and my spirit is in my words, so every word I say must contain my spirit. In Reims, Arnaud said images are at the heart of storytelling and that I excel in both, but I refused to use my skills to tell his story. Then Alma told me that I could change people, and now I want it to be true. I wonder what happened to the man who stood on my doorstep all those months ago because, without his story, I'd still be the person I used to be, and my mothers would be somewhere out here on their own. But now, I am the narrator, and my voice is clear.

The next few days after Santhià were difficult. We left in the boats we had arrived in but still without any idea of where we were ultimately going. While we were saying our goodbyes, Helen tried to push Tomasso for an answer, but it was clear he didn't know. I suppose it was for his own security because there was always a risk of the Border Forces finding out who had helped us, but it felt strange to be the focus of such secrecy. After the boats, a liftshare stopped and took us to Vercelli train station, which is when we realised we hadn't been given any instructions.

"So, what now?" Helen asked.

Isha tried to play it cool, but I could tell she was worried too. “Beatrice wouldn’t just dump us here... unless something’s happened.”

“What’s Beatrice got to do with any of this?” Helen looked as surprised by her comment as I felt.

“I won’t see you tomorrow, but I will be following your progress. It’s what Beatrice said the last time we saw her. Or maybe you don’t remember.”

When Isha added that last part about remembering, it sounded like it was the continuation of an old argument, so I pushed between them. “Hey! This isn’t the time—”

“Or how do you think we’ve got this far?”

“Ben, maybe? And of course, Filou.”

They were talking over me as if I wasn’t there, and it felt like being a child all over again.

“Nothing has happened by accident since we left Rosa,” Isha carried on. “Yes, Ben and Filou helped us, but Beatrice has always been in charge, and I’m sure she has decided where we should be going now.”

“What makes you so sure?” Helen asked.

Isha shrugged. “I can feel it.”

“Fine,” I said, cutting in between them again. “But what has all this got to do with us standing in front of a railway station with no idea of what to do next? If Beatrice isn’t going to tell us, we’d better think of something else ourselves.” I was trying not to lose my temper but was on the point of stomping off Helen-style when Isha called me back.

“Wait!” she tapped her Nband. “We’re going to Parma.”

“Who says so?” Helen asked, but Isha only smiled, and then Helen gave me a look to say, *let’s drop it*.

We picked up our bags, headed in the direction of the station doors and were just about to walk through when Isha stopped. “Have you checked your disc?”

The sweat prickled all over me. *Crap!* I hadn’t even thought about them after Mafi left.

“Check your pockets,” Helen whispered, her face so white I thought she was about to faint.

“Let me deal with this,” Isha said to her. “You go and sit down.”

I dug around in every pocket, panicking, hardly able to breathe until I found first mine and then Ayo’s in a pocket I’d forgotten about. It was a massive relief, but I imagined myself swinging on a pendulum between two signs, one saying too young, the other saying too old.

“Better run,” Isha said. “We’ve got five minutes.”

The train was full, and Ayo had to sit on my lap. It was her first time, and she was excited. “Look, Mama!” she screeched when the houses flashed past our carriage window.

All we knew about Parma was that it was a city, and it wasn’t on the Via Francigena.

“Population over 300,000,” Isha said, quoting from her Nband. “And a strong centre of partisan resistance during World War Two.”

“Maybe it’s kept up the tradition and is a strong centre of resistance for this new Savoy now,” Helen replied.

If it’s got a good memory, I thought, but I wasn’t really listening because I knew they were only trying to fill in the silence. We were nervous, worried and probably asking ourselves the same question. Why was Beatrice sending us to a big city when she had kept us away from them since we’d left Rosa in Switzerland? “Are you sure that message was real?” I asked. “It could have been faked like Kasumi.”

Isha shook her head. “I’ve checked everything.”

The train pulled into the station, we got out, and the platform was empty apart from the people who’d got out with us. We stood there for as long as we could without drawing attention to ourselves, then Isha pulled her pack onto her shoulders and walked off. “Let’s have a look outside.”

The square in front was busy with people on bikes, others walking, and some standing behind market stalls. Everyone seemed to have somewhere to go or something to do, except us.

“Any messages?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Isha replied. “Let’s wait over there in the shade.” She pointed to an archway and started walking again without looking back. Helen and I followed, and I’d just settled Ayo when a woman about my age walked over from the other side of the road. She was smiling, but I know we were all thinking the same: Border Force goons come in all sorts of disguises.

“Have you just arrived?” she asked in Italian when she was standing in front of us.

Helen nodded.

“Where have you come from?”

None of us answered, but the woman smiled again. “Perhaps Santhià?” This time she had switched to English.

“Maybe,” I answered cautiously. “Does it matter?”

“It helps if we know, but don’t worry if you prefer not to tell me. I’ll call someone to find out why no one was here to meet you.”

I watched her connecting and then chatting with whoever was on the other end. We didn't know what was happening, and other people were still in control, but I didn't feel as uncomfortable about it as I would have before. "I think this is it," I said.

"What is?" Helen asked.

"Parma is."

Long ago the Greeks... gave to the Earth the name Gaia or, for short, Ge. In those days science and theology were one, and science, although less precise, had soul. As time passed this warm relationship faded and was replaced by the frigidity of schoolmen. The life sciences, no longer concerned with life, fell to classifying dead things... Now at least there are signs of a change. Science becomes holistic again and rediscovers soul, and theology, moved by ecumenical forces, begins to realize that Gaia is not to be subdivided for academic convenience and that Ge is much more than a prefix.

—James Lovelock

Epilogue

Parma. What is it? I'm trying to find the answer while I sit here under the shade of an ancient Italian oak because Mathilde described doing something similar on the first page of her diary. *I stared up into the branches and thought about crown shyness and how some trees agree to grow their branches together without touching, like a roof with gutters of light suspended in between.* She wondered if she was like them because she always kept her distance too, and now I wonder if we have this in common. She also asked herself, *if everyone does something completely out of character on the day before they leave home.*

I can see her staring at me now with her slanted Slavic eyes, asking why it took me so long to get here when the lessons had been so clear. I opened the door to a migrant who stank of the streets. I let him sit on my sofa while he told me his story, but then I asked my parents to come home instead of leaving home myself. Is that why we all had to journey first before coming here to Parma? But again, the question. What is Parma?

I'll change the angle of my gaze away from the sunlight blinking through the branches above like diamonds in a tiara and look over the city instead. I'm propped up inside the elbow of a root that stretches away down the slope and then disappears. I imagine it clasping the hand of a subterranean sibling, and now I can see Parma, with its sprawl of streets and burden of buildings that stretch across the valley like a tumorous growth. Cities smother and silence the earth, so why does the energy flowing through Parma's streets feel so different?

Years ago, Helen told me that current science defined our human mind as an assemblage of organic algorithms. On this basis, the theory was that we could be programmed in the same way as artificial intelligence, albeit a poorer version. But when I asked her what had happened to free will, and where did our souls belong in the idea, she didn't have an answer.

A few weeks ago, I asked Isha if someone could have reprogrammed the mindset of Parma's inhabitants, and she suggested I consider the Latin etymology of the word city, which is *civitas*, meaning citizen. I've just spent the last two hours walking through the streets, searching for an answer in the faces that passed by, and now I'm here on this hillside trying to understand what I've seen so that I can explain it to you.

Parma. I'm describing it as a single entity when in fact it is a collection of histories, cultures, ideas and aspirations of the people who lived and still live there. A million seeds that bred a million more. Yes, this is where I should look, below the surface and into the roots.

Thinking like this is tiring and I've slipped down the trunk, and now I'm hugging my knees in a snail-shape like Ayo does when I read her a story. Is this oak a mother too? Does she tell her children stories through what Tato called the *roots and the larynx of fungi*? The earth around her trunk is a dry, flighty dust, but when I try to clear it, I feel a thousand filigree fingers taking it back. The sensation reminds me of Paris. A city built from its own underland. The literal land-grab that left a subterranean network and a mirror image of the streets above. Does Parma mirror its arboreal underland too, or am I looking in the wrong place again? No, this time, I think I'm getting closer to the answer, and it isn't in the buildings or the people living inside. It's in the stories that guide them, the descriptions of our place in Nature's reciprocal web and how we should straddle the strands without tearing them. The difference in Parma is that its inhabitants have learnt how to listen.

Tato told Mathilde about the mother trees. The caregivers of the forest that feed their own seedlings but also nurture the seedlings of other trees because, in an arboreal community, the whole is always much greater than the sum of its parts. They do this through the mycorrhizal network, with which they also have a symbiotic relationship. When a mother tree dies, her fall clears the overhead canopy to allow more sunlight through, and her rotting trunk feeds the soil and all its inhabitants below. Reading Mathilde's diary taught me more than I could ever have learnt on my own and I've brought her second diary with me to read again here.

'Botanist looking for a young assistant researcher, no experience required.' I saw it in a small column next to the lonely hearts section and wondered if the author had used a special code I should know about. I applied for the job anyway.

The botanist, an old man by my standards then, was even more nervous than me, so I told him about Tato and what he'd taught me about trees. I'd never been out of my village before, but two months later, I was in the Amazon rainforest talking to indigenous people whose homes the loggers had destroyed.

"We smell the trees screaming even before the saws get here," they told me.

"You mean you smell their fear," I replied.

An old man in the group looked at me strangely and told the translator to come closer. "No," he said. "We smell their warnings to every living being in the forest. Trees have their own way of shouting."

"But the loggers can't hear them?"

He shook his head slowly, the movement as light as a sycamore seed drifting on the wind. "The loggers won't listen, not even when the trees tell them that if you destroy us, you destroy yourselves."

Parma's mother tree was a woman from Nigeria called Alice. She'd left because people like her couldn't live there after the sea rose, the interior burned, and freak storms uprooted entire cities. She ended her journey on a boat that capsized a kilometre before a town called Massa, then she swam and floated the rest of the way, lucky because the tide was turning in.

"There's thousands more of us," Alice told the man who watched her stagger up the shore. "We're coming every day," she shouted after him as he walked away.

Yes, thousands like her, and the few hundred who survived hid in woodland camps or cellars in Parma. Some found work because even if migrants aren't welcome, their cheap labour is. Alice sorted plastic by day and told stories by night.

"If we forget our stories, we'll forget who we are and end up like the rest of the human race that believes our planet is a factory." Alice's Nigerian tongue sharpened her words, even in Italian. "Have you ever asked yourself how long you can keep on growing in a place that's shrinking?" Her laugh was whetted too.

Alice came to Parma in the summer of 2040 and died on Christmas Day eight years later. We didn't meet her, but it's clear that, like all mother trees, her past fed the future. Her timing was key, because if there had still been a sliver of hope and optimism, no one would have listened. Or do I think that because I'm still ambivalent about my own role as a narrator? Either way, experience has shown me that people in a burning building invariably choose the jump over the fire, and we were already in free fall – the inhabitants of Parma, Helen, Isha and me, so any option, even Alice's strange indigenous stories, was worth considering.

Alice's first hiding place was in Lubiana, a suburb of Parma where the poorer people lived, though by then, everyone was poor because anyone with enough credit had left long ago. Parma is in the Po Valley, where the heat, mosquitoes and malaria can be demonic. I suppose this is where some of my questions about Parma started, because it isn't the Utopia I had expected. For me, Utopia is a fertile valley with pure air, a crystal clear river, enough food for everyone and no Directors or Entrepreneurs. Instead, Parma is crammed full of people, some more desperate than others, just like in every other city I've known, except perhaps Reims. When I told Isha how I felt, she disagreed and instead described Parma as being like an anthill, a highly developed and eusocial community.

"But we're piled up on top of each other," I argued, pointing around the tiny apartment we were all living in.

“True,” Isha conceded. “But cities are the best solution when there are so many of us. Plus, our nomad existence was wiped out centuries ago when the colonialists turned land into a commodity.”

This is only a snapshot of what we talked and argued about for a long time before I began to really think about why Parma was so different. Sitting here now, I can see how each suburb is a village with its own narrative, clusters of seedlings if you like, and why Alice had said people need a centre where they can gather and know each other as equals.

A few days after arriving in Lubiana, she told a story about how in the beginning, the peoples of the earth knew only one language, but a madness struck during a severe famine and they wandered off in all directions jabbering nonsense no one could understand. “Becoming indigenous to a place means understanding its language,” she concluded. “And you people here don’t seem to have words for the things we live with and walk over every day.”

“But you’re a foreigner,” a man shouted out from the crowd. “How would you know?”

“I know enough to know you don’t listen,” she snapped back.

The next day she drew a chalk circle in front of the old church no one went into. “It’s what my ancestors called the Loop of Living,” she told the people watching. “Where a person’s footprints are marked both behind and ahead at the same time, so be careful how you walk from now on.”

When I was taken to the circle, I saw not one but a concentric succession of circles like the seasons in a tree’s life that Mathilde had described.

“Alice drew the rest of them later,” Ayla, the woman who had brought me, explained. Then she watched in silence as I struggled with a flood of emotions I couldn’t decipher. “Yes,” she said finally. “Some people find it harder than others, but I can see from your face that it’s already gone.”

“What has?”

“We call it species loneliness, our isolation from everyone else we should be living with, but you’re one of us now.”

I didn’t answer, but was reminded of the day in Reims when I had sat shoulder to shoulder with people and felt that we were all part of something so much bigger. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying Alice was a guru, just as I’m not saying Parma is a Utopia, and that’s mainly because Utopia can be whatever anyone wants to imagine. For an Entrepreneur, I suppose it would be a safe city on Mars with a solid customer base on Earth. For the Directors, it’s probably all the advantages without the hard work, but Alice’s Utopia

is in the indigenous threads she wove through her stories and stretched across continents until they tied everything and everyone together.

“We all have the same needs,” she told the people of Parma. “Just different names and places for them.” But sometimes, she wasn’t so gentle, perhaps because she was impatient or simply scared like the rest of us. Once, she told a huge crowd of people that Nature isn’t a machine and you cretins aren’t the drivers. Yes, sometimes Alice’s stories stuck their noses in their own shit, but she’s gone now, her nurtured seedlings have taken over, and I’ve listened to them with Helen and Isha.

“These stories take us back to before philosophers like Descartes and Mandeville started to describe our world as a soup of subservient particles,” Helen concluded after one particularly difficult discussion. “They’re the opposite of the mechanistic vision used by the ruling elite to oppress everyone else who doesn’t speak their language.” Then she turned to me. “Why can’t you see that?”

Why? Because it was all I’d ever known. Because I’m part of the problem. I wonder if being from a previous generation helps people like Helen and Isha understand ancestral ideas more easily. Anyway, the next morning it was my turn to smile when a young girl stopped her in the street.

“Humans are junior members of the ecosystem community, newcomers who’ve arrived thousands of years after everyone else. How would you older people feel if we started telling you what to do?”

“But you are,” Helen replied.

“And we’re listening,” Isha, who was standing beside her, added.

I wonder how old Mathilde was when she finally found her voice like that girl. It’s hard to tell because the timeline of her entries is so erratic. *I gave them hell*, she wrote in the second diary, *but when I got down off the platform, an old man came over and shook my hand. Then she stuck a small piece of paper onto the bottom of the same page and scrawled: Has nobody thought about how perverse it is to base morality on a story that banishes a woman from a beautiful garden and leaves her to sweat and toil just because she wanted to taste some of its delicious fruit? Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do? As long as we only take what we need. And what about the Native American Potawatomi story about Skywoman, who created a garden for the well-being of everyone? A primitive myth, some people say, but it seems a hundred times more credible than the Bible ‘truths’ I’ve been told to believe.*

Alice's heritage of heritages lives on in Parma, and we work and live according to new rules. Parma is what Helen called a "bubble in the mire", which was an acknowledgement of how limited its impact is, but also an expression of hope. If there is one bubble, there can be more, like the one I found in Reims, even if they are very different.

In one of her more philosophical moods, Isha said something along the lines of there can be no struggle for justice without a vision of the future, and to create that, we'll have to be both historians and soothsayers. I'm not sure I'm either of those, but in Parma, I meet the refugees who land on the beach as Alice did in 2040. Then I guide them up the remote Via Abati that the BF surveillance quadcopters generally avoid for reasons we can't quite fathom. Isha thinks Parma is like Santhià, a solution of sorts for the Directors and still too small to matter. She may be right, but it probably doesn't even matter. Parma can be a new home for the refugees if they want it because their skills, cultures and experience will help all of us to survive. If they don't, we'll help them to go on to wherever they have chosen. Each time I lead a new group into the main square, I think of how Helen, Isha, Ayo and I stood outside the station and waited for something or someone to change our lives, in the same way as the refugees do now.

One day, when Helen came with me to check on the mental health status of a new group of arrivals, the past came to haunt her in a way neither of us could have imagined.

"Look," she said, pointing to two men walking towards us.

I looked but didn't see anything unusual, just a middle-aged man with an arm hanging loosely by his side and a younger one who supported him. "What about them?"

"They've recognised me... It's like soldiers staring at an enemy after the war is over." Then she sat down and cried.

Helen found her niche in a small clinic, often performing operations she hadn't even done as a med student. Her first ever leg amputation was on a stray dog that had appeared injured on our doorstep.

"I'm going to call her Pearl because she brings out the best in me," she announced over breakfast the next day, and from then on the two were inseparable. Every evening they could be seen walking together, a small, slightly pear-shaped woman who had never wanted a pet, and a large, three-legged dog of indeterminate breed and colour. Meanwhile, Isha fulfilled Beatrice's prediction that her pre-AI skills would be extremely valuable. Her biggest claim to fame is a house built entirely of mycelium bricks, the first of many. When our savings vanished after a bitcoin fraud that affected over a quarter of Europe's population, we, as a family, were relatively sanguine.

“How are the Entrepreneurs going to survive without customers?” Isha asked.

“Let’s hope they don’t,” Helen replied. “Perhaps this is the change we have all be waiting for.”

The truth was we’d left that world so far behind us we didn’t even know what it looked like anymore, so perhaps in this sense, Parma is the Utopia I had imagined. And what about my sweet Ayo? How does she fit into this part of the story? Well, perfectly and naturally, a child with friends of her own age, as opposed to an obdurately programmed porter called Christopher, and in her polyglot world, she already speaks more languages than we can name.

You’re probably wondering what happened to Ben, Filou, Jean, Lauren, Andrei, Lena, Beatrice and of course Rosa. I’d like to give you a happy ending for all of them, but Ben was picked up on his way to meet Jean, who was already on the run. Given their work with Femto, I have to assume the worst in terms of their punishment. Filou was in Langres at the time, working with Andrei and Lena on the plan, which we all know worked because of the Nband and e-bomb mayhem that followed shortly after. There have been more attacks since, of different kinds, though I try not to follow them because I still can’t accept the violence involved or the equally violent Directorial reprisals. I wish there was another way, but most people seem to think there isn’t. As we soon found out after coming here, Rosa is intricately involved with the transfer of refugees, and the help she gave us was nothing compared to what she has done for others. And finally, Beatrice. Well, she’s just been re-elected *Madame le Maire* and will serve out her time for as long as no one finds out about her extracurricular activities. She still communicates with Isha.

I came to this oak to think about Parma and explain my conclusions to you, but it wasn’t my only reason. I also came to remember how Helen walked up here every evening with Pearl, and towards the end always with either Ish or me because we wouldn’t let her walk alone.

“I’m just tired,” she used to tell us when we had to wait. “Stop worrying.”

Isha and I didn’t argue even though she was gasping for breath. We didn’t discuss what was happening either because we had silently agreed that Helen’s decision had to be her own and without our influence.

I was with Ayo the last time, walking very slowly as usual with Helen just behind. We’d already reached the summit when I heard the creak in Helen’s throat. When I looked round, she was sitting down with one arm wrapped tightly across her chest.

“Get Ish,” she said.

“I can’t leave you here.”

“Please...”

I leant down to put Ayo on my shoulders.

“No, I want her to stay...”

I hesitated.

“Please.”

Then I ran.

“It’s Hen,” Isha said as soon as I opened the door, then she ran too. We heard Ayo crying long before we got to the top of the hill.

H-Mum was in too much pain to say much, but she held our hands, and we waited quietly for the arrival of the inevitable. As I sat there and looked into her eyes, I saw the circle of what she used to call *Einsteinian time* stretch, shrink, dilate and finally close.

Isha picked her up, and we walked back down the hill with the sun sinking as a red gash in the sky behind, a gaping wound that followed us into the street where people flowed through the blood-light towards us. Simon, who was in the lead, walked over to Isha and took Helen, then we followed him to the church no one went into and where Alice’s circles had been redrawn.

“I’ll lay her in here, where it’s cool,” he said.

The people came later, lines of them walking up the steps to where Isha and I sat with Ayo and Pearl between us, then into the church where someone had started to sing. When it was dark, a woman I didn’t know at the time went inside and closed the door behind her. “I’ll stay with her tonight,” she whispered through the lock.

When you grow up with someone like a mother or father, you see through their eyes. Helen was my lens, and losing her means I will have to realign my sight in a world without her. No more birthdays, no more waking up to the sound of her shouting, “What time do you call this?” No more worrying about her reaction to a comment I’ve made.

Helen’s friends wanted to arrange a funeral, but Isha and I wanted to be alone, so we asked them to help us carry her up here and then dig the grave. When they had finished, a woman from Senegal dug a small hole nearby with her bare hands and planted a small piece of aloe because, as she told Isha, it would keep Helen safe. Ayo left with them, riding on the shoulders of a man we all called Pazzia, who said she looked like his daughter.

Isha and I had decided to do for Helen what Mathilde was not allowed to do for Tato. We would bury her under the branches of an ancient oak tree. I had prepared myself and was tucking in the corners of the brightly coloured blanket Helen was wrapped in when Isha pulled me away.

“I can’t,” she said. “I can’t roll her in and shovel soil over her face.”

So we sat on the edge of the hole, with Pearl between us, our legs reaching down halfway and Helen in the shade behind. We waited until the evening greys started to seep up through the soil and pour shadows over our feet. I saw that the moon wouldn’t be strong enough for us to see by and said as quietly as I could that we’d have to do it now.

Isha stood up then, her slender length silhouetted against the remaining light like a poplar. I remembered how Rosa had once described her as serene. We carried Helen together, laid her in the grave and shovelled the soil in without looking where it fell. Then we sat and waited until our darkness was punctured by stars. We were halfway down the hill, a walk of maybe ten minutes before Isha spoke again.

“A long time ago, I promised Hen that I’d finish our journey to Rome if... if anything happened, and now I know I won’t be able to let go and start again until I do.”

“How long?” I asked.

“Time...” She shrugged. “I don’t want to count anymore... but don’t wait here if you’ve got somewhere else to go.” Her voice was android flat, dead.

Two weeks later, Ayo and I stood beside her. She was ready to go, the cycle panniers hanging off her shoulders with the straps she had added before. Whose lens can I look through now, I thought as we watched our I-Mum, the last part of my childhood, dissolve like a snowflake into the shimmering air.

“Mama? Pearl?”

Yes, Pearl had gone with her too, our last remnant of Helen. I turned away and wished I was blind.

The next day I welcomed a new group of refugees as if nothing had changed. I sat with a woman whose child had drowned just metres from the shore. We buried him together in an area outside the city because the old cemeteries were full. I felt guilty because I had been able to choose a place for Helen when she couldn’t do that for her son. Later, the woman found me sitting on a doorstep with Ayo. She had been walking past but stopped to stare at us. I could feel her anger like teeth in my skin.

Ayo refused to talk not long after. My friends told me not to worry and that I should give her time because her grief had to come out one way or another, but all I could think about was Filou. And now I’m walking back down the hill for the last time, leaving the oak and Parma’s past, present and future behind me. This part of our story over, another circle closed.

Jana, Nmail, November 25, 2051

I-Mum, you probably already knew I would do this, but we're going to Reims. Marc and his family are ready for us and have asked me to say you are also very welcome.

Ayo is growing so fast I can't keep up, and yesterday she spoke a complete sentence in Bantu, I think!

Please keep writing. I have to know how you are and what's happening.

Love you, love you,

J

Isha, Nmail, December 2, 2051

Hun, I'm happy to hear it, for you and for Ayo. I knew you'd go back, it was only a matter of time, but I think I'll be here for a few months more because there's certainly enough to do.

I've got over the shock of seeing St Peter's Square and the Vatican flooded and full of sewage. As a woman I met there said, at least you don't have to queue to get in anymore, and entry is free. The looting has been terrible, but they've got more security in place now, and there's something right about it, too. I mean the ignominious end of that all that wealth and power, even if it's sad to see some of the beautiful artworks go.

I've fallen in with a group of people who've come up from Naples to help out, and a lot of what they're saying and doing reminds me of Parma, so maybe there are even more bubbles in the mire than we know about.

I still miss Hen day and night, every minute, but even so, I'm almost ready to start living without her.

Miss you both so much. Hug Ayo for me, and let's speak for real very soon.

I-Mum

There's so much more I want to write, so much more you should know about, like what was happening in the world beyond the narrow road Helen, Isha, Ayo and I were following and all the other details I couldn't find a place for, but to do that, I'd have to write a book a hundred times longer and as chaotically as Mathilde, a thready mess like the underground networks of fungi that are only understood from the mushrooms and toadstools that grow above. They are the random memories I don't want to lose: the rivers we saw in Africa when I was a child, all of them dry like the drained veins in a carcass. The man who told us that when food is scarce,

elephants split into small groups to avoid food competition. Helen who asked if he thought we could still learn from them. The gibbous moon that shone over Ayo and me when we slept outside after leaving Reims, and the way I thought it was significant, even though now I can't remember why. The woman who shook me and shouted in my face that despair is paralysis. The girl who said she had asked her god to turn her into a tree so that she could do the world's work by standing silently in the sun. The moths I saw, clamouring for light and dying in the moment of finding it. My dream last night, time running backwards, our traces disappearing and the land healing.

Marc met us at Reims Airlander terminal and lifted Ayo onto his shoulders as if we'd never been away. Then we walked the last few kilometres until we came to the circle of coloured stones in Place Drouet-d'Erlon.

"Have you still got the blue one?" he asked.

I opened my hand and threw it back into its place. Then we walked to the Hôtel Particulier where Arnaud and Anna were waiting for us.

"*Enchanté*, Jana, we've missed you." Arnaud leant forward from the hips to extend his hand just as he had the first time.

"An understatement," Anna added as she hugged me, her sharp ribcage still reminding me of Isha.

Helen once said we were in the middle of a contemporary version of Homer's *Odyssey*, and I had planned to deliver this section to you as the conclusion or culmination of that journey, but now I realise I was wrong because stories, like maps, take us from one place to another. I've only just arrived at the beginning and from here, in this new place where I have never been, I'll do what I had refused to do before. I'll be the storyteller.

The year is 2055.

Ayo is five years old.

My name is Scheherazade.

My mother, Isha, is sitting beside me.

We need another way of knowing. If we are to succeed, we must listen not only to each other but to those we have systematically marginalised. It's not about you. You don't own the story, carry it beautifully and give it to someone else.

—Barry Lopez

There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth.

—Doris May Lessing

Credit¹

Credit refers to a virtual currency that has no physical existence and is traded and stored in electronic form. In 2045 it replaced money (in the form of paper or coins) on a quasi-universal basis. However, local pseudo-currencies and goods/services exchanges persist in societies where the required credit system infrastructure either does not exist or is perceived to have no useful value.

Digistant

The equivalent of a Smart Assistant today, but communicated with via thought because it is part of the Nband system.

IDent ²

The IDent microchip is inserted under the ulnar artery in the wrist. It contains a unique ID number linked to external databases. These databases hold both fiscal and personal details of an individual's life from birth to death.

In 2035, the United Nations ratified the agreement that, in the interests of international security and resource allocation, identity implants should be a mandatory requirement for all member nations, with full implementation by January 1, 2037. All children born after this date would receive the IDent immediately after birth.

Though there was an initial and expected show of resistance, the convenience associated with the IDent in terms of e-commerce, access rights, and data retention ultimately persuaded most citizens to comply. As one developer said, "Nothing has changed, except that now everything is stored in one place and never left behind in a drawer at home when you need it."

¹ Reference source: Bitcoin will replace money from central banks by 2050, says experts

² Reference source: Thousands of Swedes are inserting microchips under their skin

IRL

In Real Life

Nband³⁴

The Neural Band, more colloquially known as the Nband, is the latest technology in 2050. Not everyone can afford one, and many people will use the less interactive wrist options instead. The Nband is worn around the head like an old-style sweatband and facilitates every function currently associated with being online. Nbands are mediated through the Brain to Device (B2D) sensors located at specific points relevant to the interior brain anatomy. The B2D sensors enable transmission between the user's neural system and the receptor network, which supersedes manual techniques such as typing text. By 2050 the letter n, for neural, has substituted the letter e, for electronic, for example, n/email. Nmails are prepared and viewed in the Virtual Vision (VV) before being sent. The VV is best understood as a replacement for display screens shown on the backs of the eyelids when the user closes his or her eyes. This is also the way other people can know that the user is 'viewing'.

The VV also incorporates the Mirror World Augment (MWA), more commonly referred to as an augment. The MWA intercepts and augments the users' views of their physical world.

Nbands also offer a significantly advanced 10DoF (Degrees of Freedom) in the Virtual World option, which provides feel, taste and smell.

On request, Nbands will display selected elements of the individual user's profile as a display around the head known colloquially as the Nswarm.

Qcloud⁵

The term qcloud is derived from the quantum computer and is the successor to the Cloud data storage system.

Traditional computers store information in bits – 1 or 0 – but quantum computers use qubits that can be set to either 1 or 0, but also 1 and 0, a process that gives quantum

³ Reference source: Elon Musk unveils neuralink's plans for brain-reading 'threads' and a robot to insert them

⁴ Reference source: Army developing 'synthetic telepathy'

⁵ Reference source: Here's what a world powered by quantum computers will look like – they will reshape society as we know it.

computers the ability to process much more information and much faster than the highest performance binary computer available in 2021.

