

The Ghost Waves

Novel

1.

The words came flying out of the darkness, careering into his mind. Can't unring the bell, can't unhear the words, the ringing words, ringing in his ears, ringing in his mind.

No!

He knew what was happening, he could feel the ideas worming deeper, intruding into every thought, infecting every synapse. He knew what to do, what he had to do: get out his card, read the card, stop the thoughts, stop thinking them, thinking about them; their form, their elegance. They were so elegant. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, if there was such beauty behind them.

No, read the card, stop thinking about the words. Stop believing them, stop believing in them.

Closing his eyes he tried to focus on the protocol, to recall the drills, but all he could think about was the timbre of the voice, the inflection, the accent, the volume, the eight syllables, thirty-one letters. Thirty-one stupid letters. He pictured them in his mind until they began to lose any meaning, until they began to dance and weave, lines unravelling into strings winding around and around inside his mind.

The card fell to the ground from his useless fingers, his body falling beside it. This wasn't how he imagined it would be.

There were footsteps all around him, but all he could see were ghosts. The rough cement scratched at his cheek as he trembled.

After four minutes someone stopped. It took twelve for the fake ambulance to whisk him away.

And then it was still and quiet. There was no siren anymore, just him on the stretcher and two agents – the tall one sitting beside him and the little one perched at the back. Neither looked familiar, but he tended to avoid their department. If they pretended the Hazardous Population Department didn't exist, then they could pretend they'd never become one of the hazardous ones.

He retreated into darkness as the walls of the van shook and wobbled.

‘Don’t worry, Agent Hull.’ The voice from the agent beside him was calm and reassuring. ‘We’re here to help.’

The peace that spread over him was immediate. He hadn’t expected that, either.

He opened his mouth at the gentle touch on his chin. A pill was placed on his tongue, the sugar coating melting on to his tongue.

‘Swallow that and it will all be over.’

Rika watched as the truck driver climbed down from his cabin. Over the weeks she had come to recognise the reactions of their visitors and he had the stride of one who took any obstacle as a personal slight; the kind that would require her to do something when she only had ten minutes left in her shift.

June held the clipboard aloft as Rika passed behind her. ‘No deliveries scheduled.’

Rika sighed. ‘Fabulous.’

The third agent in the room wasn’t concerned with either the conversation or the visitor below, writing away on his little table in the corner. Rika leaned over his shoulder and flipped through his notebook, tearing the paper caught under his pen.

The pages were full of the boring minutiae of their shift, notable only for the fact that, at points, they had preceded the action. He sat back in his chair, hands clasped over the belt of his robes. They wore their unofficial uniform like it imparted some inherent spirituality, like it wasn’t because they couldn’t work out how to use buttons and were frightened by zips.

‘What do you think, Cowboy?’ she asked, flicking a hand towards the window.

She didn’t bother remembering – or even asking – the names of the EPD agents that cycled through the office. With no intention of acknowledging their right to exist, or even their humanity, it was a pointless use of her time.

‘He is no bother.’

It was tempting to ask him to send the visitor away and be done with it, but that would be an unnecessary interaction. He’d refuse anyway, and she’d get into trouble if she stuffed the notebook in his smug face.

The fact that she'd never been able to make a single one of them snap made it all the more chilling when they sat there, writing out their little prophecies. At least you could anticipate passion; they were so cold and calculating that there was no sign of what they believed in. There was no way of predicting what they'd do and how far they'd be willing to go.

Rika returned to her window to find the driver reading the plaque beside the gate. It wouldn't give him much information, other than to confirm that he was standing in front of Sacer College. Easy way to distinguish outsiders, they called it Sacer. To the agents inside it was SACER, the difference in pronunciation nonexistent but the distinction immense. SACER stood for something, even if that something was both in French and, due to mistranslations and miscommunications, in contention.

Rika sighed again. 'Your turn, Juney.'

'They never go when I ask them.'

'That's because you *ask*.' Rika broke off their staring contest with a groan. 'There'd better be coffee when I get back.'

She returned within five minutes, the dust already clouding the air. Smiling as she picked up her mug, she prowled the room with the satisfaction of someone who'd still be home in time for dinner.

The relief was short-lived, June pointing out new movement on the horizon. Rika grabbed the EPD agent's notebook, rifling through it then hurling it back when she failed to find any notes about her hubris.

Rika returned to her window, squinting at the approaching vehicle. She gnawed on a hard biscuit June had set out, studying the livery on the van. Her relief at recognising it as one of their own was short-lived. Another ambulance.

June noted the time in the log. 'Fourth one this week. You don't think this is it, do you?'

Rika dunked the biscuit in her coffee. Despite her perkiness, June was determined to believe that they were never more than a day away from annihilation. 'Don't be such a drama queen.'

The driver was wearing a SACER uniform, but the agent who emerged from the back was in plain clothes. Or at least the Hazpop version. The sunlight glinted off the silver studded through and around him, a ridiculous top hat

crushing his spiked hair. He walked around the vehicle, holding up one finger to the observers, the glimpses of blue hair glowing almost as brightly as his clothes.

‘Raf,’ June said, filling in her log.

‘No, really?’

‘I guess Piet’ll be in the back, then.’

June leaned forward, straining for a better angle until she hit her head on the bricks, rubbing her head as Rika snickered.

June turned. ‘Your biscuit fell in.’

Rika looked down to find she was indeed holding on to the barest sliver of damp crumbs, swearing as she stuck her finger into the hot liquid. She grabbed a spoon and dug around for the sludge.

‘Shut up and finish the entry,’ Rika said. ‘1045 hours: Agents Psycho and Quixote drag home one more monstrosity.’

‘Don’t say that. It could be any of us next.’

‘Not us. We’re stuck inside a dark little room in the wall.’

‘Our ‘droom’.’

June was so proud of her creation that Rika couldn’t let it slide, setting down her mug with unequivocal disapproval. ‘And *that* is why we’re stuck in here.’

‘I thought it was good. Droom.’ June rolled the creation around in her mouth. ‘Nice foreboding to it.’

‘Just keep it to your damn self this time; I’d like our exile to end in my lifetime.’

Raf slammed the doors shut as he returned to the ambulance, the noise enough to divert June from her sulk. She lowered her voice conspiratorially. ‘I’ve heard that EPD are testing out their spells on the rest of us. And that we don’t even have to hear or read them anymore, it’s *poof* and you’re gone.’

Rika was unsure if June was trying to provoke a reaction from their third wheel, or if she believed that the agent in the tiny room was magically unable to hear anything *sotto voce*.

‘They aren’t magic, just stupid people with stupid prophecies,’ Rika said loudly. ‘You’ve been listening to too many Hazpop agents, Juney.’ She pointed to the two agents below. ‘They’ve both perverted what we do and they’re tainting

us all. I mean, who here will be surprised when that truckie is found in an hour, slumped over his steering wheel.'

June's eyes widened. 'She didn't mean that. She would never suggest...'

The agent glanced across before returning to his work. 'It is of no concern to me.'

'Hear that? Murder is of no concern to him.'

Rika hit a button and sent the metal gates swinging open, the ambulance rolling into the compound. She crossed to the small window at the back of the office, following the ambulance the small distance to the Hazpop building. The two agents led another down the steps, supporting him between them. The patient was wearing a neutral SACER uniform, marking him as another ordinary agent caught in the middle of the battle of the freaks.

'Got a live one this time,' she reported.

June made a face as she untwisted herself. 'Do you think he's lucky? Maybe it would be better not to wake up,' she murmured. 'Just slip away.'

For once, a glimmer of sense emanated from her partner's lips. Rika had made it very clear that if she was ever a zombie no deluded do-gooders were going to try and rip her apart. People came back without heads, without feet or organs. Sometimes all that was left was an eyeball.

That wasn't another chance at life; it was a perverse attempt to bargain their way out of fate. Dead was dead, you either accepted that or you paid the price.

'If anyone ever tries it on me I will not only shoot the messenger, I will rip them limb from bloody limb before I hit the ground.'

'Elimbinate them?'

Rika stared. 'You may never speak again.'

'Jealous.'

'Oh yes, nothing to do with your tragic addiction to puns.' Rika held up a finger as June lowered her cup. 'If you say pundiction, I will hurt you.'

2.

‘Perhaps you might impart your truth with a little less relish next time,’ Piet said, as Raf rubbed at his temple.

‘I was telling him the truth. Like you always say.’

Piet had never said any such thing. The closest he’d come was a moment’s pause after one of Raf’s outrageous lies, that could just as easily have been a mistimed breath. But the essays Raf had written in the space of that hesitation could fill books. Over the years, the silences had filled his mental library of Piet’s peculiar moral code.

Raf flicked the ambulance door away with his foot, the artificial air flow providing some relief from the stifling heat; a large metal box probably not the best choice of seat on a sunny day. Piet had found himself a nice tree to lurk under, rather than wilting in solidarity.

‘I’m not sure that demonstrating where his flesh would be eaten by the maggots was wise, especially while he had his eyes closed.’ Piet’s voice emanated from his mutinous position in the shade.

‘He almost kicked my eye out! Luckily I have the reflexes of a cat.’ Raf recreated the scene, even though Piet had most certainly noticed the first time around. ‘I was only trying to show him the tasty bits.’

‘I think, in the future, that the doctors might be better at breaking the news.’

‘But they’re so jaded about it. Man, they don’t think it’s even a little bit cool anymore.’

‘That might be for the best.’

‘Categorically untrue,’ Raf said, punctuating the point with an extra hard kick. The door came back at him with a painful speed that he somehow failed to anticipate.

Piet’s silence this time screamed about the tenets of karma.

They were parked in front of Hazpop’s building, having hustled in their new arrival for a series of assessments. Now they were sitting around until they found out whether their charge would require an onward journey.

Waiting. Always waiting. It was Raf's job to wait. And then it was his job to die. They made it out to be an honour, but Raf couldn't care less about the accolades; he had a different reason for wanting to die. In the meantime, his days were filled with menial tasks and more waiting.

It was his father's fault, although he didn't hold it against him. Raf would never be chosen if his father had his way, and that was fine. It wouldn't stop him. One day he'd be able to see into the worlds of the other zombies, into the old worlds where his mother lived and he hadn't.

A fly landed on his cheek, evading Raf's lazy swats. There was a humid buzz in the air, a million irritated insects complaining about the heat.

Raf surveyed the deserted lawn and the perfect picnic spots going begging. 'Was this what it was like?'

There was no doubt that Piet heard and understood but his partner feigned deafness, just far enough away for a veneer of veracity.

Raf couldn't wait to be undead, he could use a bit of their psychic power right about now. As it was, he had to settle for the fact that Piet was worried enough that he wouldn't answer a direct question.

People hurried more these days, avoiding open ground as if it would save them. It wasn't hot enough for a fear of heatstroke; something else was keeping the agents from lingering in the pleasant sunshine.

The few who ventured out were rushing past Piet, unwittingly standing in as a harbinger of doom. He was a stark reminder of what they were pretending would never happen to them. Never mind that Piet was about the only hope they could glean from the situation: not everyone had died. But no one gave Piet or the ambulance a first glance, let alone a second, even when Raf kicked the door extra hard and the passing agents had to step around the nonexistent obstacle. Raf was hoping he'd hit someone; he'd like to see them pretend that it didn't exist when it whacked into their leg.

He greeted each passing uniform with a nod, sufficient intimacy for both a stranger and a casual acquaintance, neither insulting nor particularly encouraging. With their determined purpose, he had no chance of reading the tiny stitches on their uniforms that made up their names. At least he had some

hope of recognising fellow Hazpop agents from their individual styles, although they rudely insisted on changing their outfits most days.

Finally forced from the impromptu oven, Raf jiggled from foot to foot as the agents continued to give them a wide berth. He itched to reach out and shake them, forced into the role of street corner prophet trying to convert the apathetic masses. Except his message was far more important than salvation; it was nothing less than their survival.

He stepped in front of the next agent, bobbing and weaving to prevent their passage. 'The end is coming. Judgement day or whatever you want to call it.'

He was knocked backward by an errant arm that he longed to grab.

'Listen to me, listen to my partner! He knows what awaits us. We're so determined not to see what's coming.'

It had been almost two years since the last collapse and a veneer of denial had spread across the last standing branch. They alone had been spared and it would be tempting fate to ask why.

Raf almost whooped when he spotted legitimate prey, an EPD agent exiting the gate post and returning to their lair. The lack of sport didn't deter him from stalking the agent up the rise, waiting for the moment to pounce.

Piet was following behind with his quiet air of judgement, a reluctance only observable to Raf. There was something in the way his feet lifted that made it clear that he wasn't happy with where he was being led. It probably didn't occur to him not to follow.

Raf circled behind the oblivious agent, pouncing as open ground loomed. The calm of the EPD agents was always a downer; a little fear wouldn't have gone astray. It was unfortunate that he could feel them forgiving him even as he did his best to terrorise.

Raf wasn't bothered by the requirements of the other Hazpop agents, he would be able to see into other worlds without effort one day. His purpose was a higher one, in general, a much lower one at that moment in time. Unlike them, there was no need for him to hide his belief that EPD was working on a way to kill people without the untidy business of weapons or bodily fluids, and was creating an even bigger mess in the process. A mess that he was made to clean up, forced to inform victims that their choice was to die or to decompose slowly.

His intent wasn't vengeance, at least not of a proportional kind. Hatred was all-consuming. Destructive. What he wanted to do was wake them up, and if a violent shaking was what that took, then he was more than willing to oblige.

'We're not killing people,' the EPD agent stated calmly, obviously mistaking Raf for one of his equivocating brethren.

Raf didn't bother corralling the captured agent far into the bushes, not planning on doing anything that required more than the barest concealment.

He cocked his head towards Piet. 'What do you think?'

'This isn't productive.'

The captured agent looked relieved, Raf tutting loudly enough to dissuade any notions of reprieve. 'I think our friend Francis may disagree with that – our friend Francis that one of you psychopaths tried to kill this morning. What do you say to that?'

'We're not ...'

He reached up to grab the agent by his robes, but there a light touch on his shoulder. That damn hand. Twitching away in disgust, he turned on someone he could menace without consequence.

Piet refused to meet the challenge, pretending to keep watch over the prisoner. He needn't have bothered, the EPD agent wasn't concerned enough to be planning an escape.

Piet stepped out of the agent's path. 'Go.'

Raf dismissed the agent with a flick of his hand, knowing that any further action was pointless. 'Yeah, you scurry on home and tell your friends that they are skating on thin ice. Never know when I might catch one of you without my conscience beside me.'

'That didn't solve anything,' Piet said.

'I disagree, it was fun. And when we collect Francis we can tell him all about it.'

'His name is Franz.' Piet steered him back down the hill and the waiting ambulance.

'Really? I have to say, cold, dead lips are no excuse for poor diction. Oh well, still a nice fellow, if a little mumbley.'

Orlagh knocked on the door, realising that she had dirt on her cheek as her mother called her in. She brushed herself off hastily, stepping into the office with an unwarranted confidence.

‘One hundred and seventy-two,’ her mother announced.

Orlagh closed the door and let go of the handle. Her father turned to greet her with a less confusing smile. Orlagh preferred his approach, hoping he wasn’t merely amused at a missed smudge.

‘OK,’ Orlagh said. Even her non-committal answer was wrong, based on her mother’s expression.

‘That’s how many seconds it took for you to get here.’

Orlagh beamed at her speed, and she wasn’t even out of breath. Except that was even more clearly the wrong thing to do. ‘Sorry?’

‘Where were you?’

The question was either a test or a simple enquiry; her father giving no indication on whether he’d already shared the task he had set. With no idea about what such a test might constitute, she was stuck with the truth. And the truth was stuck on her. ‘The lawn.’

‘In the dirt?’

Orlagh had done as she’d been asked, had come as soon as her father had called. She had nothing to hide.

‘On it,’ she clarified. If there was going to be disapproval, it would at least be based on the facts.

Her mother was silent for a long moment. ‘Downstairs. We have a freshly dead agent.’

Freddie beat Orlagh to the door, grasping at the handle before she could reach it.

‘Why was Mum counting?’ she whispered.

‘Because she’s cruel.’ Freddie’s pointed look behind him sacrificed all pretence of secrecy.

‘Because he’s incompetent,’ Brigid said, locking her office door with a snap of her wrist.

She brushed past Orlagh, who let a longer period elapse before turning to her father. ‘Was I supposed to ignore the call?’

‘Who knows?’

‘One of us should,’ she said. He seemed unconcerned that she had failed another of her mother’s tests, but she couldn’t keep laughing it off. It was all getting a little too real now. ‘It seems like she’s in a hurry, so how was getting here quickly wrong? What should I have done?’

‘Well, it depends.’

And there was the problem, hanging between them like his unfinished answer. It all depended on something, a little something that Orlagh never seemed to guess at and her father could never explain.

She sneaked a glance at him. ‘Nothing to do with me having to retake my grading?’

‘Why would you think that?’

Orlagh rolled her eyes. ‘Don’t bother. Apparently it’s all over SACER by now.’

‘I doubt that. But you know I can’t say anything until you get your official results. Up until then, always assume that you’re being tested, whatever you’re doing.’

His evasion gave away more than he intended. Or possibly exactly the amount he planned. Her mother must have pulled some strings, arranging a new examination immediately.

‘Should I have come in through the window?’

‘Maybe.’

By the time they reconvened with her mother, Orlagh had managed to ascertain that not one of her hypothetical responses was definitively correct. Apparently her father could only judge their correctness in the same way as pornography; he’d know it when he saw it.

Putting aside another crushing blow to her career, she focused on her chance for redemption. There was a new task for her to get right, to show she’d learned something. Anything.

Franz Hull was enclosed in a secure room, devouring a hamburger. Apparently temporarily dying didn’t ruin your appetite.

It had been a hard day for Agent Hull, but he was right to be celebrating; he was a rare creature. So far it seemed like enough of his living tissue had made it to the same world, in all the important places.

Orlagh's mother was a statuesque presence at the back of their observation room, engaged in her own scrutiny. At least Franz had glass between him and his spectators.

'We need everything we can get from him,' Brigid said. 'That's why I've put my best team on this.'

Orlagh perked up. Maybe holding her nerve in the face of unwarranted censure had been a test. 'Really?'

The comedown was mercifully swift. 'Of course not, darling. But it's a good idea to get into the habit of telling it to your agents. Feel free to write that one down.'

Freddie shook his head as he held the door open for Orlagh, unlocking the interview room door and ushering her in.

'Morning, Franz.'

Freddie and Orlagh took their seats, sitting opposite the victim. Orlagh could feel the judgemental gaze of her mother on the back of her neck as the silence lengthened. It seemed to amuse Franz and her father, leaving the first question to her.

'What was dying like?'

'Which time?'

'Um. Either.' Her flustered answer wasn't the right one, even she realised that much. The second death had been by Hazpop's hand, no need to go into that one. She clarified the answer, 'First one.'

Franz stared up at the corner of the room, scratching at his neck as he leaned back in his chair. 'There was a white light ...' he began, eyes fixed on the camera as he recounted his tale.

Orlagh began transcribing the details in her notebook for an additional record. Her pen slipped across the page when her father put his hand on her wrist, squeezing her arm until she stopped writing.

Franz watched her intently. 'I heard someone call my name and I was pulled towards them. It was a strong and powerful voice, but I felt at home. Safe.'

To Orlagh's surprise, her father snorted.

'Franny.'

Orlagh was familiar with the mix of warning and amusement in her father's tone, on the receiving end of many such admonishments.

Franz looked as shocked as Orlagh for a moment, before he spread his hands with a smile. 'You never know, Fred. Have a little faith.'

'Orlagh, make a note that Agent Hull remains as big an arse as ever.'

Freddie opened his mouth when she started writing, but she took his subsequent smile as a signal to continue. As an afterthought, she crossed through the line about the light. Pity.

'Did you see anyone around when it happened?' Orlagh was keen to show that she knew her role. There was still a chance that her mother hadn't walked away in disgust.

'There was a crowd but I didn't see anyone speaking.'

'Did someone say the words out loud or did you hear them in your mind?'

'All I remember are the echoes of my own voice.'

Orlagh nodded as she filled in the details. It was a common experience. Unless the victim had a memory of seeing someone's lips moving with the words their mind took over the repetition. She had experienced it as part of her training, exposed to harmless prophecies so she knew what the effect felt like. In her case, it had become a compulsion to repeat the word, and in the end she couldn't identify that her own father had whispered them first.

Even in that controlled environment, with harmless words circling in her mind, the helplessness had begun to take over before she could pull out her *vade mecum* and fill her mind with its safe words.

'I read your stupid card, for all the good it did,' he said, causing Orlagh to look up with a jolt. The zombies often displayed some level of psychic abilities, but not once they'd been split. It was probably an unfortunate coincidence, Franz not appearing smug enough to have just flaunted his ability to read her mind.

She added the information to her page, pressing hard to hide the shaking lines. With the initial questions at an end, her father drew a sheaf of papers from the plastic pocket he had carried in, beginning his battery of tests. Her job would be to monitor how the agent behaved, rather than recording the results.

Franz didn't have trouble concentrating, enjoying an easy rapport with Freddie between the tasks. There was no concession for Franz's state, the normality almost forced. Orlagh might have been tempted to use a lighter touch but that didn't seem like the right approach. She made a note in her margin, writing 'unkind' in tiny letters. If someone did decipher it, they'd think it was judgement on her father's technique rather than a cheat sheet for what she should do in a similar situation.

'So, what do you think, Franz?' Freddie asked, having completed a final test of his short-term memory. 'Off to Havenscroft with you?'

That was even more direct than Orlagh would have ventured.

'Try and your arse will find out how solid my foot is.'

Freddie chuckled. 'Yeah, you're fine. Come on, I'll walk you back to your department. Some worried people are waiting for you.'

Franz stifled a yawn as he pushed back his chair. 'Long day.'

'Not even lunch yet, Franny,' Freddie said, holding the door. He craned his neck to impart a last instruction before he disappeared. 'When you finish writing up your report, get it to your mother.'

With no idea of where to start, Orlagh neatened the stack of his sheets. He was well aware that she had no idea how to write up such a report, but his belief was enough to stop her running to her mother for help.

There was nothing more she could do without the baseline from Agent Hull's original tests for comparison, so she locked the door and went upstairs. The observation room door was shut as she passed, but she resisted the urge to find out how much of her effort had been witnessed.

A side trip to the records room added Agent Hull's file to her papers. She found an empty conference room and spread the sheets across the desk, staring at them with increasing despair.

They kept trying to force her to learn, but this was Áine's job; she was the one who should be sitting at the table, trying to make sense of the numbers. Every crappy report and every botched interview was another reminder that the role wasn't hers to take, that she was just an imposter. But no one else realised that, continuing to hand over the responsibilities that didn't belong to her.

Orlagh put her head on the desk. Maybe this time they'd see.

3.

‘We had a brick over the wall this morning.’

It was a typical greeting from his sister-in-law. She had no time for niceties or Magnus, the two combining into an impressive brusqueness.

‘Good arm,’ Magnus noted as he took his seat. Diane’s reaction was disappointingly muted.

‘The cameras have picked up a general increase in activity around the perimeter,’ she continued. ‘We have to speak to someone about this; either the council or the heads of the departments. This is intolerable.’

‘It’s a little bit of high-spiritedness. Nothing to make a fuss over.’

‘What about when a student gets hit with a missile?’

‘They’re not allowed in the front garden, so none of them will be there.’

The list in front of Diane was long and she was only two items into it. Magnus tried to catch the eye of his brother, but Augustus was inspecting the top of his folded hands.

Augustus was determined to rub his quiet ease in Magnus’s face. Not having been trained for leadership he had fallen into the easy life of blind obedience, a peace Magnus could never allow himself. At least Diane had some fire in her; it made their daily meetings bearable, if not pleasant.

Magnus cut Diane off when she ran her finger down to the next point. ‘I heard all this in my security briefing, Diane. How about a report from your department?’

‘This does concern my department, although I’m not surprised you don’t see the connection.’

Magnus tried not to smile. It was a constant fight not to antagonise his sister-in-law. Luckily for her composure, today he was in the mood for a story.

‘Enlighten me.’

‘There is outright hostility out there. Agent Jellis was assaulted this morning coming back from gate duty. No one out there is interested in doing anything to help us, so we have to step up the efforts to protect ourselves.’

Magnus shrugged. 'If you want to be the hero here, fine. Go for it. I've given you a whole department to follow your hunch. And, despite the lack of evidence, I intend to continue allowing you to do so.'

'Allowing' was risky, but he figured that listening to her demands almost balanced out his vulgar display of power. Almost.

'You have never showed any faith in it,' Diane said, admirably committed to the cause. 'In me.'

'Surely my belief isn't a prerequisite for your success.' Magnus gathered his files. 'Anything else from the ARG? Augustus?'

His brother gave him the look of the pious pitying the unbeliever. 'We will find an answer with or without you, Magnus.'

'Excellent. Enterprising spirit, just what I like to hear.'

Diane stared at the empty chair. Magnus could almost see the cogs turning.

'Where is Idris?' Her inflection carried an accusation that made it clear that no answer was required. 'I told you he wasn't ready.'

'I wasn't prepared to keep lying to him. I'm sorry if you were looking forward to the prospect.'

'How dare you, you arrogant bastard,' Diane said, taking to her feet in a dramatic movement. 'This is on you.'

She was right, of course. The choice had been his and the consequences were his to deal with. He had weighed it all when he made the choice and he had still thought that Idris deserved the truth. Postponing the inevitable was only going to make Idris feel stupider for having believed. Magnus knew the feeling all too well, hoping to lessen the impact for his nephew as much as possible.

Augustus reflected his wife's sentiment in neither gesture nor movement, following her from the room with a quiet assurance that worried Magnus more than Diane's bluster. There were moments when Magnus could see what Diane saw: the brilliant leader that Augustus could be. His brother was calm and thoughtful and he honestly thought they were doing the right and honourable thing. He had an inner peace not just in spite of what they were doing, but because of it.

That was the problem.

‘And what did you do wrong?’

Her mother had at least waited until the other agents had filed out of the conference room before beginning her impromptu review.

Orlagh moved her pen and uncovered the last page of notes. Her account of the meeting covered the thoughts and interjections of their senior officers. She had recorded them all precisely, her handwriting legible if not ornate.

Every counter argument was on her page: those seeking a hard line against EPD for the previous day’s attack on Franz Hull and those pointing out that there was no proof that EPD was involved. A few agents had argued against their earlier positions, but that was neither an uncommon experience nor was it related to anything Orlagh had done.

Brigid interrupted Orlagh’s review. ‘Why did you let Agent Krill talk his way out of the assignment you gave him?’

Orlagh flicked back a few pages. ‘You said to be more flexible.’

‘And last week I told you that you need to stick to your decisions. You need to start paying attention.’

Orlagh confirmed the previous instruction, underlined in the middle of the page.

‘OK,’ she said.

‘You can’t just do the most recent thing I’ve told you.’

‘Right. Got it.’

Orlagh wrote a line at the bottom of the page: more flexible. Stick to guns.

She underlined it, pulling up her sleeve under the table. She wrote *Flexible* and *Guns* on the inside of her wrist. They joined the other reminders. *Decisive. Thoughtful. Mercy. Revenge.*

Every time she bowed her head in thoughtful consideration she was reading her list, finding the best choice for the situation. She would keep trying until she got the right one.

She looked up to find her mother staring at her, the question that seemed to hang on her lips dissipating as her focus shifted to the door.

Orlagh turned to find her father leaning against the frame, smiling when she waved.

He pulled up a chair uninvited. ‘How did it go?’

Orlagh consulted her minutes. ‘O’Brien thinks that all the recent activity points to EPD planning something. Dern asked for proof which O’Brien did not provide.’

‘Thank you, Orlagh.’ Her mother cut her off right when she was getting to the good bit were O’Brien almost punched Yarrow for suggesting that EPD was guilty. ‘Longer than usual. Same result. And there’s no need to look so smug. I remember when you used to bother pretending we had your loyalty.’

‘How long do I have to keep proving myself?’

‘Until you stop hiding what you know about our enemy.’

‘I didn’t leave because I wanted them destroyed.’

Orlagh couldn’t decide whether to remind her parents of her presence or avoid involving herself, indecision choosing for her.

‘We all know something’s coming and if you playing both sides gets any agent of mine hurt ...’

Orlagh jumped at the opening. ‘Do you think EPD was connected to what happened to the other SACERs?’

‘What?’ Her mother was suitably distracted, almost drowned out by her father’s vehement denial.

‘This morning, that was EPD, wasn’t it? And you think that’s a sign of something to come?’

‘We don’t know,’ her mother said, reluctance colouring every word. But there was nothing else she could say, given her position.

‘But all these attacks,’ Orlagh persisted, ‘it sounds like what happened before the other branches collapsed.’ From what they could piece together, at least. Few records had survived. ‘We have to do something.’

Her parents looked uncomfortable, albeit for very different reasons. And neither could explain to her why they were sitting and waiting for their world to fall around them.

Idris Wischard wore his gloom like a cloak. It was just as well, because what he was actually wearing was a yellow jumper with a picture of a kangaroo on the front pocket and little black ears affixed to the hood. He left his dark, heavy

cloak sitting in a box with the regret of someone forced to use primary colours to convey deep existential angst.

The colours had been bright and sunny when Áine had smuggled it in for him. These days it was faded and revealed a little too much of his wrists and t-shirt, but it was still a splash of colour in the grey castle.

He didn't realise he had been staring until the sun disappeared behind clouds and his appearance sprung up on the darkened glass. He blinked, startled by the grotesque apparition, snapping his mouth shut and standing up straighter.

He finally took in where he had been staring. Same place as always. It was the ultimate in desperate endeavours, searching for a tiny face in a window across the grounds. Especially since she was standing right behind him.

Death was all he had on his mind and she wasn't letting him forget it for a moment. The castle bled warmth at the best of times, but this morning it harboured an extra chill. He could see through even the smallest comfort now, the glow of righteousness that resided in studious and pious faces was a dangerous insidious lie that corrupted everything they touched.

It was fitting. Nothing deserved to live inside the castle.

The path he was taking to work was designed to avoid punctuality and he arrived in the basement successful on that count. It wasn't late enough, though. He turned left instead of right and imprisoned himself in a different kind of cell.

Idris sank to the ground and stretched out on his back, staring into the semi-darkness. The girl who had followed him down sat with a little more grace. He closed his eyes and he could see her there too, but it was a memory, not a presence: the shock of the touch and the thud of their bodies.

He ran his fingers over the faint scorch mark on the floor, the only indication that she'd ever been in the room. Her lighter had been open and flame dancing before he'd finished relaying the plan, her smile giving the red reflection in her eyes the evillest of glints. But he had lost his nerve and reached out to stop her.

He rubbed his arm as the memory of the shock made it ache from finger to elbow.

In his mind she was still lying there, arm outstretched. In the half-lit room, her ghost was running her heels over the floor and looking bored.

‘What I am supposed to do, Annie?’ he whispered. ‘Do you want me to avenge you?’

Maybe she came without knowing he’d be here. She might have returned to the scene of the crime as a troubled spirit looking for justice.

It had been a joke, an off-hand remark in the middle of the night. He wanted revenge for Magnus, wanted to do what he couldn’t when he was younger. But no one was laughing now. Áine was perpetually bemused, investigating her ghostly plane. Magnus was concerned. His mother shouted and then was silent.

Drawing the lighter from his pocket, he ran a finger down the polished metal case. Magnus had returned it along with the unconscious Idris to his room.

It wasn’t too late to finish the job. He held the flame above the blackened floor, flinching as it bent and licked at his fingers. It would be so easy. And the padding in the walls would smoulder long enough that he could usher everyone to safety.

Idris flicked the lighter shut and shielded his eyes when a dark figure appeared in the doorway, the light brighter as it struggled around the new obstacle.

Not even his Magnus’s folded arms crossed the threshold. ‘You didn’t make it to the meeting again.’

Idris slipped the lighter into his pocket as they both pretended he hadn’t been considering burning down their home. Magnus spent a lot of his time very studiously looking in the opposite direction when it came to Idris. It made him the only person in the castle remotely worth having a conversation with.

‘I’m not needed for at least thirty years. Thought I’d hang out with our other forgotten children.’

The cells around him were populated with students who’d broken the strict rules governing their behaviour. He’d sent a few down himself, under Magnus’s supervision. One boy’s crime was to defend himself from the attack of another student. Extreme, but there was no place for emotional reactions even under provocation, not when they could destroy lives with one word.

Magnus followed his gaze. ‘They believe in what we’re doing so much that they’d suffer for a chance to come back.’

‘Why don’t I get to be sure?’ Idris shook off the old doubts. They were righteous without cause; deluded in their devotion. ‘No, I’m glad you told me. They only believe because you’re tricking them. We’re damning them by association.’

‘We have to live with it, what we do, so that we can protect our people. Protect them, and protect them from knowing. It will get easier in time.’

Idris sat up. ‘I don’t want it to be easier. I don’t want to become that person.’ He turned from his spectral companion. ‘I’m not a killer.’

Yet still she haunted him. The distinction seemed irrelevant even as he made his proclamation.

Magnus flicked the light on from the outside switch, waiting for the fluorescent tube to fall into a quiet hum. ‘I never understood, why this cell?’

‘Why them or why me?’

‘I’m guessing my brother just took the first one available. I’m more interested in your choice.’

Idris debated the lies and the omissions but he wasn’t in the mood for mercy, not for himself or for others. He stared straight through Áine. ‘It reminds me not to let my guard down. Not to trust anyone.’

‘Your parents won’t hurt you, Idris. They wouldn’t do anything to you. And I wouldn’t ever let them.’

Big talk from a man who refused to save himself.

Áine’s ghostly hand hovered above the last place he’d seen her, trying as hard as he was to understand.

‘I’m not a killer,’ Idris repeated softly.

‘Of course you’re not. I know you don’t agree, but what we’re doing could help everyone who needed our help. Wouldn’t that be worth it?’

‘I don’t think even you believe it is.’

Magnus didn’t deny the accusation, his smile inappropriate unless it was designed to cover something else.

Orlagh pulled back her curtain and watched the students outside. Her mother had taken Niall down to the fair, no doubt seeking distraction after their meeting,

so there was no need for Orlagh to be following her. Nothing down there would make tomorrow go any better than any of the last six months.

She had revisions to make on her report on Franz Hull, all things that would have been easily included if her father had given her the slightest guidance. But she knew now that whatever she thought was irrelevant was invariably essential, and vice versa.

Abandoning the report, she pivoted in the chair and faced her back wall, replacing an immediate problem with a much older question.

‘Where are you?’ The whiteboard was impassive in the face of her scrutiny, listing all the reasons for the silence. The lines on it were impermanent, the edge of a letter coming off under her fingertip, but she had preserved them when no one else had hope.

In the centre of the board, someone had written EPD, with lines and diagrams connecting all the other points and notes. It had been circled and underlined and traced over, but she never knew who had put it up there in the first place. It was as if the assumption lurking in the minds of the investigators had leaped on to the board through the sheer power of their belief.

Now, more than ever, they needed Áine back in her rightful place. Orlagh needed her back.

There were still answers to be found, and it was the perfect day to try.

Most agents had drifted outside, leaving her to commit her crimes in peace. She glanced over her shoulder before picking the lock the way Áine had taught her, unsure if Áine would appreciate the skill being practiced on her own door. She smiled as there was a click. Áine would have loved it.

Everything was where it had been left, returned after the initial search. Orlagh kept one eye on the reflection in the computer monitor as she sat, waiting for Áine to appear and give her the most welcome heart attack of her life. When no one burst in accusingly, Orlagh booted the computer.

The hard drive had been searched when she’d first disappeared, providing no clues to the investigators. What they didn’t know was that Orlagh had already removed anything pertinent from the computer.

Orlagh had done what Áine asked; she had deleted any incriminating files as soon as her sister had failed to return that night. The copy she made wasn’t part

of the deal, but not strictly forbidden. It had been her last resort, the last hope she wasn't ready to part with.

The time for polite aversion was over.

Orlagh opened the first transcript, wishing she could read between her fingers. But she needed to be able to see something in order to justify what she was doing.

A few translations were required, but she managed to pick most of it up from the context. There was no sign about where Áine could have gone, no plans or threats. Orlagh deleted her copies and opened up the messaging program.

It was time to find out just how desperately she wanted her sister back.

4.

Diane set down her tea, the steam still too thick to attempt consumption. Pulling her chair in, she perused the open file, hoping the break might have given her new insight.

The contents remained unchanged and unchanging, but every time she read them she was different. She was the new variable and one day she would be ready to see what they were trying to tell her.

The mug cooled enough to be a source of warmth without fear of burning. The last tendrils of steam wavered and dissipated under her breath, tentative sips warming her chest.

Every draught that circled through the castle ended up down in the basement, travelling through the iron-wrought front wall of her office and hitting her in the face. She imagined Magnus was standing at their front doors, dragging them open and closed all day. He certainly wasn't doing any real work.

Still, through arrogance or misguided complacency, he left her alone. No doubt he thought she'd fail.

The aim of the Advanced Research Group was to unlock the power of words, although it was presented in less stark terms to the rest of EPD, and especially to SACER. It was a select few who were able to handle the truth of their purpose and she was beginning to fear that her son wasn't among the chosen.

But this was her destiny. Her parents had known she was going to achieve great things, selflessly stepping aside so she could be raised in an environment that would nurture her gifts. They had planned it all, left her in a church in the dead of night, knowing that she would be eventually be tested and taken in by the SACER recruitment department. They had known she would shine and be noticed. She would show them they were right to trust in her fate, that it had guided her to the only place she belonged.

And she was so close to achieving everything they'd broken their hearts to facilitate. She and Augustus were almost able to do everything they'd dreamed, to improve the world in practical, undeniable ways.

It had been her job to review the cases of missing agents, to search for Hazpop interference. They had already been scoured at the time, but she was the back-up, the last line of defence.

After a year, she had opened a box and knew it was different. She had fought with Magnus the morning of the discovery, the argument convincing her that she was closer than ever to having something to throw in his face. And there it had been, sitting in the personal effects of two missing agents: Maya Campbell and Hugo Lough.

What she had uncovered was a secret that probably cost two agents their lives; somehow Agent Campbell had written a story that was coming true over forty years later. Scribbled in the back of her partner's notebook, the story spelled out the story of a little boy and the castle he lived in.

Except no one else saw the reflections of their lives in the pages. They might have been little things, easily dismissed as coincidence, but they all added up; a mention of a particular moment in time that she could trace back to a certain passage, a description of events outside echoed in old words.

Somehow the agent had created a prophecy that was playing out now. And it ended in their deaths.

It was all coming so quickly now. The unrest in SACER – *Disharmony without will rumble in low tones* – and fall of the other headquarters around the world – *There will be no voice but their own*. She hadn't been sure about that last one until the European incident.

And now all that was left was the end, their fate scrawled in the margins:

The child of the undead will see his mother one last time, on the last day. If he should die before this day, the world will collapse in its grief.

And on another page:

The heir will leave before the fall.

Even without Magnus's help she had managed to monitor both prerequisites of their downfall. Taking care of Idris and Augustus first, she had then identified the only zombie-born agent in SACER as Jacob Israfil. Not that he was hard to find; he made his presence known to EPD agents with an alarming frequency and

vigour. The first step in neutralising his threat had been easy and satisfyingly poetic, the second proving galling as reports came in of his campaign of harassment. But he was not harmed any further than had been necessary.

The futures weren't inevitable, but at the moment she was stalling for time. What she had to do was find out how those words were so powerful when their own prophecies so often faltered and wavered. The only variable she could isolate was the presentation, but Magnus refused to shift to a narrative-based delivery system until she could meet his ridiculous standard of proof.

She glanced at the clock as the careless step of her son approached. Today she was grateful that he turned up at all. It was a depressingly low bar that Magnus had forced on her.

He slumped into his chair without greeting.

'Why weren't you at our meeting?'

He shrugged.

'Speak up, Idris.'

'I don't know.'

'Of course you know.'

Another shrug. He didn't even put any effort into it; half a shoulder raise was all he felt she deserved.

Refusing to rise to his obvious baiting, another legacy of too much time spent with his uncle, Diane resolved to find the answer at a later date. Instead she focused on the opportunity for him to redeem himself with a good day's work.

Despite his reluctance, he was a fresh set of eyes. And he didn't care, which meant he wasn't trying to force an answer where there was none. His mind was open, even in its state of derision.

It didn't hurt that he was part of the story. He was the hero. It was a hard thing to explain to a boy while forbidding him to set another foot outside their little world. Maybe if she'd realised earlier, hadn't given him a taste of freedom, it would have been easier. But they all had to make sacrifices; it's what being the heroes required.

She had tried to be patient. Magnus never shouted, so she had to keep the field level.

‘The boy – the heir – he lives in a castle, see? Look, he has adventures. He has a mother who loves him very much. And then everything falls apart when he leaves. See?’

It had been easier when he was little, before Magnus sunk his claws in. Now she lived in constant fear of his disobedience.

‘It’s a story about a boy in a castle. The person who wrote this lived in a castle. It doesn’t prove anything aside from a lack of imagination.’

And now, in the last few days, she had begun to despair. The plan had always been to wait until he was older, to wait until he was ready to accept the ambiguity of their work. She knew he wasn’t ready, she had the sulking proof in front of her, but Magnus had once again taken it upon himself to act with the veneer of transparency and honesty. It was nothing more than his pathetic attempts to steal back what he could never have for himself.

Idris didn’t comment on his work, but that wasn’t unusual. The lack of pages turning was more of a concern, finding him staring at her with a strange expression.

‘Something on your mind, darling?’

‘Do you want to murder people?’

‘What has your uncle been telling you?’

‘He only ever tells me the truth.’

Diane scoffed. ‘He’s trying to turn you against us.’

‘But he wasn’t lying, was he?’

‘I don’t want to hurt people, Idris. You know why we’re doing this, you can see how much good we’re capable of doing.’

‘Lol,’ Idris muttered darkly.

‘Idris!’

‘Laugh out loud,’ he corrected, without a hint of the aforementioned amusement. ‘Well, now it doesn’t make sense.’

Diane sighed. ‘Of course it doesn’t and I wish you would stop using such vulgar language to get at me. It’s a bad habit.’

‘M’not.’ He made the mistake of meeting her eyes. ‘I am not.’

‘You already did. Don’t do it again.’

Her son stared at her with a lack of comprehension that lent urgency to her chiding. There was no room for subtlety.

‘How would you feel if you were responsible for something awful happening because you didn’t watch your language?’

‘I’m already responsible for terrible things. We all are.’

Careless words could kill. Stories shaped their futures. And her son still didn’t understand either. He was stuck in a juvenile understanding of right and wrong, refusing to acknowledge the necessity of the grey. They were turned towards a better world and it wasn’t a misstep that would take them away from their goal, a complete about-face would be required to corrupt their intentions.

‘You’re the one putting us in danger,’ he said, ‘giving them ammunition to hate us.’

‘I refuse to apologise for wanting to protect us. To protect you. I’d do anything to keep you safe, and one day you might understand that.’

While he continued to review the day’s notes, she could tell that she hadn’t changed his mind. His eyes may have moved across the page, but his face was set into one of doubt and resentment.

‘Understanding the power doesn’t mean we have to use it,’ she said, her tone conciliatory. It would be so much easier if he was on her side, if she wasn’t constantly fighting to be heard.

‘As if you could resist.’

‘Right. That’s enough for today. Go to your room, Idris, and come back tomorrow in a better mood.’

‘Or what? I don’t get to work on your little death squad?’

‘Out.’

He slammed the gate, rattling the mesh walls that surrounded her.

Diane forced herself to move with a calm she didn’t feel, retrieving the notebook he’d flung down and reshaping the spiral binding. She sipped her cold tea and pretended it tasted like more than liquid tannin.

This wasn’t Idris’s fault. Magnus had been there, undermining her every word since Idris had been a baby. But his reaction was precisely the kind of display they all had to fight against. Even with the leeway he was allowed, and required to have, he couldn’t let his emotions rule his behaviour. She intended on

one day leaving him to run a division that potentially had the power to control life and death. Right now she wouldn't trust him to be in charge of the little power they currently wielded.

There was no way to fight Magnus's influence other than by doggedly continuing to teach Idris the correct way to deal with their power and hope that something had sunk in by the time Magnus was gone.

Diane started a new page. There was no sense in letting it distract her now. The sooner she finished her work, the sooner he'd come around.

The slammed door had barely stopped reverberating through the basement when Idris entered the main corridor. The stairs out of the basement were through the prison and he couldn't stand the silent judgement of his peers right at that moment.

He checked over his shoulder, but his mother wouldn't be leaving her lair until the end of the day, and certainly not to run after him. Ignoring his orders, he followed the series of connecting corridors until he became shrouded in a forest of pipes and wires. It was all bare concrete and mysterious drips, echoing impossibly through the cramped conditions.

Ignoring the various warning signs, some of which he'd plastered on himself, Idris yanked open the final door and rounded the corner. Taking a deep breath, he squeezed himself through what appeared to be a little drain at the bottom of the wall. It was always the worst part, the concrete closing in around him until he made it through to the main tunnel. The roof didn't clear his head by much, but it was always luxurious given the journey.

His footsteps were the only sound as he walked down the chamber, searching the wall with his torch. He found a bare patch and fished the chalk from his pocket.

Annie. Save me.

He would gladly pay for the melodrama and the use of the hated nickname if she was there to dish out his punishment, daring her to come back and mock him mercilessly.

Old messages littered the tunnel as he retreated into the castle: Different colours, different pleas, different days. No replies.

Sometimes, out of the corner of his eye, he swore there was an extra line of writing, but it always disappeared under the illumination of his torch.

He swept past the last message, crawling back through the entrance. He had intended to keep his head down through the cells, but the observation window on one had been left open, the glimpse of an arm enough to draw him over.

Except for one converted cell, there were no locks inside or out, incarceration conducted on an honour system. Idris drew open the door revealing the student sitting cross-legged on his bed. He couldn't have been more than ten but he showed no distress at his confinement. The name on the door was familiar, even if the face wasn't; Idris hadn't seen the consequences of his decisions.

'Hello, sir.'

Idris glanced over his shoulder but found no one behind him. 'Call me, Idris.'

The child nodded in a way that gave Idris no confidence.

'Come out with me, Paul. It's OK.'

The boy shook his head. 'I have another nine days.'

'That's OK. I pardon you.' Idris crouched down, trying not to loom over the small figure. 'We can go and find some of the junk food my uncle hoards.'

He held out his hand, but Paul didn't move. 'Please. You're not going to be in any trouble.'

'I'm not ready yet.'

'Of course you are, look how good you're being.'

But he was stubborn, the only childish thing about him.

Lucy and Renee in the next two cells sat with the same expressions, pitying his unseemly emotion as he begged them to step outside.

Idris threw every door open, panting as he reached the end and stood in an empty corridor. He edged forward as Paul's head peeked out, his heart plummeting as the young student closed himself back in his cell.

They had already broken these children, offering them the chance to change the world and sacrificing them to murderous ambition. More followed Paul's lead, shutting themselves away.

When Idris left there were only three doors still open. He couldn't stand being there for the last one.

The corridors were as quiet as ever, the students moving from classroom to common rooms to study and revise. The whole day was spent in various rooms, speaking in hushed voices and generally cultivating an air of benevolent superiority. It was never smug, no, that would never do.

Idris passed students who were smiling and speaking quietly among themselves; happy in their ignorance and blinded by their righteousness. Not to be confused with rightness, of which they had very little. None of them did.

Safely locked in his room, Idris sat at his computer, the only student allowed such a thing in his private quarters. He also had his own bathroom, fridge, TV and, most importantly, internet connection. Last week, he would have given up all the perks for the chance to have some of their quiet assurance but, no matter how much it hurt, the truth was still better than their enforced ignorance.

The rain was beating down on the roof, audible only on the top floor of the castle. Without a window he could only hear the downpour, a steady thrum that sang in harmony with the whirring fan of his ancient computer.

He flitted from website to website, clicking through random connections with the barest glances at the page before he was on to the next. When he had regained focus, he opened his chat window, nestling down into a familiar room. People came and went, argued and flirted, flamed and made peace. The words were his whole world while they were on the screen, instantly forgotten the moment they scrolled out of view.

He ignored the attempts to engage him in conversation. There was no one here he wanted to talk to.

Spinning around in his chair, he wondered why he bothered. Ghosts couldn't type. But she had left enough presents while she was alive, little reminders that she had existed. A jumper, a cigarette lighter. And her graffiti.

His official EPD dictionary sat on the corner of his desk, but his original resided further in, pressed behind the drawers. He had lost enough pens down there to realise the benefits of the poor construction. It was defaced by their enemy, full of little notes in the margins. She kept it up to date with all of SACER's changes, hiding messages in the pages for him to find in the middle of class.

He ran his finger over the inscription embossed on the cover: *Omnes vulnerant, ultima necat*. The shiny gold letters were fading, the wear of young fingers thirsting for knowledge and the regret of old ones recalling previous naivety.

Just having it in the room made it easier to breathe. It had been a promise; that she'd be back with new words to add, and that in this room there was a world beyond the castle.

He needed it today, needed to feel it under his fingers. It was a symbol of his hatred made into hope. The precision of language that they coveted had been updated and changed with the red pen of independent thought.

He was only half paying attention to the computer screen when he felt a flutter in his stomach. It took a moment for him to find the name his brain had already processed, recognised by a tiny corner of his mind reserved for nothing but those nine letters.

/Pollyanna has entered the room

The handle she had used wasn't unique or uncommon. He kept repeating the denials to himself as he tried to slow his racing heart.

He could almost breathe normally when there was a flash of movement in the corner of his screen. The cursor trembled as he moved to open the private conversation.

Pollyanna: Ididididiot?

It was the most welcome insult he had ever been given.

Rapunzel: ANNIE?

Pollyanna: Ouch. Geez.

Rapunzel: Don't go. Please.

Pollyanna: I'll stay if you untie the real Idiot and get rid of the shouty weirdo who spells correctly.

Pollyanna: ...and then dispose of him wherever it is you hide the bodies.

Rapunzel: Your water supply?

Pollyanna: Heh. Nice to see you again, Idiot the bold.

Rapunzel: Hi, Slantypants. Where are you?

Pollyanna: im in ur castle, killin ur prophetz. lol.

Rapunzel: oh noes.

Idris didn't want to ask again, unwilling to push, expecting her to log off after every line.

He took a deep breath and tried to keep her talking.

Rapunzel: (It was the 'lol' that made it especially menacing.)

Pollyanna: Inorite? It's like the whipped cream and cherry of creepiness.

Rapunzel: I can has sinister LOL

Pollyanna: Creepy tiem nao? lolz

Rapunzel: Snap

Pollyanna: Damn, too slow. Curse these mortal fingers.

Rapunzel: You think immortal ones are superfast?

Pollyanna: At any given moment 33% of our brain power is occupied with our impending deaths. When this is not an issue, that third is freed up for typing. And possibly flying. Trufax.

Rapunzel: Interesting statistic. A link to the study?

Pollyanna: Oh sure, it was 'Braaaaaains: A close study of the ~~tasty human head candy~~ human brain',

published in the Journal of Statistics that Pollyanna Totally Didn't Make Up.

Rapunzel: Ah, the good old JSPTDMU.

Pollyanna: Damn. If I was cleverer I would have totally ruder. Or at all rude.

Rapunzel: Totally got a new favourite word, Y/Y?

Pollyanna: ...?

Rapunzel: That you totally <3, like, TOTALLY.

Pollyanna: Oh. Totally. Ha, it doesn't look like a word anymore.

Rapunzel: ZOMG you broke a word! You killed it ded and now you're going to word gaol! Woe.

Pollyanna: Word gaol? Are the bars made of giant 'I's? Oooh, the whole place can be built from them - it'll be a true panopticon, only better! The Punopticon! Instead of observation, it's constructed around puns.

Rapunzel: No, the one we already

The icy void in his chest froze him mid-sentence.

He hit enter, fighting the urge to yank the keyboard out with every new keystroke. It was so stupid, he was so stupid.

Rapunzel: WHO IS THIS?

Pollyanna: What are you talking about?

Rapunzel: Tell me the motto of the Word Gaol.

Rapunzel: What was the warden's name? The pattern on the uniform?

Pollyanna: Let me explain.

Rapunzel: WHO ARE YOU?

Idris's fists were balled tight, an ache spreading across his shoulders and up his neck as he willed an answer to appear on the screen.

Pollyanna: Orlagh

Surprise dulled his anger enough that he could click the mouse without breaking it.

/Rapunzel has logged off

He left the window open and waited. No twinge of guilt in spying on the room, not today.

How could he have believed Áine was there? How could he have been so stupid? He slammed his heel into the backboard of the desk, a sharp burst of pain shooting up his leg.

He wanted to believe so much that he left himself open to someone making a fool of him. And there she was, ready and willing; Áine's little sister, playing twisted little games.

He hit his palm on the desk until the stinging radiated hard and far enough to block out the memories of his excitement.

There was movement on the screen, but he didn't look up until his hand was hot and itching. He ran his fingernails over the tender skin, sucking in his breath over his teeth.

Pollyanna: Hopefully you didn't close the window, so you can see this when you log back on. And if you did close it, then this is pointless. And so was typing that. And this.

Pollyanna: I'm sorry. I found Áine's old contacts. I wanted to find out what happened to her. I know she was over there that night. I just need to know where she is.

He had no energy left to cling to his anger, left with the cold reality as he switched off his computer and packed away the dictionary. They had both been

pretending Áine was alive, a little shared madness to get them through the day. But he should have known better. Living people didn't leave ghosts.

Orlagh was contemplating the whiteboard when a knock on the door made her jump. Grateful that she'd already finished her apology-by-inanimate-proxy, she scanned her room for anything incriminating before calling out that the door was open.

Her father brandished a piece of paper as he entered. 'We're falling behind.' He flapped the sheet at her when she didn't reply. 'Hard clues. We still have time.'

'Yeah?' Orlagh tried to stop her eyes darting towards the whiteboard, difficult when it filled so much of the room. But there was no point hanging around. She had done all she could for now, a little cooling off time required before she'd discover if she'd exposed anything useful.

Her father grinned as she grabbed her wallet and keys. 'I have a good feeling this year.'

'Does it feel suspiciously like the cheat-sheet in your hand?'

He rubbed it between his fingers. 'You know what, it kinda does.'

The crowd of people on the SACER lawn was thinning by the time they made their way to the starting line; the ones that remained were casualties of the blood-sport spelling bee or those who had deemed it beneath them to be out with the others in the annual Word Hunt. Some of the departments were over-represented among the ranks of the too-cool-for-school. The agents who gathered dust within the Repository of Lost Words bade their time until the crepuscule that would allow their obligation-fulfilled retreat, no doubt wishing for an outbreak of lethologica.

Hazpop was the only department with close to a 100 per cent participation rate, deeming no prize beneath them. In addition, most were using the day as a chance to practise and hone their skills among the crowds. But mostly it was for the glory. Learning was purely incidental and, frankly, slightly frowned upon.

The smiles were wider this year, but they couldn't cover the silence where the laughter should be. Orlagh was more concerned that they'd gathered

themselves conveniently in the one spot, although she kept the observation to herself, given the prevailing atmosphere.

The race had started an hour ago, although not needing to read the clues, let alone solve them, meant that they soon began to pass the less committed teams. Her father hadn't managed to finagle a copy of the codes, so they were stuck working their way through the list of locations and recording the corresponding symbols on their card.

Orlagh picked up an entrance sheet from the prize table. 'Have you checked if anybody has finished?'

'Nope. Hard ones this year. Or so I imagine.'

Orlagh's ears twitched as she heard her name, turning to find Raf and Piet crossing the lawn.

Raf was muttering angrily as they approached. 'Yes, I know who it is; I see the shoelaces. You're making her effort redundant. Most ungentlemanly of you, I must say.'

Orlagh smiled and held up her foot, raising her coded laces up for better inspection. Right foot blue, left one green; a combination unlikely to be copied by chance.

'If only everyone was as clever as you,' Raf said. He hugged her around the shoulders, drawing her in close enough to see the jagged white scar contrasted against his skin and blue hair, winding between a couple of the new spikes.

'Love the hair,' she said.

He touched the tip of a spike with a smile. 'Have to make sure I can recognise this handsome devil.'

She nodded. 'Be a tragedy not to.'

Raf glanced at the form in her hands. 'Oh! You're racing! Go!'

Shooing them away, he threatened her with his fairy-floss when she didn't move fast enough.

Her father was right, it didn't take them long to collect their codes, passing a series of frustrated competitors along the way. The Hazpop agents cheered them on; the others sent suspicious looks their way.

Even as they progressed rapidly, she couldn't help but think it would be nice to do it properly one year, with dictionaries and compasses and everything. They

could lose on their own inadequate merits, and then they'd be able to join the party afterwards, commiserating about this year's batch of clues and sharing war stories about how wrong they'd all been.

Every year she had stood on the sidelines, knowing they all knew she hadn't played the game, that she had no true stories to share.

It wasn't even about winning, they never tried hard enough for that. It was a pathological need to always be breaking the rules.

Freddie headed for the stone bench behind the Neologisms building, waving his hand towards the half-circle of rocks. 'Next code is behind one of those.'

Orlagh crunched her way over to the middle rock, noting the lack of footprints in the raked gravel, although she wouldn't put it past anyone to have covered their tracks. She perched on the smoothest edge she could find, twisting around to slip her hand between the rocks and the building they abutted.

Her father lounged as she fished blindly, smiling in response to her wrinkled nose. 'Cheating is a dirty business. It's a lesson you should learn.'

Orlagh moved along to try the next fissure, scraping cobwebs off her fingers before coating them with a fresh layer. 'You're not my supervisor anymore, so there's no need to make up morals.'

Edges of rock dug into her side as she stretched down, resolutely ignoring every tickle on her arm until her wrist snagged a taut string. Catching the swinging bag, she pulled it out of the spider-filled recess and waved it at her father until he woke from his daydreaming. Inspecting the paper inside, she read out the code, Red Omega, then dropped it with a shudder.

Freddie flashed the filled-in grid towards her. 'Time for our final destination.'

Orlagh brushed her sleeve, grimacing at the fly wrapped up in one extra chunky clump. 'So, where do we collect our prize and accolades?'

'In our minds, mostly,' he said, turning to the back of his purloined answer sheet. 'But otherwise the Refractory ... basement.' His enthusiasm faltered before he had finished the sentence. 'Huh.'

The control points weren't usually hidden inside the Hazpop building. It was deemed an unfair advantage, given that the agents from the other departments did their very best to pretend that the building and their agents didn't exist.

Maybe they would be the first to the final point after all.

5.

A female agent was lying on the floor, curled up in the corner of the room. Orlagh and Freddie had burst in, their noise instantly becoming a shocking intrusion into the scene of repose. Their smiles faded by degrees as they became less and less convinced that the agent had taken a nap to celebrate her victory.

Her father had seen it first, taking a half step towards the card that lay at the victorious agent's feet. A folded piece of paper was near her hand, red and emblazoned with a golden reproduction of the SACER emblem. The final item, the letter telling her she had won.

He snapped into action, pulling her back into the corridor and closing the door. 'Don't go in, don't let anyone near. I'll be back in a minute.'

Freddie hurried down the corridor, leaving Orlagh in a state of bewilderment. She couldn't get it out of her head; the tiny card beside the agent's body. Her *vade mecum*. Every SACER agent had one, but only Hazpop agents were required to carry them at all times. They were most susceptible to the prophecies of EPD, most in need of the protection. If they suspected an attack they read the words on the card, holding them in their minds and shutting everything else out.

The agent's card was lying there at her feet. Useless.

Orlagh put a hand on the front of her pocket, her own card wedged in the back of her wallet. Anyone she didn't recognise and she'd pull it out and read it to their faces. Just stand there reading away.

She had the tips of her fingers tucked into her pocket when her father jogged back, handing her a roll of tape.

'Had to get everything in motion.'

Orlagh jerked her hand away from her pocket, as if he could divine her fears from its location. As if that guilty snatch wasn't more suspicious.

'Who got the call?' she asked, keen to redirect his attention.

'Raf. Only candidate in the compound. They'll be here in few minutes.'

Freddie put his hands on her shoulders. 'I need you to stay here a little longer. Your mother won't be long.'

'Where are you going?'

‘I have to make sure this doesn’t get any worse. I’ll get security to double-check people coming in.’ He glanced briefly at the closed door. ‘They won’t come back.’

He nodded towards the tape that bore the Hazpop designation, an antiblue Penrose triangle in the middle of a white diamond. Without official badges, Hazpop mainly used the symbol to designate safe zones or warn other agents off, taping off ‘hazardous’ scenes. The shadiest areas in the SACER grounds were often deemed highly dangerous.

‘Put that up while you wait. You’ll do great.’

Orlagh stared after him. There wasn’t much greatness to be attained, as far as she could see. Maybe it was a message, that this was something different from what she thought. Perhaps it was an elaborate staging for her regrading and the agent in the room was simply playing her part. A fake death for her redemption.

Orlagh was acutely aware of the security cameras pointed down the corridor. At the very least she should stand up straight, hold her head high and try to look like anything but the way she felt.

She ran her thumb around the edge of the roll. She had never used it to warn of an active threat. The impossible triangle took on a sinister edge as she crossed two lengths of the tape to signal the crime scene; all the while she listened for sounds from behind the door, waiting for the agent to give herself away. But she was committed, didn’t make a peep.

She hoped they wouldn’t kill an agent solely to judge her reaction. She couldn’t be sure, not sure enough. But she shouldn’t be bothered, it was wrong that she was judging their actions.

And what if they had? She would have to prove that she could live with it, if she was going to be given the highest clearance. They were the decisions she would have to make herself, one day.

She liked to think that she wasn’t the sort of person who’d kill an agent to make a point. But the sort of person she wanted to be was obviously not the person she needed to be.

Maybe she’d be able to make them into people who wouldn’t do that sort of thing. But then they wouldn’t be able to do their jobs and thousands of people

would be left in states of confusion and despair. No one would find them and tell them it was OK.

Orlagh sucked in a deep breath and drew herself up. If she was being played, then so be it. But if it really was a body in there, she would make sure nothing happened to it, or anyone else. She could at least do that.

Raf leaned against a tree and chewed on his pink, sugary stick, the spun sugar it once held long gone. They were the only ones working, so all the worst jobs were falling their way. While the rest of SACER pretended to enjoy each other's company, they were waiting for their lift, drifting towards the apex of the driveway. Raf was actually glad to have an excuse to escape the crowd, the sea of faceless humanity too much for him to bear on the quietest days.

Piet was taking advantage of the time and space, running through some moves in the grass, a swift and precise series that Raf had seen a million times and never tired of watching. His grace was all well and good, but it wasn't what was captivating Raf. It was the deadliness, unseen, in the space around Piet's hands. The menace was in the air around him.

Piet was unarmed today. No flashing knives or stick swirling around. A concession, perhaps, to the joyous mood of the day.

With no distractions available, Raf reviewed their information pack. The PR department was working on an awareness campaign for a new word that had progressed through the research and testing phases. It was ready to be introduced into various key spots, in hopes of a viral spread. There were agents in chat rooms, casually dropping it into conversations. Field agents that had spent years in the outside world working their way up to be scriptwriters and journalists had received the word in the latest memo, busy slipping it into their latest scripts and stories. All over the country, agents were strategically introducing it into everyday use, as if it had always been there.

Raf and Piet were being sent into houses and computers, adding the word to spellcheckers and dictionaries, with accompanying definitions, etymology and examples of use. Adding it to the thesaurus, too, with cross-referenced synonyms and antonyms, if time allowed. They'd also be taking the opportunity to remove a few of the words that had been retired.

It was a strategic target, designed to best transmit the resultant changes. There was no way they could get to every individual computer, so they chose hubs of social influence and movement to implant the seeds of change.

All the agents had their favourite change, but most agreed that one of the boldest was the removal of the word un compelling from every dictionary. It sent a little thrill down a SACER agent's spine whenever they saw a new victim struggle with their knowledge that it must be a word, only to find they were mistaken.

It was a rite of passage to see The Tape, a record of their greatest triumph. Now transferred on to DVD in a last ditch attempt at preservation, the grainy recording was the first moment in their young careers when they saw the impact of what they were doing. A field agent had smuggled in some security footage from a nearby factory that showed bored guards playing scrabble, one laying down his 'un' at the front of a companion's word and following it up with a triumphant victory dance. The part of the tape where the challenger had handed over the dictionary and the guard had turned the page over and over, searching in increasing disbelief, was so worn that it was barely visible anymore.

The sound was long gone but it had become an audience participation event. It hadn't quite gotten to costumes and props, but they all knew his lines by heart, right to the final exclamation: 'This is bullshit!', which the agents roared gleefully, cheering as the guard hurled the dictionary to the ground and stomped out of the room.

The memory had sustained many an agent through a long day's tedious alterations with the promise that they too could be part of something epic.

Raf smiled as he checked over the words that were being removed, excited at the more recognisable ones among them.

His happiness was short-lived as a figure approached with a purpose suggesting they were its target. Piet was too far away to whisper a name, but Raf's confusion ended quickly as there was no mistaking Brigid's voice. He was always grateful, even as his stomach clenched, finding it useful to know which one of the non-uniforms was his boss.

Piet stood to attention. 'Good morning, Senior Agent Polisson.'

Ignoring Piet she closed in on Raf, causing him mild alarm. ‘You’ve been called up.’

She was brusque, giving him no chance to brace himself, no time to shift from anticipating punishment to being handed a welcome death sentence.

He’d expected fanfare, confetti, a parade would be pushing it, but still appreciated. Instead, Brigid had told him that he would become an ephemeral in the same voice she used when she told him he should tie his shoelaces or that the lift wouldn’t come any faster no matter how many times he pushed the button.

Piet nudged his arm, inclining his head towards their disappearing leader. Brigid had already mingled with fringes of the crowd, no doubt a little dig; a little show of the power she had over him.

Raf was ready. He had been ready ten years ago, fresh from his studies. He was ready every day that his father schemed to prevent him fulfilling his dreams. But he walked alongside his partner and wondered if the intervening years had made him question his oath.

Piet was losing his life just as completely as Raf, and just as imprecisely. Raf would share his life with death, Piet would share his life with Raf. It was a better deal for Raf, really, he was keeping most of himself, even if some had to be stored in someone else.

It wasn’t his body that he was entrusting to Piet, it was his mind. There was some benefit in the lengthy wait; Raf was sure that Piet knew his thoughts on most subjects very thoroughly. Once he became a zombie, an ephemeral, he would slowly lose the ability to hold on to his previous convictions, unable to form any new ones.

He had to trust that Piet would give himself up. He had been chosen for that purpose, but it had been a lifetime ago. They had been matched, Piet testing highest on the measures that would indicate he would sacrifice everything for Raf.

It would almost be better for the Piet who would be left with nothing. Two worlds would split off: two Piets and only one living Raf. The numbers simply didn’t add up. One Piet would have a partner, the other would be left with nothing to show for ten years of devoted service.

It was more complicated than that for Raf; his worlds wouldn't split completely. But it was black and white for Piet. It was why he was perfect for the job. He didn't believe that anyone could live in two worlds at once and so Raf would either exist or he wouldn't.

Brigid left Raf and Piet almost immediately after they'd reached their destination, no words of encouragement to offer. Raf couldn't see her being squeamish, her mind probably on things more important than the imminent pseudo-death of one of her agents.

Piet stepped over the threshold with some gravitas, Raf standing at the doorway for a moment before leaping through with a half-twirl. The two agents up the back were shorter than Piet, which would at least make it easier to keep track of his partner.

Raf took his seat at the front of the room. The guest of honour. He stretched his arms behind his head.

'Let's have at it then, boys.'

It struck him how bad the situation must be if Brigid was finally defying his father's wishes, feeling a guilty thrill that he was going to be the one at the centre of it. Imminent death did not bring out the best in him. That was a heartening thought. He would have hated to become all sentimental in the face of a little mortality.

In order for Raf to become an ephemeral, the prophecy didn't simply kill him. Instead, there was a fifty-fifty chance that it would kill him, based on the spin and turn of quantum particles. Heads he lived, tails he died: a flip of the coin designed to land on its side.

The two alternate universes that would ordinarily have split off would stick together and his bodies would occupy the same space, the living flesh and the corpse.

Up and down. Top and bottom. Strange and charm. The flavours of his life and death.

Hazpop sent off a request when it needed an ephemeral created, and the mysterious person or persons – the Charming Stranger – would design the prophecy. The prophecy would be read out for him and he would let it have power over him. They used to use stable civilians until an agent in the field had

been approached by a zombie who had a message for them. The zombie was the most solid they'd ever seen and the note he carried offered the possibility of more like him. After consultation, they sent a reply in the mysterious manner prescribed and had soon after begun a sideline in killing their own agents.

Suddenly there was a rustling of paper, Raf's eyes flicking open before he could control the impulse. He saw the two shorter agents put down their papers and leave the taller one alone.

They were done; he was dead and he hadn't felt himself die. His expiry date had been set and now all that was left for him was to slowly decompose.

'Can you see me?'

'Yes.' Piet moved and left his doppelganger at the back of the room, the one who didn't even hear the question. Raf's stomach lurched at the impossible sight of the other Piet lingering. The one left behind.

The solid Piet that bent over him had more pallor than his opaque counterpart. Raf reached up and pinched his cheek, bringing a flush to it. 'Cheer up, you won. And Other Piet looks pleased. Doing a jig. Probably thinks he's well out of it.'

Other Piet wasn't doing a jig at all, almost in a daze as he moved slowly out of the room. Raf couldn't resist following, ignoring the solid version that he bumped into on the way. Raf walked a few metres behind Other Piet, trying to find some difference, an indication that being left behind had meant something to him. But he was faster now, without the need to shorten his stride to accommodate Raf, soon out of reach and lost in the Refractory.

It was a relief that he couldn't feel the weight of the corpse he was dragging along. Perversely his head actually felt lighter with the extra rotting brain inside, fitting given that it was already sapping away all of his beliefs.

He waited for Piet to catch up then headed upstairs to hear what he had died for.

6.

The out of the way location of Magnus's office meant that he was removed from the beaten carpet, making Augustus's regular and pointless excursions there all the more galling. Magnus slid behind his desk and pretended to be enthralled by the pop-up ad that was gracing his computer monitor.

'I'm rather busy right now, Augustus, but if you want to make an appointment for your daily lurking, I've got a block of free time later.'

Magnus began typing purposefully, the finality of his dismissal not diminished by the typing of his very important words into the well-known word processor: online poker.

'Information is beginning to filter through about a death at the fair,' Augustus said, passing on the message as if it meant nothing to him. They were just words, just another task to complete. 'There was mention of an unmarked corpse.'

Magnus glanced up from his monitor. No need to play his hand yet, the flop was still to come. And that analogy wasn't a good reflection on his work habits.

Time to burn and turn.

Magnus leaned back in his chair and tried to give the appearance of thoughtfulness, when what he was actually doing was considering the odds that he would hit his gutshot straight on the river.

Augustus folded his hands in his cloak with a patronising air that he was so accomplished at. 'We need to see the body before they destroy all the evidence.'

Magnus waited, but Augustus was capable of benevolent concern longer than Magnus cared to have him there. 'Was there anything besides telling me how to do my job?'

Augustus didn't produce any evidence that he had anything else to share, pivoting on his heel and leaving wordlessly.

'I'll take that as a no,' Magnus called after him.

Augustus had some closure issues with conversations. Their father had never been big on small talk: the more words you used, the more chance to use them badly or have them used against you. After their mother had died, the table

descended into little more than a series of vaguely tuneful grunts, slipping further into silence as their father grew more paranoid about the careless use of words.

And now it was looking like his fears may have been well-founded. A dead body in SACER with no marks on it meant all eyes would be on them, and they didn't have the protection of being guilty.

He returned his attention to the screen and the last card to be revealed. Sighing as he missed his straight, he logged off before he lost more than his daily allowance.

Annoyingly, Augustus was right, but it was bound to happen one of these days. Even a gutshot came up occasionally.

Magnus walked a circuit around his office, pausing to look down into their empty quadrangle. The movement calmed his restless limbs, but proved a little too efficient. Pangs of hunger made it hard to plan their response to the indefensible.

Conceding the losing battle, Magnus left his office and walked to the opposite end of the wing. He fumbled around in his pockets, always regretting the security measures he had introduced as he sought out his swipe card, and always relieved when got inside and found his food untouched. Locating the card, he dragged it through the reader and punched in his code.

The scene before him was at once familiar and deeply, deeply wrong. The urge to slam the door closed was overwhelming, but he gripped the handle instead and managed a non-suspicious volume.

The fabric of time and space began to bend and they were young again for a fraction of a second, on the prowl for a midnight snack. Then he was back, older and no longer welcome in the private kitchen.

Freddie appeared undisturbed by his foray into enemy territory. 'I caught a peek at your handiwork, Thutmose. What's with the Hatshepsut treatment?'

Magnus was caught off guard by the air of accusation, but he couldn't place the reference. He tapped his fingers on his thigh while the boxes on Ancient Egypt were retrieved from their dusty vaults in his mind. Thankfully, it had been a well-worn volume in its time, packed away close to the surface.

He smiled, never imagining that his revisionist history would have been enjoyed by the usurper. The long hours removing every trace of Freddie's name

and likeness were retroactively time well spent; a banner day for time-consuming and petty revenge.

‘Oh yes. Your lack of disambiguation confused me.’

Freddie conceded with a nod of his head. ‘My humblest apologies, Thutmose III.’

It had always been a source of irritation to Magnus that the only part of his name that was unique was the number. Magnus XI. His father plus one. Freddie had once told him that it put him in the company of kings and emperors. And movie sequels.

Magnus moved from the door, standing across the table from Freddie. He reached out tentatively, the tip of his finger brushing against Freddie’s sleeve. So many times he had thought he’d seen Freddie, had almost wished him into existence. He could never dream him solid, though.

The material bent beneath his touch, softly rubbing against his skin. He stepped back quickly, making the innocent distance between them into a suspicious divide.

He had come in worrying about the future of his department, only to slapped in the face with its past.

‘How were the thirty pieces of silver?’

‘Shiny, thanks for asking.’ Freddie took it in his stride with irritating ease. ‘With a tasty chocolate centre.’

‘Oh good, I was worried it wasn’t worth it.’ Magnus played for time as he searched for signs of weapons. ‘I assume you didn’t risk death to search in vain for your name on our walls.’

‘Only partly. You’ve probably heard about the death today ...’ Freddie waited, in vain, for confirmation. ‘There are a lot of rumours swirling around. Details have started leaking, details like the fact that the agent who died didn’t have a mark on her.’

It was true then.

‘And?’ he asked bluntly, trying to force an answer. He wasn’t the only one with a code to this room and the other people in possession of it were not likely to look kindly upon the visitor. Not that detection was the only reason he had for shortening the meeting.

Freddie lowered his voice. 'I know you didn't do this. That won't stop most people believing that you did.'

That wasn't the reply he was expecting, in light of past events. He was the last person who should believe in them.

Magnus crossed his arms. 'Why do you even care?'

Freddie leaned forward, a hint of desperation in his earnestness. 'You think I don't care that people will get hurt?'

'You made it abundantly clear how you feel about what we're doing. Why should I believe you want to protect us? We are, after all, guilty of what they say.'

'Intent alone is meaningless.'

'I don't recall that sentiment twenty years ago. You couldn't leave fast enough. Not even time for a note.'

And still Freddie had no answers.

'Do you ever plan on apologising?'

'No.'

'Because you're not sorry?'

'Because you'd accept it.'

The sentiment was admirable, but it didn't hold up well under close examination. It was more cowardice and evasion.

Magnus smiled. 'I activated a silent alarm after I came in.'

'Sensible.'

Despite his agreement, Magnus suspected that Freddie was underestimating the threat. 'You think there isn't a button in here? A lot has changed since you were here last. Guards should be here presently, if they're not already massing outside.'

'Not unexpected, but I had to try anyway. This investigation has to be seen to be thorough and unbiased. I came to warn you that I'll be back, through the front gates for everyone to see.' Freddie spread his hands. 'I could send someone else, if you'd prefer.'

Freddie was always unflappable on the surface, but Magnus knew better. There was always something churning underneath his amiability. Once he had

made the mistake of believing he knew anything of those thoughts. He wouldn't make that mistake again so easily.

'Better the devil you know,' Magnus said, lightly.

'And there's always hope that a disgruntled student might take me out.'

Despite the joking tone, Magnus couldn't let the jibe sit. Not today. 'There is no chance that harm will come to you through their hands. Or their words.'

Freddie nodded after Magnus's quiet invective, pushing out his chair. 'I've left you something in the fridge. Sealed and unpoisonable.'

Magnus circled around the table, keeping it between them as Freddie moved towards the door. 'I don't know if I can trust my safety to made-up words.'

Freddie chuckled. 'Best not to follow me out. Plausible deniability and all that.'

Freddie didn't hesitate in stepping out into the corridor, probably thinking he was making some sort of point about trust. There was no point in following; Magnus knew exactly what hole he had crawled in through.

After waiting long enough to ensure Freddie had survived past the range of Magnus's hearing, he contemplated the gleaming white door of the fridge. Diane had insisted on sticking her screeds on it, while Magnus countered with his nephew's report cards. In the corner he had placed Idris's first horoscope, published in the local paper.

Sagittarius: Duck.

Magnus smiled at the tiny piece of laminated paper, dwarfed by the magnet holding it in place.

He opened the fridge door so tentatively that the seal held fast, finally yanking it impatiently. It wasn't as if Freddie had the technical aptitude to have rigged anything dangerous.

The plastic package sat on a lower shelf among the fruit salad and yoghurt, a beacon of the outside world. It wasn't just any contraband; it was a long-life banana cake. A cake they'd bought one night when they'd sneaked out and could only pool enough money for a pre-packaged midnight snack that was more shelf-stable than fresh. With no more money or forethought for forks, they resorted to pulling pieces off with their hands, licking the terrible icing from their fingers. It had been gloriously terrible.

Despite Freddie's assurances, Magnus wasn't sure that the packaging did guarantee the safety of the food. On the other hand, if he never accepted food that might be tainted he would lead a sad, hungry life.

Magnus picked up the bar cake and removed the evidence, returning to his office and slipping it into a locked drawer. It wasn't as if he actually believed Freddie would cause him any physical harm. The lurking doubts in the back of his mind were nothing more than bitterness, confusing cowardice with malice.

No direct attack had ever come from Hazpop, not before or after Freddie had joined it. There was no indication that Freddie had passed on any of the compromising or damaging information he had been privy to. Magnus had tried to cover any potential breaches in the aftermath, quietly and without divulging to his father just how vulnerable his trust in Freddie had left them.

Obviously his upkeep of the blockades had slipped over the years. He had stopped worrying and set about trying to forget.

Freddie wasn't the enemy, not today. Someone else had found the combination of words that could kill.

Magnus crossed to the window seat, pulling back the blinds with a finger. He leaned his head against the sticky lacquer of the sill, the short bristles at his nape prickling his fingertips as he scratched his neck.

Evidence was decaying with every passing second. Conclusions were being leaped to and his only plan so far was to wait for a chat with his enemy, a man who had betrayed him. Them.

Maybe Diane and Augustus were right and he wasn't fit to be in charge.

But that would leave Augustus to lead them into this new era, Diane by his side, whispering in his ear.

He let the blind flap back into place. No need to go completely crazy. At least his fallen friend had still been a friend, once upon a time.

Raf had ignored Piet's suggestion that they wait outside Brigid's office, delighted to find Brigid had forgotten to lock her door in the day's excitement. Normally Raf would take the chance to have an unsupervised snoop but today he headed straight for her desk and set about working on her bottom drawer with a

letter opener. Once he defeated it, with force rather than finesse, he impatiently pushed aside all the classified documents and claimed his prize.

He reclined in the chair and slung his feet up on to her desk, taking a swig from the bottle of scotch. On the other side of the desk Piet was sneaking glances at Brigid's bookshelves, filing away whatever information he was gathering from her choice of literature.

It was always nice to see a glimpse of human nature peek through his carefully crafted armour, although it did impede his theory that Piet was a robot of some sort.

Piet turned from the shelves. 'Is something wrong?'

'Nope. Death seems to agree with me.' He tapped his toes together, looking across slyly. 'Do you want to know what it's like?'

Piet didn't reply, returning to his previous occupation.

'You're so eager for it that I thought you might like a heads up.'

Piet moved down from the reference books to the fiction.

'Part of your job, isn't it?' Raf persisted. 'Your life for mine?'

Piet tipped a volume back into place. 'That's different.'

They stared at each other before Raf shook his head and tapped the bottle against the side of his head. 'It's stupid, is what it is.'

A ringing split the silence, but it was the subsequent blast of noise that made Raf splash a few precious drops of purloined liquor. He carefully juggled the bottle and the phone so he could cover the mouthpiece as he leaned over to apprise Piet of the situation.

'So, Dad found out.' He affected a whisper, as he wasn't actually sure where the sound was picked up in his little phone.

Piet's expression marked his performance as redundant. Raf rolled his eyes at the ingratitude and returned to someone who did care. 'I'm OK, Dad.'

It took very little time to progress from convincing his father that he was all right to the point where it became unnecessary to hold the phone up to his ear. Luckily the urgency of the news had meant it was only a call, rather than a sprint across the compound and Raf could absorb most of the ranting. It didn't take much longer to talk him down with promises of the importance of the mission

and how very alive he was feeling, finally feeling safe in ending the conversation.

After he hung up, he pressed the phone to his forehead. ‘Why did I talk him out of coming here? Knock-down, drag-out between Brigid and my father? She would win, normally, no question - his power means nothing to her, and no one is going to side against the queen of the freaks - but Dad is unusually motivated in this instance. Winner?’

‘You want to pit your father against your boss?’ Piet asked, with a serious undertone of it not being a good thing.

‘Pit sounds so uncouth. All I want is for my daddy to come to my place of work and shout at my boss.’

Raf was disappointed that no snarky rejoinder was forthcoming, but the interaction was more than he usually got. As much as he’d tried to hide it, Raf’s death had thrown Piet a little bit. It was about as heart-warming a gesture as he could hope to witness.

Raf was taking another long swig from the half-empty bottle when there was a flash of movement in the doorway. He didn’t have time to take the bottle away from his mouth before groaning, producing an eerie echo as the noise got trapped in the newly cavernous expanse.

She didn’t even knock to enter her own office. Nobody had any manners these days.

Brigid narrowed her eyes, noticing the bottle for the first time, her voice taking on a degree of coldness usually reserved for Freddie. ‘I’m going to assume you didn’t go and get drunk right when you became useful to us.’

Raf pointed the bottle at her. ‘You should have forked out for some better locks if you didn’t want me drinking.’

‘Perhaps you should get changed,’ she said, eyes lingering on his feet and the rather long and pointy heels on his boots. ‘Not exactly gumshoes, are they?’

‘Why Brigid, that sounded pretty judgey.’ Raf delighted in the briefest flicker of a reaction from Piet, filing away ‘insulting boss’ for future ammunition.

‘This is serious,’ Brigid said. ‘We might need people’s help.’

‘I am serious.’ Raf highlighted his newly sober mood by setting the bottle on the desk.

‘It won’t be a problem, Agent Polisson,’ Piet said, blocking Raf’s challenging stare.

Brigid rolled her eyes in tired concession, leaving with Piet close at her heels. Raf stretched and accidentally kicked a few books off her desk, rolling deftly to his feet and picking up his top hat in one fluid movement. He set it atop his spikes and moved to the door with a lingering glance at the bottle he’d left standing. Oh well, no doubt he’d make her earn it.

He stepped out into the corridor tentatively, closing his eyes against the wispy shapes buffeting around him. There weren’t many yet, both Refractories were fairly deserted. And it was too early for the little things to go one way in one world and not the other, adding up to a ghostly chaos where his worlds no longer aligned.

He had no idea what it would be like when both corridors were at maximum capacity. Two worlds full of strangers, twice as many blank faces staring back at him. That hadn’t been one of the considerations when he had first signed up; no one had warned him about this possibility.

He quickened his pace as he began to lose sight of the two agents he hoped were Brigid and Piet, catching up in the basement as they approached another agent.

‘Where did your father go? Is he in there?’ Brigid asked, raising her voice as she increased her pace. ‘I told him not to ...’

‘He left. Said it was important.’

Raf smiled at the voice. ‘Hey, Orly.’

‘Hey. Congratulations, I suppose.’

He thought he could see a smile so he returned it.

‘Enough.’ Brigid surveyed the deserted section of the building before turning back to Orlagh. ‘And no one has come down here?’

‘Hard clues this year.’ Orlagh glanced at the closed door. ‘We couldn’t understand the last one, even with the answer.’

Brigid pointed towards Piet and Raf. ‘You two, inside with me. Orlagh, you keep watch. If your father returns, send him in. No one else enters.’

Brigid ducked under the warning tape. Orlagh held up the centre of the cross as Piet folded himself in half to get through, murmuring his thanks as he unfurled.

Raf trailed his hand over Orlagh's arm as he passed. 'Hang in there.'

Brigid shut the door on Orlagh's reply.

Raf was mentally prepared to see a corpse, but his sympathetic system had apparently missed the memo, sending his insides reeling. He tried to focus on his job, why they were there. Why he'd been turned.

Piet had a notebook out, listening intently and writing much more than Brigid said. 'Do we know the agent's name?'

'We're waiting for the body to be neutralised.'

Before either of them could protest, Piet crossed the room and looked over the discarded letter. He didn't believe in the power of the letter, leaving him at little risk from whatever danger it held. Still, he couldn't have been sure. Not entirely.

Piet raised his head. 'Is this what killed her?' He held his hand above the writing as he noticed Raf leaning over, apparently believing Raf's eyesight was much better than the blurred reality.

Even before the accident he would have struggled, but he hadn't actually considered that when his eyes had been drawn to the page. It was equally as likely that a large font and bold letters might have been perfectly legible.

Once again, Piet's instinct to protect him from his own stupidity was right. Galling.

His boss was much more circumspect, focusing intently on the wall. 'What does it say? And, please, paraphrase.'

'It has congratulations and says the winner's last moments were happy ones. At the bottom there's an apology.'

'I don't think it usually says that,' Raf said, keen to add his help.

'It's not specific,' Brigid said. 'Not targeted, which means it's even more powerful.'

Piet moved down to the foot of the body, hovering near the discarded *vade mecum*. 'Simone Mortimer,' he read.

Raf clasped his hands behind his back as he stared at Agent Mortimer's shoes. That was the beginning and end of his actual plan for detection, fairly useless though visually pleasing. His training and sole qualification was having been killed himself, not long after the young agent lying on the ground.

Perhaps they expected him to bond with her, to care because of it. It was strange, but he did feel an odd sort of kinship. He wondered if he had looked like her to Piet. No wonder he'd been rattled.

Raf clicked his tongue as he looked about. Ephemerals like him were created whenever they needed to see something that a normal Hazpop agent never could. They could see both the worlds they occupied, as well as the worlds of other ephemerals and zombies. When they were in a room together, they saw the third world laid on top of their two. The third and fourth and fiftieth worlds.

Raf was still in the first stages of his ephemeral state and hadn't yet habituated to the traces of other zombies' worlds lingering in the air. There were remnants of the two worlds sewn together, like stitches peeking through along the seam.

The *gespensterfelder*, Hazpop's version of GPS; that was why they needed him. He was fresh so he hadn't tuned out all the tiny variations in the name of mental preservation.

The imperfections in the room were faint, even to him, but they were unmistakable in their non-belonging, accompanied as they were by a tiny shudder that seemed to emanate from his brainstem. An ancient reaction to the violation of the expected order of the world.

All those holes in the room, in places he hadn't been. Someone else's aberrations. Less than half an hour as an ephemeral and he had achieved his mission. Everything else was a bonus now.

Raf walked around and tried to make the broken pixels into lines, following the path the zombie had taken through the room: in and straight to the corner, a dull constellation visible as he moved around. The marks were clustered and low; whoever it was had spent some time crouched in the corner, setting the letter just so. There was no cover in the area, the envelope left sitting out in the open for anyone to find, racer or not.

Raf shared his findings as he wound past Brigid, following the path back out. He delivered the bombshell on the move, darting away while the connections formed in his leader's mind.

Pausing at the door, he waited for Piet to follow. Brigid mistook his hesitation for permission-seeking.

'Go. Follow the trail,' Brigid said.

Raf nodded, not bothered by the appearance of his taking orders, her words rousing Piet from his study of the corpse.

As he ducked under the tape, Raf was glad he was missing the fireworks for once, content to be tracing the past rather than confronting the future.

7.

The ten most senior Hazpop agents were gathered in the classroom, along with Brigid and Orlagh. Brigid was up the front, with the rest either sitting on the desks or awkwardly half-behind them. Orlagh was encased behind hers, right up against the wall, as if that might distract people from the fact that she didn't have the clearance to be in the room.

'OK, we have identification from her *vade mecum*. Agent Simone Mortimer. Records say she's from Neologisms. We've seen her staff photo and it's definitely her. And, by the way, we won't be broadcasting the fact that the card was out and on the ground. I intend to let our supervisors and field agents know, but I think we should hold off telling the rest of SACER until we're sure what we're up against.'

Nobody seemed in the mood to disagree and this scared Orlagh more than anything else had so far. They had no set of rules or regulations to guide them and a disregard for authority was drummed into them from the beginning. Whenever a group of Hazpop agents gathered to consider some action, there was usually at least one dissenting voice. And fist. And it was a minor miracle if it was only one of both.

The room was infused with unspoken fear, an underlying concern that played on all their minds and none of their tongues.

Then a deep voice cut through the silence. 'We know exactly what has happened. And we warn everyone. Now.'

Orlagh didn't need to turn to find Tam Hooper at the back of the room. Tam and Piet were the only survivors from the European SACER branch. He still wore his old uniform jacket over his casual clothes, unwilling to let go of his last link to his old life.

The door creaked as Freddie slipped in, taking a seat behind Orlagh and somehow failing to combust under the withering glare sent his way from the front of the room.

'The room is sealed and we've got people getting fingerprints from everything in there,' Brigid said. 'We have a preliminary report from our doctors:

no sign of trauma, no obvious cause of death. And Raf confirms there was a zombie in there at some stage.'

'When will we know for sure?' Lucy Barnes shot out the question from her hunched position a row over from Orlagh, her legs spilling into the aisle between them. She was an experienced field agent, usually not found anywhere near the Refractory, only within the grounds to defend her fairy-floss eating title at the fair. Which she had, although Orlagh wondered if the judges had taken into account the uneaten pink strands that still floated among the tendrils of her hair.

'The doctors are escorting the body to our nearest hospital for an autopsy, but it'll be a few hours at least.'

'We don't need to wait for that charade, do we?' Tam again. Despite his age, he was treating the furniture with even less respect than the students, idly scratching something into the desk with his keys.

Tam clung to an anger that gave his positions vehemence and consistency, making them stand out in the sea of equivocation. Nobody could agree on what to do about him, so he continued to come to the meetings and argue for more destruction.

Orlagh tried to put herself in her mother's position, preparing herself for the day that the agents would be firing the questions at her. Tam might even still be around.

Her mother was undaunted by his tone, keeping her own level in response. 'It'd be prudent to confirm that she didn't die from a heart attack at the joy of winning. In the meantime, we need to know as much as possible. For now our newest ephemeral has found some kind of trail from the body. He and his wrangler are following that down.'

Brigid turned on Freddie. 'I assume you two cheated again?' She paused as a few agents gave amused snorts, staring them down before continuing. 'It looks like Simone might have, too. And did a better job of it. Find out if she got her information from the same source.'

Orlagh was relieved to be sent out with her father again, not feeling up to organising the investigation with her mother.

'Demand your money back, while you're at it,' Tam yelled, as they moved towards the door.

Brigid whirled on him. ‘You’re on guard duty tonight, keeping an eye on the front gate. Do not even blink until the sun rises. The rest of you, and your partners or trainees, we need a timeline for Agent Mortimer’s movements. We need background on her and interviews with anyone who might have seen someone lurking around the Refractory. Keep your ears and eyes open.’

There were some streamers strewn forlornly through trees as Freddie and Orlagh walked across the SACER compound. They were fluttering away, grey fingers reaching down to grasp them, the darkness leaching the colour from them.

They hurried through the deserted courtyard, hunching over to keep the biting wind out. It would have been a warm enough night had it not been for the wind and its sense of occasion. Perhaps EPD had turned the days’ warm wind icy, their own tribute to a fallen colleague.

Probably not.

The news had spread rapidly, a ripple of sobriety through the crowds on the lawn. The first indication had been the cancellation of the hunt. No team was close to the end, but her mother had decided to take no chances. She tried to downplay the event, but her vagueness and the unprecedented cancellation was the stone that sent the whispers to all edges of the SACER pond.

There was anticipation of a shock to come that muted the reaction when the death of Simone Mortimer was made public. There were no gasps, only a few muffled sobs and an avalanche of quiet murmurs. Most of them wouldn’t have known her personally, but it didn’t lessen the impact, not when they had spent two years cringing and waiting for the final blow.

Everyone had ensconced themselves in their departments and Orlagh could see most lights in the dorms were on. The morning would be buzzing with speculation, but for now most sought the familiar surrounds of their own departments.

There were fewer lights on in the upper floors of the Neologisms department, the place Simone had called home. Orlagh and her father were directed upstairs, where a hush had descended over the top floor. Freddie’s soft knocking was still harsh and out of place.

He was greeted with a cold stare from Emilia and, after she noticed Orlagh, a reluctantly opened door. They were directed to couches in the living area with a sharp nod.

‘We need your help, Emilia,’ Freddie said. ‘I know this is an awful time, but that’s why we’re here. We need to know more about today’s clues.’

On the walk over, Freddie had told Orlagh to take the lead. And now he was looking to her and letting the silence grow.

Orlagh cleared her throat. ‘Right. I assume you gave us the answers for the hunt.’ Emilia nodded curtly and Orlagh continued, ‘OK then, good. Where did you get these answers? Did you get hold of them before they were released or did you type them up?’ She was thinking aloud now, not having prepared any train of thought, let alone a station to arrive at. ‘I know you’re not supposed to know who in your department wrote them, but... if it was you, then, you would know who wrote them. Obviously. So did you?’

Emilia took a moment to digest the rambling, probably still trying to identify the actual question. ‘It is true that I had the answers because I wrote the clues this year. I met with your father this morning and gave them to him. Being the only one to know the answers, I was also the one who hid the clues.’

Orlagh looked to her father again, and this time he mirrored her concerned gaze. Emilia didn’t seem to have made any connection between the final clue and the death. This was good, in that it meant that the detail hadn’t surfaced so far. It would also make the next bit a little tricky to do without rousing suspicion.

Freddie didn’t bother trying. ‘We need your help because we think that the final letter had something to do with Simone’s death.’

‘Like ... it was coated in poison?’ Emilia’s dazed fog lifted for a moment of panic. ‘I’m OK, aren’t I?’

‘You’re fine,’ Freddie said quickly. ‘It was more what was written on it. Did anyone apart from you read it?’

Emilia shook her head, her brow still furrowed in concern.

‘In other years, that final letter said ‘Congratulations’,’ Freddie said, bracing himself like Orlagh in case Emilia repeated the deadly words.

Emilia was getting more puzzled, irritation beginning to win the struggle against strained cooperation. ‘That’s all it said this year.’

‘And when did you put it in?’

‘When everyone was gathered on the lawn for the welcoming speeches. I think knowing that might bar you from ever entering again.’

‘A little inside knowledge never stopped me before,’ Freddie said. ‘Never helped much, either.’

‘I would think you’d be happy about that this year,’ Emilia said.

Orlagh had tried not to think about that, how if she’d been a better agent, if they’d been quicker or fitter, it might have been them that found the fatal message.

‘Did you give the answers to anyone else?’ Freddie asked.

‘To Simone, you mean? No, I didn’t. She was smarter than you all on her own. And don’t you dare go insinuating anything else back in your little group. She was honest and clever, and that’s why it was her instead of you. Don’t take that last victory away from her.’

‘Was there anyone strange hanging around the building when you put the final letter in?’ Orlagh asked, embarrassed by the flickering of pride when her father seemed pleased.

‘Strange people hanging about the Hazpop building? Hmmm.’

‘People that didn’t belong there,’ Orlagh clarified.

‘The only people about looked right at home.’

Freddie stood. ‘Right. OK, I think that’s all we need for now.’

Emilia gripped his arm as he passed her. ‘Something she read ... You think it was a prophecy, don’t you? One that killed?’ She let him go, just as abruptly, stepping back like the abstract horror had transferred on to him. ‘I suppose you want me to keep this quiet.’

Freddie shrugged. ‘You can do whatever you want to do.’

Emilia looked as shocked by his response as Orlagh felt. If there was anything that should be kept quiet, it was this. Orlagh didn’t object, though, as they left Emilia’s apartment, aware that her instinct always seemed to be the opposite of the correct reaction.

She began to speculate as they descended back to ground level. ‘So, someone sneaked in between the speeches and when Simone finished and changed the final letter.’

‘Someone who knew where the real one had been hidden and had the time and means to swap them. And the audacity to walk into the Refractory to do it.’

Orlagh put forward the thought that had been swirling around her head for a while now. ‘Doesn’t sound like EPD.’

‘Not really, no.’

‘You don’t think so?’ Orlagh was so relieved that her father agreed with her that she felt the need to make sure she hadn’t imagined it.

‘I think it looks bad for them.’

Orlagh braced herself as she pushed open the front door and stepped into the night. ‘Seems like we’ll have to be the ones to prove it wasn’t them. And how do we do that?’

‘Eleemosynary, my dear Watson.’

Orlagh faltered mid-step, her attention diverted from the important task of not tripping over her own feet. ‘That... doesn’t make sense.’

‘I think you’ll find it does. I have to go extend a little charity.’

A forlorn piece of paper skated across the path ahead of them, leaping up to wrap itself around Freddie’s leg like a clinging child. Freddie handed her the page of the morning’s *Bellwether Report*, heralding the arrival of this year’s fair and promising a day of fun and excitement. She screwed it up and shoved it in her pocket.

Brigid was on the phone when they returned to her office. She glanced up, motioning with her head for them to take their places across from her, before hanging up without any farewell.

‘Apparently Raf is still following the trail,’ Brigid said, making notes as she spoke. She looked up and raised her eyebrows. ‘And?’

‘The final letter was put there while everyone was at the speeches. Probably switched then, too. Also, Simone didn’t cheat.’

Brigid summed up the conclusion that the rest of Hazpop would be making in their own time. ‘So someone who wasn’t with the rest of SACER sneaked into our building to make it the scene of a murder. I’ve checked the security tapes and they managed to shut off any cameras in the area for ten minutes without going near the surveillance room.’

‘It might look bad for EPD,’ Freddie said, ‘but I don’t think it’s them. Not their style to be playing games with us.’

‘And you’d know all about their style,’ Brigid retorted. ‘They have the power to do whatever they like. And to throw it in our faces like this?’ She rubbed her head. ‘And yet ... it looks so completely bad for them. They’re almost too guilty.’

Orlagh had worried for a moment, but the day they were sure enough to attack was the day that their organisation would fall to pieces. They thrived on doubt and ambiguity and paradox, and without it they couldn’t do their jobs.

Some agents thought the trade-off was acceptable; one last gesture to take their enemy out in an all-consuming fireball. Mutually assured destruction, of a sort. Almost as quickly, they began to doubt this belief, leaving Hazpop to rant impotently.

Except Orlagh secretly didn’t doubt it. She believed it, that it was worth losing their jobs in order to bring down EPD. There would be no more zombies for them to find or save, so there’d be no need for them to cling to their doubts. Nobody had to die, on either side. No more innocent victims. That was worth the price. She knew that. She knew that more than anything else.

But she would never tell anyone, not again, not after Áine had burst into horrified laughter.

‘In that case you won’t object to my little excursion tonight.’ Her father smiled winningly. ‘I’m going over to EPD to interview Magnus as part of our investigation. Call it a PR exercise.’

‘You’re going to walk in?’ Brigid asked, her doubt mixed with amusement.

‘Front gate.’

‘And ask if they killed Agent Mortimer.’ Not a question this time, disbelief transcending the expectation of a sensible answer.

‘Seems like the easiest way.’

Brigid was still a little doubtful on the details of his plan. ‘And then walk out?’

‘I may be running,’ Freddie conceded.

‘I think that’s overly optimistic.’

Her father shrugged, offering no further explanation.

‘Sounds great,’ she said. ‘Say hi to Magnus from me.’

Orlagh got to her feet, causing a momentary gleam of expectation in her parents’ eyes, but she couldn’t find any pleasure in it. Fear, rather than any particular act of independence, was motivating her. ‘You can’t go back there.’

‘I’ll be fine, sweetie.’

Brigid didn’t echo his confidence, but neither did she retract her approval. ‘Better head off then, catch them before they go to bed.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Orlagh said.

This seemed to please Freddie and Brigid in theory, although neither was keen in practice. Orlagh wasn’t much more enthusiastic, not relishing the prospect of running into Idris. Pangs of guilt still committed sneak attacks in her quieter moments.

‘I don’t think they’ll take too kindly to the Hazpop heir,’ Freddie said.

Orlagh stopped herself from bringing up the fact that Áine had walked around the EPD halls many nights when she was the heir. She wouldn’t be helping her case by using Áine as a study in safety.

What if he never came back either?

Orlagh closed her eyes, not trusting herself to speak. She felt a warm hand on her head.

‘I’m not worried, so don’t you be,’ Freddie said.

Orlagh let out her breath as the office door closed behind him. At least he hadn’t promised her a bedtime story.

8.

Augustus and Diane were already seated in the private dining room when Magnus arrived and, by the look of it, halfway through their meals. A plate sat in front of the empty chair, which Magnus filled warily, keeping his eyes fixed on the plate.

Diane paused mid-chew and pointed to it with her fork. 'Veal and baby potatoes. We ordered for you, since it was apparent you wouldn't be making it on time.'

'How thoughtful. Especially as I enjoy eating babies so much.' He caught the eye of the agent who was staffing their room and held up his plate. 'Can I please change my order to the lasagne?'

Diane set down her fork with a clatter. 'Oh, for crying out loud. If I was going to poison you, I'd have done it three decades ago.'

Augustus put down his cutlery with a little more care. 'We should wait.'

Magnus waved his gesture away. 'No, no. Eat, drink. Be merry.'

Their family dinners were a lot less entertaining now that Idris refused to come. Magnus hoped he wasn't eating down in the cell; it never had the right atmosphere for enjoying a meal.

Diane was the first to finish, deciding that this signalled the end of the small talk and the beginning of their pre-dessert discussion. 'What did that dead girl expect, really? Come on. Simone Mortimer? *Mortimer*? Family should've changed their name the minute they set foot inside SACER. Brought it on themselves.'

She received nodding agreement from a chewing Augustus and a raised eyebrow from Magnus. 'And what have you been doing about this situation?'

'Nobody knows anything, so we're watching and waiting.'

'Your plan is to sit here and do nothing? Someone out there knows how to kill people with prophecies and we don't know who or how but we will still be blamed.'

'What part of 'nobody knows anything' did you fail to grasp? Was it 'knows'? Because I didn't mean to imply that there was an olfactory connection.'

‘We need to protect ourselves.’

‘We have nothing to worry about,’ Magnus said. He pushed the crisp, cheesy top off his freshly-delivered lasagne, starting on the lower layers.

‘Because everyone will be willing to give us the benefit of the doubt?’ Diane’s scorn was palpable.

‘I have my ways, Diane. But you usurpers can feel free to continue plotting my doom, if that will pass the time,’ Magnus said.

An agent entered, unable to avoid the rapt attention of people grasping for a diversion.

‘What is it?’ Magnus asked, eyeing the walkie-talkie the agent was clutching.

The agent leaned and whispered in his ear. ‘There’s ... someone at the gate, sir.’ The agent sounded nervous, as well as doubtful as to whether the visitor was a person.

Magnus tried not to sound too eager, trying for bored indifference. ‘Excuse me, Diane. Augustus.’

Magnus pushed back his chair with a last longing look at the cheesy layer of lasagne, but his appetite had deserted him. That’d teach him to save the best for last.

Magnus drew the agent down the hall before letting him pass on his message.

‘It’s Freddie Meyers, sir. He says he has an appointment with you.’

Magnus began hurrying to his office, forcing the young agent to jog alongside him.

‘Tell them to let him in,’ Magnus said. ‘And to send someone to make sure he gets up to my office safely.’

There was a long pause, but the guard thought better of whatever he was planning to say. He fell behind, holding the walkie-talkie up to relay the instructions.

Magnus went straight to his office window, still unwilling to believe. He put his fingertips on the glass below where a tiny Freddie was emerging from the gatehouse. He seemed to be chatting away to the young woman given the unenviable task of escorting their enemy through the grounds.

Magnus watched her take him off the main path and down to the side of the building. He retrieved his coat from the rack as he waited, returning to rifle through his desk drawer, trying to prepare for the meeting. He stood at the knock on his door, the agent holding Freddie back from the open doorway until Magnus motioned her in.

Freddie waved as she closed the door behind her. 'You should promote that one. She walked the Path of Dead Calves with dignity and poise.'

The one ornate flourish in the stylistic functionality of the EPD castle was the spiral staircase close to Magnus's office. Not many of the agents used it, preferring the ones less likely to break their necks. The inexperience of those who did use it meant most chose for speed, opting for the inside track where the steps weren't quite large enough for a steady foothold.

'Perhaps she should have admitted her mistake and chosen better,' Magnus said.

'I gather from the flash of panic on your guards' faces that you didn't warn anyone I was coming.'

Magnus open the door as Freddie moved to take a seat. 'Don't get comfortable.' He lifted a scarf from the rack behind his door, checking that the corridor was clear.

Freddie was undressed for the excursion, his thin jumper may have been sufficient for the still air on the ground, but it would offer little protection from the wind on the roof. There was always an unnatural biting chill concealed in its tail, stinging as it whipped across their faces.

Retrieving the pair of woollen gloves that were balled in his coat pocket, Magnus pulled the first one on as they ascended the last, narrow flight of stairs.

Punching in the code with his bare hand, Magnus waited for the green light before pulling on the second glove and opening the door. He held the heavy door open for Freddie before letting it slam shut behind them.

Freddie took a deep breath when Magnus came up behind him, dropping a loop of scarf over his head. Freddie didn't move as the rough wool ran over his skin, standing perfectly still as Magnus pulled it tighter around his throat.

He could see Freddie take shallower breaths; only relaxing after Magnus tossed the tasselled ends of the scarf on to his chest.

Magnus put his hands on the back of Freddie's shoulders and leaned close. 'Don't want you dropping dead before we're done.'

Freddie squinted into the wind, his eyes beginning to redden and water. 'How was the cake?'

'Oh yes.' Magnus pulled the packet from his coat pocket, feeling the icing mould to the shape of his fingers. He held it out to Freddie.

'You didn't like it?' For a second there was a genuine reaction from Freddie, before the wry grin took over.

'I'm merely being a good host and offering my guest the first piece.'

Freddie took the cake, tearing open the plastic awkwardly with stiff fingers. 'Good host?' he snorted. 'You're shamelessly using me as a royal food taster.'

Peeling back the paper lining, Freddie pulled off a corner and ate it. He grimaced, but missed the golden opportunity to pretend he'd been poisoned. 'We must have been desperate.'

Magnus took the cake from him, breaking off his own chunk to savour. 'I take it from your presence that we remain viable suspects.'

'I'm doing my best, Magnus, but they don't understand what it's like here. What you do. How you are. If you only opened your door and let them in, everyone would stop thinking the worst.'

'Do you think we would be the same if we become more like the rest of you? Would you trust us with any power then?'

Freddie took an extra large chunk of cake in lieu of an answer, belatedly pointing to his chewing as an excuse.

Magnus bit his lip, feeling it warm as the blood flowed towards the tender skin. 'You've been here long enough to make it convincing. You can scuttle on home and tell everyone whatever you've decided you're going to say.'

'I have a better idea. How about you and Idris come and observe the autopsy?'

Magnus was caught off-guard, hesitating mid-step and turning back to Freddie.

‘You want us to willingly walk with you into what I assume will be a Hazpop hospital? Why not invite Augustus along too, get us all out of the way?’ He didn’t give Freddie a chance to answer. ‘I’ll come. Alone.’

‘You want to come, Idris comes too. Listen to me, he needs to come. You’ll understand later.’

‘Needs to?’ Magnus asked. ‘Not making it seem like less of a trap.’

‘It’s too big for here, for now. Please, trust me. Bring him.’

‘How am I supposed to believe a thing you say? All you ever did was lie to me.’

Freddie took a step forward, but hesitated at the periphery of Magnus’s personal space. ‘I never.’

Freddie seemed sincere. But he had seemed a lot of things that had turned out to be lies.

‘You’ve done nicely for yourself,’ Magnus said. ‘Position in the inner circle. Lovely family.’

‘It’s not like that. It wasn’t ...’ Freddie cut himself off with a sharp shake of his head. ‘There’s not time.’

Magnus was in no such hurry, picking at the loose wool on his gloved fingers. ‘You had twenty years to explain.’

‘I was protecting you. Believe me when I say that’s what it would’ve taken.’

The wind picked up over the roof, flapping Freddie’s scarf into his face. He kept focus admirably, retrieving a card and holding it out between his fingers.

‘That’s where and when the autopsy is being held. And I will actually tell the guard to let you in.’

Taking off a glove, Magnus took the card before it blew away.

‘Keep an eye on Idris,’ Freddie added. ‘And take the main path. My mobile number is on the other side. Call if there’s any trouble.’

Magnus flipped the card and smiled despite himself. Next to where he’d scrawled the address, Freddie had drawn a little picture of an elf. Twenty years hadn’t improved his drawing ability.

Running his thumb over the indentations the pen had left, he read into the reverse Braille exactly what Freddie intended. He slipped the card into his pocket and pulled his glove back on. ‘What if Idris doesn’t want to come?’

‘Get him to your office. I’ll take it from there.’

Magnus drew his coat tighter, heading for the exit. He held the door and leaned in as Freddie brushed past. ‘If you hurt him, I’ll kill you.’

That wasn’t in keeping with EPD philosophy, and likely beyond his skill, but Freddie nodded with the weight of belief. Magnus had been wavering between sending Idris or guards to wait in his office, but watching Freddie descend the stairs, he decided he would give him a chance to prove himself.

His agents deserved everything he could humanly do to keep them safe, and if trusting Freddie was the cost, then he’d gladly pay.

Magnus opened and shut the bottom door quickly, treading on toes as he stumbled backwards.

His brother was waiting in the corridor, with Diane pacing agitated circles around his still form. Magnus cursed the lack of alternate entertainment. He’d have to increase the required TV viewing quota if he ever wanted to conduct anything untoward.

He moved to the middle of the staircase and phoned Idris. The reticence of his nephew was expected but time-consuming, only by promising a week without class did he get Idris to agree to the meeting.

He shoved Freddie into the corner behind the door. ‘Wait five minutes then go straight to my office. No side trips.’

Magnus opened the door again and the two pairs of eyes on him suggested that his first foray had been witnessed. He tried not to crush Freddie, but a little compression was in order to ensure his exit wasn’t suspicious.

‘Dropped my scarf. Can’t find it anywhere.’ Magnus patted his pockets and smiled in mock embarrassment. ‘What can I do for my two favourite people?’

Diane once again failed to fall for his charm. ‘The body has been taken away.’

Magnus set off in the opposite direction to his office, leaving Diane and Augustus no chance but to follow.

His sister-in-law proved more motivated, the first to pop up beside him. 'There's obviously something they want to hide.'

'Don't worry about that,' Magnus said, cutting Diane's breathless excitement short. 'We scored an invitation to the autopsy.'

'What? Wait, we?'

'Idris and I were cordially invited.'

Diane drew herself up into every millimetre of height she possessed. 'No.'

Magnus guided them round the corner, his brother still hovering at the fringe of the conversation. 'The more you try to intimidate me into not letting him go, the more it seems like an appealing option.'

'You'd sacrifice the future of this organisation out of spite?'

'Petty spite,' Magnus clarified. 'Besides, aren't you always telling me, and anyone who isn't a quick enough walker, that Augustus is the future of this organisation?'

Diane folded her arms. 'He's the immediate future. Idris will be the distant future.'

'Immediate? How odd. I don't remember planning to die any time soon.'

'Not the sort of thing you plan,' Diane murmured. 'Don't let him go with you.'

The threat would be more worrying if she'd given any indication of outright violence towards him. Thankfully, she preferred a subtler approach, the menace in her words easy to ignore. For now.

'I'm pretty sure I already did, but do feel free to close the stable door if you're feeling a draught.'

Diane's anger slipped towards desperation. The passion they so abhorred making itself visible. 'You can't. Don't you dare.'

He might have been moved by her concern if it was based on actual human feelings rather than absurd scribbles. 'The castle won't fall to pieces because Idris leaves; he's not a load-bearing student. Maybe this will show you that it's a load of nonsense. Besides, wouldn't you say that Augie here is more likely to be her fated heir?'

It had been long enough for Freddie to have made his escape, no need to drag it out any longer. Although, he was intrigued by how far Diane would go for her beliefs. He forced her to keep step, leading them around to the dormitory wing.

‘Don’t punish everyone because of me.’

Bargaining. Interesting and unexpected. ‘You should be pleased that Idris is showing some interest in his job.’

‘Please.’

Her despair was beginning to wear on him. It was exhausting to ignore. But nothing she did was pure, he had learned that lesson.

‘Stop me, Diane, if you’re going to. Try and lock me up if you think it will work a second time.’

Magnus stepped around the obstacle, leaning in to his brother as he passed. ‘Way to step up for your family, bro.’

‘I’m trusting their safety to you, Magnus,’ Augustus replied.

Magnus had no answer, forced to let his brother have the last word.

Idris was sitting in the corridor outside his room, legs stretched almost to the opposite wall. The promise of guilt-free absences had held little appeal, since he wasn’t planning on going anyway, but it was either leave or throw his computer into the wall.

Curious as to why Magnus felt the need to bribe him, Idris locked his door and headed towards his uncle’s office. News must have reached Magnus about the events down in the cells, but Idris doubted that it was because the freed students had made a daring escape.

But who was he to judge them? They were young, they didn’t know better. He was just as much a coward as they were, and he didn’t have the excuse of brainwashing.

Idris could disappear into the night without anyone noticing. His mother would be forced to face her wrongness when the castle failed to collapse around her. She’d probably even be disappointed. He’d actually be doing them a favour by leaving.

And all that tied him to the castle was a ghost of a girl who never belonged there.

The picture behind Magnus's desk drew Idris's attention before he set foot in the office. Beyond any insight offered by the underlying scene of sleeping puppies, the reflection showed a figure standing behind the open door.

There was no sign of Magnus. No visible blood.

Idris clenched his jaw. A mirror worked both ways and running wasn't an option. He stepped inside, fists balled as he furiously sought out something to explain the presence of their enemy in his uncle's office. 'I can summon the guards with one yell.'

'I'm sure you can do much worse than that,' Freddie said.

Idris had never seen him in person, but he was familiar with the face. Freddie Meyers: traitor, Annie's father.

Freddie held up his hands, revealing the lack of weapons concealed in his palms. 'Whoever you're planning to call, they know I'm here. I walked in the front gate. Even made an appointment.'

Idris held his gaze and hardened himself against the echoes of her, trying not to hear the words in her voice. It wasn't surprising that they spoke alike, but it didn't make it any easier.

'I'm here to extend a personal invitation to join your uncle in observing the autopsy of our fallen agent.'

Only a Hazpop agent could make an invitation to the dissection of a body sound like a personal favour. He had forgotten what it was like.

'And you'll want to attend because I can tell you where to find her.' Freddie leaned closer. 'Áine. You can talk to her.'

Idris wrapped the cords from his hood around his fingers, the tips pulsing as he wound them tighter. Focusing his mind on the details. His mother would be proud. 'Why are you bribing me to come?'

'Because I'm luring you to your death, obviously. Ask your uncle what he thinks,' Freddie said. He glanced towards the door. 'You have to promise me something in return. And you will be bound to it, do you understand?'

Of course there was a catch. It was almost a relief. Idris drummed his fingers on his thigh, running through the scenarios in his mind. 'What is it?'

'Say you understand.'

Idris hesitated but it wasn't like he was agreeing to anything yet, just getting the chance to hear why he'd be selling his soul. 'I understand.'

'Orlagh is coming with us and you have to promise me she'll be under your protection. No matter what.'

Idris barely heard past Orlagh's name, the flare of anger still raw. But he wouldn't let her win.

He nodded curtly.

'No, say it. Say she's under your protection.'

'Orlagh is under my protection.' It was an accomplishment to get anything out through his clenched jaw.

'Excellent.' Freddie smiled for the first time. It wasn't at all like Áine's; there wasn't the ever-present hint of malice in his, no tongue curling over his incisor.

Evidence of malevolence or not, Freddie's reaction gave Idris a cold shock. In his haste he hadn't paid attention to the words, all because of her name. He had entered into some kind of verbal contract with an enemy who trained in their methods, and his response wasn't considered silence or well-chosen words. He let passion guide him and that was the one thing they couldn't allow.

Of all the ways to learn that lesson, it was probably the one that would please his mother least.

'Are we talking stepping in front of bullets?' he asked.

'I want nothing bad to happen to her. All I need to know is that she's under your protection.'

Idris nodded at the simple language, the clear-cut definition. 'OK.'

Freddie stepped back when Magnus edged into the room. Idris was ready with a raft of explanations and accusations, but Magnus didn't look the least bit surprised to find a traitor with his nephew.

'Are you some sort of double agent?' Idris asked, surprised at the civility. 'Was the whole defection thing a trick?'

It all made sense for the second before he saw the look they shared. It wasn't one of conspirators.

'I should go and prepare,' Freddie said quietly. 'I'll see you tonight.'

Idris was left alone again as Magnus provided an escort for Freddie. For a brief second he swore he saw Áine taking in the scene but she was gone in the time it took to blink away the doubt.

He shut his eyes tightly and waited for Magnus to persuade him that it would be all right to trust Freddie. That it was OK to believe him.

9.

Raf had been following the *gespensterfelder* for almost two hours, his progress slowing as the light failed. The darkness of the other world against a black backdrop meant he had to move around more often to find where the tiny points no longer matched up.

The direction they'd headed in took them into parklands that were beginning to creep into an exclusive, leafy suburb.

On the corner of a remarkably undulating street, Raf conceded defeat at the hands of his footwear, calling into play the emergency back-up he knew Piet would have stashed away.

He grimaced as he worked off the boots, enjoying the cooling relief as the air ran over his damp socks. He slid his own shoes back on, taking Piet's hand to stand back up and handing the boots to Piet.

'You should give them a go,' Raf said. 'Might have to cut off a few toes, though. All of them, really, and then some, but I think it'd be worth it.'

Piet brushed off some of the debris that had stuck to the leather. 'They don't go with my uniform,' he said, unmoved by Raf's impression of a sad puppy as he zipped the boots into his backpack.

As they wound their way down the back streets, the streetlights allowed him to move a little quicker. He drew to a stop at a T-intersection, attracting some stares from the passers-by. Raf did little to deter them, removing his top hat with a flourish and twirling it around on his finger. Piet caught it deftly, holding it for a few seconds before returning it with a warning look.

The street running across the top of the T was larger, the noise level rising with the stream of cars. Headlights swept past their position, the variations in traffic lighting Raf's path.

Piet guided him across the road, not realising that he led them straight through a ghost car. That was OK, the young woman at the wheel hadn't noticed either.

Safely ushered to the other side, Raf looked along the line of doorways before bounding up to the door of the most ramshackle one. He didn't look over

his shoulder, didn't hesitate, turning the knob like he had every right to be there, only slightly surprised to find it unlocked. He was very surprised, however, that the door failed to emit an atmospheric creak as it swung open.

The small entrance room was dark and deserted, the light coming in from outside illuminating the dust floating in the air. Raf ran his hand through the particles, watching the eddies swirl in its wake then settle again, trapped in the golden glow like fossilised bugs in amber.

Piet stood in the doorway, reading the sign that was plastered in the middle of the door. 'This place is condemned. You need to get out of there.'

Raf continued to walk around, assessing the structure as he went. 'That's there to stop people wandering into whatever lair this is.' He knocked on a nearby doorframe with the air of someone who had considerably more knowledge than his one afternoon fancying himself as an architect. 'Solid. All good.'

None of the three rooms that led from the entry hall had doors. Raf gave each archway a cursory glance before choosing the dining room. He flicked a switch, jumping when the room flooded with light. He held up an arm to shield his eyes as they adjusted, hearing the front door shut behind him, followed by Piet's lurking presence.

'Not as derelict as we're meant to believe,' Raf said, walking about the middle of the room. 'Trail ends in here.'

'I'll check out the security, you stay in here for the moment.'

Raf took off his hat and surveyed the remnants of the abandoned room. A long table stood with a candelabrum at each end, Raf tracing a line between them in the thick dust. The only other furniture was a polished wooden hutch, lace doilies piled on top. The first one was discoloured but the ones beneath remained crisp and white, aside from the smudges Raf left as he flicked through. The cupboards were full of clean porcelain crockery and polished silver cutlery.

Piet returned as Raf was checking out his reflection in a shiny spoon.

'Windows all locked,' Piet said, not looking at Raf or where his hand lingered. 'Back door is bolted and seems solid.'

Raf pulled out a silver knife, running a finger down the blunt blade before tucking it in his pocket and closing the drawer. ‘Excellent. Great. Can we go do something now?’

‘As soon as I send an update to Brigid.’

Raf groaned when Piet pulled out his mobile and flipped it open. Piet pretended to be engrossed in his message composition as Raf ambled over and started pulling the cobwebs out of his hair. He only twitched his head away when Raf attempted to pluck a wisp from his eyelashes.

Piet sent the message and snapped his phone shut, rotating his wrist so he could check his watch as he put his phone in his pocket. ‘Not too late. We should see if the neighbours saw anyone hanging around here.’

Piet held the front door open for Raf, who ran across the room and jumped down the stairs. He surveyed the area as Piet came down, unimaginatively using each step in their intended order.

Their side of the street was home to a row of narrow one-storey houses, joined in pairs with strips of garden running between the couples. Across the street all but two of the shop fronts were plastered with the newspaper collage of failure.

Piet stood on the footpath, surveying the task ahead of them. ‘I’ll take the houses on the left, you do the right. We want to know if anyone saw someone coming or going from,’ he squinted up at the house, ‘number thirty-four, today or anytime recently.’

Raf appraised their various workloads. ‘Hey, I have half as many – oh wait, well done. Carry on.’

He self-consciously flattened his hair spikes a little, having left his hat sitting on the dining room table.

A few large flakes of paint fell away under his knuckles as he knocked on the first door, brushing the evidence from his hand as footsteps approached. The face that peeked out under the chain was lined and wary.

Raf greeted the lady brightly. ‘Hello! I’m from the house next door, the ugly brown one, sorry about that. We’ve had some trouble with break-ins and I was wondering if you’d seen anyone suspicious looking hanging about. Apart from me, obviously.’

She was unmoved by his charm ‘I was about to call the police on you and your friend.’ The way she spat out the latter made it seem that it was Piet who most offended her, suggesting that her eyesight might not be all that reliable anyway.

‘I’m glad we have such vigilant neighbours.’ Raf tried to insert extra dazzle into his smile, aware of the woman’s gaze lingering on his chipped blue fingernails. ‘You didn’t see anyone going in or out this morning? Last night? Only we’re missing something with sentimental value. We’d appreciate any help we could get.’

‘Haven’t seen no one but you and that other one. Can’t say I’d help, if I could. Don’t need people like you two coming in.’

‘Ah. OK then. Thanks for your time.’ His smile didn’t even flicker. ‘I look forward to being around here for a very,’ he drew out the word with a wider smile, ‘very long time.’

Brigid would be so proud, making friends with their fake neighbours like that.

He leaped down the steps, bounding over to the next door. Smile as wide as ever. ‘Hello there.’

His smile was a little battered by the time he returned to wait on the front stoop of their house. Piet had more to cover and, by the look of it, the added time consumption of actual conversations. He was even taking notes. Not much that Raf heard was fit for printing.

Raf yawned as he scanned the street: little foot traffic, not many people in either world. Not enough time had passed in his different worlds for things like varying degrees of footpath upkeep to be tripping him up, but there had been some event that had caused one of the gates along the road to be closed in one world and not the other.

He was thinking up all the plausible scenarios for this divergence when Piet joined him, standing at the bottom of the steps and looking over his shoulder to the row of shops across the road. ‘We should check them out, then call it a day.’

Raf didn’t get up, leaning back to rest his elbows on a higher step. ‘How did you do?’

‘I received a few offers of tea and cake. Nobody remembers seeing anyone in particular, though.’

‘You do the shops by yourself, all I got was attitude and a faceful of door.’

Piet hesitated, one foot lingering on the steps. ‘You must have had the unfriendly end of the street.’

Raf smiled, cheered by the intent rather than the inadequate content. He left Piet to make more new friends, returning to the dining room. He slumped forward and rested his chin on one arm, drawing patterns in the dust on the table top with the other.

Piet returned during an intricate spiral pattern, throwing off the flow and sending it into a giant scribble.

Oblivious to the masterpiece he’d ruined, Piet pulled out a chair and laid his notebook on the table. ‘I have a possible sighting from a shopkeeper opening his store this morning. He saw a woman, grey-haired, entering the house. Only remembers her because he thought this place was condemned. But there was nothing more from him, and nothing from anyone else.’

Raf sat up, kneeling on his chair for a better view of the table top. ‘Right then. Let’s assess the state of our investigation. We have a dead agent and the trail of a zombie from her body.’ Raf drew a little stick figure in a box, then a long curving line out from it. ‘It leads us to Friendly Street and our death trap.’ Raf drew a skull and crossbones at the end of the line.

‘Someone was seen entering the house at 0600,’ Piet said.

‘Very official sounding.’ Raf wrote the number next to his skull, adding another stick figure underneath. ‘We don’t know when granny left, but that’s less important. Probably. And now ...’

Raf let the sentence dangle, rocking back on his heels and taking in his artwork.

Piet joined him in silent contemplation, closing the cover of his notebook.

Raf screwed up his face. ‘We are not the world’s best detectives.’

‘We need more evidence.’

Any other platitudes Piet might have been saving up were lost when he froze. He held up a finger to silence Raf’s question, then pointed towards the front door. Raf heard the step this time, running his sleeve over the tabletop as he

slithered off his chair, the resulting swirl of dust more dangerous than any information that might have been gleaned from it.

Piet caught Raf's wrist when he reached up to switch off the light, lowering it back to Raf's side.

The lock clicked as the handle turned, the intruder's step faltering inside the hall. Raf pressed himself against the wall, wincing as he spied the top hat he'd left sitting in the middle of the table.

Piet held up his palm, then put his opposite hand on Raf's shoulder. Given Raf's ineptitude for hand signals, he opted to mouth his message as well.

Don't move.

Piet disappeared around the corner and out of view. The quiet scuffling that ensued was followed by a thump loud enough to suggest that there was little point in hiding, either way.

Piet glanced over his shoulder, tightening his grip as Raf moved around to check the other man over. He was many things: dirty, annoyed and indignant, but there was nothing otherworldly about him.

Piet lessened his pressure on the man's chest after a shake of the head from Raf, giving them a better look at their intruder. He was dressed in jeans, jumper and thin coat that all appeared to have been dragged along a dusty road. The man inside seemed to have waited out of the way until they were done, remaining clean and neat underneath it all. He raised his hands in a moot surrender, revealing that the personal grooming extended to his fingernails.

'I'm sorry, man. Sorry. No one's ever in here. It's warm, you know? I always clean up after myself, looked after it for you. See, no rubbish. Nothin'.'

Piet seemed unaffected, but Raf felt a warmth towards someone who took pride in their personal appearance. 'You feel free to continue keeping an eye on it for us.' He put his hand on a dusty shoulder. 'We'll leave a mug in the front window when we go, so you know it's free.'

Piet's sangfroid wasn't warmed by the man's protestations. 'Would you empty your pockets for me, sir?'

'Didn't steal nothin'.'

Raf tried to see what made Piet harangue a man who sounded sincere and frightened, slumped against the front door with no indication of a weapon.

Piet kept his voice polite. 'Please, sir.'

The man sought help from Raf, but all he could do was shrug. 'Best to do as he says.'

In a sudden shift, the man's flailing eyes stopped on Piet and his voice calmed. 'You are going to let me go.'

Raf hoped that Piet was sure, because he was beginning to think it was a bad idea to detain strangers. It was generally best for SACER to avoid drawing attention to its activities.

Piet looked the man straight in the eye. 'I don't think so, sir. Would you mind emptying your pockets?'

Raf finally caught on to the significance of Piet's questioning, noticing the bulge in the front of the man's jacket. When he made no move to cooperate, Raf reached forward and rifled around, pulling out a dictionary.

'Homeless guy who wants to improve his vocabulary. Admirable.' Raf tapped the golden inscription on the front cover. 'Haven't seen one of these for yonks. I must say, you're very sneaky for one of your ilk.'

It was actually exciting to find one that might play along. Even a cat has to pretend the toy mouse is alive.

The man straightened and lifted his chin. 'It is no honour that we stoop to your level.'

Raf shook his head. 'Wow, I didn't know you guys were allowed to be such dicks. And to think, I was going to let you sleep here. We had a secret code and everything.'

'Don't think I don't recognise you, Agent Israfil.'

Raf turned to Piet, beaming. 'Aww, I'm famous.'

'How is your head, agent?' The EPD agent spoke with the self-satisfaction of someone up to no good, but who fervently believes that they are.

Raf's dug his hand into his pocket to stop reflexively touching the scar. It was exposed today and the EPD agent's eyes fell on the area. No doubt he was smirking, or whatever the morally pure equivalent was.

The flush spread across his cheeks, relief and anger welling up simultaneously. 'I knew it was you. I knew it.'

It had been such an easy jump; window sill to branch, not even two metres. He could have done it as a child. But his hands had grasped air, fingers slapping uselessly against his empty palms.

He had known as he fell that it was all wrong; that it was wrong, and that it was going to hurt.

‘What the hell did I ever do to you?’

‘I was merely asking after your health. We were distressed by reports of your dire condition.’

‘The hell you were.’

Piet’s hand had been resting on Raf’s chest, keeping him at arm’s length, an extra pressure from his fingertips a warning to keep his distance.

Piet gestured towards the dining room. ‘If you’d come through, we can sit and talk.’

‘No witnesses. Prudent.’

‘I give you my word that we want only to talk to you.’

Sensing a long negotiation Raf grabbed him by the arm and walked him into the room, kicking out a chair with his foot and shoving the man down.

‘Sit,’ he said, somewhat redundantly.

While Piet took a seat opposite the prisoner, Raf kept up a defensive prowling behind Piet’s side of the table.

The man focused his efforts on the pacing figure. ‘You’re a decent guy, despite everything. I know you want to let me go. Knock him out and we’ll go our separate ways.’

Raf was both cheered and dismayed that Piet didn’t so much as glance around to check if there was a vase hovering over his skull. Piet placed too much trust in him.

Piet watched intently as the EPD agent reached inside his jacket, slowly pulling out his offending hand with a battered cigarette pack held towards them. ‘One last smoke for the condemned man?’

Raf doubted that such vices were allowed in the hallowed halls of EPD. It must be a trick, even if he couldn’t determine the nature of said deception. But Piet didn’t say anything, letting the agent retrieve his lighter, leaving Raf to analyse the agent’s every twitch as he took a long drag.

‘What’s your name?’ Piet asked.

The man drummed his fingers on the table, blowing out a stream of smoke. He didn’t take the opportunity to aim it in Piet’s face, directing it out of the side of his mouth. ‘You first.’

‘Agent Roorback.’

The man nodded to himself at Piet’s immediate reply, taking another drag before reciprocating. ‘Hervey. Make sure they know what happened to me.’ He viewed the rapidly shrivelling tip of his cigarette with concern, dragging a candelabrum across the table to use as a makeshift ashtray.

‘Agent Hervey, you can tell them yourself.’

Hervey rolled his eyes. ‘Sure, we have a séance every Wednesday night.’

‘You’re a very sarcastic little monk, aren’t you?’ Raf asked, unable to get a read on this new creature. He hadn’t run across many EPD agents in the wild, so maybe they sent the defective ones outside, the snarky smoking ones, hoping they’d have a better chance of surviving.

‘Is this an EPD facility?’ Piet asked.

Hervey spread his hands. ‘What do you think we’d be doing here? Improving the life of dust?’

‘Safe house. Dead drops,’ Piet rattled them off in a way that suggested he had many more that he was dying to toss off given the chance. Raf didn’t doubt he’d have an encyclopaedic knowledge of anything spy related.

Hervey leaned back in his chair. ‘Whatever it was, assuming it was anything, it’s useless now.’

Raf braced himself on the back of Piet’s chair. ‘Not if you don’t get back to report it. Maybe we’ll set up surveillance here, pick you off as you parade through.’

‘At least he’s admitting it,’ Hervey said to Piet.

‘No one’s doing anything. We’re looking for answers.’

Raf pulled out the chair next to Piet, leaning across the table. ‘We’re investigating a murder here. Bigger fish to fry than you, Your Anchovyness.’

‘I surely didn’t kill anyone, so I’ll be off then.’ Hervey’s voice had a forced chirpiness, but he didn’t make a move, eyeing Piet through the haze of smoke.

He continued to ignore Raf, who had the top half of his body sprawled across the table, chin resting on his fists.

‘We need to know why you use this place,’ Piet said. He was met with silence. ‘It’s in your department’s interest to help us find out what happened.’

‘What makes you so sure it was one of us?’

‘Whoever killed her came here. They knew what this place was.’

Hervey snorted twin streams of smoke. ‘Anyone could have come in, you saw the security.’

Piet was unmoved. ‘The other end of the trail leads inside SACER. Security is better there.’

Hervey rested his head on his free hand. ‘Who was killed?’

‘Agent Simone Mortimer.’

Hervey regarded the ceiling as he pondered Piet’s answer. ‘One of yours?’

‘No.’

‘One of ours?’

‘No. Neologisms.’

‘Hmmm.’ Hervey tapped ash into the candle holder. Long pause. Slow drag. ‘How?’

‘We’re waiting for the autopsy.’

‘But you think we did it.’ Hervey draped his unoccupied arm across the back of his chair. ‘You think we found out how. And right now you’re a little bit scared.’

‘We’re trying to find out what happened. And that led us here, to you.’

‘And here we are.’ Hervey let out a long breath. ‘I can’t help you. I’m on a whole other detail.’

‘I believe him,’ Raf chimed in from the centre of the table. ‘Too thick to be behind it.’

Piet stood. ‘I don’t think you can be of any further assistance to us.’

Hervey stood as he stubbed out his cigarette, meeting Piet at the head of the table, pausing for a long moment before shaking the proffered hand.

Piet moved into the hallway, holding open the front door and moving back to let the taste of freedom reach Agent Hervey. The agent stood at the threshold and breathed in a lungful of fresh air, turning back with a look of heavy resignation.

‘We can report that we tortured you and you held out as long as you could, if you wish?’ Piet said, when the agent failed to make his escape.

Hervey paused on the doorstep. ‘Tell them what happened. Wyatt Hervey. Two e’s. Don’t leave them wondering.’

‘Agent Hervey, you can do it yourself.’

Raf squeezed past Piet to stand on the step below.

‘There is no advantage in killing him,’ Piet said, in response to Raf’s incredulous look.

‘There’s nothing *but* advantage in killing him,’ Raf said, as he started down the steps.

‘I gave him my word.’

‘Not mine.’ Raf stopped in the middle of the footpath, spreading his arms wide. ‘You’re going to have to come and stop me. Or come and protect me. Either way, staying there and letting that draught in isn’t an option.’

Piet closed the door but didn’t follow Raf down to the street. ‘Our investigation is more important than any slight tactical advantage we may gain.’

Raf didn’t doubt this. He had no desire to kill Agent Hervey. No more than usual, anyway. He was tired and dizzy and would probably be beaten up before Piet could step in. But he couldn’t stop himself walking.

He had never intended to follow Hervey, but now, standing at the corner, all he wanted to see was how far Piet would go.

Piet’s touch on his arm was light. ‘Come inside.’

Raf shook him off angrily. ‘Well that’s fabulous, Jiminy. First day on the job and you’ve already failed. I don’t get to decide whether to accept your moralising anymore. Soon I won’t remember that I ever disagreed with you. Think about that. Think about what I want. What I wanted. And what you swore to do.’

‘It’s against the rules,’ Piet said, with a worrying firmness. ‘This isn’t self-defence. I would have always stopped you.’

Raf could feel himself slipping away. ‘This is what you signed up for. Nothing up to this point matters. Now is when you start being my partner. You swore to protect me. Me.’

As soon as Piet’s hand lifted, the battle was over.

10.

Orlagh stood at the top of the driveway to the Havenscroft Institute, burying her chin in the top of her buttoned-up coat. She was grateful that her father had given her time to grab at least that much before whisking her out of her room. Their visit to Brigid's office had been brief, mostly consisting of Freddie announcing that he was taking Orlagh to observe the autopsy.

Oh, and that he'd invited Magnus and Idris.

He'd ducked out before Brigid could get a word in, shepherding a shocked Orlagh before him.

He had insisted they wait outside, not agreeing with Orlagh's observation that her skills could be better used elsewhere. An indoors kind of elsewhere.

The large brick building behind them spread out over the top of a hill, all contained on the one level. With so many zombies gathered in one place the reality around them began to strain, the site becoming scarred with unreality. It was the sort of place where floors disappeared, not the sort of place for another storey.

She was checking her watch again when Freddie pointed to the horizon and the two small silhouettes in the moonlight.

They arrived without fanfare, Orlagh originally mistaking the sprightly figure for Idris, but the younger agent was soon revealed as the one moving with a hunched, shuffling gait.

Idris hadn't been seen outside the castle since he was in the general pool of students. He had been five years old when was selected to join EPD, after the pretence of there being any doubt.

To her, he was just a dashing figure in her sister's stories, the only person as crazy as Áine had been, and a name on the screen who probably still hated her. She wasn't expecting the slouch and dragging feet, nor the yellow hoodie he wore in place of his uniform.

A new, bubbling unease grew as she got a closer look at the jumper. The last time she'd seen it was when Áine had waved goodbye and pulled up the hood, preparing the sneak through the dark night to him. She had never been seen

again, and here he was wearing her clothes, like he was wearing the prize of an animal he'd hunted and skinned.

Orlagh was so fixated on Idris's casual insult that she was startled when the first thing Magnus did when he got close enough was to lean forward and flick the tassels on Freddie's scarf. 'Brazenly displaying the stolen goods, I see.'

'I lent it to you twenty-five years ago,' Freddie said. He flipped the end over and held it up. 'You didn't unstitch my name tag.'

Maybe she was missing some layer of malice beneath their words, or tension in Magnus's invasion of Freddie's personal space, because in all the scenarios Orlagh had imagined as they had walked over, Magnus reminiscing with her father had not been one of them. As far as she knew, EPD still viewed Freddie as a traitor, not only for defecting, but for doing so to its enemy department. She hadn't imagined the amiable nature of EPD to extend to someone who was essentially its enemy.

Magnus caught her staring, reaching over to shake her hand. His skin was warm, despite the crisp air, smooth beneath her hand.

'It's a pleasure to meet you, finally.' Magnus smiled, eyes flicking between her and Freddie. 'Well, look at you.'

She was drawn for a moment into the easy warmth of his voice. She averted her eyes quickly. It must be one of their tricks. He was hypnotising her, controlling her somehow.

'And good to see you, young Idris,' Freddie said.

As Idris stepped forward, Orlagh saw a flicker of something. An impossible something. Something that only she was privy to, apparently, as her father gave no indication that anything was amiss as he greeted Idris.

Idris was oblivious to Orlagh's poorly concealed shock, acknowledging Freddie with the merest incline of his head. 'Agent Meyers.' He gave Orlagh a slightly deeper nod. 'Agent Polisson.'

Orlagh had never heard her surname uttered with such barely concealed contempt. She could only imagine what it would have sounded like if she had her father's name as, judging by his expression, Idris didn't seem to share his uncle's lack of hostility. Her parents' plan in giving her and her siblings their mother's less incendiary surname proven pointless, if somewhat belatedly.

After the introductions, Idris's eyes rarely left her face, watching her with an odd expression. Orlagh couldn't place whether it was pity, disdain, revulsion or some combination of the above. Perhaps he had noticed her hastily covered gawping and was merely returning the favour.

He had both arms threaded through the front pocket of the jumper, staring out from under the hood. Orlagh couldn't imagine Áine in the same room with him, couldn't believe it was the same boy from the chat logs she had scoured. She didn't doubt that he was the boy Áine had punched the first time they met but she couldn't see how it was the same person that Áine had gone back to check on, and had become friends with after he regained consciousness.

Orlagh thought he would be more like Áine, yet somehow wearing fewer of her clothes. She also imagined he would be less dead.

Her father remained inscrutable, reclining casually next to the intercom. He buzzed them in, conveniently forgetting to mention the identities of two-thirds of his guests. The eyes of doctor who greeted them widened when he saw Magnus, then a little more when he saw Idris, before a professional mask descended.

The corridors were a mixture of white and steel, with no place for any extra adornments. They had to be kept as similar as possible, to minimise the cognitive dissonance of the multiple worlds.

No other agents were around as they were led towards the offices; at this time of night, the patients and working staff would be over in the wards or home for the day.

Freddie was chatting with Dr Emery at the head of the group. Orlagh tried to keep step beside them while keeping an eye on Magnus, who was watching them intently a step behind, and Idris, eyes downcast, at his side.

The head of the hospital was cheerful, despite the unannounced posse Freddie had brought into his sanctuary. He showed them to an empty conference room, half shrouded in sheets for an ongoing renovation.

'Still trying to persuade them to come back and finish the job,' Dr Emery said, apologetically tugging away a debris-strewn sheet to reveal a paint-flecked couch. He frowned and scratched at a spot of dried paint. 'We're about ready to do it ourselves.'

‘This will be fine, Nathan,’ Freddie said, as Dr Emery continued to chip at the splattered sofa with his fingernail.

The doctor stood up, absentmindedly wiping his fingers on his trousers. ‘Ah, yes. We’ll get some camp beds in here, and some sheets and that. Just the one night, yes?’

Freddie nodded.

‘Good, yes. Good. Now, if you’ll excuse us, Orlagh and Idris, I want a quick word with Freddie and Magnus, uh, XI.’

He pronounced the Roman numerals as ‘eleven’, adding a soft ‘th’ as an afterthought.

Magnus couldn’t hide his smile as he met Freddie’s eyes, before turning to Dr Emery with a serious face. ‘Magnus will be fine. Or Eleven, I guess, if you’re attached to the numbers.’

‘Or Elf, if you’re fluent in Dutch like I am,’ Freddie added.

‘Only being able to count to eleven isn’t what most people would consider being fluent,’ Magnus said. ‘In fact, I’m pretty sure you could count in Dutch the number of people who would.’

Idris had been lurking behind Magnus, stepping forward into the centre of the room when Magnus moved towards the door. ‘I’m coming, too.’

‘Sorry, Idris, not right now,’ Freddie said.

Idris raised his eyebrows. ‘Pardon me?’

Magnus leaned back towards his nephew. ‘I’ll fill you in later.’

‘He’s not even back five minutes and you’re already choosing him over me,’ Idris muttered.

Orlagh wondered if she should insist on being included, too. She had almost decided that she probably should when her father opened the door and the waft of breeze was enough to blow away her resolve. Too late now.

He waved. ‘Visit the wards if you get bored.’

Orlagh sat on the couch and watched as Idris positioned himself at the window. She stared at the back of his head, disquiet spreading through her limbs.

Her father was encouraging her to take Idris to the wards, where every single zombie there would see him for what he was. It had never been her job to inform

zombies of their untimely deaths, but it seemed cruel to let him enter the area unprepared.

Her father must have left because this was her grading: her ability to deal with this situation. Perhaps they were watching now, Magnus roped into helping out an old friend.

Even if it wasn't her task, it was her responsibility. This person that Áine had cared so much about deserved her basic human decency. The first thing they did was tell zombies what had happened to them, to end the panic and confusion. It was the least she could do.

Raf was breathing heavily, too tired to resist when Piet took his chin and turned his head from side to side. Piet took out a torch and shone it across Raf's face, assessing the blood that was drying on his cheeks. After rubbing his thumb over a few patches, Piet stood back up and turned his attention to the body. Holding the torch in his mouth, he methodically checked the pockets, making a pile of Agent Hervey's possessions.

Wallet. Keys. Gum. EPD dictionary.

Piet flicked through the wallet, taking out a few cards to study them. He lingered on a photo, before closing the wallet and setting it down next to the body.

He checked Hervey's pockets again, before walking off and taking out his phone. Raf heard snatches as he called in their location, asking for a clean-up team. Piet paused before adding the location of the EPD safe house and the likelihood that EPD didn't know it was compromised, asking that EPD be notified about the agent as soon as possible.

'I saw something,' Raf said, after Piet had hung up.

Piet still had his back to Raf, staring off in the direction of SACER. Or Raf assumed he was, having no idea of either where they were or where it was.

Raf persisted, wiping his face with his sleeve as he stood. 'Before we left, on the street. I think I saw something.'

Piet took his wallet and phone out of his jacket and slipped them into his trousers. He took off the jacket as he came back towards Raf, folding it over his

arms as he stopped to once more stand over the body. He laid his jacket over Wyatt Hervey's head and shoulders, then picked up his bag and started walking.

He didn't say a word on the walk back to the safe house, Raf too tired to try to get a rise out of him. He stopped on their street, silently waiting.

Raf rubbed his head as he looked down the road. His eyes blurred, streaks from the streetlights catching in his eyelashes with every long blink, dragging the light down into his darkness. Without the lights from passing cars, he couldn't see anything but blurred black on black. Raf stared after red tail lights, seeing nothing in their illumination.

'I swear, I swear I saw something. I just... I can't.'

It was supposed to take Piet's mind off everything, but he was making it worse. They were standing in the cold night, Piet left only in a T-shirt, and he couldn't see a thing.

He became aware of an arm around him. He didn't remember faltering, but he wasn't holding himself up any more.

He opened his eyes to find himself on his back, staring at the cracking ceiling. Piet was on a chair by the end of the bed, watching the door. He tried to fight the darkness that was enveloping him, stretching out and forcing his eyes open with his fingers. He couldn't tell if the light was an anymore.

'Pietey,' he whispered. 'Pietey, you should run away. Slip into the night. Disappear. Don't look back.'

He wasn't sure if he was awake or speaking in his dream. He woke with a jolt every few seconds. Maybe it was minutes. He had too much to say, but the exhaustion was overwhelming.

At some point he became aware of the heavy weight of a blanket on him and the softness of a pillow under his head. Piet didn't seem to move.

'Pietey. Forget me and leave.'

Idris stared out of the window into darkness. He was trying to avoid thinking about Orlagh but her reflection in the corner of his eye refused to keep still.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered except Áine. He was here for her, enduring this for her.

Her sister yammered on behind him. It was easy to tune her out. They sounded nothing alike.

There was no anger towards Orlagh anymore. There had been no room for anything else since her father had appeared out of nowhere and promised the impossible.

Orlagh sidled up to him, reclining against the wall. 'I always liked that jumper. I remember the day she bought it. Oh man, she was so sick in the car afterwards that she threw up in the bag. She cried, then tried to throw it out the window.'

He paused. 'She told me she stole it.'

'I bet. Not much fun in careful saving. Looks good on you.'

Idris plucked at the cuff, highlighting just how far up his forearm the sleeve ended. Was she trying to insinuate something?

'I'm so sorry for what I did,' Orlagh said.

She was worryingly earnest in her apology, not realising that he had little use for it. 'None of that matters now.' He tried to change the subject. 'When is your father getting back? I need to speak to him.'

'Oh? Maybe I can help?'

Given that she had been looking to him for answers, he somehow doubted it. 'I don't think so.'

'Well, good. In that case, there's something I want to tell you.'

'Oh?' He tried to play it cool. She must know more than she was letting on.

'It's ... you're dead.'

The words were so foreign that he couldn't even comprehend them. He thought she meant Áine for a moment; thought that he had misheard.

Idris's voice cracked when he tried to speak. 'What?'

'You're a zombie.'

'No, I'm not.' He stepped back as she reached out a hand. 'Don't touch me.'

'I'm sorry. But it will be better now, I promise. That must be why he wanted me to tell you. It helps you once you know. Áine would want me to help you.'

'What are you talking about? Who are you people?' He kept backing away until he came up against a wall.

Áine was the ghost, not him. He was real, he was solid.

She reached out a tentative hand and put it on his shoulder. He didn't even bother swatting it away.

'It's OK. You're OK. It's not as bad as you might be thinking. Hospitals like this are only for severe cases, and that's not you.'

He stopped listening to her reassurances. He didn't know if she was lying to him, but who could he ask? They were all in it together.

She insisted on hovering next to him, talking endlessly.

In a moment of weakness, he found himself yearning to go home. But what was waiting for him there? Creepy robot children, death and ghosts. At least here he was with his kin.

11.

Orlagh was so caught up in monitoring Idris's reactions, and her own responses, that she stopped watching the door, startled when it opened behind them.

Magnus made a beeline for his nephew while her father lingered in the doorway, gesturing for her to join him.

Maybe she'd already finished her grading and they'd come in for the judgement. It couldn't have gone well if it was finished already. She definitely hadn't done anything that would score highly.

She dragged her feet as she followed her father into the corridor, looking back to see Magnus and Idris huddled in the corner of the room. She momentarily forgot to be nervous as she wondered what Idris was saying.

Freddie tore his eyes away from the EPD agents. 'Nathan and I told Magnus about Idris.'

'Oh.' She couldn't decide whether that was better or worse. Probably better, if it meant they were in a sharing mood. Someone else might be able to get through to him.

'I might not get another chance to talk to you alone.' Freddie lowered his voice. 'I need your help. Idris can't go back to EPD, or even SACER. It's too dangerous.'

'What?' Orlagh was caught off guard, hastily discarding the speech she'd been working on. 'I told him we weren't keeping him here.'

'Anywhere but home is fine.' Freddie's brow furrowed. 'What else did you tell him?'

And now that she needed it, she couldn't remember the version she had spent time organising into coherence. 'I... uh, was doing most of the talking. I may, just possibly, have told him that he was a dead zombie person. I don't know what I was thinking. I've messed everything up. But he was so upset, Dad.'

'You did a good thing,' he said, brushing her hair out of her eyes when she looked up at him. 'How did he take it?'

'Not good. I don't think he believes me.'

Idris was still sitting on the ground inside, Magnus offering what looked like awkward consolation.

Idris was shaking his head at something but gave up eventually and sank back under his hood, drawing up his knees and burying his face.

She had fumbled the original revelation but she had time to make it OK. She knew she could show him that it would be all right.

‘Look after him. He’s going to want some answers, but I know you’re up to it. I know you can do this.’

He was leaving so much unsaid, and the sincere encouragement was almost as unsettling. It can’t have been anything but her new grading. There was no other reason that he would leave her in the dark, in charge of a confused new zombie who happened to be her enemy. Idris could probably end her life with a word and she was doing her best to become his least favourite person.

Her father left before she could object, ready to take the group down to watch Simone’s autopsy.

Idris declined to join them, agreeing to stay in their room. Orlagh worried about leaving him alone and wished she could join him, wishing that Freddie would tell her to stay.

But he was silent and sombre as he led them down the hall.

Orlagh and Freddie to the side of the metal table, down by the pristine feet. Simone’s body showed no sign of the terrible fate wrought upon her. The evidence of that had probably disappeared with her mind, her final panicked thoughts turned into the weapon of her demise. She had believed that the prophecy was enough to kill her, so it had.

On a smaller table sat the equally unmarked clothes that had been stripped from her body. A few possessions were piled in plastic evidence bags, Orlagh turning her attention to them rather than the marble statue masquerading as Simone Mortimer.

Keys. Pencil. Scorecard from the competition, all the boxes filled in a neat hand. She had drawn a smiley face next to the final code.

Her *vade mecum* and the victory letter must still be under guard in the Refractory, away from prying eyes.

Orlagh only tore her eyes away when the pathologist power-walked into the room, his lab coat flowing elegantly behind him. He hit Freddie on the chest with his clipboard. ‘Looks like we have some fun on our hands today, eh?’

He froze when he saw Orlagh in the room. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise there was a lady present.’

Orlagh made sure her eyelids were shut before she rolled her eyes. ‘Really, where?’

The doctor didn’t seem to know quite how to take that, settling for a sickly smile and a glance at Freddie. He seemed reassured by Freddie’s benevolent expression, recovering most of the bustle he had brought in his wake.

He gave the body a quick visual inspection, which only added fuel to his reignited enthusiasm. ‘This is fascinating, just fascinating.’ He acknowledged Magnus’s presence for the first time. ‘I suppose that’s why you grace us with your presence.’

‘Thus far, I seem to be at a loss as to why you are gracing us with yours,’ Magnus said.

Orlagh tried not to smirk.

As the pathologist rolled his tray of instruments across to the table, Orlagh took the opportunity to read the file on Simone. It sat next to her belongings, attached to a metal clipboard.

Her personal details revealed that she was only a few years older than Orlagh, chosen early on for the Neologisms department. Orlagh always liked them; they didn’t flee whenever they saw her coming, listening patiently as she unveiled her suggestions for new words, even letting her sit in on some of their classes when she was at a loose end, sharing notes and textbooks.

The metal base of the clipboard burned her skin as she clutched it tightly. It was cold in the steel, fridge-like room. She supposed it was basically a fridge, a fridge for people. A peoplefridge. Orlagh wondered if Simone would’ve liked that one. Probably not, given the circumstances.

Orlagh found Simone was smiling in the photograph attached to her file. Not many agents smiled in those pictures, except Hazpop agents, all of whom had an identically mysterious smile on their faces. No one outside the department knew that they had all been instructed on how to look enigmatic before their photos

were taken, complete with an afternoon's practice. They liked how it freaked out the other departments.

Simone's smile wasn't enigmatic, just joyful. The kind that made you smile back. Unless, of course, you happened to be in the room with the body of the previously happy agent.

Orlagh studied Simone's face, the record of when it still had life, not the marble facsimile. Perhaps she was smiling because had thought up a new word to describe Ulric, the SACER photographer. That would be quite a feat as he was quite beyond words. Orlagh wondered if Simone had been a skilled wordsmith, capable of crafting a word to contain Ulric within its confines.

In front of her the doctor was beginning to make the first incisions. Orlagh focused determinedly on the file. Photo Simone smiled soothingly at her, but the green shirt she was wearing prickled at Orlagh's eyes. The same shirt was folded in a plastic bag by Orlagh's elbow.

The photo would have been taken when Simone was first assigned to her department; five years later and she was still wearing it. It wasn't her lucky shirt, though. Not anymore.

Various noises and smells were beginning to intrude into Orlagh's bubble. She bowed her head, not even daring to stare at the ground, sure that any minute a pool of blood would spread down into her field of sight.

Orlagh jumped when a voice appeared in her ear, whispering her name. There was a formless blur of white and red as she turned quickly.

'You should make sure Idris is all right,' Freddie said.

Orlagh wished he'd come to that conclusion half an hour ago. She couldn't decide if it was mercy or pity behind his change of heart, and what it would say about her if she accepted.

What if her ability to deal with unpleasant situations was her grading? It was the sort of thing the head of a department might conceivably have to deal with, even if her mother was nowhere in sight.

She heard a squelch and decided that she was quite all right with failing her grading, opting to leave with her head held high and her eyes on the floor.

Their commandeered room was empty when she returned. She circled around, but Idris was definitely not hiding behind the couch or under the desk. Or in the corner of the room. Or in any of the nooks and crannies.

Still not under the desk.

Orlagh gripped the door handle tightly, looking around one more time before she left.

The building was designed that all interior corridors wound eventually, inescapably, to the wards. With no sign of Idris in any of the open offices, architecture and deduction led her to her last hope of avoiding an outdoor search.

She announced herself over the intercom and the ward door swung open slowly, designed for security rather than hasty entrances. She let out her breath as the corridor beyond became visible: he hadn't made it past the first observation window, his forehead pressed to the glass. She didn't say anything as she closed the door, knowing what he was seeing in the room.

The woman in the bed was straining against the thick leather straps that bound her wrists and ankles, writhing and arching her back when Orlagh joined Idris. The restraints held, even though they looked ancient, leather cracking at the bends. They were fastened with large brass buckles, dulled and tarnished but still holding strong.

Idris couldn't take his eyes off her, watching her catch her breath then pull at her binding once more.

'That's not your future,' she said. 'This is how she has always been.'

Orlagh furrowed her brow, grabbing the crook of his elbow. He looked down in surprise as she steered him towards the door.

The woman looked across as they entered, frozen mid-arch with her head twisted around. Almost instantly her features smoothed, falling back on to the bed with an exhausted smile.

'Hi,' Orlagh said.

The woman's eyes flitted between Idris and Orlagh. 'Thank you.'

Orlagh moved next to the bed, crouching to get down to eye level. The woman didn't raise her head, rolling her eyes to meet Orlagh's. Even that effort seemed to exhaust her, eyelids drooping beneath the strands of hair plastered to her forehead.

‘What did you see...?’ Orlagh let her question trail off as the woman stopped fighting to keep her eyes open, drifting into sleep.

‘What did you do?’ Idris repeated, staring in bewilderment at the calm figure.

‘I’m not the one she should be thanking.’

Idris’s gaze lingered on the figure in the bed as realisation dawned. ‘Me? Did I hurt her?’

Orlagh smiled faintly. ‘I think rather the opposite.’

‘What did I do?’

Orlagh contemplated the peacefully sleeping woman. ‘I have no idea.’ She turned to Idris. ‘Do you see anything different around her?’

‘No. Should I?’

Orlagh held her tongue as her brain ticked over. ‘Apparently not.’ After all the information she’d been passing to her enemy, she thought it might be best to keep her interest to herself.

Idris was different. He might be the key. To Áine, to everything.

Maybe to her grading.

She was eager to talk to her father, his instruction to her seeming less and less random by the revelation.

She didn’t know how much Freddie would be able to say if she was in the middle of her examination. If he didn’t give her a straight answer, that might be a clue that this was part of her grading. Or that it was a day ending in a ‘y’.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Your father suggested we visit. I wanted to see why.’

‘I was about to send out a search party,’ she chided. ‘How did you get in here, anyway?’

‘Door opened. Last person out must not have locked it properly.’

‘Did you sneak in under someone’s coat?’

‘It was open.’

‘I’ll check that,’ Orlagh said, dubiously.

Idris was almost pressing himself against the back wall. ‘We didn’t do this to her.’ His tone wasn’t quite defensive, a hint of desperation creeping in like he

was trying to convince himself. 'Other people can happen upon it, a certain combination of words, by chance. By accident. We don't... we don't do this.'

There wasn't much point in making him feel worse. 'Sure.'

Her agreement didn't lessen his distress, doubling over, like the punch in his stomach had been literal.

'Someone did this to me. Someone tried to kill me.' He stood with a renewed passion. 'When did it happen?'

Orlagh took a few steps, staring off to the side of his head. 'Stand in front of the window.' She lined him up, peering past his shoulder. 'It certainly isn't recent.'

Idris followed the horizon with his finger on the pane. Orlagh took his hand and put his finger down on the first fuzzy blur she saw.

'Can you see that? The trees, they're different. There's a tall one, sticking out above them all in your other reality.' She sized him up again. 'You look pretty solid, mostly in this world, so the echo should be faint. Ghostly.'

Orlagh let go of his hand, moving back to hover at the foot of the bed. Idris left his finger pressed against the glass, pointing at another world that she couldn't see any more.

'Ghosts?'

'Have you been seeing things?' she asked. 'Hearing things?'

His finger slipped, leaving a little streak on the glass. 'Like what?' It sounded like his voice was coming from another world.

'You'd see people from your other world walking around. They'd look sort of faint. And some people can hear voices bleeding through, too.'

His hand fell to his side. 'Six months. She didn't die, I did.'

Orlagh tried to keep the excitement from her voice. 'You've seen Áine?'

Idris nodded, eyes blinking furiously. Whatever code he might have been spelling out was lost to her untrained eye.

'But only at night?' she asked.

'All the time.'

'And you never leave EPD?'

'No.' It took another moment before he caught up, meeting her eyes in surprise. 'Oh.'

Orlagh leaned her head back, letting out a long breath. ‘Does she look all right?’

‘I’ve never seen guards or cuffs or anything. I mean, you don’t have to see them, but she looks happy. I think. But where is she in this world? If it’s not her ghost, if she isn’t dead, where is she here?’

‘I don’t know.’ It seemed to be the only answer she had lately. She didn’t notice that Idris had moved to stand by the side of the bed, fingers lingering on the bar where the restraint was fastened.

‘This is what I am, what I’ll be.’ He wasn’t asking her, repeating it to himself like he didn’t quite believe it.

She answered anyway. ‘Everyone’s different.’

‘Who is she?’

Orlagh contemplated the familiar figure and her unfamiliar peace. ‘Karen Hartley. She’s been here as long as I’ve been visiting. Some of our agents found her screaming in the middle of the street, swinging her arms at things no one else could see. Well, almost no one.’

‘Why won’t that happen to me? Why aren’t you locking me in here?’

‘She ... it’s like she has an almost even presence in two worlds. There are no ghosts for her, everything is real, and yet not quite real. Two worlds pressing down on her.’

He didn’t look reassured.

‘This is only the last resort,’ she added. ‘Not everyone ends up here, only the people who can’t deal with it any more. You’re perfectly able to lead a good life, with a few little adjustments. We can help with that.’

Idris stretched a finger down the leather strap, reaching half way between the bar and Karen’s wrist. The restraints held her arm out as she slept, tugging her back every time she tried to roll on to her side.

‘Can’t these be taken off?’ he asked, lingering over the buckle.

‘Maybe.’ Orlagh checked the hall for a passing nurse, turning back to find Idris snapping the clasp back with his thumb and loosening the leather strap. She should have stopped him, before he worked the restraint free, but she let him continue without a word.

As soon as she was freed Karen curled in a ball on her side, gathering herself around her one restrained arm.

Idris twisted the strap around his fingers as he watched her settle back into her deep sleep.

‘Learning anything from your dreamancy by proxy?’

‘My oneiromancy,’ he lingered on the word, ‘is unproductive.’

‘We should get back,’ she said, after giving him as much time as she dared.

There was a flash of movement as a hand snaked up to grip Idris by the wrist.

‘You can’t leave,’ Karen said.

Idris put his hand on hers. Orlagh couldn’t tell if he was trying to pry her fingers loose or reassuring her.

Orlagh leaned against the inside of the viewing window, resisting the urge to check her watch. She could see Karen’s fingernails making dents in Idris’s skin, leaving pink trails across his wrist as her grip loosened.

Her hand dropped away completely as she fell asleep again, leaving Idris to rub his wrist with a grimace.

‘Can’t you fix her? Isn’t that the point of you?’

Orlagh understood the fear behind his demands, tempering her irritation at his tone. ‘Not her. It was too late when we found her, it had been too long. Each world demands its share and there’s not enough left of her to fill two worlds. The healthy tissue would be ripped in two.’

‘That’s all you do? Kill people then cross your fingers?’

‘We fix your botched jobs.’ She dug out her pill case and held it up to him. ‘I have to carry around poison because of you, just in case I have to put someone out of their misery. That’s all I can do. How do you think that feels?’

Idris pressed a fist into the side of his hood, crouching by the bed. He reached up and touched Karen’s fingers lightly, as if redirecting electricity from her body into the ground.

Hastily abandoning her retorts, Orlagh edged around to watch him over the sleeping figure. He held his pose, only the slightest movement as his legs struggled to keep him up.

After a moment, he gave up the fight and sat on the floor, maintaining his connection with Karen. ‘EPD. Hazpop. You can destroy each other for all I care.’

The small anomalies in the world had been bothering her for some time, greater than the usual flickers in the ward. The concentrated unreality was beginning to wear down the laws of physics.

‘We should get back.’

‘I’m not going anywhere.’

Orlagh tipped a visitor’s chair back with her finger, pleased at the effect when it froze in its fall. Idris got to his feet slowly, his eyes fixed on the back leg that was half-buried in the linoleum.

‘Not too much of a problem, ordinarily. But you two crazy kids are a little too much paradox for the world to handle.’

Idris got very still, very quickly.

‘I will actually warn you,’ Orlagh said, when his fear was far greater than she’d anticipated.

‘I need a pen. Before we leave. Please.’

Orlagh returned with the first thing she found, ignoring his expression when she pressed the whiteboard marker into his hand.

After Orlagh assured him it was safe, Idris knelt by Karen’s bed, turning over her free hand and exposing the palm. He paused for a moment before printing a message. Orlagh moved around to read over his shoulder.

**I WILL
COME BACK
FOR YOU**

Orlagh didn’t comment, returning the marker on the way back out. Idris painstakingly recreated her path until the ward door was safely behind them.

Magnus and her father were already waiting, seemingly unconcerned about the absence of their wards. They were caught up in their own little conversation, ending it abruptly when Magnus spied them.

‘The pathologist didn’t find anything,’ Freddie said, by way of greeting. He checked the clock on the wall. ‘It’s past midnight; we should grab a few hours sleep before we head back.’

Idris hovered, waiting until Freddie looked over in exasperation.

‘What is it, Idris?’

‘Can I have a word with you, Agent Meyers?’ Idris asked.

‘Not now.’

Orlagh was surprised that her father failed to ignite under the ferocious intensity of Idris’s gaze. ‘I want to ask you about Áine.’

‘It’s late. We can talk tomorrow.’

Orlagh was used to feeling like she was never in full possession of the facts, never knowing the right answer or course of action. But this was a whole new level of uncertainty. She had no idea what anyone wanted of her, or each other, or of what she was supposed to do, and why. And what parts of her response to the above she would be judged on, if any.

Her train of thought was broken when Idris kicked his bed, sending it skidding into the wall. He further tested its limits by collapsing on to it, retreating so far inside his jumper that only the tip of his nose was visible past the hood and the shadows.

He rolled on to his side, turning his back towards the rest of the room.

Orlagh took more care than Idris when she sat on her bed, trying to think of all the things she should have said to him, and all the ways she could have done it better. She allowed herself a minute of wallowing in the day’s mistakes before she began to make a new list of the ways that she would help him and fix the damage she’d done. She needed to help make him back into a person that Áine would recognise.

Orlagh tried to stifle a yawn, making an odd noise that only served to draw the attention of Magnus and Freddie. Idris continued to stare at the wall, not even grateful that she’d shifted their focus from his outburst.

‘We should try and get a little rest,’ Freddie said.

Magnus took the bed closest to Idris, Freddie next to him and Orlagh on the other side of the room. Orlagh stared into the darkness and contemplated the day she’d be waking up to. Her father was going to leave her behind. She had to keep

an upset boy from returning home. Her future may hinge on the decisions she made. Just another day, then.

12.

Piet was gone when Raf woke, the sunlight filling his dreams with a red tinge until he opened his eyes. The fact that the curtains weren't drawn suggested the tantalising prospect of some passive-aggressive payback. Either that, or the fact that there weren't any.

Lying in the empty room he didn't fear that Piet was gone. He had all the hope in the world and none of the faith.

As he rolled stiffly to sit on the edge of the bed he found that his jacket and shoes had been stripped from him. More of the room came into focus and he found a towel on the end of his bed, hair gel sitting in the middle.

Raf located the bathroom and inspected his reflection in the mirror, finding his face had been cleaned from last night. He emerged, freshly washed and having finally tamed his damp hair into acceptable spikes. Piet was sitting at the dining room table, watching the front corridor where a table sat in front of the door. A vase was poised on the edge, threatening to fall at the slightest provocation.

Breakfast was laid out on the table, more delights from the depths of Piet's backpack. When he had changed into the clean clothes Piet set out for him, he returned to find the vase and table were gone, their shining moment of usefulness already a fading memory.

Raf hesitated in front of their dusty nook on their way out. He almost took the vase with him, recognition that it had spent the night guarding the lives of two Hazpop agents, even going so far as to extend his hand out towards it. But he wavered. It was really ugly. And there was a centimetre of putrid water in the base. He wrinkled his nose and settled for a salute, not bothering to explain the action to Piet.

It didn't take long for Raf to pick up the thread he'd seen in the night, the bustle of movement in the other world revealing itself in the tiny pinpricks as a strobing effect.

Raf turned slow pirouettes as the morning pedestrians streamed around him, his spinning gravitating him towards the centre of the road. Piet controlled his

progress, leading him on and off the pedestrian crossing with the flow of traffic, allowing him frustratingly brief snatches of investigation.

As Piet hustled him along on the trailing edge of the crowd, Raf kept his eyes on the middle of the road fighting his wrangler with every step.

‘That’s the trail you followed in,’ Piet said, following his stubborn gaze.

Raf tried to think of a sarcastic rejoinder, despite the attempt at helpfulness and the not insignificant precedent that supported an assumption of Raf’s disorientation. Perhaps it was fortuitous then that his thoughts were cut through by a new realisation.

‘Aha! But is it?’ Raf bounced on his toes, craning his neck for a better view of the masterpiece. ‘Clever bastard.’

The shining beacons captivated him anew, dancing out their message as he bobbed and swayed, before a jolting pressure exploded across his chest and yanked him backwards. Raf’s hands flew to his throat, clawing helplessly as the collar of his shirt dug into his neck. The grip eased almost immediately, followed by a dizzying blur as a car flew past, sending Raf stumbling back another step. He was only kept upright by the immobile Piet behind him and the handful of shirt Piet was still holding.

As soon as Piet let go, Raf sprung forward again and teetered on the edge of the kerb, too excited to be distracted by his pounding heart. He smiled as he found his thread. Turning, he tried to direct a little reflected glory on to Piet. ‘It’s beautiful. A work of art.’

Raf, tired of Piet’s lack of excitement and rather pale demeanour, followed the trail back again.

‘Home again, home again, jiggedy-jig.’ It was accompanied by his best attempt at a jig, which was likely a sad reflection on both his dancing ability and his knowledge of what constituted the said dance.

It was too early for the canteen to be serving food, the room empty except for the two agents sitting on opposite sides of one of the tables. The light and the decor were cold and grey, the last remnants of the night refusing to submit to the rising sun.

Freddie was trying to recall the sequence of events of the night before, writing his account for Brigid.

‘I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you in the dawn light.’

He looked up to find Magnus studying him. ‘Maybe not on this side of it.’

Magnus rubbed his eyes. ‘How did it come to this?’

Freddie was too weary to take him on anything but face value. ‘We’re adults now. We don’t get to sleep in.’

‘We get the corpses instead. Not much of a trade-off.’

Freddie was busy omitting his first meeting with Magnus when he became aware of a sudden stillness.

‘Will Idris be all right?’ Magnus asked.

‘He’s in shock at the moment. We can help him, though.’

‘I brought him. I trusted you. And now you’re going to tell me what all this is about.’

Freddie abandoned any pretence at finishing his work and set aside his papers. ‘I saw what had happened to Idris. I thought it was a good way to help him, while helping you.’

Magnus shook his head with something between fondness and frustration. ‘Are you capable of telling the truth? You hadn’t even met with him when you asked – no, demanded – that he come.’

‘There’s something bigger than you imagine at work here, and it’s been hanging over all our heads for a long time.’

Magnus settled back in his chair. ‘Oh! Do I sense an excuse after all this time?’

‘An explanation. I had to go. I couldn’t know what you were telling me.’

‘If you felt so strongly you could have said so. I could have put a stop to it.’

‘It was too late, Magnus. I had to make sure you’d be safe. I got you a reprieve, but that’s about to run out.’

‘From whom? I only see you sitting there, talking like we’re going to die.’

Magnus was reclining at an obtuse enough angle that Freddie didn’t bother denying a threat.

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Of course it does. What reprieve did you get us?’

‘You would have died if I stayed. But I handled it badly. I panicked.’

‘Tell me now.’

‘I can’t.’

Freddie understood the look; he’d want to shake himself too if vague non-answers were all he was hearing. But it was all he could offer.

There was a soft knocking on the swinging double doors, breaking their staring contest. Magnus won with the aid of the junior doctor who handed over a file to Freddie before skittering out.

Freddie glanced over the pages. Even without any medical expertise, he could see it was all variations of ‘nothing unusual’.

Apart from her being dead.

‘You’re not even close, are you?’ he asked, sliding the file to Magnus.

‘Not really, no. Diane thinks she is.’

Freddie froze, hand curled around the phone he’d been retrieving from his pocket. ‘Oh?’ His hesitation was unseen by Magnus, who was paying more attention to the details of the report.

‘Just her latest obsession,’ he murmured, scouring the summary page.

Freddie remembered back when Diane had been their classmate and her hyperfocus had been centred on Magnus. Only when she accepted the disinterest of her prey had she turned her sights to the year below them and Magnus’s little brother.

She wasn’t giving up. If she was on the right track, no one would be able to throw her off it.

Freddie tried to feign disinterest. ‘You don’t seem worried.’

Magnus chuckled humourlessly. ‘What’s the first thing she’d do?’

‘Good point.’

Magnus tossed the file on to the table, stretching out his back. ‘She’s stuck on some ridiculous stories, convinced of the lethality of fairy tales or something.’

Freddie didn’t quite relax, having learned never to underestimate anything where Diane was concerned.

Wandering over to a corner of the room, Freddie called Brigid to pass on the findings of the autopsy report. He found himself staring blankly as Brigid relayed

the current status of the investigation, looking away when he realised that Magnus's attention was focused back on him.

He almost wasn't paying attention to the conversation when Brigid mentioned that Raf and Piet thought they'd made a breakthrough on where the trail had started. After Freddie established that was all she knew, he managed to extricate himself from the conversation, hanging up without making any mention of when they'd be returning.

He counted to ten then scrolled down his list of contacts.

Piet answered on the second ring.

'Where are you?'

'Heading back towards SACER. Raf seems to think the trail might have started there. We're retracing the path now, making sure it goes the whole way.'

He hoped the reception was bad enough that Piet didn't hear the hitch in his breath. Freddie covered the mouthpiece as he drew in a deeper breath.

'OK, don't ... I need you to come here. I need Raf.'

There was a pause at the other end of the line. *'You want us to stop our investigation?'*

Piet's voice wasn't incredulous, restating for clarification. But he wasn't the one Freddie was worried about.

'Put it on hold for a little while. Something more important has come up.' His hesitation wasn't for dramatic effect, but it served that purpose anyway. 'It's Orlagh.' The emotion in his voice wasn't all fictional, but it wasn't exactly coming from the same place that he hoped Piet believed it was.

'Where are you?'

Freddie wasn't surprised that the response was immediate. He was counting on it.

He closed his eyes.

'Havenscroft.'

'We'll be there in half an hour.'

Freddie hung up and closed his hand into a fist around the handset. There was no time for Piet to have consulted with Raf, and he wasn't sure how much of a fight Raf would put up. But he had to believe they would come; there was nothing else he could do.

Everything was in a delicate balance and nothing could go wrong. There could be no chances missed, no information lost.

Freddie gathered his papers. 'I think we've left the sleepyheads in peace for long enough.'

There was one last surprise he had in store for Magnus. If he had warned him, given him a chance to mull it over, then his job would be a lot harder. As it was, he was hoping that the element of surprise would be enough to get them out the door.

Orlagh was sitting cross-legged on her bed when they entered. 'What's wrong?'

'Oh nothing. We were just saying that the two of you should stick around to get the final autopsy result.'

Magnus's reaction was sharp. 'No, we weren't.'

'We were discussing the possibility,' Freddie said, in a conciliatory tone.

'He's not staying,' Magnus said firmly. 'We came, and now we're going home.'

Freddie scoffed softly. 'You're so suspicious. They're hanging around to finish the job and then they'll come back together.'

'Oh no. You can't keep him here.'

Idris folded his arms and stared at the ceiling. 'Not going back.'

Freddie raised his eyebrows at Orlagh, who shrugged in return.

'Idris, please,' Magnus said, unable to walk the fine line of audible yet private. 'We can talk when we get back. Make some changes.'

Idris flicked up his hood and even Magnus got the message.

'OK. If you want. But you don't have to.' Magnus looked pointedly at Freddie. 'And you can leave any time you like.'

'Yes, you can,' Freddie agreed.

Despite the help, Magnus glared at him rather unfairly. 'Yes. So come back when you're done.'

Idris didn't push the hood from his face. 'Whatever.'

Freddie had never been so pleased by a display of petulance, only worried that he was leaving Orlagh to deal with it. 'What I said to you, Idris, you'll find your answer here.'

The peak of the hood lifted slightly, but not far enough to reveal the eyes hidden beneath it.

Magnus alternated his gaze between Freddie and his nephew. ‘What? What did he say to you?’

Freddie addressed Idris directly. ‘Don’t forget what you said.’

The hood dipped in a small nod.

Magnus hovered in the middle of the room. ‘Be careful. Call me if you need help.’

Freddie shepherded Magnus out, one last encouraging look for Orlagh. He left her without any further consultation, not wanting to be seen whispering in her ear alone. She knew all she needed to know and they, at least, would be all right. It was about dealing with everyone else now.

Raf folded his arms and waited for Piet to pass on the message, hoping that somehow he was wrong about what Piet’s half of the conversation had meant.

‘We have to go to Havenscroft,’ Piet said.

‘No. No no no.’ Raf shook his head as he walked off, returning when random people on the street showed even less interest in his disapproval than Piet. He slapped his palm against Piet’s chest to emphasise his seriousness. ‘We can’t. We’ve got a trail, we’re on a roll.’ He spun his hands over each other to better demonstrate, only stopping when they smacked into each other.

Raf was still shaking his head as he started back towards SACER, following his silvery link back home. It was the sole reason he knew which direction to go, so he hoped he was right.

Piet moved to match Raf’s strides, taking in any increase in speed with his length advantage. Raf slowed, realising he was only tiring himself.

‘Freddie mentioned Orlagh,’ Piet added.

Raf winced, screwing up his face. Anything Freddie needed an ephemeral for so urgently would not be good. Especially as he was being taken away from a murder investigation they killed him for.

‘What did he say?’ Raf asked through his clenched teeth.

‘That they needed your help.’

Raf gnawed on the knuckle of his thumb. 'OK, fine. Obviously we have to go.' He felt a little surer, having said the words and beginning to believe in them.

Still, he found it hard to stop his head turning back as they walked away. He followed the shimmering trail to the horizon before sighing and turning away.

13.

Idris counted the beats of his heart in the darkness. He sat on the couch, his knees pressed to either ear, acting as a vice on his head. His pulse remained steady. Still beating. Against all reason and logic it continued to push blood around his dead body.

Orlagh was trying to persuade him that knowledge would bring peace. Except every time she told him not to worry about something, it was all he could think about. Spots began appear all around him as she explained how harmless they were. His world suddenly filled with pricks of light and movement, like he had been pressing his fists into his eyes. He could shut them out, but he couldn't blink them away once his eyes were open.

Orlagh had tried to explain but he stopped listening after she said 'quantum-ish' for the tenth time. It was clear that either Hazpop had no idea or she was just very bad at elucidating. She had an unfortunate imprecision with language that made his jaw clench, relaxing it consciously when he realised he was turning into his mother.

More than ever, he needed to find Áine. She would know exactly what to say in order to make it clear, and then to make him forget. At this point, the hospital for the mutants was only more appealing than the castle of lies because of the promises it held.

He couldn't breathe in their room, but the world outside the window was worse. Out there he couldn't even count on the ground beneath his feet any more.

His uncle had left more than an hour ago, but Orlagh had done little since then, aside from offering her ill-advised reassurances. There didn't seem to be a plan of action and his hope began to ebb with her every deflection.

It had been a bad start when she had been surprised at what her father offered him. The initial spark in her eyes had filled him with a hope that she had subsequently chipped away. She lapsed into long silences marked only by the clarifications she sought from him about what exactly had been promised.

He had curled up in the corner of the couch when she seemed crestfallen that her father had said ‘talk’ and not ‘find’. The sound of his impossible heartbeat had filled the silence with something other than despair.

When he realised she was talking again, he opened his eyes to find her face centimetres from his. Her amusement suggested that his shock was not unintentional.

He removed his knees from his ears. ‘What?’

‘I’m going to look around for clues. I could use your help.’

‘Do you have any idea where to find her?’

‘You’re the psychic one.’

‘I’m what now?’

‘Oh yeah, little bonus for you. Often the zombies get a little bit psychic. Nothing lottery-winning, but little things.’

He raised a fist weakly. ‘Woo.’

‘Come on, there are things we should check out.’

His heart thumped at the thought of falling into gaping chasms. One wrong step out there and the ground could literally come out from under him.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked, unable to mask the panic in his voice.

‘Reception. Problem?’

He shook his head, trying to orient himself as they wound their way back to the entrance. But she took him on a different path than they’d used the night before, perhaps planning to leave him permanently disoriented in case he tried to escape.

She led him into the entrance hall, then left him alone to inform Dr Emery of their amended plans. A draught from the open front door curled around the corner into the waiting area where he’d been deposited, soothing the buzz in his head. He perched on the edge of a plastic seat and picked up the top magazine from the table, flicking through the lurid headlines until he regained his breath.

He found that he recognised most of the faces, having dutifully logged his viewing quotas of television and other forms of popular culture in case they proved to be important variables.

One page captured his attention, sending him scrambling backwards to find it again. The ad covered the lower half of the page, Idris recognising the words

emblazoned in red. They were words EPD had designed, filled with power and then loosed upon the world. They had long since served their purpose but they lingered harmlessly, a familiar beacon in the sea of strangeness.

The target had been chosen for an experimental study into the effect of prophecies on career choice and job satisfaction, steering her towards a medical career and keeping an eye on her progress. She wouldn't be saving lives yet, but maybe one day. And maybe she'd save someone who'd go on to do something even bigger and better.

‘And you'd swoop in and do what you like with their lives. Tut tut.’

He lowered the magazine to find Orlagh had taken up the seat opposite, legs outstretched.

Idris was caught off guard, falling back on to phrases straight out of the EPD handbook. ‘We only help people achieve a higher purpose.’

‘Not your choice.’

He wasn't in a mood to disagree beyond his automatic rebuttal. There wasn't much to defend from where he was sitting, and no higher ground to defend it from. He didn't bother. ‘Did Áine ever come here? Would she hide here?’

‘I don't think there's anywhere to hide. Pretty sure it's been designed for there not to be.’

Idris slumped back in his chair, ignoring the sharp pain as his spine hit a hard corner. ‘Maybe she's locked up. Something happened and this is how your father tells us.’

For the first time the reality of his hope hit him. The hospital beds and restraints weren't something he'd wish on an enemy.

Orlagh charmed the agent on reception into showing them the list of current patients, no Áine Polisson listed. No Annie Polission, Áine Meyers or Annie Meyers either.

She didn't bother hiding her relief as she slid the book back across the desk. ‘No need to become disheartened. It was a long shot and a plan that would have reflected poorly on everyone involved.’

‘Your father would have warned you, at least, if we were going to find her in one of those rooms, wouldn't he?’

‘I think he probably meant you could talk to the Áine in your other world. Like he knew there wasn’t one to find in this one.’

All that talk, the promises, and it was all for nothing. Áine was still missing and they were still trapped in different worlds.

‘Cheer up, emo kid. It’s good news. She’s OK and you can talk to her.’

‘That not her. That’s someone else. She’s missing here. Something has happened to her in this world.’

He immediately regretted his harshness when she turned away. Of course Orlagh knew. She was about the only other person who really understood.

‘Why did he bring me here? Why this hospital?’ he asked, trying to distract her.

Orlagh shrugged. ‘Maybe the answers here are for this world. Maybe it was just the easiest place to bring you, given the circumstances.’

‘Fabulous.’ Idris preferred anything to continuing the discussion, starting to move without any idea where he was going.

Orlagh caught up quickly and began to steer him around the corridors. ‘Might as well check the wards anyway. Rule it out.’

Idris wasn’t sure he even wanted to know anymore. Maybe the agonising hope was better than a future like his.

He chewed his lip. He wouldn’t say that to Karen. Whatever state he found Áine in, it might still be all right.

He almost turned back at the fortified door, but Orlagh convinced him that it would be all right.

‘Watch your foot,’ Orlagh called lightly as she leaped over a seemingly normal patch of linoleum.

It took a while before he saw the fuzzy patch of ground, the surface warping ever so slightly for a fraction of a second before returning to normal again.

While the thrill it provoked was indescribable, it was a sight he hoped never to see again.

‘I would go through that?’ he asked. ‘And the ground would solidify around my foot?’

‘If your timing was very bad.’

The earlier times, the time he was in here alone, anything could have happened. He wished the pressure in his chest wasn't so crushing, the discomfort compounded by thoughts of worlds closing in on him.

The parade of patients behind windows only added to his growing breathlessness. Their agitation was palpable, even if the curious sight of their enemy did seem to calm them temporarily. Orlagh began regarding him almost as strangely, her reaction more unnerving than those of the unnatural beings.

Orlagh circled his arm in the crook of her elbow. 'Come on, it's only a little bit further.'

They eventually looped back around to the entrance with no sign of Áine in any of the beds. Idris leaned against the heavy ward door once it was closed, ashamed of his relief.

'That was a big waste of time,' he said.

She was still staring at him creepily. 'I'm not so sure.'

'You saw something?'

'Not as such,' she said, displaying the family trait of stubborn elusiveness. 'I need to ponder. Come, let us think and walk.'

Apparently she couldn't do both at the same time, guiding him down the halls without further comment. The morning had brought some occupants to the offices, a mix of white coats and casual wear, with one SACER uniform on what must be a visitor. Idris couldn't imagine anyone being there when they didn't have to be. He was definitely beginning to rethink the necessity of his own presence.

Augustus placed his phone on the desk. Still no answer from his brother.

His wife watched from across the desk. 'I cannot believe him. Actually, I can. Of course I can.' She slammed a hand on the table. 'This is unacceptable.'

It could not be put off any longer. 'I'll gather the students,' he said.

Diane's anger dissipated and he smiled briefly. She straightened his cloak at the door, smoothing his collar before they left.

The agents in the castle were collected into the dining hall. The rows were positioned awkwardly, but they all faced him as he stood at their head and delivered the news.

He was very proud of their reactions. There was sorrow, but no wailing. And no anger.

It was the proper way to honour their fallen agent.

He sent them back to their classes immediately. Now was not the time for wallowing. Grief was selfish and did no one any good; instead their minds would be cleared in the service of others. Today the world would be a better place because of Wyatt Hervey.

He processed the paperwork when he returned to his office, preparing a report for SACER, as well as his brother, should he ever return.

The body was in transit, picked up by a SACER agent. He had insisted that an EPD agent accompany the body, to make sure it was given the proper respect.

He called to check on their time of arrival and was given the choice of bringing the body into the EPD compound or sending it to the small SACER morgue.

To have it in the castle would be sentimental and maudlin, inviting disruption to the less steeled agents. He instructed that the body be placed with the other SACER corpses.

Diane had followed him back to his office, rather than returning to her usual daytime occupancy. He sat and waited.

‘Something has to be done about your brother.’

He considered the proposal. There was an implication of action, but it wasn’t clear. ‘We have to focus on what needs to be done here and now.’

‘He is what needs to be dealt with. Right here, right now. While he’s off gallivanting with the people who want to destroy us, those very people are killing our agents. His indifference is going to destroy us.’

Augustus couldn’t deny that his brother was absent. And Hazpop had taken responsibility for the death of their agent. ‘I don’t think his presence would have saved Agent Hervey.’

Diane pulled a face of displeasure. ‘No, that’s not the point. If he wasn’t obstructing us, no one would dare lay a finger on us. We would be free to go about our business. We could make a better world in peace, wouldn’t that be nice?’

It would be nice. He would like the agents to feel safe walking out of their walls. Their resilience was heartening, but it wasn't necessary to demonstrate their focus to him.

‘Think about it. Think about how much more we could achieve if we could put all our resources into improving ourselves.’

If she was right, then they would be able to do so much more. They really could change the whole world. ‘Perhaps. I'll review your progress then present your case to Magnus again.’

Diane buried her face in her hands, but she had stopped grimacing when she raised her head. ‘And what about when the rest of SACER turns on us? It's only a matter of time. We need someone decisive, someone who can make the hard decisions it will take to save us. We need you.’

Magnus was the one who'd been trained since birth, the only one who knew the choices he had to make. Even now, Augustus was acting with the knowledge that the ultimate responsibility was not his. ‘The role is Magnus's. I will offer him insight if I feel he lacks it.’

‘We won't be victims. I won't allow it.’

‘No, we will not.’

The answer seemed to satisfy her.

Magnus prodded the edge of the garden bed with his shoe. Freddie wasn't sure what exactly he was attempting to ascertain from the investigation, but left him to it.

Everything along the side of the road had so far proved to be of more interest to Magnus than his walking companion.

Freddie had left instructions with Raf and Piet to watch over the younger agents. Magnus had been unimpressed by the relief team, even as he appeared entranced by Raf. He denied that he couldn't take his eyes off him but offered no other explanation for his interest.

As predicted, Raf had protested, but Freddie had relaxed as soon as he could see that Piet understood the importance of their task.

‘I'm leaving my daughter with him, Magnus,’ Freddie said, exercising his advantage over his floral rivals. Sweet smells and vibrant colours were no match

for his ability to appeal to things beyond the senses. ‘You trusted me yesterday. Nothing’s changed.’

‘You lied to me.’ Magnus hadn’t turned, but Freddie was reasonably certain that the rose bushes hadn’t wronged him.

‘I’ve told you all I can.’

‘You don’t trust me?’

‘It’s not about trust. You don’t understand. I have told you all that I am able. Not all that I think you should know, or are allowed to know, but everything I can.’

‘That’s not good enough. This is my family.’

‘It’s my family too. And they will take care of each other.’

‘What am I supposed to tell his parents?’

There were no flowers in the EPD compound, the place where Diane and Augustus would be waiting. Magnus was the one who’d have to answer the questions, face their wrath.

‘Tell them that the autopsy results were delayed and you’ve left Idris behind to deal with it.’

‘And then what? Will he be home tomorrow? I don’t think they’ll be so understanding a week from now.’

‘We’ll deal with that then, if we have to. But we have our own job now. We have to make sure there’s a SACER for them to come home to.’

Magnus’s back stiffened. It could have been protesting against the awkward angle he was bending at. ‘Why wouldn’t there be?’

‘We’ve established that there’s every chance Simone was killed by a prophecy and uncovered zero evidence that clears your people. I’d say that the rest of SACER might get edgy.’

‘If they believe we can kill people like that, they’ll stay away from us.’

‘A frightened group of people is capable of anything.’

Magnus ran his thumb over a shining green leaf.

‘You should requisition some seeds,’ Freddie said. He reached over and plucked a particularly well-formed yellow bud from a bush, holding it out to Magnus. ‘A memento.’

Magnus didn't take the proffered flower. 'Killing it in the process. How appropriate.'

Freddie re-examined the flower through Magnus's offended prism. The stem was fractured and oozing, strings of green hanging off the side he'd bent and torn. But it seemed perverse to toss it away, so Freddie tucked it behind his ear.

At the very least, he could distract Magnus from the floral murder he'd been witness to. 'The thing that has systemically destroyed the SACER branches around the world? I think it has started on its final target.'

Magnus clasped his hands behind his back, taking a moment before he straightened and looked Freddie in the eye. 'Simone was a warning?'

'Possibly more of a test.'

Freddie headed towards the centre of the path, away from the distraction of the vibrant garden. Magnus's curiosity won out and he drifted over to join Freddie.

'Test of their power or of us?' Magnus asked.

'Either. Both.'

'And what does Idris have to do with this?'

'That, I don't know,' Freddie said. It was true, in a way. 'And, until I do, I thought it would be safer for him to be somewhere else.'

'But why him?'

Freddie had given a lot of thought to the question. There were two answers, each as terrible as the other. Both were equally true and neither was close to the whole truth.

He hadn't made up his mind when he opened his mouth, only choosing in the split second before the words came out.

'Because he's your heir, and we'll need him to lead. And because he's a connection to Áine that I don't want to lose.' Out of the corner of his eye he could see Magnus's surprise, hastily covered.

The answer that made him look bad rather than the dangerous one.

'What about everyone else at SACER?' Magnus asked, not questioning Freddie's answer further. Just as he'd hoped.

'They have us to save them.'

‘There’s more to it than that, though. Why bother sending Idris and Orlagh away if we’re the big saviours?’ Magnus dropped his hand to his side with a soft exclamation. ‘Oh. In case we fail.’

Freddie plucked the flower from behind his ear, slipping it into Magnus’s shirt pocket as the SACER gates swung open for them. ‘A reminder to get those seeds. A bit of water will keep it alive.’

A few agents began to stare, so he moved to wrap up their conversation as swiftly as possible. He might as well end the way he’d been going, combining guesses with half-truths.

‘It will be OK.’

14.

Raf evaded Piet's attempts to call him back across the grounds, running fast enough that he didn't catch the end of Piet's sentence. Theoretically it could have gone either way: 'Don't go over and say hello' or 'Don't go over and say you suck'. He wasn't planning on doing the latter, so he was safe.

He peeked around the edge of the window, watching the two figures.

'That them?' he whispered, once Piet dragged himself to the wall.

Piet paused before answering. 'Yes.'

It was as if Piet didn't trust him. How rude.

The boy jumped amusingly when Raf gave the glass a small tap.

Orlagh came over to yank the window open, holding out her hand to grasp Piet's before hugging Raf over the sill and flicking the brim of his top hat.

'Can I try it on?'

'Only for you, Orly.' He leaned in conspiratorially. 'I've got lethal hat hair.'

'At least it's fancy-pants bad hair.'

She lifted the hat off his head, appraising his slightly dented hairstyle with a grin.

Idris came over to join them. He didn't want a hug.

Orlagh tried to look stern and professional as she handed back the top hat.

'Ah, yes, well. What can I do for you, agents?'

'We're supposed to be watching you.' Raf glanced over his shoulder.

'*Probably* supposed to be all sneaky about it, but what can you do?'

Idris's intense interest radiated at him. Raf was equally as keen to take the opportunity to study him back, trying to absorb as much as he could while he had the chance. After all, Idris wouldn't always be under someone's protection, implied or otherwise.

Raf couldn't find anything remarkable enough to distinguish Idris for future reference, aside from a refreshing lack of uniform. It was too much to hope that Idris would always wear the distinctive yellow jumper, but it was a start.

'Raf,' Idris said quietly, brandishing his advantage in the identification stakes rather uncouthly.

‘I am quite easy to recognise, thanks to you.’ Raf pointed to the side of his head, the skin smooth under his finger. ‘I hear there was a party.’

He hopped up and stuck his upper half through the window, the sill digging into his stomach. He pressed his toes into the bricks to get as close to Idris’s face as possible.

Orlagh shepherded Idris out of reach, stepping between them.

‘Nothing to say to my face?’ Raf asked, ignoring the shooting pain down his side as he twisted to follow Idris.

‘This is who I’m supposed to trust my life to?’ Idris muttered, emboldened by his human shield.

Raf smiled sweetly. ‘Luckily for you, I’m just as good at not killing people as you are.’

Again, the little EPD puppet danced for him. And again Orlagh put a quick end to his show. She held up her hands, forcing a lighter tone. ‘Weren’t you supposed to be investigating? Skiving off already are we?’

‘We have new orders, Agent Polisson,’ Piet said.

‘Spying on us?’ Idris asked. ‘You’ve been compromised now, so leave us alone.’

Piet glanced across at him before filling the silence. ‘I’m sorry, Agent Wischard, but we have our orders.’

‘It was simply a suggestion.’ His voice was soft and warm, almost seductive.

Raf’s eyes began to droop, but he could see that Piet’s remained clear and piercing. Raf tried to focus on them instead.

‘I’ll look after her, I swear,’ Idris said.

Orlagh’s head whipped around. ‘You’ll what, sunshine?’

Idris barely missed a beat. ‘But you need to be getting back to your investigation, isn’t that right?’

Raf found himself nodding mutely as Idris retreated, leaving the three agents in various states of bewilderment.

Orlagh returned his top hat. ‘And will the sirs continue to observe us from a more discreet distance?’

Raf stared at the hat in his hands. ‘I don’t ... I think we should go back.’

‘Are you all right?’

He wanted to reassure her, to smooth the worry from her forehead. But he couldn't answer, even as he saw Piet nodding beside him. Orlagh relinquished Piet into his partner's care, withdrawing back into the room.

Raf gripped the sill, the weather-beaten wood soft and yielding beneath his fingers. But his grasp weakened and he felt himself drawn in the opposite direction. He drifted over to a tree, scraping his back against the bark as he crouched down.

Sitting with his chin on his knees, he looked across to where Piet was staring off into the distance. He gritted his teeth, drew his knees closer to his chest and put his forehead on them, bouncing his head on the points of his kneecaps.

He threw his head back without warning, but it missed the middle of the trunk and lost force as his head skimmed the circumference. He re-aligned his head and achieved a more sickening thud.

Raf was momentarily distracted by the hint of panic in Piet's movement, the delay offering an opportunity to re-evaluate his plan, concluding that it would probably be better to share the details before he was unconscious.

'You can drag me along if they leave,' Raf elaborated, as Piet crouched in front of him. 'No, carry me. Don't want holes in my pants.'

'If you're unconscious, that won't be where I'm taking you.'

Raf let his head fall forward, chin hitting his sternum with another dull thump. Fragments of bark fell from his hair, dropping down the back of his shirt. He felt a light pressure on the throbbing area, fingers brushing over the tender scalp.

'You didn't break the skin.' Piet said, his assessment over. 'Is there any pain?'

'I'm fine.' Raf raised his head, ignoring the itching heat and the bright spot that threatened to obscure Piet's head. Instead he searched out a chink to work away at. 'She's a damsel in distress, you can be the knight in shining armour.'

'You're my only concern.' Piet shifted position, putting a knee down on the ground for balance. 'And you decided that this was what we should be doing.'

'I know.' The thing was, he did know. He knew Piet was right. He knew that they should stay. But he couldn't stand up, and when he opened his mouth all he came up with were excuses.

Raf tried to brush Piet off like a fly, swatting away his partner's words and his own doubts, the two droning noises swirling around his head. 'No, I was right the first time: Simone's murder investigation, that's what we should be doing.'

'Stop and think. Why did you change your mind?'

Raf rubbed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose as he tried to focus on something. Anything. 'Because... it's what I was supposed to be doing.'

'You wouldn't leave Orlagh when Freddie thinks we need to be here. Does that sound right to you?'

Raf shook his head. Unable to say the words screaming in his head. *Of course not.*

But Idris would protect her. He knew that, somehow. He believed it. He would protect her, so it was all right.

Idris's words were caught like water in his ear, but banging on the side of his head didn't dislodge them. 'I can feel him, in here, crawling across my brain.'

Piet caught Raf's hand and held it still. 'Stop. It's OK, just stop. Please.' Piet looked between the front gate and the hospital. 'You didn't want to come, but I helped change your mind. I failed you. But we can go back now.'

Raf wasn't sure if his relief came from Piet's certainty or because that was what he wanted. He didn't remember which he believed.

Piet stood and held out his hand. 'Let's go.'

The hot pain on the back of his head was enough incentive for him to grasp Piet's hand and allow himself to be pulled to his feet.

'That was so creepy.' Orlagh had spent the last ten minutes letting the silence build, wondering what excuses would be forthcoming.

Idris had the sense to look miserable rather than smug, listlessly moving around the room. He appeared to be testing every surface in the room.

'Sorry,' he mumbled, nudging a fan.

The time she had set aside for building resentment had been spent poorly, all she could think about was the very bad couple of days that Idris was having. He was stranded in the midst of his enemy and he'd just been told that he was dead and his world was no longer solid.

‘If you try anything like that on me, your mouth had better be quicker than my fist.’ She was happy to leave it at that, satisfied that the message was understood. ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. We should be able to catch a late breakfast.’

Idris’s stomach rumbled audibly at the mention of food, even if he kept his enthusiasm in check. ‘I’m not going out there again.’

‘Ugh, fine. What do you want?’

‘Cheesecake.’

‘That’s not lunch.’

Idris shrugged. ‘Whatever, then.’

‘Sure you don’t want to come? Because I’ve got to say that I’m disinclined to bring you anything right at this moment.’

Another shrug. It was so tempting to leave him to starve and she entertained that notion for a pleasurable walk to the cafeteria, but the smells of the room sent her mouth watering and her mind calculating. It would serve him right, true, but if he was anything like her, his mood would not be improved by a gnawing hunger. It wasn’t altruism if there was something in it for her.

She had decided on finding the blandest food for him when she noticed the most unnerving dessert she’d ever seen.

Returning with her Styrofoam packages, she opened his box with a flourish. ‘See? Little bit psychic.’

‘It looks like the pictures.’ Idris looked at her, a tiny echo of a smile crossing his lips. ‘I can has cheesecake?’

Orlagh giggled, momentarily forgetting her quietly building concern. ‘You can has.’

She opened the bigger package. ‘Fish and chips for two. Almost actual food.’

‘We don’t eat meat,’ he said, eyeing the selection of batter encrusted items sitting on the chips.

Orlagh picked up a dim sim. ‘No problems with this, then.’ She rolled her eyes at his blank face and put it back on the plate. ‘Potato cakes should be safe.’

‘I’ll pay you back.’

‘My treat,’ she said, omitting the fact that the food had been free. Orlagh cut off his beeline for the cheesecake. ‘At least try a couple of chips before you fill yourself up with sugar.’

Peeling back the top of her dim sim to expose the grey centre, she began digging small divots in the unidentifiable material with her thumbnail while she watched. He dutifully picked up a long chip, sniffing it almost delicately before biting off the tip.

‘Do you have any enemies?’ she asked, unfortunately timing her question to coincide with his mouthful of chips.

His confusion had almost faded by the time he swallowed. ‘Duh.’

She conceded with a bite of her battered food. ‘Anyone inside EPD?’

‘Why, do your underlings want you dead?’ he asked, wiping his fingers on a serviette.

‘Underlings? I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that bit – wait, now it doesn’t make sense. I’ll pretend you said colleagues. Anyway, no. I’ve no reason to believe they do.’

‘Why would mine be different?’ Idris asked.

‘Because no one actually wants to lead Hazpop. People have broken bones in order to avoid it: other peoples’ and their own. Besides, ambition isn’t the only reason you’d have enemies.’

Idris rolled his eyes in such a way as to simultaneously dismiss and reinforce the idea that anyone might dislike him personally. Then a look came over his face and she could see his brain ticking over, hoping it wasn’t drawing the wrong conclusions. Or the right ones.

‘You think that one of my people did this to me? To Áine?’

‘That’s what I’ve been trying very hard not to say. But yes.’

‘But there’s a chance it wasn’t, right?’

‘Of course. Random person out in the world, though? Probably not.’

‘But we don’t believe,’ he said. ‘Not like you. A prophecy shouldn’t affect us that badly.’

‘It’d have to be powerful enough that it didn’t matter if you believed it.’

Idris put his head down on his arms, staring out the window.

‘You might not have been the target, though, if there was that much unfocused power,’ she added. ‘That opens the field back up.’

She saw his back rise and fall with a deep breath, but it didn’t precede any pronouncement. Instead he pushed a chip around his plate.

She handed a fork across the table, happy to see it was enough to get him sitting up. He took the cutlery and probed gently at the top of his dessert, drawing a tine through the sticky caramel.

He sliced off the tip of his cheesecake, eating it with a hint of apprehension. His tension soon gave way to a broad smile, the fork still clenched between his teeth.

She watched as he cut off a larger piece, relishing each bite with increasing pleasure.

Smiling, she chewed the tip of her vandalised dim sim. It was nice to see him with an expression that matched his jumper.

And it was always good to know an enemy’s price, even better when it only involved an excursion to the fridge.

Magnus didn’t immediately notice his brother lurking in the corner of his office, his heart skipping an unobservable beat when Augustus emerged from the shadows.

Magnus made sure he gave his brother no satisfaction. ‘Did I go to the wrong office again? Silly me.’

Augustus managed to make his intrusion look benign and as if it was somehow all for Magnus’s good. Magnus booted his computer, typing random letters while entering his password, foiling any attempts Augustus might have made to memorise his keystrokes.

‘You were gone overnight,’ Augustus observed.

‘The little birdies have been in fine form today.’ Magnus tried to sound, and look, annoyed, but was daring to hope that this was the extent of the information being circulated. He erased all the extraneous letters and hit return.

‘I have informed the students of our loss,’ Augustus said. ‘And I arranged for the body to be taken to the morgue.’

Magnus swallowed. He had heard the news from the gate house, finding the missed calls on his phone when he switched it back on. He should have called, checked in. He hadn't forgotten; he had been avoiding the wrath of his sister-in-law and he had failed in his duties.

'Thank you,' he said, quietly. 'You did well.'

Augustus shrugged it off, like it was no importance to him. It probably wasn't. 'Do we have cause for concern?'

'Depends on how you choose to interpret the myriad factors that ensure we're screwed.'

He ascertained that Diane was back in the basement and made a hasty exit, checking his email before shutting everything back down again.

Diane was hunched over her precious notebooks, her posture simply appalling.

'What is the tale spinning for us today?' Magnus said by way of announcing himself and greeting Diane. In a masterful display, he also managed to add a sprinkling of derision, buried under the protective guise of friendly interest.

Diane turned a page. 'What do you want?'

'Do you still have your agents tailing your zombie saviour?'

Diane finally tore her eyes from her tiny, handwritten world. 'Destroyer, not saviour. And yes. Why?'

'Oh, nothing, nothing. Simply accounting for the whereabouts of all my agents. Got a number for them?'

He was walking a fine line and he was never good at subterfuge. When they were younger he had always sent Freddie to tell his lies. Freddie had been a natural, so convincing that sometimes Magnus couldn't tell, even when he was the one who supplied the lie.

And that was the man he was currently trusting with his nephew's safety. He didn't even know if Freddie had done one honest thing in his life. He had plenty of proof for the opposite.

Magnus set aside his crisis of faith for the moment. Indecision would not serve him now, especially with Diane staring at him with an expression that suggested she was doing more mental calculation than he was comfortable with.

‘I’ve given you the names of the agents on the detail. Surely their contact details will be in your files.’

Both true. Now that he had confirmed they were still on their assignment, he could track them down, knowing that he was covered if they turned around and told Diane.

The actual content of the conversation was another matter. He’d have to hope that they weren’t in Diane’s camp, despite their selection for her private project; mercenaries rather than true believers. It was entirely possible that she’d chosen them solely for their names and had paid no attention to their psychological profiles or their position on the ‘Augustus for Head’ campaign.

He was willing to take the risk because if he knew where Raf was, he’d be able to keep track of Idris.

Now that he had the information, he could move on to his other reason for the visit. ‘The report says that Hervey was killed by Agent Israfil.’

‘Are you actually blaming me? Agent Hervey was on our property. They trespassed and slaughtered our agent.’

Magnus didn’t have the energy for a fight. ‘Just stay away from him, Diane.’

He returned to his office and retrieved the files of the agents Diane had following her Hazpop agent, amused, as anticipated, at her choices for the operation.

Cian Hawker. No way was that his original name. There was quite the little sideline of young agents changing their names in hopes of attracting Brigid’s attention. His partner, Timon Sheridan? Borderline. That one could have been the work of overenthusiastic parents.

Magnus would have put a stop to the constant rotation of identities if he had a problem with it, surprised that it wasn’t more prevalent. As it was, it proved to be an amusement, in both their choices and their subsequent career trajectories. Unsurprisingly, many had been snapped up by Diane. Equally lacking in surprise was the broad range of actual outcomes for her hand-picked few.

Magnus tossed up between which agent to call, deciding on the tenacious Agent Hawker for the added opportunity to assess how much incompetence his moniker was designed to cover. As a general rule, the more transparent the name, the more its perceived assistance was needed.

The agent was breathless as he answered the call. 'Hawker.'

'Agent Hawker, this is Magnus Wischard.'

He could practically hear the snapping to attention. It never got old. 'Sir. What can I do for you?'

Anticipating that whatever he said would be passed back to Diane, he had planned what to say to give away as little as possible.

'What's your status?'

'Status, sir?'

Perhaps a little too far on the oblique side. To be fairer than was called for, all EPD agents were trained to eradicate all ambiguity.

Magnus tried again. 'Where are you and what are you doing?'

'We're still on Agent Wischard's orders. Er, Agent Diane Wischard, that is. Sir.'

Magnus grimaced, tapping the end of the receiver on his forehead a few times. 'Yes, and where have they taken you?'

'Oh, we've been out and about all morning.'

Agent Hawker was lucky that the receiver wasn't serving as some sort of voodoo surrogate for his neck. 'Agent, give me your precise location.'

'We are on a path. I believe that we are in the vicinity of SACER.'

'And your target?' Magnus asked, wincing in anticipation of the answer.

'He is in sight.'

Magnus let out his breath. Clear, concise. All good. 'And his target?'

Hawker faltered. 'His target, sir?'

Magnus sucked in a deep breath and held it for ten seconds before attempting to continue. 'The people he was following.'

'I would not know anything about that, sir.'

'Agent Hawker, please would you put Agent Sheridan on the phone for me?'

There was shuffling, then a crystal clear exchange of heated whispering after Hawker failed to place his hand over the receiver.

A new voice came on the line. 'We picked up our target this morning, following him to a Hazpop run hospital where he made contact with the junior Agent Wischard. He then left, with his partner, returning to his departure point

from this morning. We are retracing our path back to SACER currently and will be arriving shortly. Will that be all, sir?’

‘Indeed it is.’

He thanked Sheridan before hanging up, leaning back in his chair as the cold wave of reality crashed over his relief. Raf wasn’t with Idris anymore. Whatever protection Freddie thought was being afforded to them had been taken away.

At least Sheridan hadn’t mentioned Idris by name. Perhaps his ignorance of the secondary target’s identity, or his good judgement, would extend as far as Diane’s version of the report.

Not that it mattered much. It might take longer, might be a little bit delayed, but the fall would hurt just as much, no matter how much time he had to brace for it.

On the plus side, Idris was safe. Wherever he was, no matter how much danger Diane thought it put them in, one of them would be all right. Someone would be left to pick up the pieces.

And Idris in charge was the best case scenario, the one he’d been planning for. The future was just coming up a little sooner, and a little more decisively, than he’d anticipated.

15.

Freddie exhaled in relief when he found his son sitting at the living room table. He was studying a chessboard with an intensity unbroken by his father's entrance. Brigid's apartment should've been the first place he looked, but he tried to avoid entering unless he was certain Niall would be there.

Freddie sat opposite, slumping in his chair until Niall's straight-backed posture situated their heads at the same level.

'Waiting for someone?'

Niall finally acknowledged his presence. 'No.'

'Can I play?' asked Freddie.

Niall acceded with a slight incline of his head, spinning the board so that Freddie had the white army at his disposal.

'I've been looking all over for you.' Freddie picked up a pawn and moved it forward. 'I've taken over from your mother with the interviews. Did you forget they were set up for today?'

'Don't want to.'

'Don't want to what, sweetheart? Don't want to do the interviews?'

Niall shook his head emphatically. Freddie wasn't sure if he was agreeing or disagreeing.

In the absence of any clarification, Freddie chose the option he preferred. 'That's OK. We don't have to.'

Freddie had been unenthused when Brigid had palmed the job off on to him upon his return. After his efforts with Orlagh, he wasn't sure he was the best judge of what was required in a supervisor.

Niall moved his pawn and, unlike his father, placed it in a legal position.

'Have you been learning the rules behind my back?' Freddie asked, skipping a rook along the heads of his pawns and landing with a twirl at the end of the line.

'Mum said you were teaching me nonsense,' Niall said. He made another perfectly acceptable move.

Freddie bowed his knight to the queens then sent it trotting across the battlefield. ‘She’s mad because she doesn’t understand Daddy chess.’

Freddie had originally proclaimed his variant Dada chess, but the young Áine had shown scant regard for his attempt at introducing class into his otherwise slapdash creation. She had corrected him so vehemently that he had been forced to agree that she had been right all along and that he was being silly.

Niall hesitated, fingers grasping a pawn by the head. He released it, choosing instead to move his own knight, setting it down one square further than was allowed.

‘Now you’re just horsing around,’ Freddie said.

Niall hesitated, a long moment passing before a giggle burst out.

Freddie rested his chin on his hand and studied the board, pretending to toy with his bishop while he tried to catch a glimpse of the elusive joy.

‘Are you excited about starting your training?’ Freddie asked, moving the bishop to stand in the centre of Niall’s pawns.

Niall nodded, the shift in discussion sobering him quickly. He took his time analysing the board, an obvious delaying tactic as there was no analysis required, or possible, in Daddy chess.

Brigid entered the apartment as Niall moved a pawn backwards to sit atop his rook.

‘The famed gargoyle manoeuvre,’ Freddie said, in response to her derisive scan of the board.

‘I’m beginning to suspect you don’t actually know the rules,’ she said, unloading a stack of files on to the kitchen counter.

He did, if only to make sure he didn’t accidentally throw in any legal moves. That would be embarrassing.

Brigid descended the two steps into the living room, kissing the top of her son’s head. From Niall’s position he couldn’t see the glare she was reserving for his father.

‘Picked one yet?’ she asked, any trace of disapproval excised from her tone. ‘I think Georgia Graves would be a good fit.’

Freddie rolled a pawn in his palm. ‘Niall didn’t feel up to it.’ He knocked Niall’s pawn off the rook with a flick of his own piece, taking up triumphant residence in its place. ‘Tornado.’

‘Didn’t feel like ...?’ Brigid was rendered temporarily speechless by her disbelief. Either that or by Freddie’s audacious move. It *was* a little risky to bring natural disasters in so early.

Freddie didn’t like the resolve with which she regained her power of speech.

‘Niall, honey, could you go and wait in your room for a minute?’

‘Mummy will make sure I don’t cheat,’ Freddie said, after Niall stared at the board like he was committing it to memory.

Niall stood, pausing before he pushed his rook delicately, sending both pieces tumbling. ‘Earthquake.’

Brigid waited until the door shut. ‘I certainly don’t want to be going through paperwork in the middle of an investigation, but it has to be done. Never too young to be learning that.’

Freddie lined the fallen pieces by the side of the board, not pointing out how Brigid was overly fond of forms and the neat filling in of them. It wasn’t self-preservation holding his tongue, rather the presence of a far more dangerous thought bouncing around in his head.

Brigid caught him in his indecision, fixing him with a stare as he continued to play out the consequences in his mind.

He blinked first. ‘What would you think about adding a new candidate?’ He caught her off guard, diffusing her annoyance with the prospect of actual work being achieved.

‘We spent a day coming up with that list.’

A day locked in a room with her, not something he was likely to have forgotten. ‘I didn’t think of this one.’ His deep breath created a pause for a dramatic effect that was neither warranted nor planned. ‘What about Orlagh?’

‘I ...’ Brigid grasped for the words before giving up with a shake of the head. ‘I don’t even know how to respond to that.’

‘Think about it,’ Freddie said, leaning across the table as his confidence increased, ‘they can help each other. She’ll have to understand it to teach it to him.’

‘You think she was simply lacking motivation?’

There hadn’t had time to think his plan through, so he wasn’t ready with answers. He wasn’t even sure of it himself. All he knew was that his two youngest children could stand to be a little more like each other. ‘It’ll show that we believe in her.’

‘And what about Niall? It’s not fair to him.’

‘I think he’d like spending some time with his big sister.’

‘You’re insane.’

But there was a glimmer. He knew the look, the particular cadence to the rhythm she was tapping out on the back of the chair. She was thinking about it.

‘What does Orlagh say?’ Brigid surveyed the small room for no purpose other than her innate flair for the melodramatic. ‘Where is she, anyway?’

‘I was running it past you first. And she’s working.’

Brigid was already on the move before hearing the answer, nodding distractedly as she returned to the folders she’d left on the bench.

Freddie wished her lack of sustained interest meant she didn’t care. But she trusted him; trusted that he was telling the truth, and that he was protecting their daughter. He wished she’d press him further. Even if he couldn’t say anything, his silence would speak volumes, he would make sure of it. She’d be horrified, and rightly so, and then she’d move heaven and earth to get her daughter back.

If only she’d ask.

Instead she separated her work into two piles, evening the edges.

‘Reports from the investigation,’ she said. ‘Guess that means the time has come to tell the rest of the department heads. What happens next should be up to everyone.’

Freddie took the files, flicking through the first few pages. There wasn’t enough time to do them justice. Not yet. ‘Raf and Piet haven’t finished their investigation.’

Brigid stared at him. ‘How do you know that? I haven’t had any recent reports.’

‘Oh, you know, just checking up on them.’

Brigid narrowed her eyes, making no attempt to hide her suspicion. Freddie, on the other hand, was making every attempt to hide further suspiciousness.

‘Did they happen to mention why it was necessary to kill an EPD agent?’

‘They did not. Might have something to do with where the trail led.’

Brigid tapped the file. ‘Piet mentioned a derelict building.’

‘Turns out it was an EPD safe house. Guess the agent was how they found out. Didn’t they send a report?’

Brigid gestured towards the piles. ‘Probably.’

Freddie sorted through the files, retrieving the relevant document.

‘All the way to an EPD safe house?’ Brigid said, with a look of triumph that filled Freddie with dread. ‘You know what this means?’

‘Someone’s trying to set them up.’ he said quickly.

‘This is the proof – what?’

Freddie took the file, waving it around in his frustration. ‘Right into their own place? We believe they’re that stupid? If it was them, then why not go from the body to EPD? Why risk everything on the off chance we’ll notice something we very nearly missed?’

‘So it doesn’t look too easy.’

‘Can you hear yourself?’ Freddie bit his lip. It was useless to keep arguing. Something was happening. It had already begun. He was wasting time.

Brigid would never have accepted the evidence. His concern wasn’t that she didn’t trust him, or that she didn’t agree with him, it was that she only found one reason to fight him.

Freddie had no idea if he was safe or if he was running out of time. He could get away, get out from under her thumb, but if he stayed he could minimise the damage. And there was a chance that he would be spared. He always had been.

He tucked the files under his arm. ‘I’ll get on to Raf and Piet and chase up their progress.’ Freddie raced any addendums outside, quickly closing the door.

He made his way down to the meeting room that had been commandeered for the investigation. Since he’d last been there, two more whiteboards had been wheeled in. All three surfaces were covered with timelines, notes and pictures, tracing out the tale of Simone’s last morning alive.

All too familiar. All completely wrong.

And still nothing new, just like Brigid had said.

He fanned his files on a table, prepared to find the same. Hoping he'd see something she didn't. Hoping he was wrong.

Their protection was gone, sent away by his hand. Their descent into oblivion was beginning and he was responsible. There was no protection left. No other way to end it.

There was no hall large enough for the gathering of all the SACER agents, an unprecedented event in a setting that didn't include balloons and picnic rugs. So they all assembled on the lawn again, arranging themselves in neat rows, rather than the random clusters and groups of the morning before.

This time very few SACER agents were missing, aside from the expected lack of EPD agents and the Hazpop contingent still working on the investigation. Every non-essential field agent had returned, if they could make it in time. A couple of the techies had set up cameras on tripods, providing streaming footage for those who couldn't attend.

Brigid stood on the small platform that had been dragged on to the grass, side by side with the other heads of department. An hour ago they had all listened attentively, grasping for any reassurance Hazpop could offer. Now none of them would meet her eyes, not looking to be talked out of anything.

She had been in the unfamiliar position of calling for calm in their meeting, the passion of her fellow leaders no longer a welcome sight. Brent had especially relished his new role as rabble-rouser, keen to throw back earlier pleas for assistance in her face.

Gwen Roemer, head of Neologisms and Simone's old boss, had asked no panicked questions and shown no fear. She had hardened herself to some end before Brigid even presented the evidence, focus and grim determination not promising a mission of peace and harmony.

It was strange. Brigid had gone in appealing for calm, even as she shared the damning evidence, yet found herself standing next to Gwen Roemer and nodding along.

She couldn't remember much of what was said; it was all a blur now, lost in a sea of voices and movement. Then Gwen had moved through the parting sea, pulling the group inside out as the first rows followed her through the middle.

Eventually the last rows realised that they could turn around and start moving and the whole entity began to surge as one towards the castle.

EPD had to be stopped. She knew this. But something had always stopped her leading the charge. There was something. There must have been. It must have been a good reason for her to let murderers develop their weapon under her nose.

Brigid grabbed Niall's hand, pulling him from his seat before he was swept away, keeping him safe at the back of the crowd.

Niall's hand was loose in hers, not returning her firm grip. His eyes were almost feverish as he watched. Brigid shivered when she caught a glimpse of excitement in them.

She squeezed his hand to reassure him, but he wasn't afraid.

Magnus pulled open the bottom drawer in the filing cabinet, grimacing as he settled awkwardly on one knee. He flipped through the dividers, glancing at the assorted requisition forms.

Food and clothes and books. Nothing about seeds. He'd have to get other things too. Proper dirt, fancy stuff. A watering can. Gloves, maybe. Tools.

The body of his agent was lying in the morgue.

He took the flower from his pocket, twisting it between his finger and thumb. It wasn't as if he especially liked flowers. They had been more of a distraction than an attraction, somewhere else to funnel his attention. He'd been fighting the urge to sneeze the whole time, but the lurking Freddie had kept forcing his nose deeper into the cloud of pollen.

If anything, he'd like to grow something practical. Something edible.

There was a surge of noise from outside. It had been swelling for some time, waves of increasing passion crashing into the castle.

They should have a funeral, but not now. When it was quiet again.

He closed the drawer, leaving the flower on top of the filing cabinet. Maybe he'd find some water and a mug later, but there were more pressing concerns at the moment.

He was counting the casually dressed Hazpop agents in the throng when Diane and Augustus burst into his office. Irritated at losing count, he watched

their reflections in the corner of the window, their initial momentum slowed by his non-reaction.

Augustus lurked while Diane ventured further inside, making sure her footsteps were heard.

‘Oh, so you have noticed the crowd baying for our blood?’ Diane asked.

‘I thought it was the line to join us,’ Magnus said, watching her cross behind him. Watching the hands. ‘It’s lucky you came, I was about to let them in.’

Her reflection disappeared out of sight before her corporeal form appeared beside him. ‘Well?’

Magnus turned and leaned against the window pane. ‘Perhaps I should have let you dig that moat.’

‘That glibness isn’t going to form a magical shield around us.’

‘Guess I have to come up with another plan.’ He peered around the room as Diane glared. ‘Still no shield?’

Augustus spoke up before his wife had a chance to demonstrate Magnus’s utter lack of protection. ‘Where is Idris?’

‘He’s safe.’

Magnus wasn’t surprised that they finally discovered their son was gone. He *was* surprised that Diane wasn’t the one doing the asking. At knifepoint. But she was distracted, keeping a constant eye on the milling crowd below them.

Magnus swallowed. Diane knew Idris was gone, her little prophecy was playing out, and she was afraid rather than angry. It wasn’t what he had imagined, and that was beginning to make him nervous.

‘I want him here. You bring him back. Now.’

Magnus almost thought Diane had mastered both imitation and ventriloquism, actually turning to verify that it had been his brother speaking.

‘He’s not here,’ Magnus said, ‘and not here is exactly where you should want him to be. It’s definitely where I’d like to be.’

He felt a little more reassured when Diane lunged across and pushed him against the glass. That was more like it.

‘It’s beginning. You’ve brought this down on us. You.’ She shoved him for emphasis, his head banging lightly against the pane. She let his shirt slip from her

fingers, her index finger pressing hard against his sternum. ‘Don’t you ever forget that.’

Magnus tried to return to his contemplation of the gathered agents, but he couldn’t even pretend with the force of the anger radiating across at him.

‘I don’t know where Idris is,’ he said eventually. It was the truth, strictly speaking. He knew where they had been, but there was no telling if they remained there.

‘This isn’t the time for your little games,’ Diane said. ‘We all need Idris here. Now.’

‘We need to keep our heads and not pin our hopes on magic children. Besides, the crowd aren’t doing anything out there. Their friend has died and they’re letting off some steam. I’ll give them time, then meet with them if I have to.’

‘You mean meet with Freddie. You will get us all killed for your perverse little friendship.’

‘He’s trying to help us,’ Magnus said.

With a final disdainful sweep of her eyes from the gate to Magnus’s face, Diane left without further menace or violence. But the distinct threat of both swirled in the air behind her, her own particular bouquet.

Augustus didn’t follow immediately, lingering in the doorway. ‘If anything happens to him, Magnus ...’

He didn’t need to complete the warning, Magnus nodding in understanding. Augustus left him to contemplate his next move in solitude.

Diane wasn’t going to let it stand. If she believed in her work, she couldn’t afford to. He could see that much, but no further.

If she was right, maybe that would be all right. Not for him or his continued existence, obviously, but she would be able to protect the rest of EPD, if it came to that.

Magnus ran his palm down the wall, the rough stone scratching his soft palm. Never seen a day’s work to protect them.

The wall was hard and strong and it still didn’t feel like enough. This place was his home, this room was his life. And for the first time, it didn’t feel safe anymore.

He shivered as the stone began to burn his hand. It seemed to be absorbing the internal chill of dread rather than the burning passion outside.

He made a trip to each of his classrooms and tried to make the day's trials sound like a blessing, like the mob was doing them a favour; they'd been given a chance to rise above the nonsense going on outside their walls, to demonstrate to themselves, and to Magnus, how strong and focused they could be. It was a rare opportunity they'd been given, to put their beliefs to the test. He challenged them to clear their minds while their world threatened to fall down around them.

Magnus organised for the junior agents to be set tasks in their classrooms, beginning with discussions on the best way to protect a building, followed by the design and implementation of their prophecies.

And maybe a lot of small, earnest prophecies from the baby agents would add up to something more than his glibness had been able to muster.

He lingered at the door of their most recent intake of students on the way back to his office. They were concentrating so hard, grasping their pencils in their hands.

It was because of them, all of them, that he returned to go over Diane's research one more time, willing to believe in anything that would protect them. But he still couldn't see it and he didn't believe enough to justify wasting any more of his time. That would be even more dangerous, even more irresponsible.

If she was right, he hoped she would smart enough to save them on her own. And merciful enough to kill him quickly.

The cheers and shouts of the crowd travelled clearly to Freddie's concealed position, but there was no danger of anyone seeing him, no one was looking back.

He watched in resigned horror as the first missile was lobbed, a bottle topped with a flaming cloth. It came from the middle of the crowd, their noise falling away as it sailed through the air before exploding against the castle wall in near silence.

Then came the cheer.

It was time. Time to abandon the little hope he was clinging to and accept his responsibility. This time he would play his part and pay his price, gladly.

He had done all he could. Orlagh was with Idris. Niall was with Brigid.

There was no time for goodbyes. Not then, not now.

He had made a life for himself in EPD, found a family in Hazpop, but neither of them had been home. And home was where he needed to be right now.

16.

It had taken Orlagh half an hour to convince Idris to set foot outside the room, but he had seemed mildly less agitated by the thought of the world outside the hospital. Better the spatial anomaly you don't know.

Their circumnavigation of the building had uncovered one last possible hiding place for Áine. One last chance that her father had been as straightforward in his hints as he'd never been. The small buildings appeared to be sheds of some sort, more corrugated iron in view than a civilised building would allow. Still, hiding escapees couldn't be choosers.

The car park they were faced with was almost at capacity, a direct path through the quickest way to reach the outer buildings. They manoeuvred their way between the lines of cars, making it halfway across the lot before Idris overbalanced trying to sidle between the side mirrors, stumbling into a car and setting off its alarm.

As it turned out, his ducking – a mixture of fright and momentum – was the only thing that prevented a head-sized boulder from replacing its non-petrified double. Thwarted, it landed with a thunk of crumpled bonnet, the damaged vehicle falling silent when it finally had something to be alarmed about.

Orlagh was surveying the area for hidden catapults when the top of Idris's head began to emerge above the side of the car. She lunged at him as a shadow flickered overhead, pushing him backwards and snapping off one of the side mirrors with the weight of their bodies. The new boulder passed close enough to make her shirt flutter in its wake, smashing the window behind her and settling in the passenger seat.

'Stay down,' she whispered, though she wasn't sure exactly who she was trying to keep the information from.

The gravel dug into the heel of her palm as she balanced herself. It was sharp and piercing, but the pain dulled as understanding dawned.

'Correlation. Causation.' She would have slapped her forehead, but she'd probably miss that, too. Grabbing at Idris with her free hand, she ended up with a fistful of his hood, almost choking him as she dragged him behind cover. 'Stop them.'

He snatched his clothes away. 'Get off me.'

There was a loud thud as the battered car buckled under a new hit.

'Say it, say they'll stop.'

A spray of glass overcame any reservation. 'They'll stop.' The power of the message was lost in the uncertain delivery. 'Like that?'

She was too busy assessing the scene to reassure him, resting her chin on the jutting edge of the deformed bonnet. 'Probably,' she murmured.

Crawling to the end of the car, she assessed the cover on offer. The hospital was a solid shield. It was also full of people. Trusting all of their lives to a hunch was a lot harder than gambling on the safety of Idris and herself.

She pointed at the sheds, hoping they were empty of even her sister. 'Run for them.'

After skidding over loose stones when she checked over her shoulder, she lowered her head and focused on the cars in front of her. Once safely ensconced behind the wall she risked a peek, only to find no sign of Idris in the car park.

She retreated, assessing the cover the shed would afford, jumping when she turned to find that Idris had appeared behind her.

'I did not know you could do that.'

'Where did you go?' Idris demanded over the top of her, his bluster lessening as she finished her question. 'You didn't go anywhere, did you?'

He wound the cords from his jumper tightly enough to turn his fingers purple.

'I can stop meteors and make myself invisible,' he muttered, sounding more like he had discovered he could make it rain. What she had to do was show him the drought.

'You weren't invisible but I couldn't see you.' Orlagh appraised him with a new appreciation. 'I've never heard of someone who can control which reality they're in.'

'I can't.'

'You did. You just don't know how.' She tried to catch his wandering focus. 'Do it again.'

'If we hang around here I might have to.'

'I'm sure it's all clear now. You agree, right?'

‘Sure,’ he said.

She was pleased that he already knew better than to argue. It would go much quicker that way.

‘I say we’re safe and we’re safe. And if I say someone is protected, they’re protected.’ Idris let the strings unwind from the white tipped valleys in his flesh. ‘Are you planning on telling me how exactly you think I stopped those flying rocks?’

‘Because you said so.’

‘Because I said so.’ He repeated it derisively, before his tone softened. ‘Like a prophecy.’

‘Precisely.’

‘No, not precisely. Not exactly. This is nothing like what we do. I can’t even get people a new job more than four per cent of the time. This was verbal and it stopped rocks. And why were there rocks falling from the sky on us?’

‘I think your segue was less random than it appeared,’ Orlagh said.

‘I started the rocks too?’

‘I don’t recall you saying that you’d like a shower of rocks, no,’ she said. ‘I think the rocks were aimed at you for the very reason you could stop them.’

A few doctors began to emerge from the hospital, Orlagh drawing Idris out of view. Despite their being victims, there weren’t a lot of ways to explain what had happened.

She scrutinised Idris’s face as he followed her in a daze. ‘You do realise what that world is, don’t you?’ she asked. ‘Who’s in it?’

The moment of realisation in his eyes was lit by the flash of something new. Excitement. Hope, maybe.

‘Would I be a ghost there?’ Idris asked.

‘Solid as you want to be, I would think.’ One day she’d actually be able to answer him without a qualifier.

He smiled properly for the first time, the expression as flighty as a small animal. Turned out all she had to do was promise him the chance to escape. ‘I could talk to her.’

Orlagh saw a flicker of the horizon through his chest. ‘She’s not going to be here,’ she said, but there was nothing left but sky and trees. ‘Idiot.’

At least his diversion had lowered her heart rate to something more sustainable.

She heard the faintest wisp of his voice floating past her. The echo of an echo.

‘Hello?’

‘I’ll record that for the history books, shall I?’ Orlagh said, hoping that the membrane between the worlds was thin enough that she wasn’t just snarking to herself.

She checked the progress of the investigation in the car park, finding a few souls had braved the carnage. They milled around the damaged car, prodding at the boulder that was lodged between the steering wheel and the driver’s seat. One had an expression distraught enough to be the owner of the car.

When Idris reappeared, he seemed to have spent his time in some sort of apocalyptic wasteland. Any brief joy that he might have possessed seemed to have been crushed under something over there. He couldn’t have been expecting to find Áine, surely.

In a daze, he moved towards the grass at the back of the sheds. The plant life suffered for the shade and coolness, only patches of straggling green peeking out between the concrete and dirt. He sat heavily, picking something from beside his feet and twirling it between his fingertips.

‘Because I said so,’ he murmured. His flat affect made Orlagh worry that he’d hypnotised himself with the spinning plant.

Orlagh tried to snap him out of whatever plane he’d shifted to, however he had found himself there. ‘Four-leaf?’

He looked in confusion at his hands, seeming surprised to find he was holding a piece of grass. ‘One blade.’

‘Say you’re going to pick a four-leaf clover, then pick at random.’

Idris let his piece of grass flutter down as he picked a clover. He contemplated it in silence.

Orlagh chuckled at the clover he shoved at her, threading it through her top button-hole. ‘Extra safe now.’ She crouched down, running a finger over a patch of dark little clovers. ‘Bet they’re all four-leaf.’

Orlagh teased out a few with a delighted giggle while Idris looked on miserably.

‘All this time. What else have I done? What was my fault?’

‘I’d say nothing fun at all, if you haven’t noticed anything amiss. But your emo-coloured glasses are blinding you to the potential awesome at your magic fingertips. Again. It’s like you have no imagination at all,’ she chided.

Idris scrunched his jumper cuffs into his fists, pressing them to either side of his chin. It was so very tempting to wait until he gained some manners, but she had selfish reasons for pressing on.

‘It’s so absurdly simple that it can’t fail.’ She smiled brightly to better convince him. ‘We keep moving until we find Áine. You say you want to get to her and then we hop on a train or something and let it take us there. Or you could take us there instantly ... with the power of your mind!’

And if their trip didn’t work out, she could start a sideline hawking him in a carnival freak show.

‘Like magic?’ There was the tiniest hint of amusement in his question.

‘Or teleportation.’

‘Same thing.’ He closed his eyes, peeking out from one, then the other.

‘Perhaps I need a wand.’

‘And to believe it is capable of happening. Thanks to your close-mindedness, we’re stuck with the boring option. Way to go, unbeliever.’

Idris chewed on a cord from his jumper. ‘Do you believe in angels and unicorns? Fairies?’

Orlagh was amused enough at the sudden detour to play along. ‘Sure.’

‘Elves?’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t think you do,’ he said, but his mouth was less resolutely set into a frown. He looked up with a sudden resolve, having finished with his sartorial snack. ‘Let’s go then.’

Orlagh nodded approvingly.

She briefly apologised to Dr Emery and the gathered staff, explaining to the extent that it was possible. He made no attempt to talk her out of leaving, obviously under no instructions to keep her in the grounds. That’d made it easier.

Taking Idris to a nearby strip of shops, Orlagh pointed to a bus stop across the road. ‘Reckon that route will take us there?’

Idris didn’t seem interested, lost again to the little bubble of melancholy that he was intent on bringing everywhere with him.

‘Bet it drops us right at the front door of wherever she is,’ Orlagh said. ‘Or the back door? Yes, perhaps that would be better.’

His membrane of misery remained stubbornly intact.

‘I guess that is aiming a little low, considering.’ She snapped her fingers with a delight that filled Idris’s face with apprehension. ‘I can has dirigi—’

Idris deflated her excitement before she had struggled through to the last syllable. ‘No.’

‘But it’d be so awesome,’ she said, casting longing looks up to the empty sky. ‘And the captain would let me spin the big wheel around and I probably wouldn’t even kill us.’

‘People might notice.’

‘You just thought that up, in hindsight. Enough of your retroactive justification – your ret jus, if you will. I will not partake of your lovely sauce made of boiled down lies.’ Orlagh ended with a twist of her finger in his chest. ‘Yeah, pwnd.’

Unfortunately the chastening was compromised by the final addition, clouding any potential chagrin with confusion.

‘So, that’s more of a written word,’ she conceded.

Idris stared forlornly and the bus drove away from the stop.

As she watched the oncoming traffic, Orlagh considered the likely destination of their enchanted bus. If there was no Áine to find in this world, then it was probable that they would be taken to SACER. She didn’t know how much her father had known or guessed about Idris and whether that had been factored into his warning. But he had told her to use him, had set them up to find Áine. It was a loophole. It was enough.

‘You’ve discovered that you can bend the world to your word: as your sworn enemy, I’m the one who should be painting my nails black and listening to depressing music.’

Idris closed his eyes. ‘I’m dead. I win.’

‘Half dead,’ Orlagh clarified. ‘Stalemate.’

A new bus ambled down the road. ‘That’s the one we want to take, right?’

Orlagh didn’t know, or particularly care, how much of Idris’s agreement was motivated by a desire for her to let go of his sleeve before she exposed more than his shoulder. She hesitated, letting Idris catch up to her on the traffic island.

‘Money,’ she murmured.

‘What?’

She was spared having to elaborate when a flapping piece of colourful paper caught her eye, bending down to retrieve the note from the crevice it was wedged in. Waving it happily in front of him, she skipped across the rest of the road and bounded up the stairs of the waiting bus.

17.

Idris was sleeping, or pretending to, his head vibrating against the window. Only his peaceful face, and how young it made him look, stopped Orlagh from borrowing a pen and doodling on its defenceless surface. On the other hand, it wasn't doing anything to quell the uneasy thought that had been bubbling up for the last half hour: maybe her father meant that Idris wasn't supposed to make it back at all. Ever.

Idris didn't seem to appreciate his power yet, but she did. Perhaps she was meant to be the one to stop him returning. She had no moral objection to murder, but she couldn't help but hesitate when confronted with the perfect target. One more mark against her.

Getting it over and done with was an appealing prospect, like taking off a Band-Aid. A Band-Aid of murder.

She only had to kill him temporarily, though. Only long enough to split him. Then again, flat out murder might be kinder. Would he cling to whatever life he could or would he chose to end it all? It was a little hard to ask his opinion on the matter without alerting him to the general vicinity of her thoughts.

His eyes opened suddenly, mind flickering into life behind them after a few seconds. His face was proving especially hard to read as he stared at her, not blinking or looking away.

Judging by his lack of horror, it didn't appear that he could read minds. Hopefully the idea never occurred to him.

'I hope it's not completely out of the way,' Orlagh whispered, 'or we've screwed over a busload of innocent strangers.'

Idris thought for a moment. 'I'm sure they'll all manage to get to where they're going on time and they won't even notice the delay because they'll be daydreaming about the terrific things that will happen to them.' A smile began to spread across his face as the rest of the bus began to get dreamy looks on theirs. 'Because I say so.'

Obviously he hadn't included Orlagh in his group blessing, her mind turning to the darker considerations as his encouragement grew.

‘Áine always said you were the nicer one. She meant it as an insult, but still...’ She was encouraged by the small chuckle. ‘What are you going to say to her?’

Idris leaned his head back, keeping his eyes on Orlagh’s face. ‘It has been so long.’

Orlagh made herself comfortable, beginning to get the feeling that their trip might be a little longer than she’d imagined. ‘Tell me about the Áine you knew.’

She watched the kilometres fly by, listening to the stories about her sister, not surprised that his version sounded alike. Áine was never one to make concessions for her audience.

Orlagh’s growing guilt wasn’t enough to turn her thoughts from murder. There was more on the line than that; maybe her grading, maybe the future of EPD and Hazpop and SACER. Maybe the whole world. Shared memories of a missing girl shouldn’t sway her, not when so much rested on her shoulders.

That didn’t mean that she couldn’t enjoy listening for a little while longer. Her stomach lurched every time the bus stopped at lights or slowed in traffic, constantly waiting for the doors to open and put an end to it.

Idris and Orlagh arrived at their destination, almost immediately coming up against the brick wall dominating the area. The bus had stopped in the middle of a small road to the surprise of everyone else on the bus. Most befuddled was the driver, judging by his expression as they disembarked.

The only thing of note in the area, once the dust cloud cleared, was the wall near the unpaved road. Orlagh approached warily, furrowing her brow as she reclined against the bricks.

She let her head flop back, her pained expression only partly due to how hard she’d hit it. ‘Oh crap.’

One assignment and she’d managed to completely cock it up. She should just wave to any watching examiners and kiss her career goodbye.

Idris remained oblivious, giving her a puzzled look.

Perhaps it was far enough away to not really count as being back. All of the important work was done in the cluster next to the front gate. This side was hardly more than forest.

Striding up a little incline that was high enough to see over the wall, she motioned for Idris to join her. 'Quite the cocoon you've been living in. Seriously, it's not even a different kind of brick on this section.'

'Don't make me make you tell me.' His voice was light, but he backpedalled when Orlagh raised an eyebrow. 'Not that I'd do that.'

'Damn right you wouldn't. But since you threatened so ineptly and retracted so quickly ...' She pointed at a dark spot above the tree line. 'If I'm not mistaken that's your home up there, little moth.'

He sat on the dirt, running the backs of his heels down the slope. 'So the Áine in my other world is the only one left?'

'Not necessarily. Probably.' She surveyed the area with a newfound determination. 'We're here now, let's find out.'

She held out her hand, dragging him down the hill before he'd quite got back to his feet.

'Don't suppose there's a back gate,' he said, once he'd regained his balance.

'I don't know. It was hard to see while I was walking around inside the dark, cramped wall, doing my duty. Speaking of which, I hope that no one is patrolling this area right now, sending reports back to various people about the visitors.'

'I'm sure there's not,' he murmured, working his way along the wall. He rapped his knuckle against it every few metres, listening like he had some clue what he was doing.

'I'm sure there's a gate, you know, somewhere ...' Orlagh said. 'Which is why we came to this spot. Obviously.'

'I don't think there's a gate,' Idris said, warming to his task. 'But I seem to distantly recall talk of there being a tunnel, around that bend over there.'

'Of course!' Orlagh exclaimed. 'How did I ever forget that?'

'Prolonged drug use,' Idris said.

'If there are needle marks on my arm, I will hurt you.'

Orlagh refused to push back her sleeve and check as they walked around, slapping his arm when their entrance came into view. 'When I think tunnel, I usually picture something more than a hole.'

She crouched down to inspect the 'tunnel'. It was surprisingly shallow, the wall it passed beneath barely extending ten centimetres into the ground.

Idris appeared beside her, studying the area. ‘That’s some shoddy foundation work; the wall is practically sitting on top of the dirt.’

‘I’m sure it’s only in this one spot, which is why a wild animal of some sort decided to dig here ... and nowhere else,’ she said. ‘Gentlemen first.’

Idris knelt before the hole before lying down awkwardly and sliding his head through. A pause halfway through gave Orlagh a moment’s worry, before the rest of him slid through.

She heard a faint cough, followed by a raspy voice. ‘I inhaled some of the excess dirt for you. Thank me later.’

Orlagh searched once more in vain for her shiny gate, before sighing and pulling her way through. Sitting on the other side, she hoped she wasn’t quite as filthy looking as Idris.

She got up and dusted herself off, patting him on the back as he was seized by another coughing fit. ‘Right then, let’s go find Áine.’

Raf laced his fingers through the gate, peeking through the gap as he waited for it to open. ‘We always miss the fun.’

Even from his position he could see the large crowd and the small fires. Once admitted, he started jogging towards the action, not giving Piet a chance to urge for caution.

All of Raf’s plans for redemption were forgotten in light of the scene before him. Nobody seemed like they’d care much about repeated dereliction of duty in the face of a riot.

Piet followed Raf up the hill, his long strides quickly swallowing up Raf’s half-hearted run. Piet caught up where the ground levelled out, holding up a hand to stop him.

A figure made a beeline for them out of the throng, advancing rapidly. Raf tried to process the figure as he edged back. The casually dressed agent roughly pulled at Piet’s arm, trying to tug him away for a private dalliance. Raf refused to leave, keeping step until the agent gave up with an anguished groan.

‘Tam,’ Piet said quietly, as much a greeting as a concession for Raf.

‘We know what’s coming,’ Tam whispered, eyes shining.

Piet gently prised Tam's hand from his arm, holding him at arm's length. 'Take a deep breath.'

Raf hadn't seen Piet and Tam exchange a single word since they'd arrived together. Their reunion filled him with a dread that was only deepened by Tam's lack of usual belligerence.

'It's started. It's all happening again. I can't do it. I can't. Please help me.' Tam sank to the ground and raised his head, stretching out his neck. 'Make it quick. Clean.'

Tam's eyes were closed, but he had to have been addressing Raf. He was definitely insane if he thought Piet would do anything.

Piet knelt next to the crumpled figure. 'It hasn't come to that. It won't.'

Tam grabbed at Piet's shoulder with a sudden burst of aggression, leaving red streaks across the skin as he pulled the shirt from Piet's neck. 'Stop playing at being the perfect little soldier, as if it was your upstandingness that got you exiled so far away that not even the people determined to massacre every last one of us could find you.' Tam's anger was spent almost as quickly as it had appeared. He clung weakly to Piet's unresisting arm. 'You and me, we're not the good ones. Stop pretending you're better than that and help me.'

Raf wasn't prepared for Piet's implicit promise.

'I'll find you.'

It did the trick with Tam, eventually settling him down enough that they could leave him under the watchful eye of a fellow agent.

'You're not actually going to, are you? Because he seemed to believe you would.'

Piet didn't answer and it was a different silence than any before it. It was one filled with death and violence and anything but honour.

'What happened back then? What's going to happen to us?'

Piet remained silent.

'I want to know. I'd rather know, and be prepared. Maybe I'll want to be killed too, if I know.' Raf persisted, shaken by the complete collapse of Tam. 'If you don't tell me, I'll only think the worst.'

Piet stopped. 'I wasn't there, I don't know. That's why I lived.'

'Tam wasn't either, though, right? And he's still freaked.'

Piet shook his head, before his attention was caught by something behind Raf.

Another figure was closing on them, this time the barest impression combined with the intent in the approach was more than enough to identify him.

Raf kept his face blank.

‘What are you doing here?’ Freddie asked.

‘I’m sorry, Agent Meyers,’ Piet said. ‘It was my decision. I thought it was of most benefit to SACER and I will accept any punishment.’

Raf rolled his eyes at the misguided attempt at taking the blame. ‘Oh please, we all know it’s my fault.’

Freddie looked uncharacteristically flustered. Raf had trouble distinguishing between fear and anger, the negative extremes all muddled in his head. There was sweat on his forehead and colour in his cheeks. Nervous or murderous.

Freddie rubbed his forehead. ‘Uh, fine. Fine.’

Raf had never heard that sort of stammer caused by the latter.

‘Fine. Fine. Stay here. Don’t make it worse.’

He hurried off in the opposite direction.

Raf and Piet shared a puzzled look, but Raf was too relieved to linger in the confusion. He still had a job and he still had his head. Good day.

‘Our killer was bold enough to stroll through the front gates not once, but twice,’ Raf said, ignoring what he assumed was Raf’s deep disapproval. ‘Bold? Maybe. Ruthless, perhaps. Maybe someone who wouldn’t be out of place. That probably rules out EPD agents.’

Piet didn’t move. Raf gritted his teeth and avoided looking at the physical embodiment of the doubt he needed to escape.

‘Freddie said not to make it worse. We can do one better, we can fix it. We can stop them bringing about everything they’re trying to prevent. We’ll save them from their damn foolish selves.’

Raf tried to steel his mind, creating a mantra of his certainty. He needed to be able to fight long enough to wear Piet down. He had no idea how long he could hold on.

Piet moved to put a hand on Raf’s arm, not a good sign. But the touch was light and directed him back down the hill. ‘Let’s go.’

Piet held the front door of the Refractory for Raf, who patted his partner on the cheek as he went through. The building was as quiet as it had been the day before in either world, a lone agent behind the front desk the only person they came across on their way to the basement. The crime scene was abandoned, no one left on guard. Nobody cared about the real answers any longer, the focus turned towards a solution.

Piet retrieved a pocket knife from his trousers, deftly slicing through the tape across the door. Raf brushed the tendrils aside, re-emerging almost immediately. There was nothing left in there, nothing new to see.

He ripped off a fluttering piece of tape, wrapping it around his fist as he walked in a tight circle. 'Thick thick thick,' he murmured, swiping at the air in front of him.

He swung around, pivoting himself with a grip on Piet's upper arm. Storming down the corridor, he pushed his way through the same exit they'd used the day before. This time he slowed once he was outside, taking in the rest of the view.

The trail they'd followed last time curved around to the side, but Raf was staring straight ahead, the faintest of smiles in its infancy. He wasn't surprised that he hadn't seen it before, he hadn't been looking for deviations and this one was only half as strong. But now it was as clear as day.

As clear as two blurry days.

Scraps of paper fell periodically from the castle, a few managing to clear the compound wall. Some came down on fire, others already crumbling and black, twisting as they fell. Brigid picked up one that landed on her foot, flicking off a curl of blackened paper. The message was handwritten and intact, the writing as laboriously formed as Niall's.

We will all live happily ever after.

She looked up to the windows, could see hands reaching out and letting the hopes fly out into the smoky air.

Drawing Niall in closer, she tried to focus her thoughts. Even if the answers began to elude her, she could still form the questions.

Why weren't they defending themselves? Why didn't they do something?

She screwed up the paper, gathering the others that she found and balling them all together. Misspelled pleas from children weren't going to save anyone.

What was Magnus doing? She wished she could drag him down to see how little his confetti mattered.

He probably wrote them himself, carefully child-like, trying to play on their sympathies. It wasn't like they didn't know there were children in there.

Brigid looked up at the windows. There were children in there.

She was sure that EPD could kill them all, sure that they needed to be neutralised. It was so clear.

Except the only people getting hurt were the dangerous ones.

Niall looked up at her. 'When do we win?'

Never. No one ever wins. No one ever will.

'Soon, sweetheart. Soon.'

Idris stood with a triumphant little noise, holding out his prize to Orlagh. 'Raf's boot. I know this because someone has sewn a little name tag into the back of the tongue,' he said. 'Think he'll want it back?'

Orlagh inspected it, screwing up her nose when she leaned in close. 'Perhaps it's a clue.'

Idris turned it over. It was certainly caked in enough varieties of matter, any one of which might constitute a clue.

'Which way was it pointing?' Orlagh asked.

Idris pondered, rotating it in his hand for reference, before settling on a direction that led into the dense forest.

Orlagh followed the shoe and rolled her eyes. 'Couldn't have been the clearing or the nice building, oh no.'

Idris held up his hands in a show of innocence. 'You're the one practising clogomancy. Can't blame me for what it tells you.'

'I think you'll find that it's bootomancy.' Orlagh pushed the instrument of divination away from her. 'And you can put that down now.'

He dropped it, the toe landing so that it was pointing in the direction previously indicated. 'Oh look, further proof. It's settled, then.' He surprised himself with his chirpiness.

They were so close now. He entered the solid block of trees, stepping through the thick underbrush that had gathered to fight for the scraps of sunlight.

‘What exactly are we looking for?’ he asked, searching the moss-covered trees for anything out of the ordinary. ‘I doubt there’s been a hidden castle in this place all this time.’

‘I’m thinking underground lair.’

Idris stamped on ahead, only slowing when his foot took an unexpected stop at the edge of something solid. ‘Found something,’ he grunted.

‘No, really?’

He ignored her sarcasm as he began rummaging through the pile of living and dead foliage that his foot had disappeared into. ‘I assume it will be important, considering the amount of pain it used to gain my attention,’ he said.

After a few moments of digging, Orlagh threw her handful of debris at him. ‘That’s a log, genius. And I don’t think Áine has been turned into a snake, so she’s probably not in there.’

He crouched and reached his hand in without checking. Smiling up at her horrified expression, he pulled out his arm and opened his closed fist. A shiny metal key lay in the dirty palm, the item somehow managing to have avoided the dirt that had taken seconds to coat him.

She took the key, holding it up to catch the lone beam of sunlight that pierced the canopy. ‘Doesn’t look like a dungeon key,’ she said. ‘I’d say it most likely belongs to a clean and airy lab.’

‘What exactly does a dungeon key look like?’

‘Huge, rusted steel on a leather strap. What would you know? You’ve never owned a key in your life. I’ll hang on to this, actually. I’m not sure you’d know which end to put in.’

‘Pardon me for living in a building that has moved beyond the need to lug around pieces of metal.’

‘They’re also good for stabbing,’ she said, slotting the key between her fingers and punching at the air. ‘Like to see you stop me with your precious codes and fingerprints.’

Idris searched for any sign of a matching lock, folding his arms when nothing sprung into view. ‘Right. Well. It must be around here. Other side of that

row of trees, I'd think. A nice little building with a ladder – no, stairs. Probably not an elevator, but stairs would do fine.'

'Excellent.' Orlagh held out the key in preparation, disappearing behind the screen of trees as he tugged to disentangle a snagged shoelace.

Once he was free, he hurried to follow, finding her standing in front of a tiny shed. It looked like a little outhouse, perhaps constructed for all those forest-walking emergencies. She waited for Idris, turning the key theatrically.

Orlagh paused with her hand on the knob. 'First sign of spiders and I may demonstrate how effective a key can be as a weapon.'

Idris raised his hands and his eyebrows, taking a half-step back. She made another stabbing motion at him before turning the knob.

It was lucky she had flung the door open rather than stepping through with it, as there was no floor behind it, just a hole reaching to every wall. The top of a ladder extended a little above the side of her foot, the only thing contained within the small building.

'Oh, it's the hole shed,' Orlagh said. 'Where we keep our holes. Well, only the one hole, really. Lost most of them in the great space cutback of '53.'

Her mouth seemed the only part of her capable of moving, the rest remaining frozen at the edge of the deep shaft.

'I wouldn't have let you fall,' he said.

She didn't bother to point out any of the problems there were with this, nodding with increasing vigour. She blew out a deep breath, shaking her body sharply, before leaning forward and taking a closer look.

'Down we go then,' she said.

He wished he could convince himself as easily, warily trying to work out the logistics for swinging around and down on to the low ladder.

'Down we go,' he echoed.

Diane had instructed her agents to cover the front of the Hazpop building, training her binoculars on the side exit. She kept watch from the window of the ARG office, the agents there only briefly noting her entrance before returning to their work.

Augustus tried to catch her eye, but she refused to acknowledge him. After she had outlined her concerns, her plan, he had remained unconvinced. His faith had been tested and was found wanting.

Outside their walls, their enemies stood as one. Her husband refused to stand by her side. Her son was missing and their leader was too busy mooning over old ties to do a damn thing.

The heir was gone, the castle stood alone. Endgame.

There was way one to stop it, though. One thing she could still do.

She was not going to let them die. It wasn't about getting Augustus into power, not anymore, it was about surviving until tomorrow. There was no point in anything more if they were all dead.

She shifted her position when Raf emerged from the side door, watching long enough to see that they were heading towards the Big Forest. With a last look at Augustus, his head bowed over the useless papers he was shuffling, she hurried downstairs.

Getting out past the crowd wouldn't be a problem. She hadn't been blind, all those years ago. She had spied on Magnus and, by extension, Freddie, even then understanding the value of knowledge. She had watched them, followed them, found their hidey-holes and secret passages.

She entered the passage through the basement, finding it suspiciously lacking either cobwebs or excessive dust. Something to look into when she returned.

There was no sound, no stamping of feet overhead. Nothing more than her footsteps echoing against the concrete. It was shorter than she'd remembered, already passing around the curve that began at the edge of the forest. She hoped her agents above were keeping up and that their timing would be right.

Hefting the bag she'd packed, she felt reassured by the weight of her tools. There was no choice, and there was calmness in that.

Pulling herself out of the manhole cover, she found that the forest hadn't changed. Dead leaves crunched beneath her feet as she made her way towards the path. She gripped the handle of her bag, pressed herself into the trunk of a tree and waited.

Her ears twitched with every rustle, every crunch, steadying herself after each until there was a series of noises that weren't down to the wind or animals. She risked exposing her head to get a look past an obstructive tree.

The figure sneaking around was deeper inside the trees, far from the path. She froze, trying to steady her breath. She gripped the handle tighter, recognising the face. It was easier in the context; she'd seen him creep about here so many times.

Freddie moved past, presenting his oblivious back to her. He didn't turn, didn't see her. It would be so easy, after so many years, so easy to do it.

Instead, she tore her eyes away. Not today.

He had his reprieve for the moment, fortunate that she had a higher purpose than revenge.

The stillness had barely returned before she heard the voices. It was one voice mainly, nattering away. All those words carelessly flowing out of him. She strained her ears but couldn't find any sense in the noise.

Retrieving everything she'd need, she tossed the bag into the bushes beside her. No extra weight.

She took a deep breath and stepped out on to the path.

18.

Raf stood on tiptoes and smiled as the woman approached, checking the hair, the gait, the clothes, trying to find out if his friendly greeting was warranted.

Piet was holding him behind his body, hand resting lightly on Raf's waist. Raf freed an arm and waved, but it wasn't him she was craning her neck to see, her eyes falling to the side of him.

'Oh, are you expecting someone?' Raf called out. 'We did see a couple of nature-lovers, but they might be a bit delayed. Best to start without them, I think.'

She seemed to get worried then. Raf left it up to her to decide whether his words should be taken as menacing or supportive.

Piet's tense grip supported Raf's newfound assumptions about the allegiance of the visitor and her connection to the agents they'd encountered.

She remained a safe distance away, staring at him.

'Who is it?' Raf whispered.

'I don't know.'

The woman made a noise, a strangled sort of laugh. It didn't sound very amused.

'Come with me,' she said.

Raf cocked his head, trying to focus on the words. He could feel something; a new idea lurking in the corner of his mind, disappearing whenever he tried to examine it directly.

He didn't realise he had been moving, that he'd weaved his way free, until Piet grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back.

'Come. Jacob. Pieter. You will both be perfectly safe, I assure you.'

Raf squirmed and pried at Piet's fingers. 'What are you doing? Let me go.'

'Pieter, let him go. I will protect him. I swear that his safety is my only concern.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible, ma'am.'

'I don't have time for this. Come with me. Both of you, come with me.'

She advanced and Piet retreated, Raf given no choice but to move with him.

‘Please. Please, just come with me.’

Her desperation tugged at Raf. She was scared. She needed their help.

Piet’s fingers dug into Raf’s side as the woman advanced again. Then the pressure lifted and he saw a flash movement before Piet shoved him backwards and awkwardly enveloped her.

Raf’s head spun at all the movement, clutching at it as he stumbled backwards. He blinked, trying to work out what had happened. They were just standing there.

She had lunged, but it wasn’t at him. Piet’s arms had been high as he met her, missing her arms and catching her by the head. It was so quick, and then they were both so still. Staring at each other.

Piet held her as he lowered himself to the ground, laying her out gently but keeping her close. Her head rolled on the ground, neck bending at a sickening angle.

Piet looked up to where Raf stood, pinned to the spot. ‘You have to get somewhere safe.’

Raf kept staring at the horrible pose, not moved by the urgency in Piet’s voice. He could only focus on fragments: her neck, his face, unable to take in the whole of the tangle of bodies before him.

Piet held up a hand as Raf took a step towards them, and then all Raf could see was the blood.

‘Don’t,’ Piet said.

Raf teetered on his toes, remaining where he stood. But he had moved far enough to see the knife, still in the woman’s hand, plunged to the handle in Piet’s stomach.

‘I’m OK, but you need to go. I can’t protect you if there are others.’

Raf was transfixed as Piet worked Diane’s fingers off the handle. His fingers kept slipping, everything slick with blood. When he was free, he rolled on to his back, holding the knife in place. His T-shirt was torn, the ripped edges soaking in a creeping border of redness.

Raf’s hands moved uselessly over Piet’s body, restlessly trying to find something to do but too scared to get close.

‘Go.’ The distress in Piet’s voice was harrowing in its presence. Raf clung on to the hand that was trying to let him go.

‘I can’t...I don’t know the way.’

‘Turn around and run. Just keep running until you get to Hazpop.’ Piet stopped for a long moment, a slight fluttering of his fingers the only indication of his reason for the break. ‘Lock yourself in a training room and don’t let anyone but Freddie in.’

‘I’ll let you in, too.’

Piet nodded. ‘Freddie and me.’

‘I’ll send help back.’

He reached up and moved Raf’s trembling hand from above the knife.

‘Sjaak. Go.’

More than anything, the name was enough to convince him to move. The only other time Piet had slipped back into his native tongue was in the hospital, the hazy voice calling him back.

When he was out of Piet’s sight, he crouched down and watched him through the dense undergrowth. He could see the rise and fall of Piet’s chest, small movements of his arms and legs. It wasn’t too late. He wouldn’t fail him.

Leaning against a tree trunk, he attempted to gather his bearings. There was no sky or sun to navigate by.

With one last check on Piet, he crept through the thick trees, searching for the path they come in on. He walked far enough to know he’d gone the wrong direction, kicking at the plants as the world became blurred. All he wanted to do was sit down, or go back, but he made a promise. It was the only comfort he had left to give.

He didn’t see the figure lurking in the trees until it rustled the branches beside him. Raf stared, wide-eyed and hypnotised by the shining blade that was being swung like a perverse pocket watch.

The man didn’t seem angry, voice as dull as the knife was sharp. ‘She wasn’t going to kill you.’

Raf couldn’t help but notice the blood.

Nothing about the man was familiar and he quickly realised why. The uniform belonged to an EPD agent.

They were both breathing hard, neither breaking eye-contact.

‘What did you do to him?’ Raf asked.

‘Just took back something that didn’t belong to him. Now move.’

The man flicked the knife off to the side, repeating the motion until Raf realised he was expected to follow the arcs of crimson droplets.

Raf moved sideways in his desire to keep one eye on the flashing blade, with no plan except for the last-minute miraculous appearance of a healed Piet. He took further knife-waving as a signal to stop, taking the opportunity to assess his new surroundings. It was a lonely place to die, in the middle of a forest that few ventured into and far enough from the path that those who did would probably never find him.

He clenched his fists, but he was trying to stop his hands from shaking rather than getting ready for a fight. He was never going to overpower anyone, even on his best day. Speed was on his side, judging by the size of his would-be captor, but that depended on his continuing balance, depth perception and ability to find somewhere safe at the end.

The knife seemed intent on him moving towards a metallic disc randomly set into the dirt, Raf only complying because the manhole was in his line of retreat. Dragging the heavy cover, he scraped the metal as he tugged the gibbous moon into a dark crescent.

One look down the tunnel convinced him that he preferred continued proximity to the knife. He may not have paid much attention to his survival training, but Raf was pretty sure it would frown upon going into secret underground lairs with an armed enemy.

He tried to find an escape route without drawing attention to his wandering gaze.

‘Down,’ the man instructed. When Raf didn’t move, the man added, ‘You’re not going to die.’

Raf was disinclined to take the word of a man who had a disturbing combination of flat affect and pointy knife. He had no idea what was behind him but he spun and started running. The ground was clear, a path available between two trunks.

He didn't even make it to their tangle of roots before there was a blinding pain on the back of his skull, then darkness.

Orlagh stepped off the bottom rung, the soft scuffing of her shoe too loud for her liking.

The ladder deposited them into a corridor that was lit, and scored, by a line of fluorescent lights. Following her concerned line of sight to the security cameras trained down at them, he quietly assured her that they were all inexplicably malfunctioning.

Idris did a good job of projecting confidence as he paused at each door in turn, taking them around the sharp turn in the corridor and into a second set of doors.

She followed behind, more interested in the building in general. It was a whole new building, sitting within their grounds. Hidden in the middle of the forest.

And Áine might be in here.

No one had ever mentioned anything like this, not even a whisper. No conspiracy theory. Except, there was SACER's mysterious council that adjudicated on matters, mostly disputes over words. Their meeting place had never been known and with no idea about who the actual members were, it had been impossible to trail them.

Was Áine here because she was part of the council? Did they kidnap agents to work for them or had she stumbled upon them, killed or kept prisoner because of what she'd uncovered?

Idris examined knobs and squinted at the floor before stopping in front of the last door. He pointed at something Orlagh couldn't see then pressed his finger to his lips for something she couldn't hear.

Steering her back around the bend, he paused in front a door that looked no different to its neighbours and laid a hand on it, as if he could sense something in the vibrations.

'Lots of traffic,' he said, the door not moving when he tried the handle. 'Just a minute, this one's open over there.'

His ghostly form passed through the obstacle, the door swinging inwards to reveal a still solidifying Idris.

‘Sometimes I wish I was undead,’ Orlagh whispered, slipping into the dark room. She switched on the light once the door was firmly shut. The gap below the door was a concern, but Idris assured her that no one would walk down the corridor while they were there.

He seemed to have drawn them into an impromptu library, every surface in the office covered by books. Hardcover, leather-bound and paperback ones were peppered with notebooks and folders. They were piled on the desk and chairs, scattered across the floor and arranged in shelves from floor to ceiling around the edges of the room.

‘It wasn’t like this over there,’ he said. ‘It looked like a tornado had gone through it. Half the books were confetti.’

Idris picked a thin book off the nearest pile.

‘Lynne Graves, this is your life,’ he said, flicking through the pages randomly.

‘Who’s that?’

Idris alighted on the last page. ‘Who was that, I think you mean.’

He apparently had better things to do than explain, handing her the book wordlessly before wandering around the room.

It was indeed the life of Lynne Graves, meticulously printed in the thin, lined pages. She had been a SACER agent who died ten years ago, according to the notes. Nothing in her short volume indicated a story worth writing. She seemed unremarkable, going about her administrative job and rarely venturing outside the SACER grounds.

Orlagh couldn’t recall the name or any unrecorded acts of infamy on Lynne’s part, not even what should have stuck in her mind: an agent dying so young, leaving such a small book.

The front page was adorned only with her name and a date. A simple page introducing the story of an unremarkable life.

‘Do you think this is the official biography room for SACER?’ Orlagh asked, assessing the stacks of potential records.

Idris was too absorbed in his book to take any notice of her musing, so she flipped through the book a few more times, start to end. It fell open on the final page, Orlagh only noticing on the third reading that the day it was written and the day Lynne had died didn't match.

It wasn't an observation, it was a prediction.

'Her death, it was written before she died. Long before.' Orlagh held the page up to Idris, doubting herself even as she said the words. She turned to the front. 'Before she was born.'

Idris furrowed his brow. 'Do you think it was written by someone like me?'

Orlagh couldn't offer more than a shrug in reply, an answer that didn't satisfy Idris as he began turning the pages in his book with more vigour than necessary.

Orlagh buried herself back in Lynne's story, unease growing. 'This part here, that she was an obedient child, was that because that's how she was or because it was written she should be?'

'How should I know?'

Orlagh scanned the other books on the desk, finding names on the spines and covers of all of them. One book teetered on the top of a pile, sitting noticeably askew. Orlagh picked it up, heart thumping when she saw the name.

Simone Mortimer.

She turned through a section of excised pages until she reached the end. The writing was neat, controlled: a carefully composed death sentence.

Simone was first to the final envelope. She read the contents and felt a great peace of mind before she died.

Orlagh ran her finger over the removed pages, the record of Simone's story hastily removed and rewritten. Someone had cut out half her life.

'This person, they killed Simone.' She held up the book to Idris, pointing out the date to him. 'Murdered her in – with a story the day before she died.'

Idris looked up. 'What did you say?'

Orlagh was thrown by the intensity of his stare. 'That they killed Simone.'

'With a story?'

She nodded.

Idris hesitated, retrieving a folded piece of paper from his pocket and smoothing the creases, angling it for Orlagh to see.

The heir will leave before the fall.

‘It’s from something my mother was working on. She thought that the power might be because it was a story. But maybe it’s the storyteller, not the story.’

‘Who wrote this? The handwriting looks identical.’

‘An EPD agent called Maya Campbell. She disappeared soon afterwards.’

‘Aha! Our likely foe!’ She looked at him over the pile of books. ‘Don’t lie, you thought for a moment that it might be Áine behind this.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Yeah, well, I certainly did. Never been so glad to be wrong.’

Orlagh moved around to where Idris was perched on the chair, sitting on top of a pile of books. He was enthralled by an old-looking volume that was spread across his lap, large enough to overhang his legs on both sides. He looked like a little boy with his huge book, legs swinging above the ground.

She left him to his reading, turning her attention to the comparatively orderly shelves beside him. Some of the spines were blank or not thick enough to accommodate any title, but most had a name on them. Some she recognised, many she didn’t.

She ran her finger across the spines, her nail snagging lightly in each valley, clicking out a soft count of the lives she was passing by. Her finger came to rest on one, trailing down the grooves of the name. She pulled out the volume and let it fall open to a random page.

‘I should warn Piet about ducks.’

Idris didn’t need to raise his eyes from his book to ascertain the context of her abrupt statement. ‘And replace one incident with a lifelong phobia?’

She placed the open book on top of the page he was trying to read, only getting his full attention when she let go and let him take the full weight. He looked up before realising that he should just read where she was stabbing on the page.

His eyes flicked over the passage, then again for good measure. ‘You should definitely warn him.’

Satisfied, she grabbed the book back, closing it and letting it fall open again to a new page. Except it wasn't new. Her brow creased and she peered at the crease in the binding. She closed and opened it again, and once again it fell to the same page.

The flutter of movement earned her a sarcastic eyebrow raise.

'Bibliomancy?'

'I can see into the past, at any rate, and apparently someone really liked reading about random acts of duck. Schadenduck? Duckenfreude? Quick, what's duck in German?'

'Unless I'm about to get hit in the head by the swinging gun barrel of a Panzer, I can't say that I care,' he murmured.

'Let's say you are.'

Barely glancing up, Idris reached out to take the book from her hands.

'Doesn't matter anyway,' Orlagh said, amusing herself by keeping it just beyond his fingertips. 'It happened a few years ago. Surprised he never mentioned it. Extremely surprised that Raf hasn't and that he doesn't dress up in a duck costume every day.' She kept reading as Idris groped around the edge of the book, jerking it out of his reach with a gasp.

This got Idris's unwavering attention, letting his book slam shut with a musty puff of dust. 'What?'

Orlagh leaned against the bookcase. 'Oh no. Oh, Piet.'

Idris made his way to stand beside her, reading the last page of writing.

'You can change it,' Orlagh said, gripping the hand he was holding the book with, pinning it against the cover. 'You have to do something.'

He read the double page again before meeting her eyes. 'It already happened.'

'You have to save him.'

Idris turned the last page and found a few lines written on the reverse. His stillness cut through Orlagh's haze of grief.

'What?' she asked.

'There was more.'

She read the final paragraph. 'Oh, Idris. I'm so sorry.' Orlagh gripped his wrist. 'But you can save both of them.'

Idris closed his eyes. 'Fine. Piet is all right. My mother lives to obsess another day. And they all lived happily ever after.'

Orlagh stared at him until he opened his eyes. 'You didn't believe it,' she said softly. 'You're not even trying.'

'I'm sorry, I can't bring them back. I can't bring Áine back. I can't save anyone or change anything.'

'You can do anything you want!'

'I can't go back in time. I can't reanimate corpses. I don't want to do any of that.' All of the life that had crept back into his voice during the day was slipping away.

She set aside her frustration in the face of his increasing dejection. 'Fine, you can't raise the dead. But you're wrong, you can change the future.'

He returned to his throne of books, dragging the big book back across his lap. But he didn't open it, tapping his fingers lightly on the cover while he stared around the room.

Orlagh finally saw the spine of his book. It was *his* book.

'Yours is there, too,' he said, catching her look and waving his hand towards the desk.

'Not interested.'

He bowed his head, drumming his fingers in a more organised rhythm.

Orlagh debated if she should pull the book off his lap and run off with it. Bit late, though. 'Whatever it said, it doesn't matter. They don't know what they're talking about, who they're up against.'

'We'll soon see, because they're coming.' He rapped the cover. 'It said so.'

'What? Why didn't you say something?' Orlagh moved closer, trying to find some way to manoeuvre into the space between Idris and the door and make sure she had his full attention. 'Stop them.'

He shrugged. 'Why bother?'

She was still holding Piet's life story as she put her hand on his chest, pushing the book in so hard that he'd probably see Piet Roorback's name the next time he looked at himself in the mirror. 'Because I am a far scarier prospect than whatever's coming down that corridor.'

Orlagh let the book slide down his chest, moving quickly to the door and memorising a path back to where Idris was sitting before switching the light off. She got down on the ground and crawled back as stealthily as she could, managing to avoid sending any large towers crashing down.

She found the bottom of his dangling feet first, wiping whatever she picked up from the bottom of his shoe on his trouser cuff. ‘Now,’ she whispered, ‘you tell me that they won’t look in here.’

There was a long pause, during which she began digging her fingers into his calf.

‘They won’t look in here,’ he said.

‘And they’re going back to wherever they were before and will give no further thought to us.’

‘Yes, all that.’

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see that Idris was looking down at her.’

‘Can I have one of your pills?’

‘Why?’

‘I might need it.’

Orlagh didn’t like whatever he was planning, or the lack of faith it exposed.

Idris finally met her eyes for longer than a moment. ‘Just the one.’

Orlagh had no intention of humouring whatever madness he was formulating, but there was something about his sadly rueful smile that made her pull out her box and hand over a little white capsule.

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t do anything stupid. Don’t think you’re being noble, making the big gesture. We can’t do this without you.’

Idris didn’t say anything as he contemplated the pill, slipping it into his pocket.

His voice was taking on an alarming flatness, resigning himself to something that she wanted no part of, preparing to do something it would be better not to feel.

‘There’s always hope,’ she said.

‘In that case I’ll never need it.’

Orlagh stretched her neck so she could see over the dark blob of the desk, monitoring the golden line underneath the door. There was a faint murmuring coming from somewhere in the distance, but the line remained unbroken.

‘Send them back. Say it.’

The footsteps grew louder, stopping agonisingly close. She strained her ears to hear the hushed conversation. She could only hear the man’s side, the other voice was higher pitched, not carrying as well.

‘Why are you stopping? You said someone was in here?’

Orlagh gripped Idris’s leg again, drawing the faintest gasp. He spoke almost as softly. ‘This is where it ends. I will find Áine here.’

‘Stop screwing around. Which room? What are you doing?’ He wasn’t shouting, not angry. Panicked. *‘Please, concentrate. This is important.’*

The woman’s voice was at the same indecipherable level.

When shadows fell across the strip of light, Orlagh groped for Idris’s arm, trying to pull him down to shelter behind the desk. Her hand slipped off his immobile limb, leaving her to duck under the edge of the desk alone. She backed further into the nook when she heard the door handle creak.

Crouching, staring into the darkness, Orlagh couldn’t remember if the desk panel even extended to the floor.

Light flooded in and the first thing she saw when her sight returned was Idris, reclining in the chair. He was doing his best impression of nonchalance, crossing his arms as he rocked back.

The second thing she saw was the large sheet of wood behind her back.

Idris began tapping his thumb against his bicep. ‘Sorry, can I help you?’

His innocent expression almost made Orlagh laugh.

Perhaps sensing the danger he was posing to her, he spread his arms and jumped down from his throne, moving around to the front of the desk.

‘You must be the boy causing us all this trouble. I’ve been expecting you.’

Orlagh could finally make out what the woman was saying and that she didn’t recognise the voice.

‘That’s me. Sorry,’ Idris said, not sounding the least bit like he meant it.

‘Come.’ The man was less amused than the woman had been, but was operating at the same level of unfamiliarity.

Orlagh kept waiting for some signal, for the twist in Idris's plan. But all she heard were muted steps on the carpet and the door closing behind him.

After giving them enough time to clear the corridor, she crawled out from under the desk. Hoping that she could get a signal, she opened her phone and hit the first number in her speed dial.

She froze as she heard a distant ringing. She must have done something wrong, made a mistake. The screen didn't offer any consolation.

Calling...Dad.

She hurried to the wall and put her ear against it. Hearing movement, she whirled around uselessly, before realising that she hadn't hung up. Closing her phone, the ringing stopped.

A screeching noise filled the room a moment later. It took a full second for her brain to isolate the noise to the phone in her hand. She quickly opened the phone and snapped it shut, but she hadn't been fast enough. It had rung at least twice.

She wished she could sit in the chair and face him down, cross her arms and make jokes, but she was lunging for her hidey hole again. She was on her knees, the top of her head still visible, when the door was flung open.

It was a long moment before she realised that it was pointless for her to be hiding, kneeling up straight and resting her arms on the desk.

'You followed us here?' She grasped for the only straw her mind could conjure. 'I failed, didn't I? I tried to keep him away, but all I managed to do was bring us straight here.'

Her father looked over his shoulder before closing the door. 'What are you doing here? You have to get out. Now.' He crossed as far as he could at any great speed, beckoning for her to meet him halfway.

He looked like he was shaking, face pale and forehead glistening. Like he couldn't take on anyone, let alone people who had him so worried. He barely looked like he could hold himself up.

'We came here looking for Áine.'

'Here?'

'Idris ... led us here.' She tried to gauge his reaction. 'Is that what I was supposed to learn in the hospital, to find out about him?'

‘We can talk about that later.’

That wasn’t especially encouraging, but wasn’t a denial.

‘What will you do?’ she asked.

‘I’m here to end it. You have to go.’

Everyone was so eager for it all to end, no matter the cost.

‘I can help.’

‘No.’ His face softened. ‘No, sweetie, you need to get far away.’

She picked her way around, leaving a wall of books between them. ‘I’m not going.’

‘This isn’t your grading.’

‘But you’d say that, wouldn’t you.’ She shook her head, already deep enough in paranoia that nothing would dissuade her. ‘That’s not why I can’t leave. Idris was taken away, he’s being held somewhere. That’s why I was calling, to get your help.’

‘I’m here now, so you can go.’ Freddie paused. ‘Do they know you’re here?’

‘I hid.’

‘Good, you did good,’ he said. ‘I’ll get Idris out.’

‘You? What will you do? Do you know how dangerous they are? They were more powerful than him.’ Orlagh cut off her babbling, cheeks burning. ‘You knew that. No, of course you did. You didn’t follow us, you had no idea we were here.’

‘Orlagh, please. I’ll explain later. I assume you came in through the shed, go and wait there. We’ll meet you soon.’

‘Sure. Fine.’ She emerged from her bibliographic fort.

‘Promise you won’t come back.’

Freddie jumped as his phone rang, hesitating when he read the number, trying to muffle it for a ring before giving up and answering the call.

‘What’s wrong? Are you all right?...’ He glanced over at Orlagh, moving around the room as he listened to the other end. All she could hear was a deep voice, so it wasn’t her mother checking up on him. ‘Oh, right. Thanks for letting me know ... No, it’s fine, they’re here with me...’ He looked at her again, before

turning around. ‘What’s happening there? ... Just hold on, I’m working on it. It will be all right... Yeah, me too. Good luck. Bye.’

Orlagh clenched her jaw. ‘Maybe I’ll go and tell everyone about this.’

‘Please do.’ He moved towards the doorway she was currently blocking. ‘I have to go and help Idris.’

Orlagh opened the door and held it for him. ‘After you.’

Freddie gazed down the corridor, then back at Orlagh, who still hadn’t stepped out of the room. He bounced on his toes, before setting off backwards. He continued not watching where he was going for an admirable portion of the corridor, but he eventually had to let her out of his sight, jogging off around the bend.

Orlagh hadn’t had any intention of leaving when she told him she would, but now she was having doubts. Her father was scared. He was the person she was counting on to save them.

She would be no help, not in there. Not yet.

While retrieving Idris’s epic tome, she grabbed another volume that caught her eye, before closing the door behind her. She hugged the books to her chest as she ascended the ladder awkwardly. Heaving them over the top rung, she sprawled on top of them in the tangle of underbrush.

19.

Raf groaned as the light began to flood in, the pain chaser arriving soon after. After his head stopped spinning, he pulled himself up sideways, squinting out of one eye.

The man was sitting. Watching. Sweeping a torch up and down the long tunnel.

‘I won’t kill you,’ the man said quietly, ‘but you’re not going anywhere. My wife, that woman you murdered, she wanted you alive. And so I’ll keep you alive.’

Raf took in his surroundings, finding himself in a long tunnel, not so far down that he couldn’t see the opening. There was still hope.

Here, he wasn’t imprisoned, not technically. A prisoner was in a room and locked in. He was being led to his room but he wouldn’t go.

As the world continued to come into focus Raf began to feel every scrape and bump on his body, the minor injuries soon overwhelmed by the throbbing on the back of his head. He ran a hand over it, wincing as he probed at the matching pair of lumps he was now sporting.

‘You keep coming at me with knives and I still have no idea who either of you are or what you want with me.’

The man didn’t say anything. Now that he was still, Raf could make out the name tag on the front of the man’s jacket.

Wischar.

Not Magnus, unless he’d married since Raf last saw him. Idris probably hadn’t been under enough stress to send his hair grey in a single afternoon. Which left the other one, Idris’s father.

Raf closed his eyes and tried to think louder than his splitting headache. He knew it rhymed. Rhyme was a tricky little bugger to spell. No, that was rhythm. He rubbed the front of his head. Maybe he had another *contré-coup* injury; his brain did seem to bounce around in there rather a lot.

The noble house of Wischar. Magnus X had two sons, Magnus XI and... Pretentious? It rhymed – and the rhythm sounded right, too – but no.

Augustus!

‘What’s the plan, Augie?’ Raf noted the flinch. ‘If you insist on dragging my unconscious body a few metres at a time, this will take a while. And hurt. Mostly me, but you might strain something.’

Augustus assessed the sharpness of the knife with his fingertip.

‘Is that supposed to be threatening, because that one *will* hurt you,’ Raf said.

Augustus rested the knife hand on the ground. ‘I have no desire to hurt you, if you’ll come quietly.’

‘I have no desire to come with you, even if it hurts. How about we sit here for a while?’

Augustus made no sign of acceding to the plan, but Raf decided his inaction constituted agreement.

Raf felt something digging into him when he shifted position, his fingers drifting towards his back pocket. He felt cold metal beneath his fingertip, closing his fingers around the handle. He whipped it out, trying not to be insulted when Augustus’s momentary fear was replaced by indifference.

Raf waved his weapon around. ‘It may look blunt, but if I shove it hard enough in your eye I bet it’d sting. Yeah, sting to death.’

Now they had a real standoff: very sharp knife versus butter knife. Both lethal if you tried hard enough.

‘Up.’

When Raf failed to move, Augustus got to his feet and loomed.

Augustus re-gripped the handle of his knife a few times. ‘Move.’

Raf felt a weariness descend, his head heavy and throbbing. ‘Tell me why you want me and maybe I’ll believe that you want me alive.’

‘Prophecy.’

‘And in it I’m alive, but your prisoner?’

‘You’re alive, and we aim to keep you that way. That’s all you need to know.’

‘And what happens if I die?’

Augustus missed the wicked glint in Raf’s eyes, stuck repeating his promise of safety. ‘You won’t.’

‘I mean,’ Raf began, his tone designed to sound perfectly reasonable, ‘what if I should decide to smash my skull open rather than come with you, for instance?’

Augustus looked stricken.

‘Oh dear me,’ Raf said, clapping his hands together. He made a little movement towards the knife, which Augustus withdrew reflexively, causing Raf to chuckle. ‘Dearie, dearie me.’

Augustus rubbed out the wrinkles in his forehead. ‘You would rather die?’

All of Raf’s traitorous, survival-obsessed cells screamed ‘No’ but he nodded happily, thinking of Piet. Thinking he’d be proud. ‘If my being alive helps you, which it must, then yes. I think I would.’

He could see Augustus’s lips moving, murmuring to himself as he returned to his side of the tunnel.

He closed his eyes, turning his back on Raf. ‘Leave.’

‘Why?’ Raf asked.

Augustus was more puzzled than angry. ‘What do you care? Get out of here.’

‘What if I go and top myself once I’m out?’

‘I don’t think that counts.’

‘Counts as what?’

Augustus’s face flushed red. ‘I don’t care. I don’t care anymore. Just go.’

Raf’s voice echoed down after him. ‘Counts as what? What do you want with me?’

Augustus disappeared into the darkness, leaving Raf standing in the middle of the tunnel.

It probably led right into enemy headquarters. He could sneak in and be a spy, be a hero. And throw away the life that everyone else was so intent on saving.

He could go back into the forest and look for a body.

He slid down the curved wall, butter knife still clenched in his fist.

For a while, maybe he’d just guard his section of the tunnel.

Orlagh sat cross-legged on the ground, Idris's book spread across her lap. She was trying to find how she saved the day, hoping that Freddie and Idris would burst through the shed door and save her the trouble.

Idris's story seemed to be a work in progress. Everything past his childhood had been ripped out, leaving ragged edges. All that followed on from his early schooling now were a few scrawled sentences, far from the neat hand preceding it.

Idris swallowed the pill dry, stretching his body out lazily. Smiling at Orlagh to the end.

No time frame. No specifics. But she was there when he died, so she should avoid him and he'd be fine.

There was nothing in there about what was happening below.

She slammed it shut and contemplated the name on her other book. Áine Polisson.

It was only a quarter filled. Some books were larger, some were smaller, yet all had been filled almost exactly to the end; ended when they were planned to end. Hers was way off the mark.

Orlagh bolstered her courage while she studied the cover. Then the first page. Then she began to skim through, not absorbing enough consecutive words for actual comprehension. The pages were well-thumbed, not the near pristine of most of the other volumes. The writing changed more than the others, too; different coloured pens, varying degrees of liberty taken with the ruled lines.

She flicked to the last page of writing and found it was sitting oddly, turning back to find another section of torn out pages. She ran her finger along the ragged edges, the years she never lived.

And then after them, a scribbled epilogue.

A death sentence. Three of them.

She paid the price for her father's betrayal. It was peaceful; all life simply slipping from the room during the night. She didn't suffer.

Orlagh closed the book with a burning prickle in her eyes. She thought there would be relief, after all this time, knowing one way or the other. Right now it felt more like a punch in the stomach.

This person, Maya Campbell, had written Áine out of existence. And Idris was just an innocent bystander. Wrong room, wrong time.

Her father's betrayal. What did he have to do with it?

Orlagh slammed the book into the ground. Reading about the past was doing her no good. Here, in the present she had left Idris alone. Three against one. At least she could even the odds a little, in number, if nothing else.

They'd do it together. Go out together, if need be.

What would Áine do?

Blaze of glory, that's what.

Orlagh hid both books beneath a shroud of branches then swung her leg over the ladder and hoped the protection Idris promised her was still in place.

Slipping back into the library, she began arming herself for the battle with the only weapon she had.

It didn't take long to locate Maya's book. It was sitting near the top on the desk. Obviously one she liked to keep at hand.

Orlagh took up position on Idris's throne, wondering how he pretended it was remotely comfortable.

Maya Campbell, missing EPD agent.

It looked like it was in her handwriting, going back through her childhood and her training; her first years of work as an agent. Then it got interesting, as she told the tale of a young agent and her rash partner. How they had begun a secret relationship. She detailed how they had been sent to deal with a rogue EPD prophet and how in the struggle the agent had spat out a death prophecy at her.

They had kept quiet about it, even as she began to see the symptoms. Rumours abounded about what happened to agents who became 'infected', none of them ending well. Then she found out she was pregnant and she began writing stories to amuse her unborn child, trying to write as much as she could while she had the chance. Trying to preserve a little of her mind for the child to see.

That's when they had noticed strange things happening, coincidences and eerie similarities following them. Hugo had made the connection first. Maya described in some detail the feverish glow in his eyes.

They had taken the discovery to Magnus IX, waiting for their accolades. But he had become obsessed with the power, and with her, and in their fear they had lashed out and killed him.

They had gone on the run, using her power to seek out the council, a secret group of agents, one from each department, who made decisions and arbitrated over SACER matters. Finding them in their underground bunker, they went to ask for help, for guidance about the child, but the council didn't take kindly to the intrusion into its secret lair, becoming even less friendly when it found out what she was.

Maya had recorded the details of each death, printing out names and dates.

Hugo had suggested that they take over the running of SACER; use her gift for good. They completed a smooth transition, unnoticed by the world above them.

Their son, Alfred, was born underground, Maya ensuring her own labour would be free of complications. They kept young Alfred with them until he was old enough to go to school. She used her power to get him into the general pool and keep the apparent foundling unnoticed, steering him to EPD. His task there had been to monitor the situation, keep track of their progress. Make sure they never got too close to discovering what Maya had died to see.

The story seemed to be written after the fact, unlike the others, recording rather than dictating the life. There were traces of confusion in the story when Alfred had left EPD and stopped sending reports, refusing to explain himself. Eventually the new situation had been embraced, a new mission created.

Orlagh scratched her forehead with the top of the book, trying to put together the puzzle that had been flung in her face. Before she had time to recover, there was another burst of yelling down the corridor, her attention torn between the past and the present. Her choice was made easier by the fact that she wasn't sure how much of Maya's story was pure fantasy, justification added retrospectively to her long string of murders.

But she did know that Maya was dangerous and that Idris was probably in there with her.

Orlagh put the book on the desk, not allowing herself time for doubt.

She pinpointed the yelling to the final room in the corridor, the one Idris had heard the voices in. Having made her choice, she flung the door open. She was met with three distinct reactions to her sudden appearance.

Curiosity and smug nodding came from an older woman sitting in a chair. Anger and annoyance emanated from the man holding a fistful of her father's shirt with one hand.

And her father's eyes were full of a horror that made her yearn to run away.

She didn't move, not through bravery, but from a new wave of indecisiveness. And the fact that there was no fourth pair of eyes.

Freddie mouthed a silent plea for her to go.

Ignoring everyone else, including the man who had him backed against the wall, Orlagh forced a smile, almost keeping the trembling from her forced joviality. 'This my grading party?'

'Surprise,' her father said quietly.

'You shouldn't have. I don't even know most of my guests.'

Freddie strained to look over the arm pinning him. 'These are my parents, Hugo and Maya. Grandma and grandpa. But for now, pretend they don't exist and don't pay attention to a word either of them says.'

His parents.

Her grandparents.

Orlagh kept her eyes firmly fixed on her father's.

'Where is he, *Alfred*?' she asked, enjoying the surprise on her father's face. Although, to be fair, it was probably more to do with the fact that she'd addressed him by his first name, whichever variation.

In the corner of her eye she could see Maya nodding to herself. 'I knew the boy was lying about being alone.'

Maya had her chin resting on her hand, watching Orlagh without the intensity of the other two. Curiosity in her eyes, rather than fear or anger.

'What did you do to him?' Orlagh asked.

Maya turned to Freddie. 'Another child you've sacrificed.'

Freddie craned his neck as far as he could. 'I didn't, I swear. I tried to keep them apart. If you'd let me explain, I did as you asked. But this is her grading, deciding what to do about Idris. Give her the chance to make the decision.'

Orlagh was keenly aware that Freddie had probably lied to a woman who seemed to view betrayal as a killable offence.

'You think I don't know what you've been doing?' Maya asked. 'I see. I see everything.'

'Where is he?' Orlagh asked, searching the room for a sign of what had happened. Needing the proof, even if it hurt.

'He will come. He has a reason to, now.'

Freddie was pale. 'Please. There's another way.'

Maya closed her eyes and sang out in a quiet voice, 'Come out, come out, wherever you are.'

And then Orlagh could see a ghostly Idris standing behind Maya. It was difficult to convey her sincerest desire that he remain hidden while not revealing any hint of his presence to their captors.

'Perhaps I underestimated him,' Maya mused. 'Perhaps you did, too. He seems content to let you die.'

'No,' Freddie said sharply, bursting past his father to kneel by his mother's chair. 'This is Orlagh, my daughter, your granddaughter.'

'I know who she is.'

'Don't hurt her. You don't want to.' He searched the area, reaching over to take a photo frame from the nearby desk, deftly removing the backing. He pulled out a sheet of paper and pressed it into her hands. 'See, here, you wrote this, like I told you. When each of them was born, you added their name. You kept it close, hidden, so you could remember.'

'Áine. Orlagh. Niall. Protect them, too. Don't forget them,' Maya recited, before shrugging and passing back the paper. 'I don't remember writing that.'

'But you did, you can see that's your handwriting. You wanted to remember, you tried so hard.'

Maya put her hand on Freddie's cheek. 'You're the only thing I have to protect.'

Freddie put a hand on hers. 'Then do it for me. Protect her for me.'

Maya smiled at Freddie, but the warmth disappeared when she turned to Orlagh. 'I don't know her. I won't risk the world for her.'

For every morning of every day that she could remember, Hugo had looked over his glasses at her as he picked up his book for the day. Always watching. Then she had waited for it, felt her whole body tense in anticipation for his soft question, asked every time with the same inflection, with the same mixture of distaste and awe. It had started out as a sentence but, always big on efficiency, he'd streamlined it over the years, cramming all his revulsion into one word.

‘Listening?’

And she would nod. There was no choice, there never had been.

When he was done he would close the cover on the book, satisfied. She had heard the story, it was finished. Now all that was left was for it to be lived out.

She couldn't keep the voice out, but she wasn't listening. He didn't have all of her mind, not yet. He thought they were planning together, but he couldn't understand the depths of her desperation. She might not be able to tell where the thoughts and beliefs in her mind came from anymore, but she had spent four decades of her life devoting every ounce of willpower to holding on to two thoughts, thoughts she knew were her own.

She only had energy to hold two in her mind, repeating so she didn't forget.

Protect my son.

Destroy them all.

Her whole life had been dedicated to doing everything she could to uphold them, setting her plans in motion and making sure they weaved their own dooms.

But her power had ebbed and there wasn't time for grace, no time for intricate webs to be spun. Brute force was called for while she had the opportunity, so she had done everything she could to escalate the situation beyond the tipping point. Ensuring that the events would continue even if she wasn't there to see them through to the end.

It was all so near. There was a rush of activity. That was to be expected. But she had not expected her son. He was not to return, not ever. She had been clear, she was sure she had.

His face was unfamiliar. All she had were photos that he sent. Letters she hid away. It was nice to see him, even if it was all wrong.

Her plans were unravelling. People kept trying to stop her saving them.

Maya studied the girl, a third intruder after so long alone. She was an interesting distraction, but the missing one interested her more.

His eyes had burned.

He had told Hugo to shut up. She liked him.

The silence was nice. She could almost think. Almost had room to breathe. But the boy nagged at the corner of her mind. He was still out there.

It had taken so long to find what had been sapping her power, keeping her from completing her mission. Something had been working against her.

She had stepped up her attacks and then she had felt it shift; she felt a little bit stronger.

Of all the agents who had left at that time, it could only have been two. The EPD agents. Only they could match her power. Then one returned and she was still strong.

So she had set about destroying the obstacle. He had proved stubborn. And stupid, walking himself straight to her. Absurdly easy after such a long struggle.

Maya addressed the room, focusing on a random point. 'I know you won't have gone far. I will kill her.'

The child standing in front of her was so scared. Trying to be so brave. Maya would kill her, but she didn't know if she wanted to.

Maya looked across at Hugo, still standing silently.

Good boy.

There wasn't long to wait before he faded back into view, arms folded. The girl was so sad to see her saviour.

He was cleverer than she had given him credit for; there were two worlds when there should be three. Not the fool he played.

'What are you trying to hide from me?' she asked. 'Show me your world.'

He stepped back, sweeping his arm around the room. 'Be my guest.'

Maya stared at him, horror growing as the world came into view. On top of her carefully kept rooms was a layer of disaster and ruin. 'What have you done?'

‘I didn’t do any of that,’ he said. ‘And I’ve got a message from my other world. From Áine, your granddaughter. Remember her?’

And then there she was, standing beside him. Maya had seen photos of her, Freddie had sent them. He begged her to protect them, her grandchildren. He kept showing her more children, bigger ones.

While she was reading his pleas, she had always felt something, but it had faded into a nagging doubt. She remembered that she felt it, but it was just a memory. It wasn’t real enough to be different from her dreams.

She felt it now, though, the flare of something while she looked at two of the girls from the photos, slipping away as quickly as she tried to grasp it.

Protect Freddie. Destroy them all.

The intruders were trying to stop her. She had to stop them first.

‘You’re not infallible,’ Idris continued, eyes only for Maya. ‘You see her, right? She’s already killed you once, I’m sure she could give me a few pointers.’

Maya was so tired of fighting: fighting to remember and fighting to do what she had to do. Fighting for every thought.

It was almost over. She had set it all in place and she just had to let it run its course.

‘Enough.’ The third world fell away at her command. ‘It is over. The last SACER is burning. It is the end.’

The boy clenched his jaw. The girl was confused.

Freddie seemed upset. No one ran.

‘We’re in SACER, too, in case you’d forgotten,’ Idris said. ‘In the middle of a forest, no less.’

Hugo was bristling. Maya decided to indulge him, the ultimate test of her newfound freedom. It was worth nothing if he was able to take it away again. ‘What is it, dear?’

His returned words burst out, having waited so long to be heard. ‘There’s no need for that. Just a little shake-up, remember?’

Maya smiled as his words washed over him, he was nothing more to her. She heard him and knew he was wrong.

‘It’s too late for that. It’s too late for us.’ Her face lit up, trying to project her peace on to the rest of the room. ‘Oh, but we will be doing so much good.’

‘No,’ Hugo whispered. He realised he had no power. She could see the life draining from him. ‘I made sure you kept this place running, remembered what you had to. I remembered it all for you, so you didn’t have to worry. It used to make you so tired. We did all of that together, to make sure that SACER survived.’ His voice was hoarse, cracking with the last sentence.

Her feeling for him was brief, too. She only had Freddie to protect. Everyone else was going fade, she knew she wouldn’t be able to hold on. She nodded fondly to him while she remembered that she had cared once. ‘Thank you.’

Freddie knelt by her side. ‘You have to stop what’s happening. That’s why I had to come. I had to stop you.’

He looked like his father in that moment, but he seemed sorry. Hugo was never sorry.

‘Only a little while longer, darling.’

‘I’m so sorry. I didn’t know what else to do.’

Hugo had never shed a tear for his victims. Not for his granddaughter.

She couldn’t hold it against her boy. He was first. He was the first thing to remember, above everything else.

She reached for his head and laid an absolving hand on it. ‘I love you. It will all be over soon.’

‘He came to kill us,’ Hugo bleated. ‘You take care of him, or I damn sure will.’

‘He came to kill me. You’re not important enough to die.’ It was nice to see his face redden. It was actual emotion.

Freddie looked up. ‘Please stop this.’

‘Why would I stop? No one will interfere anymore. I can destroy all of this.’ She raised a trembling hand to point at Idris. ‘He shouldn’t exist. He is proof that I’m right.’

‘You’re the one who created him.’ There was no spite in Freddie’s voice. She imagined he must be telling the truth but that wasn’t part of her plan. The people like him, like her, they were the reason she was doing it. She wanted to stop more coming. Why would she create one?

‘No,’ she said, because it was impossible.

‘You tried to kill an innocent girl but it went wrong,’ Freddie said softly. ‘He was there too and you hurt them both. But I saved her; I found her in time and split her.’

His little girl. She remembered that she had killed that one. It had been necessary. She had probably been sad, for him.

‘You’re going to kill everyone in EPD?’ he asked.

‘Of course not, sweetheart.’ She smiled benevolently. ‘Everyone in SACER. One by one, until the end. And then that’ll be the end of it.’

‘Then kill me. Kill yourself. That’s it. No one else has to suffer.’ The boy was brave. It was nice.

But he was wrong. She had to destroy them. All of them. It was so clear, but no one else saw. It was left to her.

‘But ...’ Idris began.

Maya cut him off quickly. ‘Stop.’

He opened his mouth. The tips of his ears turned red with his effort. Eventually he managed a little noise.

‘Gag him. Now.’

Freddie moved, picking up a handkerchief from the table as he passed. He wound the strip around Idris’s unresisting mouth and tied it at the back.

He whispered an apology, but she heard.

She was sorry too. She liked the brave, stupid boy. But he was trying to stop her. ‘You can’t ruin this. And you can’t slip away. I need you to stay here and be quiet.’

Hugo was not done. He thought himself powerful still. Thought the boy was the problem. ‘Now that he’s been taken care of, we can stop this stupidity.’

‘Hugo, you are not part of my plan,’ she said quietly.

Off to the side, he fell to the ground, knees buckling as he tipped backwards. He hit the floor and didn’t move again.

Freddie didn’t appear to be pleased.

Maya felt a sharp pain in her chest. He looked scared. Upset.

‘It will be OK now,’ she said.

Freddie nodded. ‘Yes, you can stop it all now. You can make everything stop.’

But she was doing it for him. It was all for him.

‘Please, my children,’ he said. ‘My family. My friends.’

She stretched out her hand and found it was shaking. It was steady when she took his outstretched hand.

He wasn’t happy.

Hugo was gone. His thoughts were gone from her head. And what was left was pain. Aching pain.

It didn’t go away. She didn’t have to try to hold on to it. It lingered in her chest.

Maybe it wasn’t right. Maybe she was wrong.

Orlagh was watching her. His daughter. She remembered that. She was one of the people he wanted to protect, and she was going to die.

That wouldn’t make him happy.

She stroked his hair. It was for him. She had to be strong. Had to believe. She’d been working on her plan for so long.

It was for him.

But Orlagh was scared. Granddaughter. Freddie’s daughter. And Niall. Freddie’s son. She remembered them.

And Áine.

He wanted her to protect them. It would make him happy.

He looked up at her. ‘Please.’

She felt tears prickle behind her eyes. He was so sad.

Her granddaughter was scared.

Was it his concern that she felt? The pangs hurt, tearing at her own chest, but she wasn’t sure. Not sure enough when the world was at stake.

Cold air blew over the tear that ran down her cheek.

She had to protect him. Destroy the world.

Magnus held his hands over his ears as he crouched below the fire alarm system, unable to habituate to the clanging, each new peal as jarring as the last. Presumably it was designed with that purpose in mind, a job spectacularly well done, but it wasn’t the most helpful thinking music as he scoured the manual spread at his feet.

He knew they were on fire; he didn't need to be constantly reminded about it. Especially as they had nowhere to run.

He had people running to classrooms to tell them to stay put. Others were finding where the fire was and whether it was actually safe for everyone to remain where they were.

After another minute of the skull-rattling alarm Magnus slammed the manual shut, ripping the power cord out of the box. He set it down on the flagstones next to the manual that probably wouldn't have approved of his actions, watching it warily, as if it might rear up and strike at him. He was thankful that this seemed to be the one patch of the castle not afflicted by dampness as he backed away.

The walk through his castle steeled his nerve. His agents kept to their tasks and remained at peace. Not one had lashed out in fear or anger. And now it was his turn to prove himself.

He had promised Diane and Augustus that he would go and try to talk the rest of SACER down. He was a man of his word, today if never before.

He returned to his patch of dirt at the side of the castle and resumed digging with the back of a hammer. He scraped until the grass was cleared from a rough rectangle and then set about loosening the exposed dirt.

There was a sputtering rain of fire, shards of hot glass occasionally requiring a hasty move.

Behind him, the front door creaked open and a shadow fell over his proto-garden.

'I'm still going,' he said, as Augustus loomed in silent accusation. He squinted up at his brother. 'Where's Diane?'

There was the briefest pause as Augustus looked through the gates. 'She's going over her research.'

'Oh, Augustus, you lie so very badly. It's all right; I know she's plotting my doom.' He was resigned, but still smiling. 'I wish both of you luck. Actually, want to be boss right now? I've reconsidered my position.'

Augustus didn't say anything else, bowing his head.

Magnus held up his dirty hand, revealing a gnawed carrot top. 'Thought I'd plant this. Maybe it will grow.' He took a deep breath. 'I'm moving Idris up to heir apparent.'

He scratched at the ground and let Augustus digest the information. He plucked a tuft of grass out of the hammer, sneaking a look up at his brother as he tossed it aside.

His brother didn't look shocked. Or angry. Or at all interested.

'Good,' Augustus said, turning to leave.

'But we need someone who's here, now, to take over if I don't come back. You can abdicate later, if you want. Just ... make sure she's not the only voice in his ear.'

Augustus's head fell further, but Magnus didn't need to see assent from his brother; Augustus would do it anyway. And if not, no promise would bind him.

'Don't worry,' Magnus said, when Augustus didn't look up. 'We'll be all right, I'll make sure of it. You take care of this place.'

Magnus planted the carrot top into the ground, pushing a mound of dirt around it with his fingertips.

'Look after my vegetable garden.'

He started down the path, turning back before he was out of earshot. 'Don't go into my bedroom: torch it and blame it on this lot. Throw my computer on the pyre, too.'

Augustus raised his head, sadder than Magnus had imagined he'd look when his time was finally coming.

Magnus wished he could emerge dramatically through the open gates, but the image wouldn't be mesmerising enough to distract the crowd from the open entrance he'd leave in his wake.

Instead he shook the hands of the agents on duty in the guard house, taking a moment to compose himself in front of the door. The crowd outside feared him and his agents, but the only weapon he had left was a plea for understanding. His words, so feared, would still not be spoken in anger.

Orlagh could have sworn that she saw the light glinting off trails down Maya's cheeks, but she had made no move to call off any destruction she may have organised.

Her father whispered Niall's name, pleading with her.

'He's with his mother,' Maya said. 'He won't be scared.'

‘I have to check on him. He’s so little.’ He put a hand on her arm. ‘Please.’

Maya searched his eyes for a long while before she nodded. As he passed Orlagh, he mouthed what looked like an assurance that it would be OK, but she was probably seeing what she wanted to see. He might as well have been saying his final goodbye.

Then he was gone and she was the only one left alive in the room.

Her father was the only person Maya seemed to care about, but Orlagh didn’t care that he was gone. She was glad.

He had known all this time that Áine was dead and that his own mother had killed her. He had been the one to make her disappear but he let them wonder and worry, knowing they’d never see her again.

He probably knew about Idris for years, too, letting him live with the confusion that they tried so hard to alleviate.

Now was not the time for anger, though. There was enough of that already.

She held up her hands, a rather empty gesture from the least powerful person in the room. It was her turn by default, the only one left to speak up. ‘Let’s all think about what we’re doing here. Surely there’s a better way than burning it all to the ground.’

‘They all fell. They had no choice,’ Maya said, almost wistfully. ‘It is simply your time.’

‘This is insane. You can’t go around killing everyone. My father,’ she said, increasing her volume at the reaction, ‘yes, your son, he will die too. I know you don’t want that.’

‘He is protected.’ Maya rose from her chair. ‘And you will come with me. We can all find peace.’

Orlagh found herself walking out the door, followed by Idris, with Maya bringing up the rear. Maya was marching an unwilling Idris in front of her, whispering instructions that he strained to resist. She was directed across the corridor, the plain white door giving no hint of the abrupt stone stairwell it concealed. She led them down into a dank, stone-walled hall lined with heavy iron doors at regular intervals.

Orlagh was surprised to find herself standing inside a cell, looking back to where Maya was leaning against the doorframe. She didn't even remember reaching the bottom of the uneven stone steps.

'I won't let you suffer, I promise. He won't suffer either.' Maya rested her head on her arm. 'I'm sorry it ended like this. I think I might have liked to meet you. To remember you.'

Orlagh took a step and found that her ankle had been attached to the wall, a heavy cuff scraping against the bone. She shuffled forward as far as the chain would allow. 'I'd like to know you, too. I want to hear stories about my father when he was little. All the best embarrassing ones.'

Maya hesitated, Orlagh was sure of it. She seemed to be considering something.

'You know what you're doing is wrong now, I can see that,' Orlagh pressed, trying to force open the tiny crack. 'I can see you don't want to.'

Maya met her eyes but Orlagh could see the resolve before she even opened her mouth. 'Forgive me, Orlagh.'

The door clanked shut just out of her reach, her hands grasping at the air. 'Please! Don't leave us.'

Maya's voice was quiet in the corridor, a one-sided conversation that gave Orlagh hope and dismay in equal measures. Another cell door squeaked before it clicked into place and the footsteps faded away.

She called out but Idris didn't answer.

She didn't know if the forest over their heads was burning; if the castle was razed to the ground or the whole of SACER had been consumed. All her family and friends could be up there, dying.

She didn't know if Idris was sitting in the darkness, on the other side of the wall; she didn't know what had been done to him.

All she had was a chain attaching her ankle to the wall, long enough to let her pace around her cell. Her eyes started to burn, watering as she blinked furiously. A hint of smoke seemed to be seeping in, but there was nothing hanging in the air. It must be her imagination. If the smoke had made it down to her, there was no hope for anyone.

She slapped at the wall with her palms, kicking and scraping at the slabs before collapsing against it when she was finally too tired to be scared.

‘We screwed ourselves good and proper, didn’t we?’ she said. ‘But you know what makes everything better? That’s right, a bedtime story. And I’m going to tell you a story, Idris Wischard.’

She didn’t know if it was the right wall, but it didn’t matter. He could still hear if she talked loud enough. ‘All you need to do is sit there and believe it. You’re right there and nothing’s happened to you yet. And it won’t. Because I say so.’

Orlagh leaned her head against the wall. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said, voice steady, ‘because this story will blow your mind. And it will be so totally awesome that it couldn’t not be real, and you’ll have no choice but to believe it.

‘Once upon a time ...’

21.

Orlagh was leaning against the cell wall, pushing against it like she was the only thing holding it up. As the heavy door scraped open, she peeked under her arm, her wariness evaporating as her father appeared in the doorway. His own concern turned into a giddy relief.

‘Dad! I thought you’d left,’ she said.

‘You had to believe it. All of you. But I wouldn’t leave you.’ He knelt by her feet, hefting the chain in his hand. ‘This seems a little excessive.’

He dug a pen out of his pocket, inserting the nib in the lock and jiggling it around. The lock opened with a soft click and he dangled the open cuff from his finger. ‘Good thing these are cheap and mostly for show.’

Her father went to the next cell along, throwing back the enormous bolt and wrenching the door open. She hesitated, finding her view obstructed by her father when she finally dared to look into Idris’s cell. All she could see were Idris’s feet, and they weren’t moving.

Her father tossed a pair of open handcuffs across the room, finally giving Orlagh a clear view of Idris. He was still gagged, his head lolling forward when Freddie moved him. Orlagh knelt beside him and untied the gag, tugging it gently from his mouth.

Opening his eyes slowly, Idris lifted his head and until he focused on Orlagh’s face and smiled.

Once he was fully conscious, he told them what had happened; how Maya had been interrupted by a loud noise upstairs, how she had left, promising to return and end it all. How he sat there, in the darkness, until Orlagh’s voice had come through the wall.

How he had listened, and believed.

‘What did you sacrifice for the distraction?’ Orlagh asked, forgetting to be mad at her father for the moment.

Freddie grimaced. ‘Grandfather clock. Heirloom. Sorry about that.’

Orlagh didn't care much for her lost inheritance, more concerned about dying before anything was up for grabs. 'Did you make it outside? It was a metaphorical burning, right?'

'Far as I know, it was only a turn of phrase. Doesn't mean it won't ignite.'

'Then we'd better go rain on their parade,' Orlagh said, reassured by the energy Idris sacrificed in order to groan at her. He was definitely all right.

Orlagh suggested bringing Simone's book to the masses, the proof that they needed to abandon their vigil. But it didn't clear EPD, in the end. If the whole story of Maya and her power were to come out, they wouldn't be milling about with vague menace anymore.

Maya was nowhere to be found when they made it upstairs. Hugo's body had been covered with a sheet, but her father only spared it the barest of glances before checking the rest of the rooms.

He led them back into the forest. 'You should get out of SACER, get to safety. We need you alive.'

Orlagh agreed, cutting off any protest Idris might have mustered. As soon as her father left, she held up a hand. 'Shut up. Now that he's gone, we can set about saving the day ourselves. We'll make sure that it's safe, then we have some unfinished business.'

They crept around the outside of the SACER wall, Idris sure that no one would see them as they came up to the front gates. They watched silently through the gap between metal and bricks. The crowd was still there, but they were all alive. EPD was still standing. And they would all stay that way until she and Idris returned.

Satisfied, they left the smouldering situation to seek out the means to extinguish it, once and for all.

'Where are we going?' Idris asked.

'We're off to see the wizard.'

Idris wasn't impressed, pointing out the particular shade of gray under their feet. Orlagh wasn't impressed when he refused to skip.

She refused to tell him where they were going. He was not a quick learner, making it hard for Orlagh to ignore him as she leaned back in the gondola, tilting her face up to the sun.

Orlagh shielded her eyes with a large hat. Idris had thrown his arm over his head, squinting out from underneath it.

‘Why are we in a boat? Where are we in a boat?’

‘We dropped by for a little bootomancy, in the bootiest country I know.’

Idris didn’t join in her laughter. ‘Tell me that we didn’t take this detour, to a whole other country, just so you could make that joke.’

‘That, and I wanted to do this before ...’ she trailed off. ‘It’s nice, though, isn’t it?’

Idris finally relaxed as the breeze rustled his hair. ‘Of course it is. But I can’t help but feel that there is somewhere else we should be.’

‘There’s time enough for all of that,’ Orlagh said.

They drifted along for as long as he could stand to be inactive, before they alighted and set off to their ultimate destination.

Idris scoured the rocky landscape for clues, failing to make any connections until she pointed him to a plaque. He rolled his eyes, no doubt wishing he had thought of it himself.

The silhouette that appeared in the mist gradually cleared to reveal Maya sitting on a rock, contemplating the thundering water below her.

She didn’t seem pleased. ‘What have you done?’

Orlagh raised her voice above the dull roar. ‘Reichenbach Falls.’ She was counting on the fact that the one work of fiction they’d found in the library had belonged to Maya.

‘There will be no popular reprieve,’ Maya said, ‘not for any of us.’

‘Not for you, certainly. Idris and I, however, will keep churning out the adventures for many years to come.’

Damp strands of Maya’s hair slapped against her face and she brushed them back impatiently. ‘Now they will all have died for no reason. You call me cruel when it’s you who abandon them to their fate. I would have died with them.’

‘Nobody is dying. I can split both of you and end it.’ Orlagh said.

Maya shook her head. ‘It won’t ever be over. I thought of all the plans, all the ideas. The only answer is destroy it all and salt the earth.’

‘I refuse to believe that,’ Orlagh said.

‘Everything I did, now it’s for nothing. All that sadness.’ The fight left Maya, her voice barely audible above the crashing water. ‘And I am so tired. It was supposed to be over.’

She looked searchingly at Idris, then her granddaughter,

‘I do remember you, Orlagh.’

And then, before Orlagh could even reply, she was gone. Two steps to her right and over the cliff into the mist.

‘Did she go into her other reality?’

Idris shook his head. ‘She made sure I could see her go over.’

Orlagh inched forward on her stomach over the slippery rocks. ‘I can’t see her hanging on. We should wait a while, though, don’t want a miraculous return from the dead.’

Idris remained a safe distance from the edge. ‘She fell to a painless death. We can go now.’

‘And she was at peace,’ Orlagh murmured.

‘She was at peace,’ he echoed. ‘And now we undo everything she did while she was a peace-deprived pyro.’

Orlagh watched the churning water beneath her for a few moments, the spray taking the place of the tears she couldn’t shed. ‘Let’s go save the world.’

Orlagh was sad in an abstract way, as they made the long journey back, mourning the murderous, insane grandmother she’d barely even known was alive. The only time Idris smiled was when Orlagh found that the tunnel under the back wall was a lot roomier than the last time.

Observing the castle from the fringes of the forest, they saw that Maya was closer to the mark. Even from their distance the threat of violence crackled in the air.

Idris’s eyes lingered on the singed façade of the castle. ‘It’s not going to burn down.’

‘That’s not enough,’ Orlagh said. ‘We say don’t set it on fire, someone kicks over a candle. We say it’s fireproof and an earthquake hits it. There are always loopholes, if you try hard enough. We need to sew it up, and then we need to stop people pulling at the threads. And apparently we need to pick a metaphor and stick to it.’

Finding Áine was the key to their plan. The plan in question being the one they were going to steal from her. No need to waste time when she had already done the dirty work for them.

They had wandered the Big Forest in what might, to an untrained observer, have appeared to be a random fashion until Idris had kicked his toe into underbrush that had an oddly metallic twang.

Following the secret passage back into the castle, Idris led her on a tour of all the places Áine liked to haunt.

‘What’s up here?’ Orlagh asked.

‘Offices for the senior agents,’ Idris said, fading in and out as he walked around her, creating a crude zoetrope.

‘Why would a Hazpop agent be up here?’ she mused, taking in the featureless walls.

They both ducked as something smashed into the outside wall, the hall momentarily thrown into a collage of orange light and jutting shadows.

Idris was gone before the light faded. Orlagh scrambled to press herself against the wall. After a moment she sidled along to peek out the window. The lawn glowed beneath them, EPD agents darting out occasionally to throw water on the larger fires. At least no one was throwing anything directly at the agents. Yet.

Idris solidified beside her. She wouldn’t have blamed him if he had stayed in safety.

He started to say something but she cut him off sharply. ‘Stand still.’

There was movement around him, flickering in and out of the edges. Orlagh held out her hand, hovering beside his shirt, touching the edge of it as her hand trembled.

A ghost of a smile widened across his face. ‘You see?’

‘Can she see you?’ Orlagh asked. ‘Is she talking to you?’

Idris didn’t answer, off in his own little world.

Orlagh took over the pacing as she waited, catching glimpses of his ghostly figure in the corner of her eye. Eventually she moved down the hall to sit on a bench and stare into the darkness.

She began to wonder if Idris's protection would extend to her, even if he no longer existed in her reality, checking nervously at every creak and groan. She was about to attempt to catch his attention when he began to solidify. He was still opaque when he stopped, clearly talking to someone, none of the sound making it across with him. But he did see her, continuing to chat as he made his way to sit on the bench.

Idris and Orlagh pressed themselves up against the two ornate metal arm rests, a ghostly void between them where Idris assured her that Áine was sitting.

'Tell her, say ... Say hello. From me.'

Orlagh tried to work out where Áine's head would be, even if she couldn't address her directly.

Idris followed Orlagh's eyes into the space between them. 'Her head is below my chin. She has appalling posture.'

Orlagh couldn't think of a single thing to say now she had the chance. 'Ask her ... if she's all right.'

'She says she's fine.' Idris frowned. 'This is annoying. How about I relay what she says in a funny voice, **like this.**'

'Ask why she's here.'

Idris listened for a moment, a smile creeping across his face. '**I might ask the same of you.**'

'I'm saving the world. What's her excuse?'

'**Shut the hell up.**'

Orlagh laughed, both at the response and Idris's face.

'**...And it's top secret,**' he added.

'I think I can be trusted,' Orlagh said, 'being in another universe and all.'

'**I'm more worried about him.**' Idris folded his arms, but was unable to stop smiling even in his mock offence. '**Although, you sound as annoying in this world as you are in mine.**'

'We came here for a reason, we need your help. But we need more time than we have now. We're over in that dungeon place; Idris tells me that you know it.'

Idris came back nodding.

He led them back out through the tunnels, Orlagh taking over once they hit the thick trees.

‘And where’s that state-of-the-art lift you promised me?’ she asked in the shadow of the shed.

‘We looked in every room. Nothing there.’

Orlagh narrowed her eyes as she tentatively set her foot backwards on to the first rung. Once she was steady, she shook a fist at him. ‘Curse you and your lack of imagination.’

They decided to wait for Áine in the room where they had met Hugo and Maya, the scene of crime downside of the choice balanced by the comfy chairs. And the fact that neither of them liked the little they saw of Hugo. His body was gone, probably removed by her father. She tried not to think of him having to drag his own father out for a secret forest burial, trying to remain angry at what he’d done.

Idris faded and came back with a message so abruptly that Orlagh took a minute to realise that he’d put on his funny voice. **‘Tell our ... your ... parents that I’m all right. I forgot to say that before.’**

For the first time, Orlagh was glad that Áine couldn’t see her face. ‘I will.’

‘Wow, you really did turn into a soft little thing without me to guide you. You were supposed to mock that.’

‘Sorry,’ Orlagh said, not sure why she was apologising or if she even meant it. ‘So I turned out better over there? Am I a good agent?’

Idris looked faintly embarrassed. **‘You wouldn’t have asked nonsense like that, let’s put it that way.’**

Idris faded in the uncomfortable silence, coming back armed to break it. ‘I asked her why she was down here, and I quote: **Dearest grandma and grandpa? Cleared ‘em out years ago.’**

Orlagh was horrified. ‘She actually killed them?’

‘Oh sure, only way I was gonna get them out of here. I think grandma was actually relieved. Grandpa? Not so much. So, offed yours too, eh? Maybe I was wrong about you.’

Idris only seemed to process the words when he repeated them, sharing a look with Orlagh.

‘Ask her what she’s doing at EPD,’ she said.

‘We’re working together, me and Magnus. Returning the favour after dad scarpered with *their* secrets. I started hanging around after it happened, waiting for you. Me, that is,’ Idris added, still passing on the conversation even though Orlagh wasn’t directly involved. ‘I hadn’t seen your ghost yet, so I had no idea what had happened. Actually, I had a fairly good idea, based on what had happened to me, but I had no proof. I had no idea someone was watching me. One day Magnus frightened the life out of me by coming up and introducing himself. He asked, very politely for a man whose organisation I was infiltrating, why I kept coming back and staring at the walls. He sat and talked with me, even though I didn’t answer. After a couple of weeks he made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.’

Idris had begun looking pale, taking longer moments before each new answer.

‘Are you all right?’ Orlagh asked. ‘That was for you, by the way.’

‘Just a little dizzy,’ Idris said.

‘Maybe you should stick in one world for a while.’

Idris looked relieved. ‘Funny you should say that, Áine wanted me to go back to EPD with her while it’s still dark.’ His grin was wicked.

He began to fade out, with a last little wave, not giving Orlagh a chance to list all the reasons he shouldn’t go, a list that she continued to add to while sitting in the middle of the empty room, wondering if this was the time he wouldn’t come back.

Orlagh spent the rest of the evening sorting through the remnants of her grandparents’ makeshift office. Among the files and papers, on a desk that appeared to be Hugo’s, was a box full of familiar looking forms.

A quick search found the end of the pneumatic tube that aggrieved agents hastily crammed their capsules into, a growing number of them waiting for answers that wouldn’t come. All of the top ones were about the troubles at EPD, aside from one Neologist who had a dispute with a colleague over the spelling of a new word they’d co-designed.

There were a few from Gwen Roemer seeking an official sanction for their action against the people who murdered her colleague. Some other Neologists were asking for an official investigation into the murder and swift retribution if EPD proved responsible.

No requests from her mother in there. And, not so surprisingly, none from her father either. The only call for council assistance from EPD was a two sentence note from Magnus.

Slight problem with angry villagers brandishing torches. Assistance appreciated before the pitchforks appear.

Their pleas for help were falling on the wrong ears; nothing she would write would stop what was happening.

But she could do something for the duelling wordsmiths. She hoped they were duelling. She almost suggested they settle it with pistols at dawn, but thought better of it. Well, not better of it, since few things would have been, but smarter of it.

Cut the word in half – she gets the prefix plus the first two letters, and you get the rest plus the suffix. Submit the meanings for your new words to the registry by morning.

Orlagh snickered at the resulting words; the agent who wrote in was going to have a hard time crafting a new word from his letters, but millions of Scrabble players around the world were set to rejoice. She addressed the reply and sent it off, disappointed that she couldn't find any more problems that she could deal with.

She rifled through all of the riot-related requests, trying to compose replies that might do some good, dropping them almost guiltily when Idris appeared in front of her.

‘Over the gradual fading thing now are we?’ she asked.

‘Sorry,’ he said breathlessly, the air of barely repressed mirth belying his apology.

Orlagh had never seen him so animated, finally seeing the resemblance to Magnus in his features. ‘Have fun?’

Idris chuckled, a laugh coloured with memories she wasn't privy to.

She noticed the rest of him. 'Did you change your clothes?'

He looked down. 'Oh yeah, thought I'd better.'

Orlagh narrowed her eyes. 'It was less embarrassing when it was a stinky *à deux*.'

Idris returned and tossed something on the desk.

'A couple of my shirts,' he explained as she regarded the objects warily.

'They're clean. Shouldn't be too big.'

'Thank you, I guess. I'll change in a minute, but is she still with you? I thought of something I forgot to ask.'

Idris nodded, still randomly breaking into breathy, half-formed chuckles.

'How did she manage to kill Maya?' Orlagh asked.

Idris nodded and raised his eyebrows. 'Good question,' he said, fading away with a tip of the head to Orlagh, returning quickly with a disbelieving smile.

'The old-fashioned way: a zombie posse,' he relayed. **'I picked up a few tricks from my new colleagues. I would have taken over SACER then and there if I'd been able to persuade more than two of them to come with me. And by persuade, I mean blackmail. Unfortunately no matter how much dirt I could dig up, no more than two would ever come.'** Idris repeated the message with a frown, following up with a question for Orlagh. 'Why two?'

'Normal zombies, even ephemerals, when they come close to each other, they begin to see the realities of each other,' Orlagh said. 'Most can cope with three worlds, if they have to and only for short periods of time, but no more.'

'Karen wasn't bothered, she didn't want me to leave,' Idris said.

Orlagh nodded, pieces falling into place. 'You had the opposite effect. You never even considered that you would exist in two worlds, so you didn't. And your belief was strong enough for the both of you.'

Idris digested this as Orlagh's mind whirred on. 'Ask her how having the zombies with her helped,' she said.

'Copying from my homework now?'

Orlagh recognised Áine's obtuseness all too well, knowing it only hardened when pressed, like cornflour in water.

'What are you working on with Magnus?' she asked.

‘I can’t do the cackle justice, but I’m sure you remember it fondly. **Righting wrongs, redressing balances. Generally being awesome. We’re developing power that never would have been possible in the nanny-state.**’ Idris looked across to Orlagh. ‘That sounded ominous.’

Orlagh was less concerned, not believing that Áine would do anything to hurt Hazpop. For all her recklessness and disobedience, none of it had ever been directed against her colleagues.

‘You didn’t mention anything about the Refractory being a smoking pit when we were sitting outside it.’

He nodded. ‘It was fine.’

‘Ask her what she did,’ Orlagh said.

‘The zombies were not a problem, they are our future. We have taken over their care and instruction.’

Orlagh chose her words carefully. ‘What do you do with them?’

‘We use what Maya, the council, tried to keep from us – their power. People are more susceptible if there’s already a disturbance in the reality in the area. One paradox makes it easier for the others to sneak in. Send a pair out with a prophet and they’ll have the world at their feet.’

‘If the paradox is the key, then that must be where you and Maya get your power. You’re the ultimate paradoxes. Your minds aren’t open to it, but you exist in a state of unreality. You’re living proof of a paradox, yet don’t believe in them.’

He didn’t disappear to pass on the message. ‘Alive and dead. Pretty big one, right there.’

Orlagh nodded, chewing her lip as her mind raced. Trying to work out what knowledge Maya had been so desperate to guard. ‘But normal zombies wouldn’t be able to learn the new skills to become prophets, which means existing prophets would have to be turned. Why aren’t there more of you, then? Surely there have been mishaps – your agents turned?’

‘Like Maya was,’ Idris mused. ‘In her reports, there was a confrontation. She was scared about people finding out.’

‘What would happen?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. But agents sometimes... disappear.’ Idris looked over, curious but without malice. ‘Everyone says it’s because you lot kidnap and kill them.’

It was Orlagh’s turn to reveal her ignorance. Nice to keep it even. ‘Maybe we do. But, I mean, to get the ones inside your castle, it would require an effort that would reflect knowledge about the urgency of the situation.’

She clicked her fingers, but Idris was right there with her.

‘Your father.’

‘My father,’ she echoed softly. She idly twisted the button of his spare shirt, staring into the space she thought Áine was occupying. ‘Do you think your lot would try and zombify each other if they knew what would happen?’

He shrugged, but his pained expression provided the answer he couldn’t. If it was happening in one world, no reason it couldn’t in this one.

‘I think Áine may be the star of Maya’s cautionary tale,’ Orlagh said.

‘It seems fine over there,’ Idris said quickly. ‘At least nobody’s trying to burn people alive.’

The shirt wove between her arms as she folded them, unable to confront the real problem and taking it out on her proxy. ‘Maya was responsible for that, using it to justify her actions.’

Idris was unmoved. ‘That lot outside are more than willing to carry it on.’

‘Because Maya wanted them to.’ Unfortunately there were bigger considerations than his wrongness. ‘We have everything we need now.’

Idris rose to his feet. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

Orlagh move from her chair. ‘Don’t you want to know how? Because it’s an idea, but I’m not sure if it’s a good one.’

‘I’m not an idiot. I gather a few zombies, keep ‘em happily in the one world and we take over.’

‘I was thinking more of an army, but yes.’ Orlagh tapped the arm of her chair, trying to convey her objection. ‘It will amplify your power, along with all the creepiness that goes with it.’

‘I get my zombie army, we march on SACER and persuade everyone that they don’t want to kill each other, in any way. And then we go for cheesecake. Seems like win-win.’

Orlagh viewed him with a new appreciation. ‘That sounds like a plan I’d come up with.’

‘And I repeat, what’s the problem?’

Orlagh shrugged. ‘Just a little issue with forcing people to believe something against their will.’

Idris sighed again, drawing it out this time. ‘Annie’s always easier to convince than you.’

‘That’s so creepy.’ She wasn’t teasing him this time, a hard edge to her voice.

‘I didn’t mean like that ...’ His voice trailed off but his mouth remained open. ‘Have I been ... I didn’t do that, did I?’

Orlagh softened in the face of his horror. ‘When you knew her back then, you had absolutely no power to make her do anything.’

Idris was beyond her consolation for the moment. ‘But now – I’d never know if I was doing it. What have I been doing?’

‘You’re not king of the world, so I’d say you haven’t been doing much of anything,’ Orlagh said.

‘What if I make sure that each person finds a reason to stop that fits in with their existing beliefs? Just heighten whatever reservation they might already have.’

‘What about people with no qualms?’ Orlagh asked.

‘I’m sure there’s something – maybe they can believe that the fire will spread to the rest of SACER, specifically to the parts they care about. Or that EPD will retaliate with more power than they have. Everyone will have something that outweighs their lust for vengeance.’

It still didn’t sit right with Orlagh. ‘How about if you don’t change the people, but change the outcome?’

‘If I say no more zombie prophets will be created,’ Idris began, scepticism and optimism battling in the crinkles around his eyes, ‘would that work?’

‘You could even say that no more zombies would be created. At all,’ she said, as pessimism seemed to gain an upper hand on his face. ‘It’s worth a try.’

In the absence of a more efficacious or ethical plan it was the best she could do. Idris promised that the situation would remain unchanged while they got

some sleep, both choosing to use the armchairs rather than the empty beds down the hall.

The next morning, while Idris disappeared to let Áine know they were leaving, Orlagh slipped into another room to change out of her old shirt and into the crisp and cool one Idris had loaned her. She rolled up the sleeves until she could see her fingers, waving them at Idris as she emerged to find him in the corridor.

They didn't bother sneaking out from the forest, safe in their belief that Idris could keep them shielded from view. The sight of the charred, smoking castle hurried their steps in the opposite direction.

23.

Idris and Orlagh headed towards the closest hospital, sending forth the rallying cry to every other ephemeral and patient who was close enough to make it in time.

Orlagh paused outside the Havenscroft gates. ‘We shall call this move the Great Zombie Gambit.’

‘Gambit? Really?’

‘It strikes fear into our enemies’ hearts with the possible reference to chess and how smart we must be.’

‘I don’t recall the zombie element of chess.’

‘Have you even read the rules? If a jerk player moves a piece to a new square and uses said piece to knock the loser off the board, the loser becomes infected and can rise from the graveyard to wreak havoc. Mostly it involves eating the brains of the queen’s servants, guards and husband, while your helpless opponent must sit there and watch, complaining impotently as you rampage across the board for the final course.’

He was still shaking his head when they met Nathan Emery at the front door and explained their plan.

The zombies weren’t prisoners in the institutions, they were able to get up from the beds and leave should they choose. Most were in there because they couldn’t face the world, but when Idris arrived they emerged from the rooms with a slow-burning excitement.

Idris walked Karen out himself, leaving Orlagh to spread the word to the other patients. Karen had shown Idris her hand, his message traced over and over into her skin. She walked out the front with them, leading the group, holding on to Idris’s arm to support her unsteady legs. They moved shakily, most having been bedridden for years, atrophied muscles holding them upright by sheer force of will.

They made their way with the Havenscroft zombies to the gathering point they’d nominated, surprised when they came over the crest of the hill to find a crowd gathered in the valley. Many were patients from the surrounding suburbs,

braving the potential loss of solidity in their transport to get to their destination in time. By the early afternoon they had enough for Orlagh to officially upgrade them to army status.

The air around them wavered and shimmered, but it wasn't heat they were giving off. Worlds danced and flickered across the sky, flaring out from each zombie. The colours were beautiful, hanging like an otherworldly aurora over their heads. Free for the first time to enjoy the sight, many of the gathered were staring up with wonderment and joy.

Idris wasn't smiling. 'Now?'

She nodded.

Nobody paid them any attention as they stood on a little hill and Idris quietly rewrote the laws of their world and made sure there would never be another person like them. There was no big flash of lightning or shaking of the earth. The heavens weren't split in two.

'Did it even work?' Idris asked.

'We'll see. But you've done all you can. You did well.' She patted his arm and he let a smile sneak past. 'And now we have to go and put out a fire.'

Orlagh decided to give their army a motivating speech, upturning a box to stand on. 'Stand in a line, look fearsome. Stare them down. Be intimidating, but don't do anything. And, um, band of brothers and all that, from this day to the ending of the world ... so, um, let's make sure that the world has all the time in itself to remember us. We'll have postcards made up of this moment and write upon them, 'Wish you were here', then send them to everyone who missed this day. And we will tell boring, endless stories to rub it in. Because they suck and should consider themselves lesser undead for having missed this. Yeah.'

Idris didn't bother getting on to the vacated box for his addition. 'All right, let's go.'

'Mine was better,' she said, as they prepared to lead their army to SACER.

Orlagh had told Idris that she was sure the old front gate was due for a malfunction any day, smiling as they filed past it into the grounds. They walked up the slope, turning left at the first fork, leading their horde on to the already crowded lawn. The gathering forces at the castle gate had swelled in number, but

had, inversely, quietened. This was, perhaps, a little more dangerous. Nobody likes a thoughtful mob.

A few of the gathered agents happened to be facing in their direction, quickly alerting their neighbours, so that by the time Idris and Orlagh came to the edge of the mob, all eyes were upon them and their massed zombies.

Orlagh could see her mother in the distance, pushing her way between unyielding shoulders. Orlagh leaned over to whisper something to Idris.

‘Everyone stay where you are,’ he said in an incongruously loud and authoritative voice. Orlagh thought he even looked a little surprised in it himself.

Orlagh saw that her mother had been swallowed back up by the sea of agents.

Behind the EPD wall, flames were licking the castle roof, faces gathered in the windows. None of them seemed panicked, none trying to flee. Orlagh was fairly sure that, had the situations been reversed, at least a couple of Hazpop agents would have already been trampled.

There was a swelling of noise as hushed questions became layered on top of one another. Orlagh couldn’t blame their surprise, doubting that anyone would have been anticipating the arrival of the two rival heirs, bringing an army of zombies in their wake.

‘Quiet,’ Idris said.

Orlagh shuffled her feet as the crowd before them fell into an unnatural silence. She couldn’t look at the agents who were physically struggling to get words out, letting her eyes rest on the flames behind them.

‘It’s time for this to end,’ she began, not needing to raise her voice in the eerie silence. ‘We have proof that EPD was not responsible for Simone’s death. She was killed in an effort to create this exact situation, to make us turn against each other. Let’s make sure that’s not her legacy, instead let’s come together in her honour.’

‘This ends now, your violence and the reasons behind it, and it will not happen again,’ Idris said, sternly. ‘We will not turn on each other like this. It will not end well for you, you all know this.’

Even as she appreciated his balance of words and meaning, Orlagh felt a little queasy when there was a wave of nodding heads.

‘Go back to your homes, EPD will be dealt with.’ He faltered after Orlagh glared at him, hastily forming an addendum. ‘If you feel it is the right thing to do.’

Orlagh was relieved when nobody seemed to be resisting as they split off from the group and wandered off towards their respective buildings. Almost all were happily talking to their neighbours, some thanking Orlagh as they passed by. All ignored Idris.

Idris contemplated his smouldering home. ‘A good fall of rain will take care of that.’

The droplets began to fall on Orlagh’s head, the sun returning as soon as the last flames disappeared. All the agents were gone, leaving behind a large patch of flattened grass.

Orlagh went over and stamped out a smoking patch of lawn, taking in the view of the zombie army. It was an intimidating sight, despite their lack of weapons or ability to form straight rows and columns. They were standing quietly, unconcerned that they’d come all this way to mill about.

Idris joined her. ‘We have to do something to help them.’

‘You can give the stability to them permanently, if they want it,’ Orlagh said.

‘I guess I can.’ He moved closer to the first rows, eyes lingering on Karen.

‘Thank you all for your help,’ Orlagh said, filling in the silence while Idris contemplated his wording. ‘It might not have felt like it, but you’ve helped us and everyone in here more than you’ll ever know.’

Idris took a step forward and raised his voice. ‘From now on, if you so desire, every zombie and ephemeral will be able to choose a reality to live in. Spread the word to anyone who couldn’t make it here today, go to the hospitals and empty the wards. Today begins a new life, and a new peace, for all of our worlds.’

‘You enjoyed that, didn’t you?’ Orlagh asked, as they watched the excitement spread throughout their gathered force.

‘A little bit.’ He held his thumb and index finger apart to indicate a centimetre’s worth of enjoyment. Orlagh reached over and pulled them as far apart as she could before he squeaked.

A few of their army disappeared almost instantly, more following with some caution. The remainder became resolutely solid, clapping each other on backs and shoulders, giddy with excitement as they examined everything they could find and nothing they couldn't.

Idris and Orlagh revelled in the goodwill until they were left completely alone.

'There's one zombie I want to visit personally,' Orlagh said.

She was smiling as they left, but felt a growing unease watching him stride up the sloping ground before her. There was no way to use his power benevolently, not completely. She knew this because she was already planning ways to use it while she had the chance, even as it made her skin crawl.

Orlagh didn't recognise the figure at first, his upright posture so foreign, adding another few centimetres to his height. The height he gained was balanced out by his flattened hair, falling in soft blue waves to his shoulders.

'It's Orlagh,' she said quickly, after he flinched at her approach. 'Idris is with me.'

Raf's dark eyes burned into Orlagh's.

'Raf, if you want, Idris can help you.' She nodded to Idris, who closed his eyes. She turned back to Raf. 'Can you see it?'

Raf stared ahead until something caught his eye, a flush appearing in his cheeks.

'He can send you over there. Make it permanent ... You'll be as solid over there as you are here.'

Raf took her hand, as if to demonstrate how corporeal that was, and she saw a flicker of something dancing across his face.

'I won't ... I'll never be able to find her. It will all have been for nothing.'

Raf gestured helplessly across the graveyard. The motion was wild and imprecise, but Orlagh couldn't help but focus on the large monument that housed Raf's mother. They were an important family and it stood tall and ornate above the other headstones.

The ghost he was looking for wasn't haunting the graves before him, not the usual way. It was in the other worlds that Raf's mother lurked; the worlds of the

old zombies, worlds where he didn't exist. The ones where she hadn't died because of him.

Orlagh couldn't understand his need to see a glimpse of her, a woman who could never be who he wanted her to be. But Orlagh knew she was lucky that she didn't understand.

Lacing her fingers through his, she squeezed his hand. 'You'll still be able to see into the other worlds, if you like. Idris can make sure.'

Raf closed his eyes.

'We don't have much time,' Orlagh said. 'Idris can do it now, send you there.'

'How do I find Piet?' Raf asked.

'Stand in the middle of the lawn and he'll find you.' Orlagh held her hand up in farewell as Raf faded out of view, holding on to her hand until the last moment.

Idris's eyes were locked on the distant hill in the corner. 'What do we do now?'

Orlagh hesitated. 'You can run further than me, disappear completely into another world and never give us another thought.'

'Yeah.' He was wistful as he gazed over at the corner of an unseen world.

'Spend your days running the halls with Áine and Magnus.'

His voice was firmer this time, an edge developing to it. 'It won't solve anything.'

'It will for you,' Orlagh said.

'You can come with me?' His suggestion was so hesitant that it came out more like a question.

He'd taken his time asking. At least it had given Orlagh time to consider her response. 'I can't ... that's not my family there, not anymore. Besides, there's an Orlagh in that world already. I think the universe might implode or something if we ever meet. From the awesome, you understand.'

'I can make sure it doesn't.' His earnestness faded when he met her gaze, lowering his eyes. 'That wasn't the real problem.'

'No. But it has always been your world. You'd belong there.'

'You want me to go?'

She thought he was teasing at first, but there was something in his expression that made it clear he'd taken it a whole other way, like he thought she wanted to get him away from her. Against her will, she was compelled to answer. 'You shouldn't feel obliged to stay. You've done enough.'

His laugh was weary. 'So far, I've mostly been undoing the damage I've done unwittingly. Damage done in my name, at the very least. We're not done here. We need become as good as we pretend to be.'

'How much influence will be tolerable, though? Where will you draw the line?'

'I don't know. Maybe EPD should be shut down, maybe I'll do that. Yeah, I'll start the process. Begin to rehabilitate them, make them into real, horrible people.' He laughed. 'I'll make them into proper jerks.'

'Awesome.'

'But I can't do that, not now. I can't do anything without it becoming creepy.'

'There's one way ...' Orlagh let the thought trail off, hoping he'd spare her the need to complete the sentence; grateful that he'd already saved her the awkwardness of starting the conversation. 'You'll be stuck. Whichever world you choose.'

He chewed his lip and nodded, blinking as he stared off at his castle.

He smiled. 'I'll put you out of a job, you know.'

'Yeah, good thing, because I'd never be a great leader,' Orlagh said, cutting off the silence before it festered. She smiled at his unvoiced objection. 'Oh, I *could* be, sure, but I don't *want* to be. I don't want to have to make myself into that person.'

Idris glanced over at the Refractory. 'How much will you tell your mother?'

It didn't seem fathomable to keep something so important from her mother. She never had cause to doubt her judgement before. 'Everything, I suppose.'

Idris clicked his tongue. 'Won't be good for your father.'

'That ship sailed a while ago. He chose his berth.' It sounded crueller than she intended and still wasn't adequate to convey a fraction of her anger. 'He'll be OK; he's a survivor.'

They strolled across the lawn, enjoying the last traces of the setting sun. ‘We can sign up for the dole together,’ she said.

Idris was quiet as they entered the castle’s towering front doors. Orlagh didn’t try to distract him, busy feeling sick about her own choices and what it would mean if Idris failed to make the right ones.

They made it up two floors before Idris slowed. Orlagh recognised the corridor, meeting his apprehensive eyes with a reassuring nod. She didn’t have to wait long for the half invisible Idris to fade away, quickly returning to stand by her at the window.

There was something approaching calm in his demeanour as he put his fingertips on the cold pane, leaning close enough that a hint of fog appeared at the end of his breath.

The sun set over the burnt grass beneath them. It was a less violent scene in the half-light, the contrast of black and green reduced to shades of grey.

She turned to find him opaque, half way between the worlds. His voice echoed strangely, bouncing between two dimensions.

‘Same view,’ he said, pointing to the grounds below. She could see him fighting a smile. ‘But the grass is greener over there.’

Orlagh groaned as he faded away to escape the consequences of his pun. He returned, bracing for an onslaught.

‘Annie says that she heard that and that you should absolutely not hit me at all. And half of that was true.’ He grew a little more serious. ‘She also said to say goodbye. And that you should keep me in line.’

Orlagh moved around quickly. ‘Stand in front of her.’ When Idris complied with her request, she stared to the side of him.

Her eyes watered in frustration, blinking away the blurriness that was only compounding her failure. Any decent Hazpop agent should be able to see a trace of the worlds, at the very least. All she’d ever seen was a smudged haze around the zombies and blocks of colour in motion.

Idris stopped her from turning away. ‘Look again, you’ll be able to see her.’

She moved closer and the blurred edges began to sharpen, even as he slid back into his half-existence. The flashes of movement turned into an arm, and a hand, waving at her.

And there she was. She looked happy, the EPD uniform seemed to suit her. Orlagh never thought she'd see the day when Áine was smiling in a uniform, explaining away the shining shoes and pressed jacket as tricks of the light.

'Can she see me?' Orlagh asked, when Áine seemed to react to her intense scrutiny.

Idris's voice was distant again, struggling to find her ears. 'She sees you.'

Orlagh could see Áine's mouth moving, combined with a few looks in her direction.

'What did she say?' Orlagh asked.

'Finally!' Idris said, slipping back into his impersonation. 'You've managed to find me, even if you had to use a little zombie mojo to cheat.'

Áine's accompanying smirk was crystal clear, even across realities.

'Has she been able to see me all the time we spoke to her?' Orlagh asked, suddenly self-conscious about all the reactions she had been glad Áine hadn't seen.

'Of course. Don't tell me you still haven't mastered the baby agent basics.'

Orlagh was trying to think of a retort when she noticed Áine talking again.

'What did she say then?' she asked.

'Are you doing my voice? I don't sound like that. And I think now might be a good time to wind this up, I can't tell if she's genuinely annoyed or not.'

Orlagh agreed that that was the best time to end things with Áine. 'Tell her goodbye. And I miss her. And don't let her laugh at that.'

She watched Áine receive the message, seeing a smile tinged with sorrow rather than mockery. Áine raised her hand again in laconic response to Orlagh's undignified waving.

Orlagh gave him a second's reflection before breaking into his silence. 'Has she gone? What did she say?'

'I told her to look after her Orlagh and she told me to look after mine,' Idris said.

'Yours? Hers? No wonder she ran away.' She shot him a dirty look.

Idris's face flushed. 'I only meant, you know, the Orlagh she could see. Not one she possessed in any way.'

When Idris looked up, Orlagh was surprised to find the expected sheepish grin was a more sombre expression. ‘Sorry.’

If it had been a tactic to distract her, it was a successful one, as she let the matter drop, suggesting that they move on to the last stage of their day’s plan.

When Magnus’s office was deserted, they moved to Idris’s second choice of likely location. While they had been farewelling Áine, night had fallen, the fluorescently illuminated stairwell leading them into darkness.

Once their eyes had adjusted to the low level of illumination they could see the dark figure of Magnus sitting on the edge of the roof. There were lights built into the wall, set at intervals to warn of the approaching danger, but they were only meant to signal distance rather than provide any source of light.

The figure beside him was residing in the gap between lights, edges and angles skimmed by moonlight. They were enough for Orlagh, though, her father’s face immediately recognisable. Apparently, EPD was the only refuge left open to him.

They didn’t seem at all surprised, slow to break off the conversation they’d been deep in.

‘Ah, the prodigal son.’ Magnus had the relaxation of a man whose cares were beginning to fall away.

‘We saw what you did,’ Freddie said. ‘Thank you.’

Idris wasn’t interested in his gratitude. ‘I want to lead EPD.’

Magnus didn’t hesitate. ‘Oh, thank goodness. You’re welcome to it.’

And with those words, Idris became Idris I, leader of the Experimental Prophecies Division of SACER.

Magnus sealed the deal with a shake of Idris’s hand, sadness mixed in with his obvious relief. ‘Don’t spend the rest of your life in this place. Get out as soon as you can.’

Idris and Orlagh exchanged a look, her face sombre as Idris let Magnus’s hand slip away. ‘I will.’

Freddie lingered as Magnus moved towards the exit, leaning forward to give Orlagh an awkward little hug. She didn’t resist, raising her arms in a token show of reciprocation.

‘I always knew you’d save the world,’ he whispered with a half-smile, before he joined Magnus at the door.

She hadn’t made up her mind until the chance almost slipped away. ‘Wait, wait a moment.’

Magnus glanced back before continuing down the stairs with a nod to Freddie.

‘Idris can see Áine. I know you know that, but I saw her too, spoke to her. She’s still there, she’s OK. You gave her that,’ Orlagh said.

Her father leaned against the damp stairwell. ‘She’s OK.’

‘Thriving,’ she said. ‘What will you do now?’

Freddie didn’t look up from the moss-covered bricks at his feet. ‘I’ve done enough damage. Time for better people to begin repairing it.’

Orlagh couldn’t think of anything else to say when he reached the bottom. She saw him meeting Magnus and walking off before the door swung shut.

She still hadn’t forgiven him, not sure if she could. But she almost understood. And, despite everything, she didn’t begrudge him the chance to start again, to make a new life.

Idris was waiting on the roof, his hair whipping against his cheeks. There was a long silence, the humming of the lights mixed in with their quiet breathing.

‘I don’t want to die,’ he said, voice barely above a whisper.

She took his hand freezing hand in hers. ‘I’m here, I won’t let anything happen.’

‘I could tell people not to obey me blindly.’

‘Hey, and you can also order anyone to be your friend,’ she said. ‘And you can make them all respect and like you. It’ll be awesome.’

Idris nodded with newfound resolve. They had discussed this. It was the best thing. They didn’t know if it was right, or wise, but it was the least bad outcome. They had reached the same conclusion every time.

‘It will turn out the way you say it turns out,’ she said, squeezing his hand.

He sat on the ground. ‘When I’m gone – when my power’s gone,’ he said, hastily reconsidering his words, ‘the zombies will still be able to make their choice, right?’

Orlagh nodded, smoothing his hair back from where it clung to his forehead.
'Of course.'

Idris retrieved the pill from his pocket, holding his death sentence between thumb and forefinger. 'No going back.'

'I wonder if this was my grading, if I passed,' she said, watching as he held it up to his eye.

'You blew them all away.' He toasted the pill to her. 'Congratulations.'

She tipped his fist with her own. 'Then, Idris, my dear, eat up. I'll see you on the other side, intact and whole, and we shall begin the rest of our lives.'

'To our glorious, happy, long lives.' He swallowed the pill dry, stretching his body out lazily. Smiling at Orlagh to the end.

She took Idris's hand in hers as his arm grew limp, preparing to revive him as soon as he slipped away.

In the darkness, the last thing Idris heard was Orlagh's voice.

'The story is over. Applaud.'

Language as/of Power: Fate and free will in speculative fiction

Exegesis

Introduction

This exegesis offers a significant new contribution to knowledge by bringing the observations and insights into the practice of writing a novel together with the academic debates surrounding practice-led research.

In order to best demonstrate this nexus, the format of this exegesis has its basis in the view of narrative research espoused by Umberto Eco. Eco advocates narrating the act of research, including the false starts and discarded hypotheses, rather than just the ideas and lines of thought that lead directly to its conclusions (Eco, 2006). This challenge to the results-based method of writing up research holds great appeal to me, especially as a writer of creative work. In this capacity I often despair of my own inadequacies, and if other authors had omitted their struggles from records of their process, the feeling would have only been exacerbated.

The diaries and journals kept by writers provide a similar experience of the process of creation, and reading an accomplished writer such as Edgar Allen Poe elaborate upon the unseen process of writing (generally undiscussed by writers, who prefer to cultivate a more mysterious and enigmatic perception of creation) gave me confidence to accept my own frustrations over “the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought” (Poe, 1914/2000, para. 5), the ideas written then discarded, and treasured ideas that end up posing too many problems. Using such a record in the exegesis also presents a challenge to the accepted methodology of research that aims to provide as unambiguous a conclusion as possible. This idea ties into a theme throughout the creative piece of questioning accepted norms - examining them and the purpose they serve.

In the spirit of this narrated research, and to best illustrate the vacillating lines of thought and investigation, this exegesis is presented as a chronological record. It traces the insights gained through the writing of the novel, following how this writing progressed alongside the academic research for the exegesis. In this manner, subjects may be initially addressed and then, later, revisited in the light of new thinking. This enables the reader to follow the shifts in thinking regarding academic areas of research (such as genre and audience-reception) alongside the production of the creative work. In this practice-led approach to

research, the comparison offers a view of the two that highlights how they developed side-by-side, evolving together, influencing and feeding off each other. This reinforces how intertwined the two elements became throughout the process, as well as how this connection began to be problematic. The ideas are raised, dismissed, and revisited in a slightly haphazard style, in an attempt to create the closest representation of the actual progress of the two pieces of work. Ibrahim Taha (2004) sees this composition of literary texts as a process, with drafts acting as documents of each stage in the evolution, and this approach captures these important changes and their motivation.

Gregory Ulmer (1989) conceptualises the field of knowledge as a space to move within, where items of interest can be found. The level of personal interest is then complemented by examining popular representations of the item, as well as expert discussion of it. Ulmer's "mystory" style of presentation highlights the chance associations between these three levels of understanding and sources of knowledge. The serendipitous connections made between the expert and the personal levels are the essence of practice-led research, as well as autoethnography which seeks to record personal experiences within and alongside the social and cultural influences that inform these experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The convergence of theory and narrative in these reports use the "middle voice", where the subject is both the creator and the subject of action, as opposed to traditional research that, through the post-Barthesian removal of any trace of the author, denies the role of the author in the outcome (Ulmer, 1989). This style of presenting research is not a justification but a record of discovery, illuminating and recording the traditionally silent voice that accompanies this act of creation (A. Ryan, 2005). The three levels of the 'mystory' approach allow for the examination of the personal account in light of the academic work in the area and the insights of other authors with regard to the issues.

Having noted the similarity of autoethnography to the approach of Ulmer, the role of this type of enquiry was investigated further. Eco's narrated research and Ulmer's 'mystory' both acknowledge the presence of the researcher, positioning them as a participant rather than an objective observer. Challenging this type of traditional dichotomy was an aim of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur

Bochner when developing their methodology for autoethnography, searching for a way to make “social sciences continuous with literature and thus to make a narrative and an anecdotal style unobjectionable as a form of sociological discourse” (2006, p. 439).

Jan du Preez (2008) discusses autoethnography as something that allowed autobiographical elements into research in order to “contextualize [du Preez’s] researcher position.” (2008, p. 510). This aspect appealed to me, as in this exegesis, my status as an inexperienced writer contributed to how I interpreted and applied the theories I encountered, perhaps giving more weight to the opinions of others than more experienced writers would have. This affected not just how I wrote the novel, but also how I wrote about my process and how I chose to frame my experience. By bringing this data into the exegesis, the decisions I made sit alongside those of other writers surveyed, but also showed the influence they had on my writing.

In addition, I kept a journal from the beginning of the project, recording the process from the initial proposal through to the final stages of writing. This was a site to record frustrations and triumphs, random notes and puns, which as Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2009) observes, is a valuable resource for capturing the immediacy of emotion I would later need to re- and de-construct. I recorded the life that was taking place around the writing, the activities that shaped each other.

Situating my work in a more global experience of writing, I turned to the similar records created by writers including Umberto Eco (1985), Edgar Allen Poe (1914/2000), John Steinbeck (1969) and Virginia Woolf (1975). These journals and diaries provided a less sanitised account of the creative production, documenting it in its entirety including the difficulties and missteps along the way.

With these elements already in place, I considered using an autoethnographic methodology in the writing of the exegesis. However, while there was an initial convergence, I began to have concerns about using this approach. An overview of the current thinking in the field revealed a lack of agreement over what exactly an autoethnographic piece of research would look like or contain (Wall, 2008). This lack of agreement in the field was worrisome, especially in the face of similar concerns I already had regarding the fuzzy natures of genre and even the

form of the exegesis itself, as discussed in the literature review section of this exegesis.

One division in the field was revealed when Leon Anderson (2006) called for a more rigorous, analytic approach, proposing the alternative of an ‘analytic’ autoethnography to what he considers to be the traditional, ‘evocative’ approach. With this insistence on the rigours of scientific method, DeLysa Burnier (2006) questions whether this would then circumvent the boundary blurring aims of autoethnography, where it seeks to ““undercut conventions of writing that foster hierarchy and division.”” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 436). Established to challenge the boundary between research and researcher, between art and science, this postmodern approach is borne from a ““desire to move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation.”” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, pp. 433-434).

Another concern was raised when Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2006) presented their response to Anderson in the form of an autoethnographic article, refuting his points in the form of a dialogue and narrative between the two authors, set against the backdrop of the hurricane that hit New Orleans. Given that the major piece of my thesis would be a narrative, and one that at times became a creative exploration of the theoretical concerns I was consuming as part of the exegesis, I was wary of providing the required academic accompaniment in the form of another narrative. Aiming for something more academic, in deference to the role of exegesis of academic justification (Bourke & Neilsen, 2004), I was wary of producing an exegesis that would gain this legitimacy from an uncertain field. I wanted to capture the process of writing without making my experience too personal, including details only when they served to illuminate decisions.

Ultimately, I decided against using an autoethnographic approach for the above reasons, however, there were elements that appealed to me and that may have influenced my final exegesis. The idea of non-objective researcher and the challenging of the traditional approaches to research remained an important part of my approach to the exegesis. Bringing more of the personal into my exegesis

helped to explain some of my choices, situating myself as a new writer seeking guidance from the accounts of others.

The resulting exegesis begins with a discussion of the initial ideas for the creative piece, as well as a survey of the potential areas I identified for research, and follows them both as they progress together, focusing on the interplay between the two. In view of this, the decision on what to include, and what to exclude, was influenced in part by how well the elements illustrated and illuminated this symbiotic relationship, rather than their centrality to the novel (or even their ultimate inclusion in it). This requires some record of the process, as well as reflection upon it. The exegesis serves this role in practice-led research.

Issues and focus emerged in response to the work in progress, as will be highlighted. As a result, as well as the novel leading the exegesis component, the research often influenced the creation of the artefact. On the surface this may appear to be a contradiction of the concept of practice-led research, but instead it acknowledges the mutual influence of the two areas. This research aims to explore the knowledge produced by the creative artefact through the concurrent production of a work of exegesis, with the artefact as the source of the knowledge (Mäkelä, 2007). The critical knowledge comes both from the act of creation and the self-reflexivity about this act (C. Nelson, 2008). Interestingly, it was not a straight reversal (and reversion) of the anticipated direction of influence, where the act of creation is intended to precede theory (Mäkelä, 2007), but rather a creative loop of influence emerged, with the research shaping the novel, and this in turn shaped the academic areas to be investigated.

By way of example, my initial considerations when beginning the novel centred on issues of genre, which became a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of importance. The influence of the exegesis can be seen here, in that I had in mind, from the very beginning, that the creative process would be analysed and held up to investigation through the exegesis. With respect to genre, I thought the resulting exegetical discussion would be most focused and clear if I was able to confine my reading and analysis to one genre. The initial academic considerations of genre led to further exploration at various points of the creative production, which then led to elements of this research becoming incorporated

into the story, which then necessitated further considerations of genre in this light. This area was selected as a main focus because of how it exemplifies the symbiotic relationship of the exegesis and the creative work.

The research data for this PhD, as documented by the exegesis, is the process of writing the novel (Scrivener, 2000), the creative piece and accompanying discussion adding to the body of work in the genre rather than any hypothesis testing. Scrivener takes the view that the work doesn't have to set out to address a specific weakness and provide a solution (2000, para. 5). Taking the points of Scrivener and applying them to my own situation, I wasn't setting out to push forward knowledge in the area by writing a novel in response to what I felt were weaknesses in the genre, the additions to knowledge were in my reflections upon the process of creating the novel.

The anticipated outcome of this style and topic of research is an addition to the knowledge about the process of creativity through the exegesis, adding to the existing body of work with the novel.

The exegesis builds upon the work of other researchers and practitioners, and in evaluating their knowledge against my own experience and applying it to my own work, this exegesis aims contribute to the body of knowledge by presenting a unique view of this creative process.

Literature review

This chapter will investigate narrated research as an academic methodology, as informed by the experience of writing, and begin to examine the historic academic underpinnings of the creative piece.

Creative writing PhDs are a relatively new field of study and practice, with a small but growing body of work being produced on aspects such as their necessity, form, content and presentation. The vanguard of the practice-led PhDs in Australian universities have produced a record of the new research practice in its infancy, published in a special edition of the journal *TEXT* (Special Issue, No. 3, April 2004). The myriad approaches contained in these articles illustrate the differences, as well as similarities, in the experiences of the candidates.

The award of such a degree typically requires some form of academic exegesis to be presented alongside the creative artefact. As the inclusion of the exegesis is an attempt to emulate traditional research models, areas of focus have centred on how well they can serve this purpose, as well as the ways in which this can be achieved (Bourke & Neilsen, 2004). In such a new field, the majority of work examining these questions is emerging through journal articles and in the wake of the first trickle of completed theses.

There are arguments for and against the need for an exegesis and, in turn, what role the exegesis should be playing. Does it serve to render the creative work worthy of such a high academic award? If this is the sole reason for its inclusion, is that a good enough reason? (North, 2004) At particular issue is the view within academia that fiction doesn't represent reality and is a sort of falsehood that "narrates one thing in order to tell something else" (de Certeau, 1986, p. 202), which doesn't fit with the aims of uncovering an objective and new form of "knowledge". In addition, success is measured in different ways: a good story is not assessed by the same factors as a convincing argument would be (Bruner, 1986, p. 12).

With the rise of postmodernism, and its attendant disdain for arbitrary boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, the door is opened for the blurring of academic and creative work (A. Ryan, 2005). A space has also been created

where the artificiality of the dichotomy can be exposed, leading the evaluation of other ways in which knowledge can be attained.

As Jerome Bruner indicates, a case can be made that fiction is in fact more truthful than even the scientific models of research, long held to represent the purest form of knowledge gathering, in that fiction makes no claims at representing objective truth. In reality, even the hypotheses that precede the scientific knowledge, the kind held to be most objective, often start as “little stories or metaphors”, a beginning that doesn’t impact their validity if they are later supported by gathered evidence (Bruner, 1986, p. 12). This subsequent research is also less objective than it may appear: the decisions that test these hypotheses, the modes of analysis, the interpretation of results and the framing of hypotheses are all affected by the subjectivity of the researcher, and the observations can only be understood and reported in language and words imbued with the history of the researcher and their culture, and received in the cultural framework of the reader. Michel de Certeau further illustrates these layers of influence, highlighting the fact that before results reach the wider public they must also pass through the filters of power structures, such as peer reviewers, newspapers or television news, limited by all the pressures and limitations, biases and prejudices of the people involved in choosing, summarising and framing the “reality” (1986).

With the objectivity of traditional forms of research under scrutiny, Jeri Kroll suggests that the university guidelines, practices and advice to examiners regarding PhDs with creative artefact and exegesis must either try to broaden ideas about what constitutes research in order to include creative works or require the supplementing of the creative work (by adding an exegesis) in order to fit in with the traditional model (2002). The viability of an unaccompanied creative piece as research is uncertain, as it would be difficult for examiners, and others in academia, to subjectively judge how successfully any hypotheses and original contributions to knowledge have been explored within the creative work if they are unfamiliar with either the theory or the medium (Kroll, 2002). In addition, the finished product may fall short of achieving its goals and as it offers no opportunity to analyse why or how, this removes any original insights that might have been gained along the course of the attempt, even a failed one.

Umberto Eco expands upon the idea that research could illustrate the evolution of the novel by recording and reflecting upon its progress (2006). This suggests that the exegesis would be most informative when produced as a form of narrated research. Such a record could compare and contrast the envisioned product with the end result at different points along the journey.

However, the role of exegesis as validation for the award of creative Higher Degrees is only one of the many goals, and one of the many ways, in which creative researchers have sought to demonstrate their research process and results. Not surprisingly, given the lack of agreement of the role of the exegesis, there is also a lack of cohesion on the expected content of the exegesis and the manner of presentation.

If, as Sue North suggests, the inclusion of the exegesis is an attempt to render the creative writing thesis as an academic project equivalent to a traditional thesis (2004), then the tone and style of this exegesis comes into focus. While a purely theoretical study would be most recognisable as traditional research, such an approach is less able to capture the interplay and subjective experience of creation that gives the accompanying exegesis the new knowledge to contribute. An alternate view embraces the idea that the exegesis is a different type of writing, and just the requirement of its inclusion (regardless of the structure and content) alongside the creative work already renders the creative work as a piece that contributes to new knowledge.

Eco's discussion of research (2006) alludes to the complementary nature of creative and academic writing. He found that his academic work, which he presented as narrated research, gave him an arena to explore and satisfy his creative urges, and that this led to the late start to his career as a novelist. Eco considers creative research analogous to creative narratives, in that it acted, in part, as a substitute outlet for his creative drive.

Furthermore, the idea of narrated research resembles the many articles (e.g. Poe, 1914/2000) and journals (e.g. Steinbeck, 1969) written by authors detailing their experiences of writing, often reflecting upon this process of creation. In these cases, the subject of the research is the author and their experiences as documented by the journal's contents, using the power of narrative to represent

that life “both anticipates telling and draws meaning from it. Narrative is both about living and part of it.” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 746)

What is included, and excluded, in a creative exegesis depends on the initial research aim: the hypothesis. If the process of creation is the focus of the exegesis, then a methodology is required that will best capture the relevant data at all stages of the progression, rather than just reporting the end results. This research methodology then focuses the work on the areas in which there is revision and correction. More functional sections and less problematic areas will gain only one or two mentions. This draws the attention of the reader to the areas that occupied the author most frequently, allowing insight into areas that caused trouble and how this was dealt with, allowing the reader a new perspective on the creative piece in light of this knowledge.

The product of this struggle, the creative work, also provides myriad theoretical issues that can be explored. One of the surface issues of the work is the question as to what genre it belongs. Genre itself is an unstable concept, relying on the reader as much as it informs them (Jauss, 1982). This led to problems for my creative piece, which contained elements of both science fiction and fantasy, generic areas that contain many blurred boundaries and overlapping elements.

Within the genre of science fiction¹ alone there is no agreement on the origins of the genre or on what constitutes a science fiction story, with existing definitions generally too narrow or too loose to be useful (Kincaid, 2003). Clute and Nicholls (1993, p. 311) identify the 1930s as when the term “science fiction” entered into common use, although noting that the separate elements can be seen from before the late 19th century.

Science fiction is a contentious, unstable and ill-defined genre, which has prompted a shift in its study to a reception-based focus, re-defining science fiction as being “in the eye of the beholder” (Kincaid, 2003, para. 8). These issues have led Edward James to suggest that a circular argument is the only one that will gain agreement, defining science fiction as something “sf writers write for sf readers” (James, 1994, p. 51). James goes on to discuss how definitions of

¹ Within this exegesis I will be using science fiction and sf interchangeably, and avoiding the term sci-fi, which many within the field see as a pejorative term (Oltion, 2005)

genre are also compromised by the aims and allegiances of the theorists, who will frame the genre in a way that includes the works they deem to be science fiction, and excludes those that they don't (James, 1994).

Paul Kincaid's attempt to map the sf genre derives from an idea that there is a web of connections, a family resemblance that connects all works within a genre, from a beginning point that assumes most people can confidently identify at least one book that they would view as science fiction (2003). He proposes that strands of this web connect these differing books, and this means that although two books identified as science fiction may share no themes or ideas, they will eventually be connected to each other through a series of other books that span the themes across the expanse of this web.

Kincaid further avers that at different points in the web, sf stories can have elements of mystery or romance, can be detective stories or thrillers, and can be read in these genres while still allowing an alternate reading as a work of sf (Kincaid, 2003). The porous nature of science fiction and definition through connections suggests a close bond with works of fantasy, where there is overlap in their dealing with elements outside the ordinary.

On the surface the differences between science fiction and fantasy seem easy to define and identify, with Carl Malmgren defining sf as dealing with the dichotomy of known/unknown while fantasy addresses the question of real/unreal (1991).

As a genre, fantasy has more agreement of the elements, as it is one more step removed from reality than science fiction, abandoning the ties to physics and logic which bind science fiction (Malmgren, 1991). One requirement identified in a fantastic novel recalls an element of Freud's "Uncanny" (1958), where there should be hesitation between a logical explanation that doesn't violate the recognised laws of our universe, and a supernatural one, bound by no such restrictions (Todorov, 1973). Tzvetan Todorov puts the idea of the uncanny at one end of a scale of fantastic elements, with the marvellous at the other end (a category containing fairytales and myths), arguing that the fantastic falls between the two extremes. This scale confuses the issue of the fantastic as a genre, by using two measures that are not analogous. In Todorov's model the fairytales of the marvellous have no direct opposite in pure forms of the uncanny, leading to

the suggestion that the fantastic is a mode, rather than a genre (Jackson, 1988, p. 7), similar to the way in which film noir can be viewed as a style rather than as a genre.

James explains how these generic boundaries, hazy as they are in both science fiction and fantasy, become even more blurred with the hybrid genre of science fantasy that encompasses works that combine the two genres (1994). Science fantasy stories draw elements from both genres, often ignoring the physical rules that govern our universe. Nevertheless, it retains the gaze towards science to provide truth or validation, and attempt to create plausible and internally logical scientific explanations for the fantastic elements, an attempt that fantasy doesn't make (Malmgren, 1991). Malmgren makes the distinction between the levels of plausibility of the two, with science fantasy eschewing science-based explanations and instead often relying on "questionable analogies, imaginary science, far-fetched gadgets, or counterfactual postulates" (p. 141).

Adding more connections to the complex web of family resemblances that connect and overlap science fiction and fantasy are works from the genre of horror. In light of the tangled web of relativity that can be seen to connect these genres, there has been a shift towards a designation of "speculative fiction" as a genre that unites and contains science fiction, fantasy and horror. This genre also uses and shares elements from Kincaid's web, attaching itself to that family resemblance, with its embodiment of the idea of Freud's uncanny, a designation itself used in the definition of the fantastic (Jackson, 1988, p. 64). Ideas of the supernatural, and the dichotomy of real/unreal are also key, linking it to the fantasy family tree.

As a result, the focus of the research, and the creation of the novel, began to align more closely to the emerging trend considering the wider genre of speculative fiction. This idea of such a diverse genre draws upon the issue of what to consider when defining genre. Fredric Jameson offers two alternative sources of information, looking at either the essence and ideological position of the work as a set of specific elements that govern and limit its works (1981). Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn shift the view when considering the case of speculative fiction, where the focus becomes what unites rather than divides

these works: an overarching theme of a sense of wonder and curiosity, and asking ‘what if?’ (2003, p. 4)

The novels produced in the area are both the data and the testers of these academic theories. The views of authors about the genre they are writing in, and sometimes a deliberate lack of this consideration (Gaiman, 2008), inform and illuminate the academic work.

Despite the impermanence and impreciseness of genres, they remain an important consideration in the production and reception of any creative work, and in turn reader reception is an essential element in defining a work within a genre (Wilkins, 2005). Roland Barthes removes the author from any position of authority, instead positioning the ultimate completion of a text within the reader who holds “all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (1977, p. 148). The reader is informed by the intertextual frames produced by genre (Eco, 1979, p. 22). These provide a shorthand, setting up expectations and using a shared frame of reference that minimises the chance of misinterpretation (Jameson, 1981). This becomes important in the view of Donald Spence, who holds that good literature “controls both the content of the passage and the background of associations against which it is read; it provides a context that helps to determine how it is sensed and what associations it brings to mind” (1982, p. 41).

Frederic Jameson highlights another potential function of genre, where writing within a genre adds a degree of similarity to the backgrounds of the readers. They have certain expectations of what a work within this genre should entail, acting as a set of instructions as well as constituting what Jameson views as a social contract between the author and the genre reader (Jameson, 1981, p. 106). When the author doesn't control these background associations, the reader begins to rely on their own associations, decreasing the reliability of the transmission of the intended content. Hans Jauss suggests that writers who abandon all aspects of genre in search of uniqueness do so at the “expense of its comprehensibility”, as genre provides the rules that the reader takes with them into the game of interpretation, orienting them and trying to maximise the quality of the reception (1982, p. 79).

Any work is open to interpretation, and Wolfgang Iser argues that the aim of the author, usually, is to limit misreading and misinterpretation outside of any

deliberate ambiguities (1978). Jameson sees a similar aim for the writer to narrow the possible readings, while excluding “undesirable responses” (Jameson, 1981, p. 107). This can also be seen as a function of the exegesis (Krauth, 2002), offering the author a chance to elude Barthes’s death sentence and direct the reader away from surface readings and point them towards deeper workings of the novel.

Umberto Eco sees a limit to the limitless interpretations by adding a measure of validity, rather than restricting the number, where any interpretation can be judged against the text and “establish whether a reader has a sense of reality or is the victim of his own hallucinations” (Eco, 2006, p. 7). However, the text itself can’t be the definitive voice, if opposing views are able to be drawn from the same words (Fish, 1986). Interpretation is also determined by cultural and historical factors including the current views and theories that are in favour, in addition to the individual subjectivity that influences these definitions and decisions. There is always potential for any shift in these elements to change the way in which a text is read, leaving today’s hallucinations to become tomorrow’s reality, an environment that in the end promises freedom rather than restriction.

Chapter One: In the beginning

The narrated research documenting the creative component of this PhD will follow the process chronologically, beginning at the start of the candidacy, using my experience as a source of new data to interrogate and expand upon the academic theories and research introduced in the literature review.

In this chapter I will detail the “spark” of creativity that began my novel, with view to Arthur Koestler’s (1964) and Stephen King’s (2000) thoughts on how inspiration for stories involves unique combinations of ideas. In addition, there is evidence of the beginning of the praxis between research and practice. This is seen in the story creation phase, where the initial entwining of academic and creative in the area of genre shaped the future direction of the project. The conventions and considerations of naming were examined in light of narrative choices (Lupton, 2003). The power of language was considered via prophecies and their mediation on free will and fate.

The idea of a mysterious “creative spark” is one that has plagued writers and one that has therefore had some critical attention focused on it. The critical ideas put forward by Arthur Koestler (1964) are mirrored in the comments of writer Stephen King (2000) who captures them in practise in his attempts to articulate his own process.

My creative piece was begun without a clear idea of the story that I was going to tell. I had ideas and themes but nothing definitive. Koestler (1964) posits that there is a state of “ripeness”, where a person is ready to make a discovery by possessing the right skills or knowledge. The history of simultaneous discoveries by scientists suggests that the elements that combine to produce the discovery are present in a cultural consciousness, and in the state of ripeness, connections that may have been “hidden from the eye by the blinkers of habit” can be made (Koestler, 1964, p. 108). Stephen King speaks of this phenomena when he recounts how ideas for his stories are formed when “two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun” (King, 2000, p. 37).

The original idea behind my story was born from previous study within the field of criminology, specifically exposure to one school of thought, “labelling

theory”, which proposes an interactionist view of deviance (White & Haines, 1996). This theory proposes that deviant behaviour is not an accurate reflection of a person’s character, rather it is the product of the label of deviant being applied to an individual (White & Haines, 1996). Once the label of deviant has been applied, the resulting way in which the individual is treated by society (or some form of power/authority) results in internalisation of this expectation. This leads the individual to begin to act in ways which affirm the original judgement of them, the label becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (Carlson & Buskist, 1997).

In addition to the labelling of an individual by an authority, such a power can also be encoded in a name. After all, characters throughout literature have lived up (or down) to names inherited and given (for example, the disposition of Shakespeare’s Constable Dull and Sir Toby Belch were never in much doubt). At issue with names and naming is whether a character’s destiny is determined from (or by) the moment they are named, and as a sub-issue, whether surnames (which are inherited) have a different level of inevitability attached to them than given names (which are chosen specifically for the individual, and thus may be seen as deserved).

The use of prophecies in the broad genre of speculative fiction, which I intended to write within, provides a more direct exploration of the ideas concerning the inevitability of futures. Things to be examined were the conditions in which the power of the labels, names, and prophecies included either fulfilled or defeated, as well the contexts in which such devices are utilised. In addition, the story would explore what the use of such a device said about the role of the speculative fiction. It could evaluate its use as a tool to highlight the social condition and as a precursor of social change, and examine what the outcome of prophecies signal to the reader about their ultimate ability, or lack thereof, to do something to change their world.

Also of interest to me were the ways that this power could be negated/neutralised or even reappropriated by the powerless (Rosenberg, 2003). I wondered about how the power of the word could be challenged and compromised through the filter of other words in redefinition, neologisms and self-denying prophecies, challenging and reappropriating the power contained within and transferring power to those who had previously been subject to it.

In part, these issues were examined through ideas proposed by Michel Foucault (2002) regarding the creation of power within society and the ways in which society produces and transmits social discourse, and how the individual accepts or rejects the application of this power upon them.

One of the most interesting areas, the self-fulfilling prophecies, offered the first opportunity to put this research into practice. Rather than having self-fulfilling prophecies occur within the story as a background part of the plot, I made the decision to have the characters create and execute these prophecies themselves. The story would involve characters who studied the power of language and of self-fulfilling prophecies, discovering through research the best combinations of words to create prophecies, then show some of the members taking this power to the extreme and using them as weapons.

After having an idea of what area the creative piece would cover, I began to read academic work on these issues in anticipation of the exegesis component. The first direct influence on the story from the research came from an article that led to the discovery of a secret society dedicated to monitoring and nullifying the abuse of language in furtherance of political ideals (Rosenberg, 2003). Thus, the initial group within my story arose in the shadow of Urbain Domergue's 1791 formation of the Société des Amateurs de la Langue Française (Society of Friends of the French Language). The further discovery of the existence of Louis-Sébastien Mercier's revolutionary dictionary of neologisms (Rosenberg, 2003) solidified the idea of words as power and as revolution. The tension between Domergue's group and Mercier's dictionary introduced into my story the idea that there should be two sides fighting for the power of the words. One side acting as guardian to the words and their power, while the other works to liberate the words from this influence. This added a dramatic tension to the narrative, giving characters some built in goals with regard to the characters from the opposing side.

The research also uncovered power in ambiguity, with Laurel Fulkerson examining how the imprecision of language can be exploited to create self-fulfilling prophecies (2002). Fulkerson details how the ambiguity of language in *Heroides 13* brings about the feared event it was meant to avoid. These ideas

began to shape the power within the prophecies in my novel, which was tied to both ambiguity and accuracy, an idea that I explored further within the narrative.

The research also began to shape the story in a less direct way, when ideas from research were incorporated into story planning. Reading Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's proposal that observations are "inextricably connected to the vocabulary they use to express or represent them" (2000, p. 735) and Bondanella's similar theory that receivers of messages "receive only an empty form that each addressee fills up with his or her own cultural models" (1997, p. 88), led to the combination of the two ideas, which began to affect the novel. Within the story, the self-appointed guardians of society sought to control and monitor language, as well as to apply a more direct influence through self-fulfilling prophecies. This manipulation is achieved through, amongst other things, changing meanings, shifting usage, creating new words, retiring old ones and reviving lost ones.

The solidification of the prophecies through the initial research that fed back into the story strengthened the importance of prophecies to the work.

Echoing and illuminating the earlier ideas of Koestler and King, the combination of Rosenberg's formal society surrounding language (Rosenberg, 2003), Foucault's ideas about power (2002), and a more general interest in criminology and deviance all combined within my story.

Moral relativity

The situating of moral dilemmas within fiction can be seen as a way of using a safe environment to experiment with and test out ideas about belief and morality. Eva Dadlez (2002) explores this environment and how it can be used to play with concepts such as Kohlberg's theories of moral development (Carlson & Buskist, 1997).

Applying Ulmer's "mystory" approach (1989), my interest in aspects of morality intersected with the popular and expert levels of knowledge that arose from reading Rosenberg (2003). The chance discoveries of the societies dedicated to controlling language were viewed through the prism of my pre-existing knowledge, and my background in psychology connected questions of morality to the theories of moral development within the field. The novel

provided the space to explore some of these ideas through the differing viewpoints of two departments regarding the ethics of control and manipulation, as well as personal views on right and wrong.

One of the first elements this introduced was the concept of gradings of “evil”, where students within one organisation are tested as to the upper limit of the morally ambiguous concepts they are comfortable with, and in the future are restricted to knowledge that falls within these limits. One product of this grading was the idea that Orlagh, the future leader of the amoral department, Hazpop, doesn’t have a high enough clearance at her current grading to access information associated with the leadership position. Using my background in psychology, I linked this concern with personal morality to Kohlberg’s stages of moral development (Carlson & Buskist, 1997)², using this view of morality as a framework to develop the beliefs of the opposing departments. When thinking of the properties that would be valued in such an organisation, the sixth stage offered a view of the ascension past societal concepts of morality that fit with Hazpop’s aims.

Although the students of the moral department, EPD, don’t undergo any formalised assessment like the gradings, the connection with Kohlberg also allowed me to view their training in another way. EPD agents are encouraged to ascend to (but not beyond) a way of thinking that could be seen as equivalent to Kohlberg’s stage four - a stage that involves upholding social order through obedience of outside laws and rules.

The recognition of how the story could be applied to these stages led to the idea that the amoral agents consciously take a scale of this sort and use it to identify the most suitable new recruits. While the organisation may strive towards amorality, there is recognition of the difficulty in attaining this. In addition, the original idea of the grading of the amoral agents was integrated with Kohlberg’s theory. The highest stage of moral development, the morality of cosmic orientation (Carlson & Buskist, 1997), involves transcending societal norms, a description that I found helped to better quantify the attributes that the

² The stages are: Punishment and obedience orientation, instrumental purpose orientation, morality of interpersonal cooperation, social-order maintaining orientation, social contract orientation, and universal ethical principle orientation (Berk, 1997)

agents would need in order to be deal with the morally ambiguous concepts at the top level of clearance.

The examination of amorality versus misguided morality within the story built upon this framework of moral development. The fictional setting offered a way of assessing the concepts in practice. The gap between theory and behaviour (echoing the one between theory and the practice of writing) is captured in the range of reactions of the characters to their expected moral codes. There is an historical precedent for delivering philosophical treatises through fiction, offering detailed examples of how the problems may be dealt with, leaving the judgement up to the reader. Eva Dadlez argues that fiction does this through the presentation of novel situations, opening up a safe space where readers can project their own morality and assess how it fares (2002).

The use of fiction as a moral testing ground was put to use in my exploration of Kohlberg's moral stages. Instead of testing out personal beliefs, I attempted to assess the effectiveness of creating moral systems based on the theoretical development process outlined by Kohlberg.

Ambiguity

The ambiguity of language can be seen in its precarious and fragile relationship to meaning (Morson & Emerson, 1990), a divide particularly highlighted in the area of heteronyms. Tests designed to measure language processing have illuminated some of the process of the retrieval of meaning through the inclusion of words with ambiguity (Frost & Bentin, 1992; Frost & Kampf, 1993). The difference in the time taken to construct meaning from ambiguous versus unambiguous words can illuminate how the brain processes this information.

Turning back to the work of the organisations, one of the ways that I wanted to explore the compromised power of words was through the connection between prophecies and ambiguity, such as the classical ones discussed in an earlier section. In order to further investigate aspects of ambiguity and how it could be applied within my artefact, I began to research the area further.

Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson report an area of research touched upon in Bakhtin's idea of the "word with a loophole": words that hold on to ambiguity by

always offering another possible meaning (1990). Though context can often offer enough clues to resolve the ambiguity, a pure form of these words, heteronyms, came to my attention while writing the artefact. After contemplating their use within the story, I decided their power was most concentrated when stripped of context and used in isolation, as will be discussed later.

There was also a consideration of the dangers of imprecise language, explored through the creation of the prophecies within the story. This tension was extended and explored as a differing point between the two rival departments in an early draft of the story, where one embraces ambiguity and doesn't seek to resolve it (Hazpop) and the other can't function effectively with it, needing their language to be as precise and unambiguous as possible (EPD). The research into the power of words and reader reception didn't lead the story in this direction, but rather helped to develop the ways in which the power of the prophecies could be compromised and corrupted.

Returning to Bakhtin's idea of words that hold on to ambiguity by always offering another possible meaning, I decided to return to heteronyms for chapter titles. Using words such as 'tears' and 'wound' in isolation takes away the immediate context for disambiguation, leading the reader to seek any possible meaning in the chapters they title. The actual inclusion of chapter titles was rethought during the process of writing, as is discussed in later chapters.

This interest in the idea of heteronyms led to further research into the technical explanations of how they are processed in readers' minds, an understanding that would allow insight into how best to use them.

Heteronyms are words that have different meanings depending on how you pronounce them, so the act of pronunciation ends the ambiguity. Ram Frost and Michal Kampf investigated the processing of heteronyms, their results suggesting that exposure initially activates both pronunciations in the brain, preceding activation of their meanings (Frost & Kampf, 1993). Meaning can only be accessed through the phonological representation, so in order to make any judgement about the word, the decision about pronunciation has to be made first - the ambiguity is resolved in order to find the meaning. When the word is presented without context (such as when used as a title, for example) both meanings are held in the mind long enough for supporting evidence to be sought

out and a choice to be made, at which point the appropriate meaning can be retrieved (Frost & Bentin, 1992). Although both pronunciations are activated initially, the one that occurs most frequently in everyday use is retrieved more quickly, and is held in the mind for longer than the less dominant interpretation. A retrospective assignment of meaning could then be made after reading the chapter, with a conscious view as to the intended meaning.

Putting this research into practice, however, highlighted some of the concerns associated with epitexts. Gerard Genette (1997) has identified problems with assigning chapter titles to works derived from oral performance (such as plays), where they break the suspension of disbelief by requiring readers to invent reasons that these chapters would be titled, rather than the usual acceptance of these markers within the text. This articulates a concern I had in the section that Orlagh may or may not be recounting as a story, where the presence of the author in these decisions may bias the interpretation of the section one way or the other. In addition, an informal survey of some science fiction and fantasy novels showed a mix of chapter titles/non-titles, and discrete chapter/non-chapters, and after feedback from early readers indicated that the chapter titles proved distracting, they were taken out of the story. Upon reflection, this removal was made permanent.

The attempt to use and build upon the ambiguity of language led to the evidence of Bakhtin's words with loopholes in heteronyms, and the scientific studies conducted to further understand their nature and power. The presentation of these words in isolation, as would occur if they were used as chapter titles, would activate multiple meanings (Frost & Bentin, 1992), allowing the ambiguity to linger in the mind of the reader and forcing them to acknowledge both meanings. In practice, critical work in another area articulated a wider concern that I had regarding the use of titles within the story, and ultimately this led to the idea of using the heteronyms being dropped.

Genre

Genre offers both familiarity and restriction to a story and to an author. As discussed in the literature review, genre offers the familiar to readers and the potential for anticipating audience to writers (Jauss, 1982). However, there are

also generic conventions that are required to provide the necessary cues to the audience, establishing the social contract (Jameson, 1981). The expectations of genre then demand something known and recognisable, an area that affects the genres of science fiction and fantasy. The blurred boundaries and overlapping of themes has made categorisation and definition problematic, leading to an alternate view of the two elements being connected rather than separate (Kincaid, 2003).

Having some idea of a general plot and knowing that it included words with the power to influence people and events meant that the decision to write a “genre” novel rather than general fiction was a relatively unexamined choice. In hindsight, perhaps these thoughts on genre were already influencing plot decisions, allowing the prospect of zombies and magic as a viable option.

As I began to work on this exegesis, I became increasingly fixated on the need to have a firmer idea of genre in mind before I could go any further. It would affect future plot, I reasoned, so any further outlining at this stage should be put off until some decision had been reached. It would also allow a more directed approach to research within the exegesis. An entry from my journal at this time captured some of this frustration with the uncertainty:

No exegesis today. Just thinking about the overall direction of the book, namely how there isn't one. I can't decide if it's dark or light or both, and if it's fantasy, sci-fi, horror, all three or none. And if I should just write it and see what it turns out to be.

Journal entry dated 29/5/05

This initial choice was made from an academic standpoint, to ensure that my artefact was readily identifiable as belonging to a particular genre. I thought it would be simpler to use the resources of an established genre, not considering at that point how this was actually going against the tenets of the book I was proposing to write.

Judith Merrill uses the term speculative fiction to describe works similar to science fiction that have more of a focus on social change (Clute & Nicholls, 1993), while James and Mendlesohn (2003) focus on the shared sense of wonder and curiosity.³ The decision to work within speculative fiction rather than a more specific science fiction or fantasy was informed by the content of the story, with the respective conventions of the two genres in mind. While fantasy offered freedom from scientific extrapolation or viability, it also split irrevocably from a representation of a relatively realistic world. Science fiction required some rigorous scientific methodology and plausibility to which my story may not be able to adhere. Speculative fiction offered freedom to explore and question commonly held beliefs, without requiring a hard choice about confining the work to any one genre. The blurred boundaries between science fiction, fantasy and horror were all safely contained within the genre of speculative fiction, and so could all be drawn upon.

Each of these decisions bears some deeper reflection, as each reveals something about the type of creative artefact that I was aiming to produce, how I was to go about producing it, and how this all compares to the final product.

A hard science fiction⁴ novel was not considered an option as I don't have the kind of science background that would enable an adequate exploration of the limits of science in an authentic manner, and also because it is restrictive in its own way. The dubious science being employed in the initial story ideas seemed to preclude it from being any kind of general science fiction. Even if the science was based on real world elements, the extrapolations bore little resemblance to anything that could be considered plausible. Given Peter Nicholls' summary that science fiction follows "natural law whereas fantasy may and mostly does suspend it" (Clute & Nicholls, 1993, p.313) I began to consider whether I was writing within a different genre.

³ For further reading on the shift towards speculative fiction as a genre see the relevant entry in Clute & Nicholls (1993).

⁴ I am following Oltion (2005) here in considering Hard SF to be works in which the scientific elements are all derived from what we know to be possible.

Fantasy seemed a better fit, but still the story didn't quite feel like it belonged in what might be seen as the traditional and familiar works of fantasy.⁵ There were no elves, no wizards, no new worlds and no actual magic. Added to this hurdle was my reluctance to relinquish the provision of some kind of non-fantasy explanation for the paranormal events that occurred. In other words, I wanted to explain the power of the prophecies with theories grounded in science and psychology and utilising the power of the linguistics and social psychology. The creation of words, and their subsequent dissemination, also drew on possible methods of promotion, advertisement and exposure that were all based in techniques not beyond any laws of this universe.

At this stage, it seemed like there needed to be a choice of genre so that it could serve as the backbone for the exegesis, focusing and guiding the research in the relevant area. Ironically, this became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as this early focus then ensured that genre played a large part in the research, thus forming a significant part of the exegesis.

Once the decision had been made to consider the novel as falling within the genre of speculative fiction, the next consideration was to establish exactly what constituted a work within this genre. Detailed research was weighed against the possibility of writing to the genre and unconsciously slipping into what might be stereotypical and clichéd characters and plots,⁶ or discarding ideas simply because they didn't fit within the confines of what was expected within a genre.

To deal with this, much of the outline was written before delving with any real substance into genre and what it meant for, and to, the story. The issue of genre is revisited at further points in the creative process, which will be discussed in later chapters.

This avoidance led to the investigation of how other authors navigate genre and its attendant expectations and obligations. An interview with fantasy author Garth Nix (best known for his Old Kingdom series) reveals that he lets the story

⁵ When referring to fantasy here, I was thinking of traditional stories in this genre such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and other stories involving magical lands populated with fantastical creatures. For a more thorough list of fantasy texts see Clute & Grant (1997).

⁶ The website of the speculative fiction publishing company Strange Horizons offers a guide to new writers about clichéd and overused plot elements (<http://www.strangehorizons.com/guidelines/fiction-common.shtml>). Clute & Nicholls (1993) also provide an abbreviated list of clichéd themes and gadgets.

unfold and sees which genre it falls into (Phelan, 2005). Novelist Karen Joy Fowler also comments that she lets the initial spark lead the work into genre rather than vice versa, her works falling across a number of genres (Sussex, 2005).

Nalo Hopkinson (*Brown Girl in the Ring*, *The Salt Roads*) illustrates the flexibility of genre, describing her work as speculative fiction at times, but remaining open to using “whatever definition I think the audience will either understand or be curious about” (A. Nelson, 2002, p. 98). Hopkinson also comments that she had been combining science fiction and fantasy before she was aware of the historical divide, believing the split is an artificial one created only for marketing purposes (A. Nelson, 2002). This element of genre is discussed in more depth in a later section.

In answering a question on his blog, author Neil Gaiman displays a similar approach to genre in his writing: “I don't worry about it. I don't think about it. It's not something I feel I need to bother with. People put the books where they want to put them, but the books don't change” (2008). In an earlier interview, Gaiman also admitted that it is easiest when books fall neatly into one genre, and that he is lucky that his success allows him greater flexibility to blur boundaries (Bolton, 2005).

In attempting to negotiate the question of genre regarding the novel, the experience of other authors proved invaluable. While critics such as James and Kincaid struggled to define the science fiction and fantasy genres, the words of writers put the question into perspective, privileging the story and the ideas over (often arbitrary) categorisation. Examining my own experience, it is apparent that the requirement of the exegesis influenced this balance. The inquiry and investigation into the critical work on genre influenced the creation of the story rather than simply offering guidance to the reception and interpretation of an already completed work.

Nomen et omen

The act of naming is one that has changed within fiction, shifting from an outwardly signifying designation of character to a trend towards mirroring real-life names (Lupton, 2003, p. 1213). There is precedence for the connection

between names and fates in fiction (Warren, 2002), and this continues even as the associations have generally become more subtle. For the author, the considerations reach beyond the information it transmits to the audience. Writer Elizabeth George (2004) relates how the act of naming is tied to creativity, and how it can impede it. There are wider considerations of the act of naming and what names do and do not signify.

From the outset I felt that the meanings of the names of the characters were important, especially in light of the themes of destiny and self-fulfilling prophecies.

There were many elements to be considered in choosing a name. I didn't want to make them too unusual, and tried to avoid the speculative fiction cliché of the uncommon letter combinations and extreme punctuation. The names needed to emphasise that the story was set in this world (or a close approximation of it), so all of the characters have names that are in real world usage (some more commonly than others).

Within the story, naming practices differ according to which department they belong to. The people involved with the self-fulfilling prophecies, EPD, don't want to tempt fate with the names of their children. The members of the rest of the organisation, SACER, have varying levels of superstition, with EPD's rivals, Hazpop, giving little regard to such things.

Working on a dual layer principle with the choices, the actual name meaning was intended to offer clues and cues to the character within the story, while the surface details of the word – spelling, pronunciation, etc – were chosen to be signals to the reader.⁷ The actual meaning contained within names is under debate, with associations standing as distinct from meaning. They act as referents, denoting things, but can be shown to be meaningless, especially when referring to characters that are, themselves, fictitious (Adams, Fuller, & Stecker, 1997). This didn't seem like a productive theory to explore within the narrative, although there is some measure of this seen in the ease in which some characters discard their names. The most notable example of this comes from within EPD

⁷ A deeper investigation into grammar of names is beyond the scope of this project, see Anderson (2004) for an overview and discussion of this area.

where agents change their names to ones with more auspicious meanings out of superstition and ambition.

The name of the organisation, SACER, was also given consideration. This organisation was originally called SALIS, an acronym chosen for its similarity to the original inspiration, Société des Amateurs de la Langue Française, and for the association with *cum grano salis* (“with a grain of salt”). This was later changed to SACER, a Latin word meaning both sacred and accursed (Fowler, 1911). Attempts to make the word into a “backronym”, retrospectively making the initials stand for something, were ultimately unsatisfactory. However, the temporary stand-in idea that SACER was a fake acronym soon became an appealing prospect, especially as within the story it was the disillusioned Idris who points out that SACER stands for nothing.

After some initial feedback from readers expressing frustration at the lack of actual meaning and expansion of the acronym, I decided to address the issue within the story. The façade presented to the outside world of the legitimate boarding school was changed to Sacer, distinguishing it from the internally used SACER, and it is noted that the acronym does indeed stand for something (a reference back to the original Société, in that the true name is said to be in French), even if no one actually agrees upon what it actually is. Whether by accident or design, this ties to the view of names in fairytales such as Rumpelstiltskin where naming has power, and to know a person or object’s true name is to have power over them. With SACER’s knowledge of the power of words, it isn’t unreasonable to assume they would have some measures of protection in place, using both Sacer and the unexpanded SACER to mask their true identity.

Coates (2006) draws attention to the divide between the semantic work on naming (which focuses on signs and referents) and the focus on meaning within popular culture (as evidenced by the provision of meaning in baby name books). Despite the lack of focus of critical work, meaning came to play a large part in my choices. Within the story names were chosen that had a meaning that reflected some part of the character; that weren’t tempting fate (especially if they are chosen by parents concerned with such things); and that either reflected a fate that a parent would wish for a child or were neutral.

These ideas are best illustrated with examples from within the story. Idris, one of the main characters, is the young reluctant EPD heir. His name means “lord” (Hanks, Hardcastle, & Hodges, 2006), which is a name without much hubris, and just royal enough for EPD’s pseudo-monarchy. The name also has the added meaning of “impulsive”, which is a trait he shows within the story, so his name provides a clue to his future behaviour. The surface appearance of the name has references including “Id”, suggesting Freud’s idea of the “id” as the primitive instinctual drive. His name also suggests ID, as in identity, and id. as an abbreviation of the Latin *idem*, with the association of his being like something that has come before him, his identity merely the next iteration or footnote in history. All of which can serve as a series of cues (or clues) pointing to the direction that his story is going to take.

There is an additional consideration of how well the name seems to represent and encapsulate the character. This could be in how it sounds, whether it has echoes of association, how it looks, just *something* that sets it apart. In an example of what can happen when this factor is missing, author Elizabeth George (best known for her Inspector Lynley series of mysteries) recounts how she gave a character a name that didn’t fit with how she saw him, finding herself unable to write until she had chosen a more appropriate name (George, 2004).

My interest in the meaning of names, and the levels of textual transparency, led to a review of the historical use of names and naming. In talking about choosing titles, Gerard Genette identifies the main purpose as one of identification, using the analogy of choosing a name for a baby, where the motivation behind the choice is “wholly immaterial” once the name is affixed (1997, pp. 79-80). However, when considering names, I viewed the artefact as Barthes’ intertextual tissue (1977) and nothing was above closer analysis for meaning and associations. Disagreeing with Genette’s corresponding idea that the initial reasons behind the name are irrelevant to the purpose of identification, I felt that, in a written record, names are on a equal level as the other descriptors (strings of letters, lines of ink, etc.) and are thus open to the same scrutiny for the reader. A misleading or inaccurate name offers no clues to an attentive reader, and no reward for seeking deeper connections.

There is a history of using names as stand-ins for fate and destiny, making them almost self-fulfilling in efforts to overcome the implications (Warren, 2002), even acting as ill omens such as in *Tristram Shandy* (Lupton, 2003).

This research fed back into considerations for the names, with a new emphasis on the underlying assumptions open to the reader about the names of characters, and the need to consider what conclusions they may draw.

With the concern of prophetic names, focus switched to the role of the author as invisible name-giver. There is a point at which names are specific enough in meaning and foretell the future accurately enough to reflect something that the parents in the story would have no knowledge of. If there's too much foreshadowing, it can take the reader out of the story with the obvious presence, and prescience, of the author - the reader attributes to the author "what is physically impossible to attribute to the narrator" (Genette, 1997, p. 154) and thus is made aware of their existence. Christina Lupton traces the shift from descriptive naming to a more naturalistic style that approximated real life naming conventions, necessitating a movement away from inscribing too much fate within names (2003).

An attempt was made to negate this issue by leaving most meanings quite vague, but a judgement call with Freddie had to be made. His real name is Alfred, a name meaning "elf counsel" (Hanks et al., 2006). The problem was that Freddie is close to Magnus XI, whom he calls "Elf" (because eleven is *elf* in Dutch), which is veering into dangerous territory because his parents couldn't have known the closeness would happen, thus bringing the author into view. I chose to embrace this apparent coincidence, hoping that if there was no other evidence of parents naming outside their own knowledge, I would have cultivated a model reader who may begin to look deeper. They might then wonder if Freddie's parents may have planned (or determined) this role in their son's life, a reading that would find support in the text.

Upon reflection, the amount of time spent on researching and considering these deeper meanings for character names (which would probably not be noticed by any reader, no matter how attentive) could be traced back to the expectations associated with the exegesis. These decisions were made near the beginning of the project, with the future necessity of analysis in mind. In

addition, one of the earliest theorists consulted was the author Umberto Eco, who expounds upon, at length, the many layers of meaning he puts into his stories.⁸ While the importance can certainly be demonstrated, as in George's anecdotal inability to overcome a misnamed character (2004), the focus on names may have been out of proportion with what a reader expects and requires.

Online communication

The recent emergence of the internet as a communicative tool has seen a concurrent rise in the use of language specific to this online communication (Crystal, 2006). The function and significance of this language can be seen through the prism of social psychology, with in-groups and out-groups in evidence (Blashki & Nichol, 2005), the members of each group forming tight internal bonds while viewing those outside their group with suspicion or derision.

In addition to parents as in-text namers, there are names chosen by characters for themselves. Idris and Áine chose a series of nicknames that became attached to their virtual identities, alongside a virtual vocabulary that also exists in this online space. There are linguistic forms that are emerging with new technology, seen in the "netspeak" that can be found in online chat rooms and blogs, and the more specific genre of "leetspeak" that has its origins in gamer communication.⁹ This new language is very much a written language (as evidenced by Orlagh's attempt to verbalise the word "pwnd"), even as it also begins to approximate speech (Crystal, 2006). The language of the novel, even outside of the direct transcripts of online conversation, is influenced by some elements of this writing, especially in the sections with the younger characters.

There was some reticence about using this kind of language, and in the presentation of the transcripts, as it can appear unfinished and mistake-ridden. After some initial comments from test readers that it was hard to understand, there was some consideration given to abandoning it altogether. Eventually a sprinkling of the terms was settled on, with an almost self-conscious usage on the

⁸ Eco's *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1985), details his thoughts and process in creating this novel.

⁹ The essence of the language is the substitution of symbols and numbers for letters, as well as deliberate and escalating misspelling of words. See Rhoads (2007) for a more thorough introduction.

part of the characters – mocking the overuse while drawing upon the sense of in-group community in shared language. There is also a chance for those unfamiliar with the terms to identify with Magnus’s confusion when Idris throws in a reference he doesn’t understand (his variation of the “my hed is pastede on, yay!”¹⁰ phrase).

My anxiety about using the potentially frustrating language was lessened when Eco’s idea of a “model reader” was encountered. This allowed me to consider what kind of model reader the text was aiming to produce. Eco describes the function of his first 100 pages of *The Name of the Rose* as grooming for what (or whom) he considers to be his model reader (Eco, 1985), and I made a conscious decision to similarly try and build up the competence of readers by introducing transcripts of the online conversations early in the story. An added benefit of this training is that the author has more tools to either accentuate or minimise ambiguity for the rest of the story (Caesar, 1999).

The younger characters, Idris, Áine and Orlagh, embrace the new and shifting language and the exclusionary nature of the associated leetspeak. This shared knowledge helps to form their own in-group characterised by almost indecipherable terms, along with in-jokes and references that further reinforce their shared experience. The story begins with Idris and Áine¹¹, and later Idris and Orlagh, already having this shared language, and this can be hard for the reader to comprehend at first, positioning them outside the group. Through context, and an investment and understanding of their discussions from the transcripts, a space is opened for the reader to become part of the in-group.

The use of leetspeak opened an interesting line of enquiry about the attraction to exclusionary language, and what it might highlight in the characters engaged in this behaviour. The ironic use of the leetspeak highlights a contradiction that Idris, Orlagh and Áine are unable to see for themselves. They use the terms in a mocking tone, punctuating their own communications with deliberate references to how others communicate rather than spontaneously

¹⁰ See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=my%20hed%20is%20pastede%20on%2C%20yay!> However, this reference was cut from the re-edited novel, replacing Magnus’s confused response with Diane’s later horror at Idris’s use of “LOL” (p. 28).

¹¹ The records of these conversations were cut from the final, re-submitted novel, although Orlagh still consults them in preparation for her deceit.

generating the responses. These can be seen in the transcript of Idris and Orlagh's conversation (for example, Idris/Rapunzel exclaiming "ZOMG" (p. 35) in a moment of revelation). Idris's question "I can has sinister LOL" (p. 34) combines the LOLcat vocabulary with the practice of punctuating sentences with lol, even when it isn't appropriate. He and Orlagh both use this form of punctuation precisely because it's inappropriate.

Katherine Blashki and Sophie Nichol uncovered this type of deliberate usage in observation of an online community, where members created a new ingroup in an effort to distance themselves from the marginalised cultural group of geeks who use the language in earnest (2005). However, to the outside world, the ironic intention is not obvious and thus the usage does not distinguish them from belonging to the marginalised social group. This can be seen within the novel when Idris later, seriously, asks if he "can has cheesecake" (p. 132). Orlagh also later tells Idris that he has been "pwnd" (p. 155). This is a gamer term¹² that is also an example of the written nature of the language, as Orlagh's reaction indicates that her pronunciation confused Idris enough to ruin her moment of triumph.

It is worth noting here that the exegesis serves an important function in sitting alongside the novel in areas such as this, providing the opportunity to explain the apparent abandonment of spelling and grammar.

Within the novel, the engagement of the characters in online communication allowed an exploration of the shifts in language, fitting in with the broader theme of the novel of words and power. The observations of Blashki and Nichol echoed the behaviour exhibited by characters in the story, which had been based on personal experiences and observations regarding online communities and their shared language.

Constructions of identity

The connection between language and online identities illuminates the artificiality of these identities through their constructed nature. In the spatial disconnection between online manifestation of character (on screens) and the physical body, the nature of online communication allows questioning as to what

¹² See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=pwnd>

makes up identity: does a person act one way because of who they are, or does who they are inform how they act? (Marsen, 2005). The use of transcripts created an artificial (and virtual, in more ways than one) Cartesian split between the personality of the characters through their words on a screen and their identities as people sitting behind the keyboards and monitors.

It is revealed in the novel that, through imitation and the anonymity afforded behind computer screens, someone has contacted Idris and posed as the missing Áine. The message of a simple emoticon is transformed into something sinister when attached only to an identity (with the person behind it missing - literally). The lack of more than superficial understanding of their language is covered by the refusal to interact with Idris, leaving only a string of unanswered comments.

Orlagh later goes further and engages Idris in a conversation, also making contact under the guise of Áine's old identity. Through the adoption of both the linguistic style and content, she is able to recreate the identity Áine had constructed for herself, exposing the artificiality of the construct in her believable imitation. She is only found out when the content of the conversation reveals her lack of shared memory (it is outside of what she has been able to gather from old transcripts).

Through the considerations of identity and how it is constructed, the story sought to investigate the disconnection between mind and body. This Cartesian split is noted by Megan Boler (2007), although the cleanness of the split is disputed.

In this chapter I attempted to address the question of the “creative spark” (King, 2000) by detailing the process and discoveries which combined into the beginning of my novel, offering another perspective on where ideas come from. The issue of naming was addressed, with input from Lupton (2003) especially valuable in articulating issues surrounding the current and historical use of names. Genre was investigated with particular attention to the relevance it has to audiences. Online identities were investigated, with the language and behaviour on screens reflecting, fracturing and illuminating real life identities.

Chapter Two: Creative loops

In this chapter I will trace how the boundary between practice-led research and research-led practice began to blur. The direction of the story content is shaped by the exegesis, even as the story also began to exert its own influence, taking over as the driving force for the areas to be researched and explored within the exegesis. The question of genre is revisited and the benefit it offers is investigated. In trying to decide upon a title for the novel, the purpose of titles came under consideration. I also demonstrate how my research into zombies affected their representation within the text.

Serendipitous undead cats

The intersection of science and literature is a feature of speculative fiction, especially seen in novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Current scientific enquiry is moving towards a quantum basis, with this cutting edge of science echoing the little understood advances of Shelley's day. Gribbin (1991) explains the strange possibilities inherent in the workings of quantum physics, the ability for something to theoretically exist in two states at the same time.

Writer George Orwell (1984) related how an author's subject matter is "determined by the age he lives in", bound inescapably by the resulting framework (Neale, 1992, p. 186). At present there is an ever-changing view of science; the body of knowledge is constantly changing with new discoveries at the smallest and largest scales within the universe. In fitting with the ideas of Carl Malmgren, who traces the beginnings of sf to a shift in the balance of man and Nature, this unstable base knowledge makes the time ripe for speculative fiction (Malmgren, 1991). This possible increase in the relevance today of speculative fiction, and all the genres it represents, may be reflected in the observations of Jerry Oltion (2005) who notes the rising popularity and prominence of science fiction in mainstream society.

Given this environment, it may have some significance that when I decided to move from a horror-influenced representation of zombies I turned to one that captured another form of unease, that concerned with the often mysterious world of quantum physics.

I began to revise elements of the story, moving away from an initial, more traditional, portrayal of the zombies because I felt that image of the mindless zombie seeking out brains was too great a departure into the realm of fantasy and horror.¹³ This choice was influenced by the research I'd been doing for the exegesis about genres and their boundaries. This is an example of a time when I'd unthinkingly veered into research-led practice. At the time of this decision, I was still trying to confine my work to one genre, so the research I was doing into genre meant that I was more likely to exclude elements that would make clear generic definition problematic. This change in the balance of the research and practice was in opposition to the aims of practice-led research, which seeks to use creative production as a source for data (Mäkelä, 2007), rather than letting theories and other research dictate the artefact.

The zombies were initially going to eat the brains of people and assume the identity of each new victim in turn, so that while the body of a loved one would appear unchanged, they could be every other person in the world except for who they were originally. This was an idea I favoured, but, because of my worries about genre at the time, an alternative was sought that veered less into the realm of the fantastical.

The resolution for this occurred with the discovery of the “Schrödinger’s cat” thought experiment, devised by Erwin Schrödinger to illustrate a paradox posed by quantum mechanics (Norris, 1998). This initial exposure led to research in the area, seeking further insight into the experiment and the rationale behind it.

Quantum mechanics posits that particles exist in many states at once, and only appear to stabilise in one when under observation (Merali, 2007). In Schrödinger’s experiment, a cat is placed in a steel box where radioactive decay may or may not set off a poison that will kill it, and until the box is opened and the outcome is observed, the cat theoretically exists in both states, dead and alive, simultaneously (Gribbin, 1991). This state of dead-and-alive sparked in my mind a new angle on how I could create my zombies, the research feeding back into the story.

¹³ Here, my own personal experience of the genre clouded my decision. The connection between zombies and the specific consumption of brains, rather than general cannibalism, is only a relatively new inclusion into the traditional lore, introduced in the 1985 movie *The Return of the Living Dead* (Cooper, 2007)

The presence of quantum physics within the narrative, and the alternate universes associated with the zombies, led the research into work dealing with the creation of parallel worlds and how to manage these in a narrative. The use of quantum mechanics to capture a many-worlds universe opened up a new series of possibilities in quantum narratives, creating a space to interrogate fundamental questions on topics such as fate, destiny, ethics and individuality in worlds of doubles and fractured space/time (M.-L. Ryan, 2006).

The use of zombies within the novel began with a vague idea gleaned from personal consumption of media, an impression that turned out to be a narrow view of the representation of zombies. The combination of the personal with research such as Merali (2007) and Gribbin (1991) was evident in the way that current reading then evolved the representation of zombies into a quantum state.

Titles

The importance of titles can be viewed from a number of perspectives. Marie Maclean (1991) sees them as something that illuminates the text, while Umberto Eco believes that the best titles blur and obfuscate (2006). In addition to the guidance, or obfuscation, available to a reader, there is also impact upon the writer. Authors such as Norman Mailer (Moss, 1982, November 7) and Virginia Woolf (1975) demonstrate the variety of approaches that can be taken towards this task.

When deciding upon a working title for the novel, there were considerations about the purpose of titles and their impact upon both reader and writer. Maclean believes that a good title “offers guidance, attempts to control the reader's approach to the text, and the reader's construction of that text” (1991).

The considerations and concerns of choosing a working title can be seen in a journal entry from the time:

Trying to think of a working title today.
[...] But I wasn't happy with anything I
came up with. It's a measure of their
importance that I can't bring myself to
commit to one I'm not comfortable with.

It's like I think the wrong one will steer the book in a different direction than I'd hoped. [...] I guess I don't want to be mislabelling the work and influencing myself as the model author as well as the potential model reader.

Journal entry dated 28/7/05

I set about deciding upon a title by trying to recall phrases or words that stood out. These most often were taken from other creative works, and the certain combination of words that stood out. The appropriation of these ideal words, someone else's words, to headline, frame and interpret my own writing reflects a long history of paratextual influence. In using such devices as titles for stories and chapters, as well as epigraphs, the physical proximity of paratext and text creates a new space in which the reader can create a new meaning (Genette, 1997).

Titles considered included *So Long As We Can Say*, a partial reference to a quotation, *Wordswords* (discussed later) and *A Quantum Prometheus* (an allusion to the subtitle of *Frankenstein* in combination with the genesis of my novel's monster). After considering which of my possible titles would provide the most data for this creation of meaning, a working title, *Jupiter Descending*, was decided upon. This was a phrase that had jumped out while reading one of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Holmes was noting the unprecedented nature of his brother, Mycroft, visiting, likening it to Jupiter descending. Aside from a character in my story being obsessed with Sherlock Holmes stories (a plot point that was later dropped, then reinstated again, as will be discussed in a later section), it also could be associated with astrology (if Jupiter referred to the planet) and the prophecies being created (these include horoscopes), or associations with the Roman god in the power of the zombie prophets. The descending part could refer to what might be an unwelcome visit from the gods (and presumably from the planet), as well as generally suggesting descent and recession away from something.

While the story now had a title, this was always considered a temporary move and I remained open to choosing a more suitable one during the writing or once the novel was completed. The anxiety that led to this lack of permanent decision turned my attention to the experiences of other authors in this process. While some authors such as Norman Mailer choose to name their books as early as possible (Moss, 1982, November 7), others do so when the work is complete or near completion. I focused on these at this point, as I was looking for validation of the choice not to commit to a title at this point in writing. The advantage in naming a story after it is written is that the title can arise from a theme or specific element of the story to provide resonance, as seen in Eco's choice for *The Name of the Rose*. This book was named after the story was completed, chosen for the final line of the book as well as other allusions, but also because he hoped it wouldn't "lend itself to one-sided interpretations" (Eco, 2006, p. 130), with its ambiguity and multiplicity of sources defying any one interpretation.

Virginia Woolf's diaries record the impermanence of her titles, often following titles with qualifiers such as "or whatever it is to be called" (Woolf, 1975, p. 146). There is also a record of her having finished a 900 page novel that still remained nameless (Woolf, 1975, p. 225). This suggested that the selection of a title while still in the process of creation may not be as important a decision as I thought, helping to keep the decision in perspective.

In negotiating a balance between the influence and importance of working titles, my own experience captured some of the feedback that can occur between novel and title.

Inevitability of self-fulfilling prophecies

A key question when dealing with prophecies is whether or not they accurately predict future events. John Clute and John Grant (1997) have observed that the inevitability of prophecies in fantasy is balanced by a vagueness that hides their true nature and the fates they foretell.

The self-fulfilling prophecies were initially only used by characters as tools of influence. As the power of the zombies changed, Idris's position as prophet and zombie led to him becoming a walking self-fulfilling prophecy. He creates

powerful prophecies that always come true, so when he expects people to behave in a certain way toward him, because of his influence over them, this is exactly what they do.

I looked at prophecies in other works of speculative fiction to see how issues of free-will and determinism were addressed. Clute and Grant note that in fantasy the events that have been prophesied usually end up occurring, also observing that to “preserve free will and narrative suspense, prophecies tend to become wholly clear only in hindsight” (1997, p. 789).

William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, a play that contains many elements of speculative fiction in its supernatural themes and characters, offers some insight into the use of prophecies within fiction, and Sophocles’ character of Oedipus provides an earlier meditation on fate and free-will. Recent books (broadly contained within the designation of speculative fiction) that centre on elements of prophecies include Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman’s *Good Omens* and Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. In all of the above examples, the prophecies prove accurate and unavoidable.

Science fiction and fantasy often deal with the destiny of a character. In recent times, the Harry Potter series has provided a meditation on prophecies and their nature. Author J.K. Rowling explores this idea through a central prophecy within the overall story that “becomes the catalyst for a situation that would never have occurred if it had not been made” (“J.K.Rowling Official Site: FAQ,” n.d.).

This idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy was explicitly referenced in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling, 1999).

“‘Oh, I wouldn’t read that if I were you,’ said the assistant lightly, looking to see what Harry was staring at. ‘You’ll start seeing death omens everywhere, it’s enough to frighten anyone to death’” (Rowling, 1999, p. 45).

After the introduction of the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies, later in the book Harry refuses to engage in any prophesising about the impending execution of Buckbeak, instead pretending to see a future where Buckbeak flies away. His is the prophecy that ends up being fulfilled.

The inclusion of self-fulfilling prophecies led to an examination of the unique way in which these commented upon destiny. Their fulfilment isn't necessarily the reflection of a loss of free will, instead it can be seen that they offer a kind of freedom. With the knowledge of the future, the agents in the present can become empowered to bring about these glimpses of what might be (Franke, 2005). In this view, it is then the present shaping the future, and thus the free will of the agent remains intact.

With this in mind, I tended towards the inevitability of the prophecies. The issue of free-will was then an area that could be explored from the perspective of its loss, and the effect of this on the characters.

The use of prophecies within the story prompted research into how other authors negotiated their inclusion and the question regarding their ultimate fulfilment. The obfuscation of prophecies described by Clute and Grant (1997) is a technique that is used within my novel, especially important with the inevitability of the outcome.

Genre revisited

After having decided that I would write a speculative fiction novel, I didn't do any further research (at that earlier stage) into how this may impact the creation and reception of the work. My journal from the time reflected my concerns about how such research might impact the creative work:

[...] am I going to be writing to fit elements of the genre, when they might not necessarily be appropriate? Will the work turn out to be a certain genre just because I somehow nominated the work as such before I started?

Journal entry dated 17/7/05

Concerned about the prospect of research-led practice, I wrote for a while without doing further research into my chosen genre. However, when the exegesis began to draw these issues of classification into the foreground, I

wanted to look for reasons why genre might be relevant to me, and in what areas such focus might be appropriate.

James (1994) offers three areas in which considerations of genre are important: criticism, consumption and marketing. James continues to investigate how academics and critics regard genre as a tool for areas such as analysis, classification and generalisation, and comparison of works within and between genres.

The last of James's areas of consideration, marketing, is the one that seemed most relevant to me initially, and began to lessen the self-imposed frustration at trying to fit my work within a single genre.

An interview with author Karen Joy Fowler (Sussex, 2005) highlights how an undefined genre can make books harder to market and provided evidence to me that the effort could be beneficial. She discusses how she struggled to sell her first novel, *Sarah Canary*, a story that combined a variety of genres, the lack of any one defining genre seen as an impediment to sales and marketing. With the aim of the practice-led PhD to produce a manuscript of publishable quality, this apparent preference for easily defined genres within publishing meant that it was a relevant concern to me.

The audience approaches a creative work with expectations about the conventions of a genre, and may base decisions about what they will read largely on the genre of the novel, and to that end, there are marketing decisions to be based on the genre. These included expected readership and how best to target marketing toward them, in addition to ways of bringing in any new potential audience. In addition to the effect of genre on marketing, the associated choices in turn reinforce the notions and expectations of genre (Malik, 2008).

Once I had established one definite area in which genre was applicable to me, I began to explore another area that James had highlighted: consumption. I was particularly interested in its role as mediator between author and reader. The identification of a work as belonging to a certain genre allows the potential for a more accurate anticipation of the model reader, knowledge which can be used to minimise the chance of any later confusion or frustration.

Genre can provide some of the information for this profile of a model reader, with Donald Spence noting that we can listen with a "bias toward coherence and

continuity" (1982). In order to take advantage of this, an idea of the reader and the way they will think is required, information that can be signalled by "the choice of a particular kind of encyclopaedia or ensemble of cultural references, particular vocabulary or style, genre" (Caesar, 1999, p. 123). There are different expectations that a reader has when coming to a work within a specific genre. For example, when confronted with something they don't understand or that is unexplained, "the mainstream reader might be disconcerted, while the sci-fi [sic] reader calmly trusts the writer will eventually explain" (DuVal, 2004, para. 4). As noted earlier, I was already trusting that I built a model reader like Eco through the use of transcripts that included leetspeak, and the anticipated patience relied upon this type of reader that the genre attracted.

The research into the importance of genre illuminated the areas in which such a designation could be helpful, strengthening the connection between the genre and the novel and exegesis. DuVal's (2004) idea that genre could target a specific audience offered a new freedom into the storytelling, with more space to trust the reader.

Redressing transgression

Abjection and transgression of bodies informs most of the critical work surrounding the representation of zombies. Zimmerman (2005) locates the source of the horror in the breached boundaries of the corpses, the ultimate transgression between life and death. England (2006) explores how this challenging of dichotomies renders none safe, challenging the validity of the borders between concepts as dramatic as good and evil.

I had initially created zombies that were externally clean and clinical with no gore or horror of brains or rotting corpses. Further reading about horror convinced me that there should be some consequence of what was essentially a corpse decomposing in the same physical space as the living flesh of the zombies. Their lack of outward change meant that any physical effects would have to be wholly internal. Given this, the most interesting area for any impairment was the brain, as this could lead to more externally observable symptoms in behaviour.

There is external transgression added once the two bodies are separated again, with most ending up with a mix of live and dead flesh. The horror is captured through one of the guards, Rika, who is disgusted by this outcome, and especially by Hazpop's use of maggots to clean away these traces of the corpse that may have been spliced into the surviving body.

Examining my earlier choice through the prism of Ulmer's "mystory", specifically the interplay between levels in his idea of a field of knowledge, personal interest in zombies is what shaped much of their early formation (as well as some interest in the quantum physics used to animate them). Later recourse to the other levels of knowledge located the story within a wider social context, albeit one still focused by my unique views and interests in the subject. Popular representations of the zombies had been absorbed by my consumption of mostly visual media, namely film and television, and this was a representation that I had deliberately chosen to eschew, as detailed earlier. However, with my newfound interest, I decided to then delve to the other level of understanding detailed by Ulmer, the expert discussion of my item of interest.

In response, I decided to use more of the psychoanalytic reading of zombies, Susan Zimmerman summarises their power as representing fears about breaching the open/contained dichotomy of the body and where the "putrefying corpse represents the ultimate border problem" (2005, p. 101). They disturb and, in doing so, point to the artificiality of the dichotomies of not only living/dead and interior/exterior, the instability of borders extending to concepts such as good/evil and other/self (England, 2006). This possibility offered by speculative fiction "tears a hole in the fabric of Reality, thereby revealing to what extent that apparently self-evident entity is a social construct, a fiction itself" (Malmgren, 1991, p. 101).

The culmination of this new view of the zombies was the expansion of the living death of the zombies, delving deeper into the dead half of the fused identity. This half now was more explicitly a decomposing presence within the living being – the breached body literally rotting from the inside. The grotesque is both minimised and magnified with the containment of the decomposition within the living vessel, the exterior remaining intact and sanitised, concealing the true border transgression inside. The bodies of the zombies are at once

putrefied and unmarked, their state even more horrifying because it can pass unnoticed by themselves or others. Idris is particularly disturbed that he didn't notice that he had been dead for years.

The physical consequences of this degradation had to be addressed, and in order to keep the zombies ambulatory, this became focused on the potential damage to the brain - the most delicate area and thus the most affected by the overlay of rotting flesh in the same space. Thus the physical became linked to the psychological – constructs of self and identity are exposed in their loss. The declining ability of my zombies to hold onto previous beliefs, and their resulting openness to influence from outside forces, is a feature of zombie fiction. These works often explore “contemporary anxieties about our lack of control over our own lives, and fears concerning the precariousness of identity and subjectivity to which the situation gives rise” (Jancovich, 1992, p. 92).

This fragility of identity is mirrored in the narrative in the character of Maya, who has power over others while she is simultaneously losing control over her own life. She has to fight to remember what she actually believes in because she can no longer tell her thoughts apart from those around her. This is also echoed in the Ephemeral/wrangler relationship, where Piet has to lose his own identity to ensure that Raf can keep hold of his own, as well as in Idris and Orlagh's relationship, where each is vulnerable to the influence of the beliefs of the other.

The story doesn't conclude with the destruction of all the zombies, as may be demanded by traditional narratives where their presence is subversive and disruptive (England, 2006). Instead, if we assume the final section does happen, the story ends with the zombies achieving peace and stability in their states. They are given choice and power over themselves, over how they experience their worlds, an autonomy that frees them but that doesn't resolve their state of living death.

However, if Orlagh is just telling the last section as a story, then Idris (and presumably Maya) both die in the fire that Maya has arranged to wipe out the last traces of SACER. Her actions were motivated by the group's role in the creation of the zombies, and she takes the position of society, demanding that the status quo be restored and the transgressions punished and set right. Within the wider society that contains the zombies, there is often a subversion of authority figures,

who are often shown to be “at least as callous, brutal, unthinking and threatening as the zombies from whom they are supposed to save the social order” (Jankovich, 1992, p. 91). This element of subversion of authority ties in with a theme of the novel, and especially Maya, who serves as both authority and subversive zombie.

The research opened up a new way of viewing elements already present, allowing insight into their significance. Because of the nature of the work as in-progress, this was able to shape the resulting drafts of the story, especially affecting the representation of zombies. This feedback allowed my artefact to draw upon the research, with my own creative choices also offering a way to examine the ideas and theories uncovered through the exegesis.

This chapter followed the progression of the story as the writing process began to provide data for the exegesis, and this in turn shaped the process. In this chapter I reconsidered the role of genre by seeking what it could offer rather than by focusing on its restrictions. I explored the role and importance of titles by placing my own experience alongside those of other authors, examining both through the prism of academic work. I also began to consider how I was going to resolve the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies within the artefact by looking at how the ideas of fate and destiny had been used in other novels. Finally, the chapter traced the evolution of my portrayal of zombies, beginning with the initial idea that had been shaped by the possibilities of quantum physics (Gribbin, 1991). This representation was revisited in light of the critical work on zombies and the source of their horror as ultimate boundary transgressors was restored.

Chapter Three: Ending

In this chapter I examine how the balance of practice and research shifted during the later stages of the project. This covers the period of the final drafts of the novel, many of which were influenced by earlier experiences in the composition of the exegesis. Ibrahim Taha explores the role of drafting within literary texts, seeing them as always in progress, citing the numerous revisions and new editions that texts can go through (2004). Taha believes that drafts capture a nexus between theory and practice, visible in this raw state, and in its progression. Stephen King (2000) offers some insight into his drafting process, revealing that he only begins to focus on and observe themes that might be emerging in the second draft, nurturing them in the existing story rather than artificially creating them. In keeping with this reflective position, this chapter revisits issues such as genre and titles from a later point in the project.

Internet language

The emerging language of online communication is constantly shifting (Crystal, 2006). In-group status is only preserved while the terms are exclusive, which leads to new terms being created when the old fall into common usage. This phenomenon is illustrated by an exception to the rule: the “LOLcat” meme notable for its longevity even with its spread into mainstream media (Cox, 2008).

This speed of change was evident when I decided to include some of the “leetspeak” I had cut, having become more trusting in my model reader’s ability to tolerate and understand the potentially frustrating language. When it was decided to reintroduce these elements, the old sections of the story were retrieved. Reading them back I found that, in the two years since I’d written them, the language, especially slang and in-jokes, had moved on. The section that had been taken out preserved the trends that had been current at the time, and the fact that it was initially taken out of the story meant that it hadn’t been updated during the drafting and editing process. The earlier draft saved that iteration of the “chaotic text”, capturing the deletion and allowing the re-addition of the text (Taha, 2004).

The leetspeak of the characters moved on from the trends that can be seen in the conversations between Áine and Idris, with the conversation between Idris and Orlagh introducing a newer trend of language that deliberately uses poor grammar and spelling (such as “I can has...?”) as seen in phenomena such as LOLcats¹⁴. This helps to date the conversations (which meant I had to be mindful of dates and years lining up), and also captures the faddish nature of some of the language and the speed of its change.

This was an unintentional benefit that offered a clearer contrast between an early draft containing online conversations in the story and the drafts that were written later, which introduced new elements of language. It further enforced the passage of time between the two in the narrative world, as well as capturing within the novel the constantly evolving nature of this cybercommunication (Crystal, 2006).

In noticing this effect, I became interested in the temporal aspects of the internet, particularly in the ever mutating and evolving “memes” within online communication, especially in blogs. Memes were named by Richard Dawkins¹⁵ to describe the idea that there is a transmission of culture comparable to that of genetic information by genes, a metaphor that has been appropriated to describe a new form of communication found on the internet (Jeffreys, 2000). The spread of the LOLcats phenomenon, one such meme, combines photographs of cats (or sometimes other animals) with captions that have poor spelling and grammar (Grossman, 2007). These both integrate the language of past memes, as well as creating a new way of speaking and spelling (Rutkoff, 2007). The resulting language has spread to usage in blogs and emails, and occasionally into real life, outside of and separated from the specific pictures.

The phenomenon has also moved beyond the boards and webpages, reported on by mainstream media, who at the same time reinforce the exclusivity of the language to a certain group (Cox, 2008). What sets this particular phenomenon apart is that, unlike the transience of other memes that mutate and/or fall out of favour rapidly (as is the case for the early references in my novel that sparked

¹⁴ LOLcat (Laugh Out Loud cat) language can be seen in the images created at <http://icanhascheezburger.com>. For an overview see Rutkoff (2007).

¹⁵ *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1976) contains a more detailed explanation of the original meaning for the word “meme”.

this enquiry), it is notable in its longevity, and it's this enduring appeal that has given time for a wider audience to pick up some of the specialised language and effectively join the ingroup.

The chance discovery of the record of the evolving online language led to further investigation of this phenomenon. This resulted in a clearer understanding of the linguistic shift, and strengthened the attempts to preserve this serendipitous discovery.¹⁶

Title redux

The role of the title came into focus again after the initial connection between the story and the working title was removed. Eschewing the approach of parataxis and letting the reader create their own connection between the new story and the old title, I instead began to consider a new title and, with the exegesis in mind, began to closely examine my reasoning behind the choice.

With rewriting, recasting and editing, the Sherlock Holmes element in the story all but disappeared, rendering the previous title, *Jupiter Descending*, confusing and irrelevant. I was beginning to strain to retain the connected elements simply to justify retention of the title.

The title was changed to *The Ghost Waves*, the translation of one of the items within the story, the *gespensterfelder* (GPS) device that tracks zombies. The term, *gespensterfelder*, was used by Albert Einstein to describe the wave-particle duality of light (Bohr, 1958). On a surface level it gave a better impression of the book, since it does involve ghosts, and it implies communication, specifically farewells, at some level. It also sets up the expectation of the reader that some supernatural elements will occur, while at the same time the word “waves”, a term associated with some friendliness or at least courtesy, diffuses some of the anxiety contained within the supernatural. In the actual meaning of the word *gespensterfelder* there is a further connection with the zombies in the duality of their states.

A problem arose when further research uncovered the fact that the literal translation of *gespensterfelder* is “ghost fields”, which is less relevant and threw

¹⁶ Following submission of the novel and the subsequent feedback from examiners, these sections were ultimately cut again from the final novel. One chat transcript remains.

the title into doubt once more. I considered alternate titles, in the face of this discovery, the main reason being that the mistranslation, or potential of one, introduced an element of erroneousness that I was trying to avoid (a parallel with the desire to avoid the unprofessional look of the punctuation and spelling from the online conversations).

The indecision over this choice led to further research in the area of titles and their importance. The relationship between work and title can be both ephemeral and crucial. A survey of authors found editors often removed long-held titles, separating them from the work to which they were attached. However, the degree to which some authors fought these changes hints at the importance of the relationship (Moss, 1982, November 7).

Further research into the area of titles helped to shape my own opinion of these in my own novel. An important factor in choosing the title of the book was the intended audience, which is a broader group than just the readers of the text (Genette, 1997). Not everyone exposed to the title (through shelves at bookstores, libraries, reviews, word of mouth, etc.) will have any other knowledge of the contents of the book, or will go on to read it.

A title is also intended for transmission, not just reception (Genette, 1997, p. 75), which was the main reason I decided against one of my early choices, *Wordswords*, as the title for the book. Like the heteronyms and Schrödinger's cat there are two outcomes, and it requires a choice before a stable meaning can be assigned. But the resulting difficulty in pronunciation would compromise the purposes of the title when addressing its broader audience, who are more likely than those immersed in the story to be frustrated or confused rather than tempted by it.

Titles can also allude to intertextuality, giving a special sense of deeper connection to those who identify the layers of meaning (Maclean, 1991). The web of connections between the title and the *gespensterfelder*, the zombies, Einstein, duality, ghosts and goodbyes offer a number of references for readers to form connections with the title, and between the title and text.

In the light of the new thoughts uncovered by this research, a choice was made to keep the title, as it was still a fitting one, and there was an added dimension from this ambiguity of translation that nicely encapsulated some of

the ideas within the novel. I also decided that having the exegesis influence what I otherwise thought was a good choice was allowing it too much power over the novel it was intended to support.

Further investigation revealed the translation as “ghost waves” was actually used in the work of Niels Bohr (1958, p. 36). In addition, the spirit of Einstein’s remark, as related by Bohr, was revealed as being especially appropriate, as, like Schrödinger and his thought experiment, Einstein was seeking to subvert the idea he described. This use of words to compromise a concept made it an even more apt title for my novel.

When the original use of the term *gespensterfelder* was removed from the story, because of the struggle to keep it earlier and the accompanying work done in the exegesis, I felt a strong desire to keep the term within the story in some capacity. For this reason, I didn’t simply abandon the concept, instead seeking out an alternative use for it. This probably wouldn’t have been the case had I not been writing the exegesis alongside the novel, and recording the process while it was ongoing and in flux, rather than solely as a reflection from the end.

Towards an ambiguous end

In this section I will examine how the plot influenced decisions about narrative voice, and how a greater understanding of narrative theory gained through research helped to support the aims I had as an author.

The role of the narrator within fiction is mediated and represented through choices regarding point of view as well as through choices regarding narrative voice. Seymour Chatman (1980) details elements of narration, and the possible role and presence of the narrator within the story. Narrative voice is established through the expression of both the narrator and the characters within the text (Aczel, 1998).

The creation of the final section of the novel highlights another instance of the confluence of ideas uncovered by the exegesis, and my subsequent strengthening of this relationship within the creative piece. This constant praxis of research and practice shaped my ambition for the end section of the novel, creating a wholly new perspective on my aims and process for the final chapters.

The final section foregrounds the idea introduced by the zombies, Schrödinger and the heteronyms, one that could almost be termed quantum ambiguity, where two interpretations of outcome exist and are plausible up until one is chosen.

This section begins as a story Orlagh is telling Idris, and there is evidence throughout the preceding sections that if Idris can hear her, then it is possible that she is creating, through him, the events she is narrating. There is also the possibility that he is either not there, or can't hear her through the cells, which means that the whole section is just Orlagh in her cell telling a story while they wait to die.

If it is real, then the style needs to allow for another shift in the narrative when they are freed. At this point Orlagh will no longer need to be telling a story and thus the normal narrative will resume. The ambiguity of the final section is a continuation of the themes running throughout the novel; power and destiny, belief and fiction, stories and truth.

Little things like attributing dialogue to characters also became important when considering the section as an oral narrative, as Orlagh would need some way to make this clear to Idris in the other cell.

The exception to this is the part where Idris is relaying the conversation from Áine in her alternate reality – Orlagh has him employing a different voice (reflected in a different font), which she could also be using in her telling.

Over the whole story I was striving for mimesis by using the limited third person with a covert narrator. In this approach the narrator largely serves as a “stenographer” or “camera eye” recording the story as it unfolds, where the convention is to ignore the narrator’s minimised presence (Chatman, 1980).

The decision regarding point of view was a choice that evolved alongside the story. Initially it was with the main characters of Idris and Orlagh, but with the expansion of the story came characters who existed and operated in scenes without either of the two characters. After debating whether these scenes could be cut or rewritten, it was ultimately decided to employ a shifting point of view (POV) of third person limited. A benefit of this approach was that it gave a range of experiences of the events that privileged no single interpretation and offered

no overall truth to the story. The whole picture and scope of the story is thus never shown from any one perspective, leaving parts ambiguous and unknown.

It also offers the option of withholding this privilege, as in the case of Piet, who is the only main character whose viewpoint is never known. This serves to solidify his role as cipher for Raf, and his own chosen role in their partnership.

With the shifting points of view, there were occasionally glimpses into the thoughts and attitudes of the POV character. For Orlagh's section this presentation style had to be balanced against the possibility that she had taken over as the narrator. In order to achieve this, the presence of the narrator needed to be no more jarring or obvious than in other sections, so I limited the direct free thought in the earlier sections. I included some, in order to be able to leave in Orlagh's comments and (possible) asides in the last section, and to give the audience the freedom to read it as Orlagh's storytelling flourishes or as a continuation of the early style.¹⁷

Early in the artefact, this element can be seen when Áine is going off with their mother to “whatever boringness the two of them got up to” (p. 21). In the final section, Orlagh and Idris are described as being shrouded by “creepy zombie power” (p. 301)¹⁸, a phrase that echoes Orlagh's earlier asides within the narrative, but could also be seen as an embellishment in the story she was telling.

In practice, the ambiguity of these final chapters proved a hard balance to strike. These sections were the most technically intricate to write, requiring a careful selection of words, an attention to detail that then spread back all the way to the beginning of the story. Involved was the examination of choices of narrator, point of view characters and narrative style.

In order to have the section stand up to multiple readings, it was important that there was no abrupt shift from the earlier narrative voice, yet there had to remain the possibility that the previous narrator had been replaced (assuming the Orlagh hadn't been the covert narrator for the whole story). As a result of the choice to minimise the role of the narrator, no narrator stands out in the earlier sections of the novel to provide evidence either contradict or confirm this

¹⁷ This also raises the question of the “unreliable narrator”, an area of narrative theory not in the scope of this thesis. For further reading see Chatman (1980).

¹⁸ Both of these references were cut from the re-submitted novel, however this does not affect the reader's ability to read the final section as a continuation of Orlagh's POV.

interpretation. This both helped and hindered the writing of the last section, in that it meant a transition could slip by unnoticed, but this also meant any sudden intrusion of a narrator *would* be noticed.

Writer Neil Gaiman relays in an interview the variety of influences on the narrative voice he aims for (Bolton, 2005). With the narrative voice I had always striven to keep the line between nonnarrated and covertly narrated text ambiguous, through the use of what Chatman calls “indirect free form”, where insertions into the text of non-attributed thoughts or actions may or may not be filtered through a narrator, with the possibility that they could legitimately be attributed to either the character or the narrator (Chatman, 1980). The reduced intrusion of narrator also meant there was a question of whether there was a single unifying narrator across the novel, or if this changed along with the shifting perspectives from chapter to chapter.

The role of narrators in general is to act as mediator between the author and reader, although the exact nature of their influence can vary. In my novel I sought to minimise the conscious experience of the narrator, except when the identity of the narrator became blurred in the final section.

Open texts

Umberto Eco explores his notion of open texts by beginning with details of musical compositions that require the performer to make decisions about how to realise the scores, the performers joining the composers in “making” the text (Eco, 1979). An extreme version of this can be seen in B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*, a novel presented in loose sections, with only the first and last marked as such and the rest free to be read in any order (Taylor, 2008). This parataxis requires an active reader, constructing and ordering the content to make a whole, the combination of the sections offering proximal context. Eco, however, adds a further condition of the text being “organically whole”, the text being a completed product with openness coming from the role of the reader in interpretation and performance (Eco, 1979). The act is one of collaboration, which anticipates the role and participation of the audience (Eco, 1979).

Eco’s idea of the open text suited my desire to create an uncertain narrator. The choices detailed above regarding the final section of narrative led to the re-

reading and editing of the novel so that Orlagh's narrative could slip into the story in the blurred space opened up by the ambiguity and covert nature of the narrator.

The construction of the end section also offered a new view of the text, with the narrative taking on the properties of Schrödinger's cat – two possible outcomes existing in the same space until the ambiguity is resolved, making the novel a new zombie text that resisted a definitive reading. While sharing some features as a hypertext, as discussed below, the fact that the different readings exist in the same space, and within the same words, also connects the structure of the story to the content. The "openness" of this text then becomes temporal, much as the cat in the box remains in its indeterminate state only as long as the lid remains closed and the outcome not observed.

The attempts I made to keep the interpretation ambiguous led to research into open texts, and specifically Umberto Eco's definition of them. Eco considers texts to be open when they are created with the intention that the reader completes the text through the act of reading, taking an active role in the reception and interpretation (Eco, 1979). The openness is then reduced once the reader has interacted with the text, opening the box and finding whether the cat has survived or not. Combining this structural element with the content of the novel, Eco ties the development of the idea of openness within text to the scientific theories of that time – those of Bohr and Heisenberg, and the duality of light – the very problem that led to the coining of the phrase *gespensterfelder* (Eco, 1979).

The state of the prophecies

The use of prophecies has the potential to illuminate issues of fate and free will in their ultimate outcomes, and also in how they are brought about. With considerations of power central to the destiny of the characters, there is an issue of using the words of oppressors to resist and challenge this power. Marsen (2004) investigates the use of prophecies in science fiction films, finding that victories often entail reframing the question of freedom within the overarching system rather than overthrowing them.

The issue of the outcome of the prophecies was always going to be one of central importance, given that one of the original story ideas was the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies and the loss of free will. Early in my research for the exegesis I came across a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson, “the efforts which we make to escape from our destiny only serve to lead us into it” (Emerson, 1860). The tragic inevitability of this appealed to me, and its discovery before I’d even written a creative word surely created its own inevitability about the outcome of the prophecies.

In considering the novel’s treatment of the free will in prophecies, the ultimate test can be seen in the death Maya had composed for Idris. Even with his power, Idris’s death follows word for word Maya’s account of it, its inevitability either the ultimate triumph of Maya’s prophecies over Idris’s (if the narrative resumes after Orlagh’s rescue of them), or a reflection of Orlagh’s belief in the need to fulfil it (if she is the one telling a story that repeats Maya’s words). This is important in signalling how far (or not) Orlagh has come in terms of questioning beliefs.

Idris is only able to resist the oppression of Maya because he shares the instrument of oppression/power. Sky Marsen analyses the content of the science fiction movie *Dark City*, a movie set in a world where people are unknowingly posed and pre-programmed with sets of knowledge and memories in order to observe their response to the situations (2004). Through the investigation of agents within a structure of power, *Dark City* asks “what, in light of our limitations and conditioning, is our ultimate freedom?” (2004, p. 145)

The ultimate answer to the power of the prophecies is frustrated by the indeterminate nature of the end of the narrative; it is impossible to make definitive statements about the fates that are ambiguous. The multiple worlds that are created and exist within the narrative become part of the structure of the narrative itself, creating a novel of multiple endings that begins to resemble some aspects of a hypertext. Such a text is one that is read and accessed in a non-linear manner, blurring the boundary between the writer and the reader as the reader is involved in the ultimate creation of a text (Landow, 1994). The unspoken contract that reader accepts when beginning a book - that there will be an unchangeable ending – is subverted and compromised by hypertext narratives.

The lessons for the reader about inevitability and fate that traditional narratives impart are set in opposition to the freedom of hypertext narratives to re-write the choices and ending (Eco, 2006). In this view, the hypertextual nature of the novel compromises any attempt at definitive pronouncement on the nature of prophecies and fate that it reflects, and in doing so actually offers its own perspective on the nature of fate and destiny.

The nature of prophecies and their power over free will was examined, and compared to other examples of how this power can be overcome (Marsen, 2004). The ending of the story explored some of the critical work on hypertexts (Landow, 1994), which provided a new way of viewing the alternate endings encoded in the text. The nature of endings within texts is challenged by this approach, resisting any definitive reading, a condition I was hoping to emulate within my own ending.

Reflections from the end

As I began to reflect on my experience of writing both novel and exegesis and reviewing the progress through the exegesis when preparing to write a final account of it, I began to see more clearly all the times I'd veered into the area of research-led practice. Eco's view of narrated research led to the inclusion of these missteps, with notes highlighting problem areas added after the fact. It also ensured that these deviations from the aim of practice-led research were not just kept within the story, but explored for the influence they had on the story.

More significantly, the specific elements that I had explored within the exegesis took on a new significance to the story, to the point where I was almost unwilling to change things in the novel because they'd been spoken to, in length, in the exegesis. Elements that might otherwise have been taken out or revised were shaped and twisted to fit into the novel, since they had already been documented in the record of its creation. The danger of writing such an exegesis with the creative piece still unfinished apparent in the littered references lingering through the novel.

This issue may have been avoided if, following the practice of Nimkulrat (2007), the process was documented during creation, and the role of researcher only taken once the artefact is completed. In this approach, the knowledge of the

researcher-as-practitioner is accessible through memories and the recorded documentation, and the completed artefact remains unaffected by the subsequent analysis.

However, this examination might not have been all negative, as the careful consideration of any drastic deletions or changes isn't necessarily an unwanted consequence. Keeping the elements when they had outgrown their original function also offered some new directions that might otherwise not have been explored.

Postscript

Some changes were made to the exegesis and novel following the initial submission of the thesis in order to take into account the feedback received from the examiners and my supervisor. Given the production of the novel as a component of an academic work, these were ultimately the ideal readers, and their suggestions were addressed with their important role in mind.

One main concern addressed was the length of the novel, and in response the word count was cut by approximately one third. Another concern raised was the thin characterisation, and this was addressed with reference to clearer motivations for the actions of the characters, especially Diane, Idris and Raf. Sections were re-written to avoid exposition and cliché, and the first few chapters were removed to bring the action to the forefront of the novel.

In addition, the methodology of the exegesis was unclear, so an effort was made to clarify the mention of autoethnography and why this ultimately wasn't the methodology chosen.

In this final chapter I have shown how I came to terms with the influence of the exegesis on the creative piece, but not without some self-doubt and introspection along the way. The nature of endings was examined with reference to ambiguity and hypertexts. The ultimate resolution of the prophecies was examined for its position regarding fate and destiny. A final title was chosen, echoing the ideas in the earlier work on the impermanence of titles when it was changed from the working title. The new title invoked fears of mistranslation, but ultimately that added another layer to the multiple readings it offered.

The journey was not only one of creation and the recording of this process, or examining and analysing the underpinnings of both, it was also one of growing to accept and embrace the format of the novel within the unique environment of the creative writing PhD.

Conclusion

As a new and unsure writer, looking for guidance wherever I could find it, I fell into a trap of constantly viewing the story through an academic kaleidoscope of genres and theories rather than interrogating these academic ideas through the unique viewpoint of my own work and working practice. In retrospect, the right balance for me as a practitioner may have been to have embarked on research only after the artefact was well-formed and solid. This would ensure that it was able to clearly guide the research, as well as to survive the rigors of academic interrogation.

This investigation began, and was continually interacting with, the idea of genre. The importance of genre in shaping the novel was flagged from the very beginning of the process, and so it proved to be. As I have shown, it preoccupied my thinking and informed narrative choices. Through the research – most importantly James’ constructive uses for genre (James, 1994), and the thoughts of other writers on the matter - I managed to find a way to reframe the question of genre into something that was necessary yet flexible, and thus the act of researching the problematic areas of my writing helped me to find peace with this issue.

The presence of zombies within the text changed through several iterations, from a visceral, abject one at the beginning of the process, over time shifting to a quantum physics inspired version (Gribbin, 1991). The first change was due to incidental reading for the creative aspect of the PhD, in part due to the problematic question of genre. The second change that re-introduced the boundary transgressing function of zombies was influenced by the reading done for the exegesis component (Zimmerman, 2005). The initial change remained, with the two ideas that were meant to replace each other instead becoming synthesised into a new imagining of the zombie.

The act of naming characters invoked some questions of authorial interference, which led me to seek guidance from research in the area. With the ideas of fate, free will (Warren, 2002) and naturalistic style (Lupton, 2003) that this uncovered, I sought to combine this thinking into a balance that meant I made choices I was happy with.

The fate and inevitability of the prophecies was interrogated within and by the text, with research in the area contributing to my understanding of how the text dealt with these issues. The structure of the story ultimately informed this final understanding, and the nature of open texts (Eco, 1979) and hypertexts (Landow, 1994) offered some answers, as well as opening up questions regarding the nature of texts and the limits of their insight.

Finally, some changes were made in response to the feedback of the examiners, recognising their unique position as the audience for the novel and exegesis.

The areas of investigation explored in this thesis mean that this PhD is a new and significant contribution to knowledge because of the unique perspective that my novel offered in illuminating a variety of issues.

This record of this process may have strayed from its original aim of strictly practice-led research, but it instead has become an exploration of the pitfalls that the creative PhD can pose to unwary authors.

And ultimately, while the novel was shaped and influenced by the concurrent production of the exegesis more than was intended, their tangled nature was responsible for a world of quantum zombies that I would not trade.

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