

**MR LONDON**

and

**EIGHT TROPES OF  
FRIENDSHIP NARRATIVE**

by

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# ABSTRACT

This submission contains a novel and a critical essay, each engaging with the philosophical ideals and narrative forms of male friendship within Western storytelling.

*Mr London*, is a literary fantasy fiction novel which charts the tragic adventure of Benjamin Farthing as he travels through worlds and wars to save a friend. Along the way, Benjamin discovers that nobody is immune to the potential atrocities inspired by friendship, including himself. The final part of the novel is provided as a summary.

The critical essay, *Eight Tropes of Friendship Narratives*, explores how fictional friendship seeks to identify and concretise itself within narratives, and how this influenced the writing of *Mr London*. The essay examines the commonality of the quest plot in friendship narratives and how the structure of the quest plot serves to build and explore friendship, before identifying eight narrative tropes of friendship – cohabitation, feasts, other realms, confessions, oaths, battles, sacrifice and leave-taking. Finally, the essay discusses friendship's tendency to disappear from fiction in order to fully realise itself, and how this process is used to shape the individual.

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**MR LONDON**

MEPHISTOPHELES: Now, Faustus, what wouldst thou have me do?

FAUSTUS: I charge thee wait upon me whilst I live,

To do whatever Faustus shall command,

Be it to make the moon drop from her sphere

Or the ocean to overwhelm the world.

*Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe, 1604

**PART ONE**  
**CRANE**



# Chapter 1

This place was good, wasn't it? Selwood Gardens. Kind of like a meteor crater in a rainforest, only in reverse; a green hole in the landscape of London with a steaming rim of yellow-brick terraces. When you stood in the middle of it all, it was more like a wood than a garden, with its leafy ceiling of oak, elm and sycamore. A hundred years ago it'd attracted the type of residents who filled their homes with rosewood Bechsteins and first editions of Byron, but now the flats were being overtaken by designer interiors in velvet, steel and glass, and bloody massive tellies.

I finished my third bottle of beer and pushed up the window. I leant out into soupy August air. Beneath me were constellations of residents on cashmere blankets, rogue planet businessmen, children orbiting fast around au pairs. It was all familiar. All small. Far too small. Like going back to primary school and sitting on one of those tiny plastic chairs. I closed my eyes. Squeezed them tight. I listened to leaves. Branches creaking. Shoes on gravel. Phone notifications. Someone laughing. And this place was good. Good, good, good.

Oh, sod off, no, it wasn't.

It was bloody rubbish.

Because one by one, my friends had all coupled off and disappeared, two by two, into an unfollowable land of romance and family. And the very last one, Mr Arthur Crane, my stalwart bachelor friend and housemate, had gotten married three weeks ago and buggered off on honeymoon to the palm leaves, thunderstorms, white beaches of Sri

Lanka, with a person he preferred over me. Abandoned me, we joked. Ha. Funny. Yeah. And I'd stayed in London putting off moving out of the two-up two-down near Finsbury Park, which we'd shared for six years, before the happy couple returned and I got kicked out. They'd said: 'Stay as long as you need, Benjamin,' in a pub back in July while I'd sipped my pint and thought: *I don't actually enjoy listening to my best friend having sex with my boss*, but had said: 'That's kind, cheers.' And I'd clung to the raft of London, the companionless void of my summer holidays had crumbled into too much drinking, too many strangers who just wanted to take drugs and dance and shout over the music about loving each other forever, picking my way out of some woman's room, until last week I'd stood in my bathroom hungover, unable to keep my hands steady enough to shave. The face in the mirror dull. Grey. Unwholesome. Dark hair hobbiting. I'd pushed my cheeks up into a smile, created lines around my eyes that I'd never seen on myself before. I'd tried a laugh. Ha ha ha. I'd sought after twinkles in my eyes. 'Sod it,' I'd said, and brushed my teeth hard. Spat. And the next day I'd started moving into the flat I'd inherited, quietly owned for years and avoided.

But it was a nice place really, and I needed to enjoy it.

Eye still closed, I imagined a different type of light in the garden, something autumnal that tingled. It was my trick to feel better. A kind of mental medicine. I spent a lot of time scouring the city for nicenesses, trying to distil the essence of someone who put a tenner into a tip jar, of hippies who turned Waterloo Bridge into a playground, of kids at school who helped each other on tests when they figured I wasn't looking – tried to distil all that *goodness* into a tonic I could spread over everyone else. I needed to shower Selwood Gardens with golden paint, expand the edges of good feeling to absorb as large a population as possible.

*You'll find friends here, I thought. You will.*

Cheers.

*You'll look past all those silk blouses and tweed blazers, and you'll find friends inside them. Give it a year, and you'll know them all. You'll have had dinner in most of their flats, and you'll be known for your expertise in world geography. 'Where is East Timor anyway?' they'll ask. 'Heaven knows, darling, but why don't you ask Ben Farthing over for a drink? He'll know.' 'Oh yes, good idea, he's a capital chap! The best company around.'*

But when I opened my eyes, the residents of Selwood Gardens had all evaporated. The blankets were empty, toys abandoned. I leant further out. They hadn't vanished, they'd been drawn away towards the east end of the garden. Like space debris into a blackhole, I thought. I couldn't see what was going on over there. No, there was something there when the wind moved the branches. What was it? I caught sight of a shock of blonde hair glimmering through the leaves like a coin at the bottom of a well. Then the flash of a face. A boy? Yeah, a boy. He'd been driven off the lawn into a flowerbed until he pressed up against the ivied bricks of the wall separating garden from street. He raised his arms against the crowd of residents around him.

I left my flat and hurried downstairs, crossed the entrance hall with its mirrors and chessboard floor, and flung open the back door to run across the lawn. I was about to shout, *hey, leave him alone!* or something else heroic, but I didn't because I got closer and saw that the boy wasn't a boy at all, but a fully-grown man who didn't need rescuing. I'd been confused because his face was smooth and flushed like an overgrown golden choirboy, but I guessed he was in his early thirties, same as me. He wore a grey jacket, smart and buttoned tight under his chin, but there were leaves in his hair like

he'd stepped out of a brutalist version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His hands were still warding the residents off, but he was smiling now, his eyes bright. Maybe he'd always been smiling.

I joined the crowd. 'What's going on?' I asked.

'He doesn't live here,' said someone, and someone else: 'He climbed the wall.'

I laughed. Of course.

The wall had always caused problems. It was too thin a veil to separate these private properties from the oily commotion of all those red buses, black taxis, brown Thames, blue skyscrapers, and nine million revolving grubby people. Like outside wasn't just nice tree-lined streets and bistros. Oh no, out there was a warzone. There'd been a gate in the wall when I was a kid, but that had long ago been bricked up because someone had probably said, 'Honestly darling, what if the masses come in? Wherever would we go?', disappointed that the block didn't include secret tunnels and spiral stairs down to a private tube station decorated in William Morris wallpaper. I'd seen residents catch teenagers and spray their clothes with their own spray-paint. I'd seen them phone the police on a homeless woman looking for shelter in the snow. I'd seen them trap fox cubs in plastic boxes.

The intruder wasn't oblivious to his danger, his legs were bent and ready to run. He glanced at the climb behind him, at the dense ivy with its greenish globes of flowers getting ready to bloom. It was twice as high on this side compared to the raised pavement outside. Easy in, difficult out.

A bear of a resident stepped from the lawn into the flowerbed. He had the type of ruddy face I associated with wellington boots and pheasant shooting. 'Alright then, son,' he said, stalking close. 'Who are you, then? Come on. You're shy, are you? Pipe

up. Nothing, eh? Well, this isn't a park, for god's sake; it's private land. You're trespassing if you don't live here, and I saw you dropping over the wall, so unless you have a very good reason—'

'The garden is beautiful,' the intruder said.

But he didn't just say it. He delivered it like a spell or the line in a play which summed up all the morals. His voice was spiced with some kind of Scandinavian and filled with such genuine appreciation that the people in the garden legally eyed their surroundings with rekindled affection. They'd forgotten how they'd felt when they'd seen it for the first time. How had they forgotten? But here was a nice man smiling and reminding them, his smile bracketed with lines of joy: *yes, oh yes; you see how beautiful it is too, we are the same* – and really, how could anyone be angry at that?

But a few residents were untouched, the bear among them and he said, loud enough to indicate it should be everyone's final decision, 'I'm going to call the police,' and he was surprised when the rest of the garden protested.

'But he hasn't done anything, has he?'

'Give him some slack.'

'No need to bother our bobbies, I'm sure they've got enough on their hands in other parts of the city, without worrying this young man.'

'Hardly a cardinal sin, eh? Climbing a wall?'

'It's trespassing!' said the bear. 'This isn't a bloody *park*.'

If anything, I thought the intruder was amused. He was still on his guard, still bounced on his heels, but it wasn't because of the crowd, I realised; we were less dangerous than something else nearby. He scanned the trees, all the white-lintelled windows, all the faces of residents arguing over who he was. His attention snagged on

me, the faraway man at the back of the crowd, one of the only people left watching him. I couldn't figure out his expression; it was something like the surprise of being caught in a secret, something like the anticipation of walking out on stage. I smiled back.

The intruder began, 'Could I—'

The bear whipped back to him. 'You speak when I say.' After the magic of the man's first line, he wasn't going to give him another one.

It all came down to a half-hearted vote, and no one complained when the 'forcefully remove the man' option won by only a third of the garden putting their hands up. I waited to throw my hand in the air for an alternative, but no other option was given. The bear signalled for others to help him and two more men added themselves to his ranks. Together, they had the intruder surrounded, and as they closed in the crowd of residents dispersed fast, afraid to witness the breaking of a nose or a punch to the gut.

The intruder pressed himself into the ivy, almost disappeared, but with nowhere to go his assailants grabbed his arms and dragged him back out. He fluttered with unhideable panic at being touched. He paled. Ashened.

'Hey!' I pushed through the crowd. I'd filled with a dangerous feeling, something like a riptide pulling me away from shore. Last time I'd felt something like it, I'd ended up in the head's office for throwing a whiteboard marker at a student who'd pinged a girl's bra strap. 'Leave him alone.'

The crowd refocussed, the coordinates of the blackhole shifting to me. There was laughter. The bear fluffed himself up and assessed me. He found me wanting and unshaven and smelling like I'd worn the same clothes for days of ferrying boxes across the city. 'Who are *you*?' he asked.

Which was a fair point, actually. I was also an unknown, wasn't I?

Bugger.

*Is he a workman?* the crowd demanded. *He looks like a workman.*

I scabbled back onto the path.

*Does anyone know him? He can't be a resident either.*

Their anxiety circled like wasps, and I probably should've said something, but instead I was thinking that surely, *surely* it hadn't been that long, until finally, a woman's voice said: 'Ben Farthing, is that you? I *told* you he was back.'

'Ben?' asked the bear.

'Benjamin,' I said.

The woman who'd named me was triumphant and elderly. She wore a fur scarf despite the heat, the animal's tail rambling down her chest and I recognised her face but couldn't have given a name. She shuffled towards me.

'This is Ellis's boy,' she informed everyone. She stretched up to squeeze my arms hard with wrinkled fingers. 'You know, I remember you learning to walk, can you believe that? Just over there.' She nodded to a spot under an elm.

The bear was laughing at me, moving away from my little interruption, signalling for others to begin the removal of the intruder while the old woman cupped my face, forcing me to look back at her.

She continued, 'You were trying to grab your mother's hands and falling flat on your face. Oh, but I did *love* your mother. Terribly sad that she was so young. And I'm sorry about your father now, too.' she delivered a tender look of: *gosh, where has the time gone, dear me, you have grown, why haven't you come back sooner? The flat's been empty so long.* And the inevitable cheek of: *You're not married yet, no?*

I wriggled free.

‘He’s my friend,’ I lied. ‘Leave him.’

*Oh*, said the garden, turning back to the scene.

Then a cascade of *whats?* and *why didn’t you says?* and who are you?

The intruder was quizzical, then all joy.

‘You two know each other?’ demanded the bear, looking between us, his hand tightening on the intruder’s arm. His comrades were nervous.

‘He’s helping me move in,’ I said.

‘You’re lying.’

‘Oh, let the poor wretch go,’ called the old woman in fur back on the lawn.

‘But they’re lying,’ insisted the bear.

‘What does it matter? You want someone to take responsibility for this one, and he’s doing it? Well, Benjamin, I assume you’ll ensure your friend doesn’t damage any property while he visits for the afternoon? Yes? There you go, then. All sorted. Oh, calm down, you don’t need to win every fight. Go on, get back inside to your steak and slippers, all of you.’

I closed and bolted my front door. Checked the peephole for following ruddy cheeks or polo shirts, but the landing was empty, just a fishbowl of curved marble stairs and bannisters. I turned and leant against the door. My living room had windows on either side, three to the outside street, three into the garden. It was empty; all white walls, bare floorboards, and barren mantelpieces and bookshelves because I’d stupidly sold all the furniture, down the last piano stool and family picture after my Dad had died so I could do Route 66 with Crane. In the middle of the floor was a pile of cardboard boxes, and



next to the boxes stood the intruder. He looked around at the emptiness of the flat like it was St Paul's Cathedral instead of a place where the water spluttered from the tap and the electrics short-circuited if anyone used a kettle and hairdryer at the same time.

'Are you alright?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said, not allowing my question to interrupt the majesty. I wondered if he was homeless. Maybe that was his secret.

'We'll give it a minute,' I said. 'Then you can escape.'

He looked at me and smirked. 'I can see it's important for you to uphold a reputation among such ethically upstanding neighbours.'

Ha! I decided Crane would like this guy.

'I'm Benjamin.' I stuck out my hand. 'Good to meet you.'

Something about that stung him, but he quickly switched his dial back to cheeriness and nodded his greeting from across the room. 'I'm Jack,' he said, which was a disappointment because I'd imagined he was called Lysander or Aloysius or something like that but Scandinavian.

'Jack,' I repeated. I dropped my hand. 'Well, it's good to meet you, Jack.' I laughed. 'Are you going to tell me why you were in the garden?'

'It is a very nice garden.'

'Yeah, but—'

'I should stay on my side of the wall? And the laws here are strong enough to make it not worth the risk to do otherwise.'

'But you spit in the face of the law.'

He smiled.

'You're moving out,' he said.

‘In, actually. Well, back in, I guess. I grew up here.’

For a moment, my childhood home superimposed itself over the white walls. It’d been an odd mix-match of furniture which visitors had kindly called ‘bohemian’, books everywhere on sustainable gardening and vegetarian cooking, and a whole bookcase of second-hand orange paperback classics. There’d been tomato plants lined along the windowsills, growing up the glass.

‘You’re alone here?’ Jack asked.

‘Yep.’ I made the consonant pop, and the world returned to emptiness. I leant back against the door.

‘And what do you do?’ he asked.

‘Do? I teach. Secondary geography. And you’re actually nodding like that’s an interesting thing to do. Cheers. My mates usually take the piss. They call it glorified colouring.’

He grinned. ‘What do *you* call it?’

‘Everything. I guess I mean, oh, I don’t know. It’s seas and forests and mountains and cities. Even gardens.’

‘And that’s everything?’ he asked.

‘Well, I guess there are planets and stars too. Blackholes and all that.’

He laughed. It was a clear laugh which felt like a compliment. ‘You forgot about people,’ he said.

‘I said cities, didn’t I?’

‘That’s not the same.’

‘I guess not.’

‘But you’re not sure?’

I thought about it. ‘On the wall of my classroom there’s a photo of London at night taken from a satellite. All the streets are lit up orange, kind of like brain synapses or this glowing mould fixed to the side of the planet. Like the whole city just created itself from a spore, and sure, it’ll radiate into the universe for a few hundred years, maybe a thousand, but then London’s doomed to die and become a fossilised skeleton of the tube network. And I reckon that’s probably the best we can hope for human civilisation.’

A glow of fascination had kindled in the other man. He’d been unsure if he’d find any treasure here, probably hadn’t been looking for it, but now he’d spotted something; look, there! Glinting at the back of the cavern of my brain.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I’ve not really seen anyone for a few days. Spouting nonsense as a result.’ I struggled to pull the conversation back to normal lines. ‘Where’re you from?’ I asked.

‘You want to understand my geography?’ This amused him.

‘I suppose so.’

He went to the window, the one open onto the garden.

‘You’re well-kept here,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid my view isn’t as green. I overlook a square. It isn’t interesting. Only, sometimes when it rains, the buildings reflect in the puddles like there’s another world underneath the cobblestones.’ He sat on the windowsill and considered me. ‘Until a child runs across it and it all shatters.’

‘Is that near here?’ I asked. ‘Sounds like Kentish Town or somewhere that way. But it’s probably some faraway place, is it? Helsinki or Oslo? Or somewhere else covered in snow.’ I grunted a laugh. ‘You’re a wall-climber and a law-breaker. You can go anywhere.’

He smiled. 'I can't go to the moon.'

'Good point.'

'I always longed to.'

'Oh man, me too.' I glanced up at the moonscape which always lingered in the upper part of my vision.

'The solitude,' said Jack with yearning, like his world was the opposite of mine and filled with people he couldn't get rid of; maybe he'd climbed into the garden to escape them? 'And the expanse...' he continued. 'Those wide fields of untouched dust like virgin snow. And the stars would be a lot brighter up there.'

'I always fancied bouncing around in antigravity.'

He laughed. 'Sadly, never to be. It's like a story I heard once about a man who made friends with the moon. What was it, now? Something like: "Oh, Moon," said a man one day, "you are so clever shining up there in the sky, you make me see everything so much more clearly, you, sir, are a true friend." But one day the man saw that Moon had fallen into the lake, and there Moon rippled and gasped for life. So the man jumped into the water and swam as far as he could, then twice as far again, but alas, Moon was always ahead and could never be reached.'

'Think I had that picture book,' I said.

Jack sighed. 'I always liked it for the wrong reason; there it was meant to be a cautionary tale about the lonely stupidity of seeking the unachievable, and here I am thinking; yes, but I bet that man swam out further into that lake than anyone else had ever done.'

I liked that. I leant against the door and swum in it for a moment. I opened my mouth to ask him if he too, thought that loneliness was a necessary but conquerable

demon in this pushing out into the impossible, something I'd been wondering for a while, but we were interrupted by a beeping. Jack's wrist flew up for him to press a button on a silver watch. The beeping stopped. He stood up from the windowsill. All his nervousness from the garden was back. I'd almost forgotten it.

'I need to go,' Jack said.

'You're just gonna leave me with that?'

'It looks like it.'

I ran a hand through my hair. 'Of course you are.'

'I'm sorry. Time isn't mine.'

He looked around the room and, for a second, I thought he'd hop out of the window and fly away. I opened the front door for him instead. On his way out he paused long enough for, 'Thank you for saving me,' and a strange stiff-backed salute, before his watch started to beep again, insistent as a squalling child, and he left. I should've gone down with him to make sure he got out okay, but I didn't. Instead, I closed the door quietly after him. Swore under my breath, and I sat down on a box of lesson planning I'd been ignoring for too long.

I wanted to text Crane to report the strange drama, but he was thirty thousand feet over an ocean, and if I sent a message the plane would probably crash and Crane would end up on an island, red beard around his ankles, talking to a football named Benjamin.

And man, if Crane had been here, he would've asked Jack if he'd go for a pint sometime, weird as he was. Crane would reckon this Jack was a laugh, and maybe we'd discover over the next few months that he was correctly qualified to become part of our friendship, because there was something in him I'd already seen, wasn't there? Something joyful and clever, something about the strange, cosy landscape of him –

those things Crane and I'd searched for in foreign countries and pint glasses for years, and which Crane had so easily found, and I hadn't. And suddenly the traitorous part of me thought; I'd done the whole world with Crane, and it'd bloody been fantastic, but I needed someone else if I wanted to get to the moon.

But I'd let Jack go, and I'd never see him again.

*Get off your arse and go after him.*

I took the stairs down two at a time, out the door, down the steps onto the street. The street was tree-lined and black-railed, white pillars framed front doors with brass boot scrapers beside them. I looked left, I looked right. There was no Jack. He'd skedaddled away from Selwood Gardens as fast as his legs could carry him, and suddenly I was three years old again, having let go of the string of my red balloon, watching it floating irretrievably up into the sky.

Back inside, I discovered I'd run straight past the bear. He accosted me as I climbed the stairs, asking me what the bloody hell was I thinking? And did I know I needed to watch my back if I wanted to live here? And what was I doing letting just *anyone* into the garden? When I reached my door again, I was exhausted.

'Look, mate,' I said. 'He's gone now, calm your tits.'

'Gone?' The bear frowned. 'When? I've been waiting for him right there down in the entrance. Right there.'

For a moment I mirrored the bear's confusion before I pulled myself together and said, 'He's gone from the garden, I mean. So he's none of your business anymore, is he?'

Back inside my flat, I waited five minutes for the bear to stop knocking and finally watched the fishbowl of him pad away, angry, back to his post in the entrance. Then I stepped quietly back onto the landing.

*Jack, where've you gone?*

If he hadn't gone down, I reckoned the only other way was up.

I went up a flight to the top landing, where a too-large chandelier hung over the stairwell. Up here, everything was quiet, large open windows made it sluggish-breezy and bright. The doors to flats five and six were locked. I tried them loudly, but there was no one home. A third door led to the narrow staircase of a fire escape going up to the roof. Here, the stairs were already lit by motion-detector lights; someone had been there recently.

I went up.

At the top, there was a metal fire door with a release bar. I knew it led outside. The door hadn't quite closed – the catch had caused problems years ago too, you really had to slam it to get it closed, if memory served me right. I pushed it open and stepped through out onto the rooftop, except...

Except, instead of a summer afternoon, I stepped into near-darkness.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. I was in a room, a bloody *massive* room I'd never been in before, not in all my years in the building. The space was tall, wide and long; far larger than should've fitted up there between the gables and chimney stacks. The ceiling was distant, curved like the upturned hull of a ship, painted wine red. The wall to my left was segmented with night-blind latticed windows, and all the other walls were covered from floor to ceiling with framed artwork. There were hundreds of paintings and photographs. Mostly individual portraits, but some of groups

and crowds, in a mosaic of frames and faces. Flat people looked at me with indifference, apathy, loathing, love. A girl in a red nightgown prayed by candlelight; a proud, dark woman, raised her chin high above shrouds of cherry satin and tiger skin; the sketched torso of a shirtless man reclined, dusted with green and blue pastels; children swam in a lagoon with oil paint cracked across the surface of brown water; a black and white woman had black blood on her knees and a gun in her hand; an elderly man had tattoo-rimmed eyes and a beard backlit by morning sun; a group of charcoaled coalminers watched with chalk-pale eye whites; two Victorian gentlemen in top hats and tails stood small in the middle of a rainforest, one with his palm out gesturing to the fauna, the other with his face lofted towards the canopy.

Jack's golden face was hard to spot in the crowd; he seemed small at the other end of the gallery, dwarfed by a ten-foot scene of a battlefield above him; mud, horses and dead men littered the edges in almost-Napoleonic uniforms. He was in the process of kicking off his shoes when he saw me and stopped.

'Benjamin?'

I walked into the gallery. Ten steps. Fifteen. Far enough that I should've been walking in thin air over the garden. I turned around once, three hundred and sixty degrees, jumped up and down on the spot. The floor, cold marble, was solid. If I was dreaming, it was a solid enough dream to support my weight.

Suddenly I felt a bit ill, like I'd stepped off a boat.

'What is this place?' I asked.

Jack came towards me barefoot. 'You need to leave.'

'But this room isn't...' I laughed. 'It *can*'t exist.'

'Ben—'



‘It’s bloody fantastic!’ I ran my hands through my hair, turned around again to take it all in. ‘You’re magic, I knew you—’

‘You need to go!’ Jack shouted, finally overriding his surprise, but flinching at his own volume. ‘Get out!’ he whisper-shouted. ‘They’ll hear you. Go!’

‘But this place is... Whoa, hold on!’

Jack was running at me fast. He threw himself at me, colliding hard, pushing me backwards, hissing, ‘Get out, get out!’ I held ground, setting my feet behind me, pushed back, but he was strong and desperate. ‘Get off me,’ I said, through clenched teeth, anger and injustice resurfacing with confusion. ‘Who *are* you?’ Jack had managed to get me to the door I’d entered by, he’d got my heels over the edge of the stairs, and surely he wasn’t going to... Oh shit, maybe he was...

‘No, please don’t!’ I cried as Jack shoved me down the stairs.

I twisted to half-fall, half-run down the stairs until I rushed back out onto the top landing. I hit the handrail and buckled over the stairwell and got a swinging view of three floors straight down to the entrance hall and the top of the bear’s head. I scrambled back. Winded, I hurried back to the bottom of the fire escape.

‘Jack?’ I yelled up the stairs.

No answer.

I staggered back up the staircase, arms to my stomach against bruising, and rising nausea. I burst through the metal door to skitter out onto an empty rooftop ceilinged with open sky and ringed with chimneys, television dishes, slate roofs and, beyond those, church spires and the promise of skyscrapers, and there I howled with frustration and threw up.

## Chapter 2

Three days later, it was night over Kensington. The moon was bright and big in the sky, the garden silver, and the rooftop was glowing, full of people. University friends, colleagues, squash partners and travel buddies gazed around, fairy lights reflecting as star-clusters in their eyes. How lovely. The warm outdoors had reduced them to children, and the alcohol made the conversations of all these doctors and graphic designers and social workers ridiculous and pointless. A camping table was full of bottles and Esther had cooked a feast of curries, served as a pop-up restaurant on paper plates with wooden cutlery. The party was the last one of the summer, a traditional gathering which Crane and I usually hosted (aka purchased beer and sent out texts) in Finsbury Park, but this year it'd been upgraded to Selwood Gardens because no matter how hard Crane had tried, I still refused to leave the rooftop.

I played my part. I was a bloody delight. I laughed at their jokes and told self-congratulatory anecdotes about my luck in property roulette, ignoring the fact that I'd become an orphan by winning, but I drank too much and was watched carefully by Crane and Esther, and now it was *late* late. Almost early. I sat cross-legged on the wall, looking out over the dimness of the garden.

Crane joined me. 'You alright, Farthing?'

Arthur Crane was a big man. As teenagers, we'd both been skinny beggars, but over the years he'd somehow acquired the bulk of a man who worked long days in the sun, while he actually just managed software design in a blue-glass building over in

Canary Wharf. He had red hair and a full beard which he'd almost shaved off a few years before when it'd become fashionable. His cheeks and forehead were tanned from his honeymoon, over shorts and a brown festival T-shirt. He was my favourite person in the world, a status confirmed since the day he got his driving license, bought a rusty Corsa and asked me where I wanted to go. 'We should leave bloody London,' he'd said, and we'd lurched to the M25 and lapped the city three, four times, claiming it.

'I wish everyone would leave,' I said, glancing back at the party.

Crane smiled and I could tell he meant it even though I'd been testing his patience for a while now. 'Want me to turn bouncer?' he asked, lighting a cigarette.

I thought about it but decided that in the long run, I'd prefer to keep the good wishes of these people. 'No, don't worry.' I finished my drink.

'Esther's done a good job, eh?' he said. 'It feels like a treehouse up here. I always wanted a treehouse. You need to get a telescope. And a treasure chest! Fill it with doubloons.' He dragged on his cigarette, delighting in the thought. 'We had that tree in the back garden for years, why didn't we ever make a treehouse?'

'I don't know.'

He flicked ash down into the garden. 'Have you told anyone what happened?'

'No. They've been asking what's wrong, but nope.'

'Wise man.'

He offered me the cigarette. I took it and watched the tobacco curling orange. Smoking was Crane's one fault, everything else he did was brilliant, making him the steadiest, kindest, most personable human. Maybe he only had the energy, the patience, for being so good because he went outside ten times a day, stood alone, and said sod it to being so wholesome.

I gave him back the cigarette unsmoked.

With an effort, I turned my attention back to the party. Esther Crane wove patterns through everyone. She was beautiful, I had to give her that. Her father was English, her mother Sri Lankan, and her skin glowed with a sun inside her. She wore multicoloured skirts and strings of amber, and if I'd seen her on the tube I'd have guessed she ran a stall at Camden Lock. She came towards Crane and me across the rooftop, twisting the screw cap from a new bottle of wine. I put my hands in my pockets. Crane offered her my empty glass, which she filled.

'I just met one of your neighbours,' she said. 'She says you're getting a reputation as the madman on the roof. They've all seen you watching them.'

'I'm not watching them.' I took the glass. 'Anyway, what about Crane? He's been here too.'

'I guess he doesn't seem like such a threat,' she said, smiling.

I downed the wine.

'I'm not a threat,' I said.

Three days earlier, Crane had stood in baggage collection at Heathrow, Terminal 3, and turned on his phone. The first message was his tariff provider welcoming him home, the second (through fifteenth) had been his friend spouting desperate stuff about interlopers, attacks, police, near-arrests. An hour later, as the curtains of Selwood Gardens were being opened to the day, he hurried up the steps to my building and gained admission through the intercom because a lady in a first floor flat recognised him from when we'd been teenagers. Upon finding my flat open and empty, he made his way up to the roof

where I sat on the wall overlooking the garden, arms wrapped around my legs, eyes sticky from lack of sleep, hair damp with dew.

‘Hello,’ I said.

Crane pulled me up to standing, hugged me with a hard slap on the back, before he held me at arm’s length, looked me up and down.

‘You smell like shit. What happened?’

‘I’m not sure what to tell you.’

‘Mate, you’re shaking, sit down.’

‘Sorry, I’ve been sick.’ I sat. Ran a hand through my hair. ‘The police don’t believe me.’

‘Don’t believe what?’ he frowned.

‘Oh, all of it, really.’

‘Tell me everything.’

Telling him things was as good as setting them down in writing; now they were fixed in his brain instead of only mine, and his brain was a much more solid repository. He remembered things with facts, figures, words, while I remembered stuff with colours, feelings and geographical/space metaphors. Into his brain went detailed descriptions of Jack in the garden, the scuffle with the bear, the conversation in my flat (edited of anything to do with the moon – I wasn’t sure why, but that felt private), and, faltering I told Crane about the gallery.

‘What? Like the National Portrait Gallery?’ he asked.

‘Kind of, only weirder and I didn’t recognise any of the pictures.’

‘Huh.’

And when I'd finished telling him everything. I felt happier, calmer in a way that telling the police hadn't accomplished.

'What did the police say?' he asked, amused now, by my having called them at all. No, not amused, just exhausted from travelling.

'Oh, they came, then left.' I frowned. 'There was nothing for them to see. And it turns out you get a written warning if you're too insistent about nothing.'

He laughed. 'Well, what did you expect?'

'I don't know.'

He was quiet for a bit, before, he announced, 'I want to see the garden,' while standing up and leading the way down the metal fire escape attached to the back of the building. I jumped after him. the weight of the two of us making bolts grate in the wall. The final floor had a drop-down ladder, rusted in place, not moved in years. Crane kicked at it, the whole escape wobbling until the ladder shot down with a scream of metal and impaled itself into the ground below.

Both of us on the ground, Crane said, 'Your man could've jumped down. Long way, though.'

'I'm too tired to figure out if that's significant.'

Crane shrugged. 'It might be. Might not.'

We crossed the garden, past nannies with young children, old couples on benches, and two girls scootering around the paths, leaving ruts in the gravel. Where Jack had been cornered, we waded through gladioli to the base of the wall. Some of the flowers there were bent, but no more than might've been caused by heavy rain or a fox. Crane sat on his haunches in the undergrowth and wore his deep-thinking expression and looking around before he smiled.

‘He came in there. Look, he crushed the leaves on the top of the wall up there. Wait here a minute.’

He disappeared off across the garden, leaving me alone long enough to lean against the wall and struggle against the heaviness of my eyelids before a shout came from the street outside.

‘Farthing, you there?’

‘Yeah.’ I snapped my eyes open. ‘I’m here.’

He jumped up against the bricks, his fingertips waving above the wall before gravity sucked them back down. ‘God, was your imaginary man eight-foot-tall?’

‘He was shorter than you.’

‘Then he must have been determined.’ He jumped again.

‘He had less meat on him.’

‘Sod off,’ he laughed.

I thought Crane was more likely to push the whole ivied wall over than get over it. But then I heard talking from the other side, and someone laughed who wasn’t Crane – whoever it was had a higher, younger laugh than his – before there was a grunt of effort, and Crane appeared, his red hair and blue eyes, over the top of the wall. He managed to get one arm over, and then the other, the assistant on the street shouting encouragement, and somehow, grabbing handfuls of tree and leaves, Crane made it up. He called back to his assistant: ‘Cheers, mate,’ before turning to me with an air of triumph.

‘Cheat,’ I said.

He looked around from on high. ‘I’d wondered if your Jack was spying through a window, but you can’t see much through the trees. Get out the way. I’m going to jump.’

He swore as he fell, the sound bouncing around the buildings, and landed ungracefully, dropping back in the undergrowth. He took my hand, and I pulled him up.

‘Ben Farthing, you really must give your friends keys.’

The woman from the day before was watching us from the path, amused. She was wearing a different fur over her shoulders today; it was sleek and grey and musty like it’d come off the back of the last of the English wolves.

‘Don’t let that tyrant and his friends spot you.’

She looked both ways down the path.

‘You’re safe for now, come on out. Yes, come on.’ She looked at Crane. ‘You’re quite a different beast, aren’t you? Not like the other one; he looked like he’d disappear on a breeze.’ She turned to me. ‘Did he disappear successfully?’

‘He did, yeah,’ I said.

Crane stifled a laugh.

‘Excellent news,’ said the woman. ‘I liked him. But, did he call himself Jack?’

‘Yes.’ I was surprised.

‘Oh, dear.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, I was standing here earlier this morning, having taken a turn around the premises, as I’m want to do, and I was wondering about our stranger. And as I say down on that bench over there, it occurred to me that, had I been in his shoes yesterday, with that oaf glaring at me, I would have called myself Jack, too.’

‘What? Why?’



She pointed with her stick at the bench from her musings. It was greened with moss and spattered by woodpigeons, and there was a dedication plaque on the back, dulled by time and English summers but still clear.

Crane read: ““In memory of Jack McCutcheon. 1897-1978.””

‘You’re saying he was a ghost?’ I asked.

‘I’m saying he is perhaps not who he says he is.’

I frowned. ‘I’m going back to the roof.’

I did, and I sat up there for the rest of the day. Crane stayed. We scoured the rooftop. Properly this time. With a tape measure and a calculator to check we weren’t missing anything until, both exhausted, we collapsed into deckchairs we found folded up against the wall, nice and companionable, like old times, and we silently watched the garden for intruders and the sky for faraway ceilings. And I wondered if Jack was wrong, and you didn’t have to be lonely to expand yourself sideways into strange spaces?

We found nothing.

‘Can I tell you my theory?’ I asked.

‘Sure,’ he said, but I could tell he was dubious.

‘In my head, it’s a weird, concertinaed space that can fold and unfold. If Jack’s in the gallery, he might be able to hear us talking.’

‘Hi, Jack!’

‘But what’s the point of that?’ I asked. ‘Somewhere to hide secrets?’

‘What secrets, Farthing?’

No idea.

I spent a few hours with my laptop on my knees, scrolling through images results on descriptions or the pictures I remembered. They'd looked like works of art to me, but I couldn't find a mention of any of them, so what did I know? I looked up descriptions of Jack. Nothing. Missing people in London? Nothing. Missing Scandinavian men? Nothing. Appearing and disappearing rooms? Nothing except the internet talking about how often they dreamt of such things.

But of course, we found nothing. How many hours had we spent up there as teenagers? With our homework and fags and cups of tea my dad brought up? Nothing had happened then. Why would it happen now? But something in me was convinced tenacity would pay off. If I waited long enough at the scene of the crime, something else would happen. I was sure.

*Wait, Benjamin, and all will be revealed.*

Nonsense. Like waiting to learn the secrets of gravity by waiting for an apple to drop. But it was all I had.

In the evening, Esther arrived with fish and chips in white paper and a bleary, jet-lagged, confused-where-her-husband-had-gone kind of expression. Crane told her everything (no secrets in this marriage!), and she nodded along to strange Scandinavian trespassers and actually commended my courage at standing up for human rights, but she struggled with even the concept of a disappearing gallery. She squinted around the rooftop and when a hundred portraits didn't materialise on red walls, a crease formed between her eyebrows like we'd set her trigonometry.

Esther asked, 'Do you really think a gallery's going to appear out of thin air?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'And if it did, aren't we sitting in the way?'

I didn't answer.

The problem with Esther was that she wasn't qualified to be Benjamin Farthing's friend; there were too many things she didn't understand. I'd understood that, like I did with most people, from the first moment I'd ever met her. I'd called out to my year nine class, 'What's the nearest star?' and thirty kids had replied, 'The sun!' 'Pedants. Second nearest then?' 'Alpha Centauri.' 'And why's that not strictly correct?' Silence. Then one girl: 'Because it's really three stars, sir?' 'Good!' The stars became blue asterisks on my whiteboard, and I narrated, 'Alpha Centauri A. Alpha Centauri B. And poor little Proxima Centauri. All bound together by gravity.'

But the new head of department, Miss Esther Martin, had been standing in the doorway. 'What does this have to do with the water cycle, Mr Farthing?' she'd asked in her personal brand of airy pleasantness, proving all at once that her view of my subject, life, the universe and everything, was too small, and the two of us were separated by an uncrossable gulf.

'It's geography,' I'd insisted. '*Local* geography, all things considered.'

That night, when the Cranes thought I was finally asleep in my deckchair, they whispered together. I watched them from behind near-closed eyelids. In the dim radiance from distant streetlights, their edges and features were smoky, like a scene of lovers in an old movie. They held hands.

'Should we be encouraging him?' Crane asked.

'Oh, don't worry, I expect it's one of his things. Like when, a while back, that student asked him a question about gravity he couldn't answer, and he spent a week solid reading about Einstein and stuff about string theory. He'd explain it to me whenever I wandered past his classroom.'

‘I remember. He didn’t eat. Let all his messages back up. Burnt out by himself in the end. I found him passed out on the sofa.’

Esther chuckled. ‘I guess that’s me saying he’ll be bored of this in a week.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Well, let’s hope so.’ She paused. ‘I think you should probably stay with him for a bit. He misses you.’ The shadow of Esther leant into the shadow of Crane. ‘And I know you miss him too.’ She kissed him on the cheek.

I waited a while for the answer.

‘Yeah,’ Crane said.

I struggled not to smile and give myself away.

Esther lowered her voice then, too quiet to make out. She spoke at length, whispering conspiratorially like my parents had done when I was twelve and my mum was dying, and they hadn’t told me yet. When she finished, Crane sighed, long and deep.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I know.’

What did he know? I lay wondering until I fell asleep.

I dreamt that the rooftop was the ruined shell of a bombed building. The trees in the garden had grown up high until they towered around me on all sides. Their trunks were silver and straight in the moonlight. I sensed someone else close by, and there was a fire crackling. I could smell pine and summer. Hear a lake lapping. A lake? What lake? There were stars above me, so many stars. More than I’d ever seen anywhere, more even than I’d seen over the sea-bound islands of Fiji where the whole of the Milky Way lit up and sparkled with shifting atmospheric pressures. But in the dream, the sky filled with spreading darkness. A cloud of interstellar dust black as coal. It billowed

towards me. Overtook horizon to horizon. It kept coming. Dust began to fall between the trees, blackening their boughs like snow in negative. It landed on my face, soft at first, then burning, burning, hot, shit, hot! Scorching me through to the bone until I woke with a start.

‘Crane?’

‘I’m here.’

I wiped my face, slick with sweat, relieved my skin was still there. I was on the rooftop under an old duvet, the pockets of feathers creating a pale pastoral landscape over me. Crane was a dark island nearby, creaking on his deckchair.

‘What time is it?’ I asked.

‘Two. I’m on watch.’ He sounded tired.

‘Anything to report?’

‘No. Go back to sleep, mate.’

I lay back and looked up; the sky was orange with light pollution.

‘I wish there were stars,’ I said.

‘The sky is low over London tonight,’ Crane said, an ominous rumble.

I smiled. ‘Ah, I’d forgotten about that.’

Once, we’d stood together on the bow of a boat harbouring overnight in a Norwegian fjord, cloud thick and barely two metres over the surface of the water, black and solid. We’d listened to the silence of the horizontal world, the fog making all sounds equal – muffling voices, while bringing out the soft dripping of condensation. The tour guide had called it a *low sky* like it was the apocalypse. ‘Coming?’ Crane had asked. He’d grinned, young and beardless. ‘When the sky is this low the only way is down, right?’ He’d unlaced his boots, and soon we were both climbing over the edge of

the boat in our boxers, shivering already, breaths joining the mist. Years later, I had no memory of the fall or the cold of the water, but I remembered the joy.

On the roof, I said, 'Maybe there's a parallel world somewhere, where you and I didn't come out of the water.'

Crane snorted. 'Where we're still down there with the fishes until the end of all time.' He lit a cigarette. 'What about global warming? Won't the sea boil the meat off us?'

'I think, if anything, that other world has global *cooling*; which is equally disastrous, but more preservative.'

'Go to sleep, you muppet.'

Nothing happened on the rooftop. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Reams and hours and days of nothing. Crane was still on leave, so stayed with me throughout the days and nights. It was fun. He was patient and funny, and only occasionally let slip his desperation to be at home with his new wife. It was sunny: I sweated off rivulets of suntan lotion. It rained: I huddled under an anorak hood, the world loud with water. It was dusk: the garden disappeared, leaving behind a glow-box community of lit windows where children were put to bed, wine drunk, TVs watched, dinner eaten, baths run, butter spread on toast. It was dawn: we were up before the pigeons. All a blur where the days muddled themselves like at Christmas time, with nothing, nothing, nothing until suddenly there I was at the party, surprised to find myself with the stem of a wine glass warming in my hand and saying to Esther:

'I'm not a threat.'

‘Oh, I don’t mean a threat to people.’ She was soft and vague; a bit tipsy. ‘I suppose I mean a threat to society.’

‘Society?’ I asked.

‘Yes. You’re a loose cannon. Look at you up here with all your scientific theories and all these stories. You’re *untethered*.’ She pronounced the last word like it was rude, and smiled, oblivious to the impact of the word ‘stories’.

Crane whispered in her ear, censuring whatever she was going to say next, but the damage was done. I looked at him.

‘Do you believe me?’ I asked.

‘Ah.’ He grimaced and put a fist to his forehead, which meant he knew he was about to be a dick. ‘Look, I think—’ He dropped his hand. ‘Mate, you’ve got to see how it’s hard to believe.’

‘You didn’t see what I saw.’

‘You’re right, but...’

Even if he’d seen it for himself. Even if I led him straight into Jack’s gallery right now, showed him all the portraits; even if he met Jack, shook hands with him, laughed with him about what an idiot I was. Even then, Crane wouldn’t believe my story was real. Why? Because the collective objectivity of the human species told him that what I was describing was impossible. Benjamin: *Well, I’m told that can’t be real, but I can see it and touch it and smell it, so it must be.* Crane: *Well, I’m told that can’t be real, so it’s not.* End of.

This was a fundamental, philosophical betrayal, and I stood shocked by the blast of it. How had I never known this about him before? It made the big man in front of me shrink.

‘Alright mate, it’s true,’ he said, glancing between Esther and me. ‘It’s true. I believe you. But... I mean, even if it’s true, does it matter?’

‘Does it *matter*?’

‘It was just a room,’ he said, and he shrank a bit more.

‘Shit, Crane. You don’t get it. That’s even worse than not believing me. Believing me but not giving a crap! That’s like seeing magic up close – a unicorn or aliens or bloody *god* – and shrugging it off with “Oh, it’s only magic, no big deal, this has no profound implications for humanity or my own life, I’m just gonna go back to my day job.” I thought you were better than that.’

‘Farthing, come on.’

‘I forgot what a simple mind you have. Didn’t I make my story interesting enough for you? You want something more exciting than impossible places? Oh, I see. You like gunfights and explosions, don’t you? Like in your video games. Would that do it? A bit of gore. What about a *murder*? Exciting, hey? I could do you a bloody murder.’

I turned around and climbed up onto the wall, swaying, arms out for balance. Crane swore and grabbed a handful of my shirt to stop me from falling. I sloshed wine down the storeys, looked down at the plants, gravel, grass below; I was so much higher than Jack or Crane had been. I turned around (awkward for Crane who manoeuvred to grabbing my front) to address the party.

‘I would like,’ I began loudly, faces turning to me. ‘To explain the rooftop.’

I spread my arms to take in the three-dozen guests and made a little bow.

*Aha*, said the flare of interest in their eyes, *here we go, here’s the nub of it*.

‘Farthing, don’t be stupid, mate.’



I closed my eyes for a moment, pictured the gallery around me, if I was a curator, I could've rehung every picture, and I opened my eyes and began to talk. Instead of the truth, the wine in my blood turned words inside out, half of them didn't make sense to anyone other than myself. To me, it felt like poetry, despite knowing I was using 'innards' and 'viscera' too much. Eventually one of Crane's colleagues cottoned on.

'Someone died?'

'He's making shit up,' said Crane. 'He's pissed. Ignore him.'

'Yes,' I said. I wiggled my fingers and put on a voice like a pantomime villain.

'There was a *murder*. A man all oozing on the stairs. The stairs you all came up? Those stairs had bits of the poor sod all over them.'

'Shut the hell up, Farthing.'

'He was all cut up into pieces. No! It was like he'd gone through a mincer!' I cackled. 'The culprit is an evil Scandinavian interloper, who is really a mob boss and a vampire and, if he peels off his skin, a lizard creature from the centre of the earth!'

'Are we safe?' someone asked, maybe concerned about a lizard creature, maybe about me.

'You're safe,' said Crane, firm.

I resumed my normal voice. 'If anyone's interested in helping me solve this thing, find the murderer I mean, I'll be holding interviews over in the corner by...' I waved a finger. 'By that guy over there I don't recognise with the guitar. And I'm sorry, but you were all only invited here tonight to remind me that other people exist, with your talking, and your photos of babies, and your... I'm sorry, but it didn't work. I don't care. So anyone who doesn't want to help with my investigation, if you could please leave soon? That'd be grand.'

Crane yanked me down from the wall. ‘Stop it.’

I laughed at his frustration, despite not finding it funny. ‘If you’re not with me in this, I’ll find someone else.’

‘I am with you. I’ve been with you for days.’

‘You’ve done your duty then, well done.’ I clapped.

He stared at me. He was breathing heavily, like when he’d realised a group of doe-eyed children in Vietnam had stolen his wallet, and he was trying not to go back and knock them all down like skittles. I don’t know what I looked like. Probably a more pathetic version of the same. Because the truth was, I was shit-scared about what was going to come next. Crane was going to punch me in the face, and my nose would be bleeding everywhere as I scrabbled desperately back at him, calling him all the names under the sun, as he put me in a headlock and I screamed, and in the end, he’d hold me at arms’ length and spit in my face and tell me we were done, *done!* He was sick of my selfishness and my not liking Esther and never paying the bills and not doing the washing up and he was bloody *done*. See you in hell, Farthing.

Esther put a hand on each of our shoulders.

‘Now the truth is, Ben, my lovely husband here is really trying to *not* get carried away with your adventure because of me, not because he doesn’t think it’s cool. Oh, my love,’ she said to Crane, ‘Don’t protest, why else have you been playing stake-out for the last week? And Ben, I know you don’t think my brain is up to much, but the only reason I’m not cheering you on too in *whatever* this is, is because I’m your boss and I can’t be rerouting all your classes up here next week; imagine the little year sevens getting lost on the tube. So I’m going to make a suggestion to you both, okay?’

Crane nodded, so I did too.

‘You give it one more day up here, then call it quits. But god; seriously, why don’t you use it to do some proper investigating? Stop sitting on your arses in confusion and actually knock on some doors, ask questions, maybe? Yes, glare at me like that all you want, Ben, but there’s a reason why I’m in management, and you’re not.’

## Chapter 3

I woke cold to a blue dawn, the sun unrisen but the sky light enough to show the angles of roofs dark against it. The city was waking up. Or the birds were, at least. I checked my phone; it wasn't six yet. Everything was damp. The wall over the garden lined with glasses and bottles, the ground strewn with flotsam and jetsam. I peeled myself up in the deckchair with a groan. My head was very heavy.

A few feet away, Crane was sleeping. I was so relieved he was still there that I ignored the lapsed watch. The sleeves of his hoody were empty from where he'd pulled his arms inside to keep warm. He was snoring. His face looked odd when it wasn't filled up with his waking-self. His beard was long after his holiday, it'd started to swirl along his jaw. I considered waking him up. I didn't like being left alone with his body without him in it.

He woke an hour later, and I said, 'Sorry.'

He waved a hand and grinned in a way he'd done a thousand times before, which meant *I've already forgotten; come on mate, life's too short.*

And so we began our final day on the rooftop, a day which was clear and warm, orange-tinged with September and already nostalgic for the summer. The last few days, I could sense something coming our way, like flying ants sensing a storm, but now the weather had broken, and the world was fresh.

Esther probably imagined we'd be running around like contestants on a gameshow – One day left! Running out of time! – trying to cover every corner and ask

every question we could, but there was nothing to be done that we hadn't done already, and so in unspoken decision, we spent the day talking about what Crane had gotten up to on his honeymoon, playing rounds of Shithead with a pack of cards dogeared from years of abuse, eating and drinking all the party remains, reminiscing about stealing canoes and chatting up women in Scottish accents, secretly planning my escape from teaching and dreaming of all the places we had still to go. And in a flash, it was evening; the day slipping away too soon, real-life looming up high ahead, when:

'Wait,' Crane said. He'd seen something in the garden and stood up.

'What—?'

He shushed me.

There it was again. A flash along the wall, where Jack had climbed in a century ago. Someone was outside on the pavement, trying to scale it now. Crane and I crouched behind our own wall and watched. They jumped up and grabbed the top of the wall, pulling themselves up by ivy just about high enough to glimpse into the garden before they disappeared, unable to make the final part of the climb.

'Well, how about that?' Crane laughed. 'You think it's him?'

'I can't tell,' I said.

The next failed attempt flashed through the trees.

'Come on,' said Crane, and he was up and running from the rooftop, clattering downstairs as fast as he could, and I followed, passing through my self-imposed forcefield around the roof almost unnoticed. On the street outside, we almost ran into Esther coming up the stairs with Turkish takeaway.

'Someone at the wall...' panted Crane.

'Well go on, then,' she said.

‘You sure?’ he asked, while I beckoned.

‘Go,’ said Esther, she was almost enthused. ‘I’ll take the watch.’

Crane kissed her on the forehead.

We split up. As the faster runner, I went the long way round, sprinting along the pavement past a few pedestrians who looked at me funny, turning left and left again, and stopping at the south-east corner of the garden. I took a moment to catch my breath, then peered around the bricks, down the long length of the garden wall with its overhanging branches. Fifty feet away, Crane was already at the north-east corner, pacing back and forth like a bad background extra.

The person between us wasn’t Jack. It was a younger man, early twenties at most. He wore a red bandana over black, unkempt hair. His features were small as an imp’s. And he was small, which was making the ascent impossible, and he was tiring, his jumps no longer bringing him anywhere near the top. A brown terrier watched his progress from nearby, laying on the flagstones next to a dirty rucksack, its jaw resting on its paws.

My phone vibrated with a call from Crane. I answered.

‘I’ve seen this guy before,’ his tinny voice said. ‘He’s the one who helped me over the wall.’

‘What?’

‘He looks homeless.’

‘He’s been around this whole time?’

‘How should I know? He could be a randomer.’

The red bandanaed man kicked the wall in frustration, before picking up his bag and calling to the dog to follow him. He crossed the road away from us and disappeared down a side street.

‘Go, go, go!’ I whispered into the phone.

‘Moving on out.’ Crane was having fun.

We followed the stranger up through the neat streets of Kensington and out into Hyde Park, where the sun was setting across the fields behind Fulham, and liquorice-stick lampposts were lit along the path. Crane and I walked together, heads down, so conspicuousness in our not wanting to be noticed, everyone we passed looked at us like we were in clown costumes and Crane struggled not to laugh. We left the park and followed the man and dog on through the smart-fronted red-brick richness of Mayfair and, after an hour or so of winding miles, into Soho, where the streets were crammed full of tourists, and we almost lost the red bandana in the Saturday crowds... But no, there! Crane spotted the dog winding through legs up ahead. The stranger had turned down a pedestrianised hive of bars and restaurants where strings of lanterns were strung from building to building, and restaurant customers sat outside drinking.

The man and his dog stopped halfway down the street in a little-used doorway between shops which had been filled with the boxes and blankets of a beggar’s holding, one of a thousand of pockets around the city that were so actively not looked at, they became invisible. The man poured the dog into a box, and perched on his doorstep, staring, blank, out across the street.

Moving to the edge of the river of people, we joined him.

‘Hello there,’ said Crane jovially.

The man rose to his feet, wary he was half Crane’s size.

‘You are police?’ he asked.

His accent wasn’t British, but I couldn’t place it. It was French-Mexican-Italian. If Esperanto had an accent, that would’ve been it.

‘No, we’re not police,’ said Crane. ‘This is Farthing. I’m—’

‘What do you want?’

‘We saw you in Selwood Gardens and—’

‘You are here following me?’

He kept interrupting, but I didn’t think it was rudeness; he was very quick in everything he did, all his gestures and the storm of emotions and confusions that passed over his features until a light came into the young man’s eyes. Even his excited blinks were quick.

‘You are interested in me? But you look too boring to be interested in me. Oh, I see... are you from London?’

‘Born and bred,’ I said.

The young man laughed, his teeth white and small. His wariness dissolved, and he clapped his hands like we were elephants doing tricks. He pointed at Crane. ‘Ah! I know you now! You are the heavy man who was climbing over the wall into the garden, no?’

Crane smiled. ‘That’s me.’

And with an air of delight, the strange young man said: ‘You will be looking for the pale-haired man, no?’

Crane glanced at me before asking, ‘What pale-haired man?’



‘I’m right, I’m seeing! And poor you, you are both knowing nothing except looking for him? That is a thankless journey, I think. You are thinking he is important? He is not, don’t worry.’

‘He disappeared into thin air, that seems important,’ I said, playing my hand too soon, I knew.

‘Yes, yes.’ He waved a hand, uninterested. ‘But he is not *as* important as other things, to my thinking. I was following him across the city. He was coming to you from elsewhere.’

‘From where?’

The young man grinned.

‘Now you are wanting to eat the chicken without hatching the egg.’

‘What?’

Crane translated. ‘He wants something in return for information.’

‘Right. What do you want?’

‘You are knowing Selwood Gardens? Because I am interested because I am noticing your man is going in, but never coming out, no? You are able to be letting me in to look around?’

Crane pulled a face which said, *What harm could it do? He’s little and jolly.*

‘Yes, okay,’ I said, simple. ‘We can do that.’

‘Good, good!’

He stuck out his hand, which I shook, dislodging the stale smell of him.

‘I am Redman,’ he said. He nodded toward the dog, asleep in the box, pale stomach ballooning with breaths. ‘This is Mano, you will find him the only creature in London more friendly than me.’ Then he pointed happily across the street with both

hands. ‘And that, my new friends – because I am being bad at secrets for very long – is the place you are wanting. That is where the pale-haired man began his journey to you.’

The place we were wanting was squeezed between a coffee shop and a gelato parlour. It was a record shop, all three storeys painted pickle green. A couple in their twenties went up to the door, they oozed easy hipness – skinny jeans and oversized jumpers, one fedora, one beanie – and stamped out cigarettes, pulled open the door, went inside. The lights inside were on, clear windows delivering a view of people inside. It was busy, their bodies amalgamated. Above the green-painted door were metal letters, shiny and new enough to still be free of pigeon crap: *Carnabeats Records*.

‘There?’ I asked. ‘What’s in there?’

‘Now, you are seeing that your garden is a place a man goes into without ever leaving, but this is a place he came out of without ever entering.’

I swore, drawing the word out long.

‘I have been watching it for a very long time.’

‘Right,’ said Crane, dubious. ‘And do you see lots of unexpected people coming and going over there?’ He couldn’t keep the incredulity from his tone, but Redman didn’t notice.

‘No, yours is being the first.’ This was a very exciting thing.

‘Then why watch?’

‘Ah.’ He smiled. ‘Someone told me it was a good place to watch. And what else am I having to do?’

‘Tell me what you saw,’ I said.

‘Your friend was not being so hard to spot. The shop was covered up to paint, it is always changing who has it, and is only opening again this week. Your friends arrived

when it was nothing yet, and he is kicking past boards and squeezing out the front and walking away that way.’ Redman pointed down the street, the way we’d come from Kensington. ‘Not hard to spot. Maybe what you are looking for next is inside, no?’

‘Hear that?’ I asked Crane. ‘More magic.’

Crane pulled me away from Redman into the hubbub of the middle of the street, we became an island in the river’s flow, and he tried very hard to say something sensible but ended up with: ‘Is he taking the piss. I can tell he thinks we’re on a wild goose chase. He’s making fun of us. Chatting nonsense.’

‘Yeah, but his nonsense fits weirdly well with my nonsense. So yeah, even if I don’t understand him yet, I believe him, I think.’

‘Course you do.’ Crane rubbed a hand down his face. ‘Right then, I’m going in,’ he said, turning to the record shop.

Redman shouted through pedestrians from his doorway: ‘The gardens?’

‘Come by tomorrow evening,’ I called back. ‘I’ll let you in.’

‘You are promising?’ asked Redman like a child with a pinky swear.

‘I am promising.’

A bell jangled when I pushed open the shop door. Inside was a warm cavern of low-hanging yellow bulbs, their filaments glowing in spirals. The shop’s insides were painted green too, and there were leafy plants everywhere, standing in pots, lining the counters; it was a cuboid of rainforest dropped into the centre of Soho, and for a moment I thought I’d stepped into another extra place like the gallery. But no. The shop floor was surrounded by record-laden shelving units, organised alphabetically and records were displayed as art on the walls. It smelt of fresh paint and wood-dust – as

though it was all a hastily constructed stage-set, instead of a real place – overlaid with the smell of people, suntan lotion, beer, coffee.

At the back of the shop, a carpeted area had sofas piled with guitar cases and music books, and a microphone was set up on a stand. The shop floor was filled with chairs in rows, a narrow aisle hugging one side to allow access to the shop counter, which had been set up like a bar. Most of the seats were already taken, and they were squeezed in so tightly that people's knees dug into each other's backs. The patrons were mostly young, but there were some older folk too, the kind of people who went to peace festivals and bought artisan cheeses.

'Move your arse,' said Crane, trying to get in the door behind me. 'Oh balls, is this an open mic?'

'Your favourite.'

'I need a drink.'

I struggled through to the bar where I got us each a pint, poured badly into a plastic cup. Crane drank half of his quickly, forehead furrowed. We managed to find seats next to each other but in different rows, one behind the other, and clambered, apologetic, over bags and knees. I couldn't sit still. I fidgeted like Crane had done at the new Star Wars film. Everything was fascinating. I was next to the B section of records, which seemed appropriate unless alphabetising by surname. On the wall over me were two records: Joy Division's mountain range of pulsar rhythm and Bowie spread on a chaise longue. Was it a code?

'Thank you, everyone,' said a woman's voice into the microphone.

The last conversations died, the last standers sat down in front of me, and at the front, a tattooed shopkeeper was revealed; forties, ear tunnels, lower lip pierced.

‘I’m overwhelmed to see you all here. What an awesome thing that, in times like these, when the world is like it is, we can still meet all together, conduct ourselves in honour and respect, and immerse our souls in art, peace and love.’

Crane groaned behind me. I could tell he was trying not to laugh. I thought he’d married the wrong woman if he didn’t want any of that romantic crap.

‘Welcome to the first of our new fortnightly open mics.’

A cheer!

‘May this be the beginning of great and beautiful things, things which enhance and change the culture around us, making a better, lovelier...’ Blah blah blah.

First up, was a woman in her twenties. Blonde and celery-thin, she rose from the audience and took to the stage, foregoing the microphone to sit at an upright piano. The piano was old, it clanged, and her voice was so soft that only the front few rows could hear her. Next was a nervous guy who had trouble lowering the microphone. He was chubby with a buzz cut, like a hedgehog wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and read bleak poems about growing up in the North, which I kind of liked. Then a folk trio took to the stage, two men and a woman, each with grey hair down to their shoulders. There were vines embroidered on their guitar straps, and they sang a fast, vibrant song about alcohol, love, politics. I quite enjoyed it; their desperation matched my own. None of these people were like Jack, but I thought they were trying to be like him. They’d never met him though, so didn’t know what template of a human being they should be working towards. But I’d met him, and even I didn’t know what it was that had separated him from other people – maybe something to do with his looking outward instead of inward.

A woman on the harp.

A boy explaining a painting.

More poems.

I was alert and watching everything. But it was all frustratingly normal and real, nothing even remotely impossible about any of it, no matter how hard I paid attention and finally, the hanging bulbs brightened for an interval, and the audience stood up, escaped their cramped seats.

Crane leant forwards. 'While this is delightful and all...'

I nodded, solemn. 'Artsy individuals expressing themselves? Consider this my gift to you.'

'Is your Jack any of these?'

'Of course not.'

'We could ask after him? Spread his description around.'

'You do that. I'm looking for something else.'

'What for?'

'No idea.' Which was true, everything was too pedestrian; I didn't know where to start. Redman was right when he'd said we didn't understand anything. 'What if there's another one of those spaces somewhere in here? 'We've been imagining that the gallery was in... In a kind of concertinaed space that was always on my roof, just, you know, inaccessible. But, no, you're right... What if there's something that leads to somewhere else entirely?' I looked at him. 'What if the gallery was *somewhere else*?

'You mean outside London?'

'Yeah.'

'But the gallery's in your head, and your head's in London.'

‘Yeah, yeah. But wouldn’t it be cool if I was right? If that gallery was actually in Moscow or somewhere? I think we need to expand our search.’

‘Ah, a good old Russian conspiracy.’

I handed him my plastic cup. ‘Get me another one, will you?’

I climbed over the seats, past the stage area and at a loss for what else to do, through a noisy wooden-beaded curtain to a back corridor filled with a loo queue. A flight of stairs led to the upper storeys and, while no one was looking, I nipped up them and arrived on a landing lit by the streetlights outside and filled with tins of paint with a ladder lying horizontally along the wall.

The rooms off it were storerooms filled with metal shelving, plastic-wrapped records and boxes of sound equipment. I had that desperate-for-a-piss adrenalin feeling I associated with games of hide and seek. I ran my hands around the walls. Opened and closed doors hoping for other places beyond.

I took out my phone and took photographs of everything, but I didn’t know what I was meant to be taking them of, so moved on to video instead. I did quick laps around each room on the first floor, and made my way up again to the second, which was more of a living space; a little kitchenette, a futon with wrinkled sheets. It was there I met the tattooed shopkeeper carrying a bag of coffee beans.

‘What are you doing up here?’ she demanded.

I lowered my phone and smiled my most winning Parent’s Evening smile.

‘Nothing, sorry. I was just looking for another loo.’

‘Show me your phone.’

I was all innocence. ‘Why?’

‘Or I’m calling the police.’

I handed it over. She looked at the lock screen – a photo I'd taken of redwoods in California – but she couldn't get past the passcode (date of birth).

'Unlock it,' she said.

'Nope.'

'Fine.' She put my phone in her back pocket. 'There's a toilet in the back there,' she pointed.

'Oh. Thanks.'

I smiled and moved into the small, dark room, pulled the door closed and immediately heard her turn an outside key in the lock and remove it.

'Hey...' I knocked on the door. 'Hey, come on, I wasn't doing anything.'

'I'll deal with you after the second half,' she said, like she was being quite reasonable, and her weight moved away down the stairs.

I swore. Several times.

I was too wound up to be trapped. Some impossible geography would be pretty welcome right now. There was a window over the sink. I pulled up a wooden blind, letting the city-light into the tiny room. I opened the window, breaking the seal of new paint, and leant out into an alleyway between shops. I was high up, and it was dark out there. All the wall around were the solid, windowless backs of shops, but at either end of the alley was late-night Soho activity; people and freedom just a stone's throw away.

I climbed up into the sink and sat on the windowsill, looking down to hard concrete. Within reach, there was a drainpipe to my left. I took off my belt and looped it around the pipe, tugged on it a few times, testing, and I really thought it was going to bear my weight until there was a grating sound and the pipe gave way, sending a few



metres of itself down onto the hard ground below, and I almost tipped me over the edge before I grabbed the window frame, heart racing.

A moment later a dog barked and a Redman hurried down the alleyway towards the noise. He examined the fallen drainpipe, then looked up to see me. He laughed.

‘What is being wrong with stairs, they are easier, no?’

‘Can you go get Crane?’

‘What is Crane?’

‘My friend. The heavy one with the beard.’

Redman thought about it. ‘For a shower, I will do this.’

‘Ha! Bribery. Yes, fine, okay. You can have a shower at mine tomorrow.’

‘You are a good man!’

He disappeared down the alley, Mano left behind, watching me with shiny eyes, tail wagging neatly. Crane soon arrived, two pints in hand. He laughed a deep laugh when he saw me, put the beer on the ground, rubbed his hands together and held his arms open like he did atop conquered mountains.

‘Come on, then. Jump.’

‘Sod off.’

Crane went back in and bargained with the shopkeeper on my behalf, but she was ‘pretty pissed’ and kicked him out of the event too. We began formulating a plan to ask all the neighbouring shops for a ladder, but I wanted my phone back too much to escape, so said something dramatic and honourable like *You go, my friend. Go back to Esther. Take the last watch. One of us has to see it through*, and Crane apologetically left me to it, the traitor, promising to bail me out of prison later if required.

## Chapter 4

I looked at my watch, holding it to the light from the window. I was penduluming between patient and very impatient. I discovered a bit of protective plastic still on the toilet bowl, so I peeled it off and stuck it to the mirror, covering the reflection of my face. I banged on the door a lot and shouted things like: ‘You buggers! Let me out of here! I haven’t done anything, this is bloody illegal!’ and so on and so forth until it was no longer any fun, and I sat on the floor.

After a while, I could hear raised voices downstairs. People began to shout. Multiple voices. I couldn’t make out the words, but there was rage, real rage; I could hear the fire of it. And then came a scream, shrill and short.

I scrambled to my knees and pressed my ear to the door. The shop had fallen silent. I looked through the keyhole, but all I could see outside was the edge of the futon, a few books piled on the floor, a mug on the carpet.

‘Hello?’ I called. ‘Is everything alright?’

There was nothing. No voices, no doors opening and closing, no feet coming to let me out and tell me that everything was okay, or even to tell me to shut up. I was about to try shouting out the window when something creaked, and all my energy from before switched itself to dread.

Someone was moving in the building, climbing up the stairs. I pressed against the keyhole, twisting to get a view of where the stairs came up into the room. I could see something there. First, they were a shadow on the wall, then my partial view showed an

abdomen I didn't recognise. A man, I guessed. A man wearing a black coat, smart and tailored; not unlike something from the British military, when they did marches with their arms and legs all in sync, not when they sat on the back of trucks in their khaki, waiting to be blown up in the desert. The coat's buttons were matt black. I hadn't seen anyone wearing anything like it at the open mic. The man moved from the stairs into the room, purposeful. He looked around with a sense of established routine, opening cupboards and leaving them open, moving any furniture big enough for someone to hide behind. Room searched; he turned his attention to the door of my bathroom. He tried the handle, black-gloved hand coming within inches of my eye at the keyhole, but the door was locked, thank god, and he didn't have the key. He took a step back. I thought he was going to leave, go back downstairs, but instead, he pointed a gun at the lock.

I moved as fast as he fired. A flash of blue-white light sliced through the door, and the bathroom was brightly lit for an instant, the shot sparking on the metal lock, leaving traces of purple and green snaking across my vision.

I squeezed myself into the space behind the door as he stepped into the bathroom. So close, so close. Don't breath. Don't move.

I examined the back of him. He was taller than me, wider than me, and all his clothes were black as soot; high boots, jacket, trousers, and the back of the helmet on his head. The helmet was solid and hard, but smooth and tight, covering everything above his shoulders, showing the moulded shape of his skull, his neck and the bulges of his ears, as though he'd been dipped headfirst into tar. He turned to survey the bathroom, and I saw that the front of his helmet was silver-mirrored and mercury-smooth. I was reflected in the edge of it, stretched and thin and hiding, wreathed in green, blue and magenta like sunlight on an oil slick.

He went to the window, still wide open, and looked down onto the street and the broken drainpipe, maybe he thought whoever had been shouting had gone down there? I held my breath, didn't move.

But he'd see me soon. Oh god.

He'd see me.

From outside the bathroom came a clicking of small claws. The man and I both turned and through the gap between the door and the frame, I saw a dog –running up the stairs fast, the pale-blurred movement of him. Redman's terrier, Mano. The little dog was searching for something, he was frantic, running back and forth outside, yapping.

The mirrored man left the bathroom to be growled at, but a second shot, another flash of light, brought the dog quietly skidding to a stop. I heard a muffled chuckle and then a strange sound; first like the breaking of a teacup, then like a boot trying to free itself from thick mud. I closed my eyes.

The man went back downstairs. Taking the stairs slow and calm.

I breathed again, grabbed at oxygen, and peeled myself from behind the door. Maybe I should stay there? Ride it out? God no. I needed out. I was getting the hell out, even if I died doing it. It took all my courage to leave the bathroom.

On the floor outside, Mano lay in a mess of blood and fur. His skull had been crushed under the mirrored man's heel, his brain stamped into his little yellow teeth, little pink tongue.

'Oh, buddy,' I whispered. 'I'm sorry.'

I edged around the mess and carefully down the stairs, wincing at every creak, stopping again and again to listen, and came down into the storerooms of the first floor, where everything was dark and quiet. I stalked past the cans of paint, almost knocking

the ladder. Down. Down. On the ground floor, I found an exit to the alleyway out back, but it was locked up tight, so I had to navigate through the building until I came to the beaded curtain between the storerooms and the shop. Crap. I'd forgotten that. There was no way for me to get through without making a noise, so I did it quickly, grabbing the beads to calm them as soon as I was through.

In the shop, the chairs were still laid out for the open mic, although a bit haphazard. The lights were off, turning the front windows into a cinema, screening a longshot of a Soho street. There were only a few pedestrians out there. Redman's doorway was empty, just duvets and boxes. The front door was ajar.

I took a deep breath to steel myself and, oh god, it stank. I put the back of my hand to my mouth against the stench of something terrible and warm like human faeces, and a humid mammalian smell, almost like metal, almost like sex.

I edged into the shop. I didn't look down; I wasn't stupid. Instead, I fixed my eyes on the green rectangle of a fire exit sign above the front door. The floor was slippery and strewn with obstacles which I nudged out the way with my shoes. I'd played a game with my mum as a kid where I'd been blindfolded with a scarf and stumbled around the grass in Selwood Gardens, trying to find the things she'd left out for me; an apple, a carton of squash, a picture book. I was good at not looking. I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms. Don't look. Don't look.

'Don't peek, Benji love,' she'd called.

Halfway out, I reached an unpassable obstacle, and I looked.

The floaty celery pianist was at my feet. Facedown, her hair was still neatly braided, and her hands were graceful like she'd fallen in the middle of a dance. Her legs

lay knock-kneed a few feet away, sliced clean away from the rest of her. I'd been attempting to shuffle through her ruined pelvis.

The shop shifted in and out of focus.

I grabbed a chair to stop myself toppling. Clamped my eyes closed and felt every muscle in me seize up into immobility. No, come on. Move, you coward, get out. Get out. But I couldn't move. I needed to look. I'd tried not looking; it hadn't served me well. I forced myself to open my eyes and glanced at each mound on the ground between me and the door, glanced at them just long enough to count them. Eleven. Eleven dead people. Brilliant.

There were footprints in the blood, a mapped-out dance routine leading from the bodies to the open front door. I stepped over the pianist and followed the trail. The prints had been made by narrow, neat shoes with no tread. Two different people, I thought. Whoever they were, they'd been unhurried; they'd stopped, contemplated the scene, then wandered out of the shop into the streets of London. I got to the front door, pulled it open. The footprints faded away off to the right. To get home, I needed to follow them. No. I couldn't do that. God no. I'd go the other way as fast as I could and phone a taxi and—

My phone.

I needed my phone.

I went back into the shop and found the shopkeeper on her back by the piano, her blood was black up the walls, over sofas, speakers, record players. I crouched down and looked at her open, surprised eyes. The scars in my vision from the light gun became worms on her skin. There wasn't enough of her; she'd half-melted into the floor. I reached out, pulled her up by the shoulder. The back of her had been sliced away, had

become a cross-section of muscles, ribs, vertebrae. I could see inside the chambers of her like a building hit by an earthquake, walls wallpapered, pipes burst. I dropped her and sat back on my heels, steadied myself, fingers dipping, briefly, into the blood around her. I searched her pockets, still warm. Where was it? Yes! No, that's hers... Got it! I rose to leave, but behind me, there was an alto-clacking of wooden beads.

I turned. The mirrored man stood behind the shop counter, faceless. He was watching me, I knew that even without seeing his face. Behind him was an orange light; he'd set the back rooms on fire. They crackled.

His movement was slow and considered. I was unexpected, but I wasn't alarming, I wasn't dangerous. Like spotting a spider, I was just a moment of, 'Oh, I wasn't expecting *you* there', before I was squashed. He pointed his gun at me and I saw it properly for the first time. It was long-barrelled and black.

I ran for the exit, already in motion when he fired, the flash of light making my shadow long in front of me over the bulges of people, barrows in the landscape. The shot hit the piano in a cacophony of breaking strings. I slipped in the mess on the floor, fell forwards but got my head and shoulders out the front door, fingers stretching, but the mirrored man grabbed my ankles and pulled me back inside.

I rolled over to see him standing over me. He put a foot on my chest to keep me still, the gun half a foot from my face, and I grabbed the gun with both hands and twisted the barrel away from me. The next shot hit a rack of records, plastic-smoke filling the air and he shook the gun to get me off like he was playing a game with a dog refusing to give up its squeaky toy; he was strong, but I was desperate. I clung on for my life. Stalemate. He fired again into the records. My face was reflected in his, I was grey-pale, ugly with sweat and effort, and he pressed his neat-booted foot down hard on

my chest, my ribs creaking, and tilted his head to watch me struggle, but then there was a siren, shrill and close – the fire alarm finally going off – and the mirrored man lessened the pressure on me a tiny, almost un-noteworthy amount and I surged upwards with everything I had left, and it was luck, pure bloody luck, which had him toppling back into a row of chairs. He landed hard, his gun spinning off across the floor, and something else fell, something metallic and small and substantial enough to clunk as it hit wet tiles and skidded towards me.

The mirrored man was up, hurrying to retrieve the gun.

I rolled over and scrambled to my feet, grabbed the metal object, shoved it deep in my jeans pocket, yanked open the front door and fled.

I sprinted.

Chest aching, lungs burning, other people's blood all over me.

At the end of the street, parked with two wheels up on the pavement and sent to me from the gods, was a black hackney cab, amber-lit and awaiting custom. The driver was a silhouette reading a newspaper. I flung myself in the back and collapsed onto the seat. The driver glanced back at me, calm as a cucumber. He folded his paper and turned the engine on.

'Where are you going?'

I struggled to catch my breath. 'Anywhere, hurry!'

A shot of light flashed from back down the street. It missed the taxi but hit the pub behind, shattering masonry onto the pavement and bringing faces to the windows. The mirrored man was running towards us, arm outstretched with the gun. His next shot came straight through the back of the taxi, an inch above my knees, and out through the other side.



‘Drive!’ I cried.

The driver pulled us away, wheels jolting down off the curb, and we accelerated away. Through the back window, I watched the mirrored man coming after us, running too hard to fire at us now, pounding his neat boots on the street in fierce staccato. He was fit, well-trained, reckless. He didn’t care if anyone saw him chasing us.

‘What’s going on?’ the driver demanded, changing gear.

‘He’s trying to kill me.’

The taxi slowed to a stop. ‘Get out. Now.’

‘No!’

The rear window was hit. It shattered, showering around me in glass cubes. The taxi started again, fast and windier than before, and we escaped the tangled streets of Soho by pulling out onto Shaftsbury Avenue, joining the traffic in a flurry of swerves and horns, driving too fast down the high street.

‘Has he gone?’ the driver shouted over the wind.

I checked behind. It was all shops, pubs and cinemas. Traffic everywhere. People everywhere. ‘I can’t see him,’ I said.

The taxi slowed to the speed limit. We became just one of twenty thousand black cabs in the city.

‘You’re gonna get out at the next lights, got it?’

I took a breath to protest, but the mirrored man had reappeared in the rear-view mirror. ‘Shit! How did he—’

The driver spotted him too and swung us down a side street so narrow that the yellow lines nearly met in the middle, scraping the wing mirror along a brick wall, showering sparks. We swerved around rubbish bags outside a kebab shop, a cardboard

box rolling up over the windscreen. And on we went through the one-way streets around Covent Garden. We turned at every junction, but the going was slow; there were too many people in crossing in front of us, too many horns protesting we were going the wrong way. And the mirrored man was always just behind, just around a corner, chasing after us like his bloody life depended on it.

I thought I could hear police sirens in the distance.

We hit the curve of Aldwych, turning into the tree-lined street of grand hotels and theatres. There was a coach blocking the road, offloading suitcases onto the pavement, and we bumped up over a pedestrian island to get through, and we arrived suddenly at the river, buildings all dropping away.

Waterloo Bridge.

The Thames was wide and smooth-black beneath us. The moon was bright. Ahead, the southern half of the city was a postcard view of night-time buildings, construction cranes and the London Eye. For the first time, there was clear road in front of us. The taxi revved as we raced into it. I stood in the back, yelled to go faster. We'd lose the mirrored man here. He couldn't run that fast. We'd lose him.

We had to.

But something was happening on the bridge up ahead.

In the middle of the road a ball of light, brilliant as halogen, was hovering in the air above the surface of the road. *A star*, I thought madly. *Now a star has fallen from the sky, and there it is floating serenely...* No. Not serene. It was growing, expanding, bloody supernovaing, spreading itself thin to stretch into a wavering, staticky wall twenty metres wide, twenty metres high. It filled the bridge from one side to the other. The light dissipated to the edges, so the wall became a halo, and instead of Waterloo

Bridge on the other side, there was somewhere else. *Somewhere else*. It was dark in there, darker even than the London night; we were driving fifty miles an hour headlong into a cave and *It's a butterfly net*, I thought, *it's here to catch me*.

‘Stop!’ I screamed.

The driver slammed on the brakes. We screeched to a halt, back wheels lifting. I smacked my head hard on the plastic divider between the back and front of the taxi. The whole windscreen was filled with the impossible place, the front of the taxi just inside it, the halo of light arching high over us; and I wondered what would happen if I got out and ran over to touch it... If I'd crisp away and— Inside the cave were shapes. Terrifying, hulking things, like hanging dinosaur bones. I rubbed my eyes. The shapes were aeroplanes. Fighter jets. Dozens of them lined up as far as I could see into the darkness, each with its cockpit dimly illuminated, each with its nose towards us. The cave was an aircraft hangar.

‘What the—’

The mirrored man ran past us into the hangar. As soon as he was inside, he slowed, one hand to his heart, and sank to his knees in exhaustion, where he was met by the quick hands of the people in there, and dragged away.

The halo of light began to close, shrinking like a firework exploding backwards. I threw my hands over my head and screamed as the light fell on us. The taxi lurched, then everything was quiet.

‘Get out, get out, get out,’ the driver shouted, his arms stiff on the wheel.

I stumbled out into the road. There were strange embers in the air; insects burning, ignited by the halo. One by one, they died. I ran forward into the area which had been an aircraft hangar a moment before. It was just road. Just streetlights. Just

pavements. I looked both ways along the bridge, up to the sky, under the bridge, but all was back to normal in London. The Thames ran smooth.

I laughed.

Ran my hands through my hair.

I turned back to the taxi. The front of the bonnet and headlights were nowhere to be seen. They'd been sliced away, straight down through the engine, exposing a cross-section of leaking engine parts. I ran my fingers along the edges of sheared tubes and wires still hot with engine heat, my hand shaking.

'Did you see it?' I shouted at the driver. 'Did you?'

'I...' He faltered.

'Did you bloody see it?' I demanded. I went round and opened his door. I grabbed the front of his jumper and pulled him towards me, and his eyes flickered between me and the police cars which edged through stalled traffic towards us. It was the first time I'd seen his face properly; he was kindlier than I'd expected. 'Tell me you saw it.'

'I saw it,' he murmured.

I smiled. 'Thank you.'

'You're mad.'

I let him go. 'That'd explain things.'

Police were leaving their cars, heading cautiously towards us from both ends of the bridge. I could hear the small voices on their radios as they chattered at each other in confusion. I backed away past a policeman who didn't even look at me, and on past the few civilian drivers who'd gotten out to see what was going on, who called after me, shouting questions about explosions and police and if I was okay, mate? You need an ambulance? But I didn't stop.

On the northern riverbank, I clattered down concrete steps from the bridge onto Victoria Embankment. People lined the river along the boulevards and pointed out over the water, their phones out and filming all the non-action. I joined them. From there, we could all see the whole spread of Waterloo Bridge as it gathered the flickering lights of emergency services.

‘An explosion,’ people said around me again and again.

Something leaked into my eyes; I pressed my hand to my forehead and discovered my own blood for a change. But I was too alive to care. I was filled with a type of joy I’d never felt before. It was the first bounce on the end of a bungee cord, it was stepping back onto a curb after nearly being hit by a bus, it was being given the all-clear. And this time other people had seen what I’d seen. Look at them all! Thousands of them. Crane would have to really believe me when I slapped tomorrow’s newspaper down in front of him! *Nationwide conspiracy unmasked!* it would say. *Hidden military base uncovered in Central London! Benjamin was right!* it would say.

My phone was buzzing. I took it out; Esther was calling.

I grinned as I said, ‘Hello?’

‘Ben!’ Esther cried. ‘Come home.’

‘Why?’

There was a lot of noise from the other end, but no answer.

‘Esther? Why?’

Time became sluggish on my run back to Selwood Gardens. Running turned into walking, then crawling, then slithering through molasses, and by the time I rounded the corner onto my street, time had stopped altogether.

Lots of people stood in the street, still as photographs. Half the residents of Selwood Gardens, I thought. There was the bear in his slippers. There was the old woman leaning on her stick. Both were stock-still as I walked past. All the firefighters in their gear were paused in the process of pushing back the crowd. The scene was lit by a nice orange glow which softened everything; the leaves on the plane trees, steps up to the buildings, parked cars, faces of onlookers, the whole scene lit like candlelight in churches. It was kind of beautiful. The only thing which moved was the fire itself. The only sound was the sound of burning.

For some reason, I imagined a giant boy with a bleeding nose and a lantern stooping over the street. He pulled out the front of my building like it was a dollhouse and used a fire poker as large as a telephone pole to stoke up my cardboard boxes of books and clothes and a decade worth of lesson plans. The giant boy slammed the building back into place, and as he and his lantern faded back into the cosmos, the world started moving again. The lights from the fire engines began to turn, the sirens sliced through the peace.

‘Ben!’ Esther threw herself around me, without noticing all the blood.

‘Where’s Crane?’ I asked, peeling her off.

‘You’re here.’

‘Where the hell’s Crane?’

Her eyes were white and wide. She goldfished unsayable words.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Right, I see.’

She said other things then, but I wasn’t listening. Something about being so, so, so, so sorry, and it was all her fault, she shouldn’t have left without him. I nodded like I

gave a shit, but all I could think about was the double set of bloody footprints leading out of the record shop.

I moved towards the steps of my building.

‘Hey mate, stay back,’ someone said. ‘Those windows could go.’

‘Why isn’t anyone doing anything?’ I asked.

‘Let them do their job.’

But the firefighters were still unravelling hoses and connecting them to the mains water, and they were doing it all too slowly, so sodding slowly I couldn’t watch, and I tugged at my hair until I dashed across the street towards the building. People screamed at me. Hands reached out to stop me. Someone fell over as I fought past them and ran up the steps into the building.

Inside, soot had dusted the chessboard floor to grey conformity. I looked up through the storeys from the bottom of the stairwell. Smoke flowed upwards like water over a rocky riverbed, collecting in a seething ceiling which roiled around the chandelier. Something about it was hellish. Brimstone and terror. But my flat was still below the smoke line.

‘Crane!’ I shouted.

Maybe he was somewhere else? Hiding in another flat, maybe? He just needed a friendly voice to coax him out.

‘Crane?’

Nothing.

The building shook, it’d been burning too long already. The air was hot. My skin prickled with new sweat. I pressed my T-shirt to my nose and mouth. Headed up. Eyes streaming. I reached my landing. There was my front door. It was closed. Looked fine,

really. Except for the glow from underneath, the rising wisps of smoke and the soot staining the wall above. What was it like in there? Like standing inside a wood burner with all the floorboards shimmering blue with heat, burning so fast because there'd been nothing inside, the flames forced too quickly to the infrastructure, and I was thinking stupid things like *god, I haven't even slept there yet.*

High above me, something in the building collapsed. I grabbed for the handrail. Dust and ceiling fell through the smoke, chunks of plaster appearing out of the smoke, clattering down the stairs. Something had given in to the heat, a wall or a floor, and fire had leapt out at the oxygen in the stairwell. There were flames above me now, flames roaring out of the flat above mine, filling the top landing. Smoke swirled through the bannisters; a whirlwind of heat becoming the backbone of the building. I felt the solid heat of it as I struggled towards my door. But the air on the stairs wasn't clear enough to see any more, it was all burning brown and orange. My door was somewhere up ahead. Why was finding it so hard? I coughed. Drew in a lungful of fumes. They battered me from the inside out, and I staggered, got up, staggered again, blind and lost now. Oh hell, the door was gone. All was murk. I found a wall and slipped down it, cradled there by the building, world close, dim, fluttering and searching for the door as far as I could reach, thinking this was it; the boiling fjord where our flesh simmered away, our bones turning into stock.



## Chapter 5

Esther pulled out a chair and sat down opposite me. She looked at our surroundings as though they said something about me that she didn't like. The hotel was expensive, all white marble, velvet armchairs, modern art, menus without pricing. We sat in the restaurant, a small terrarium on the table between us, which contained a struggling aloe vera in black soil. I'd chosen the hotel because it was the closest to Selwood Gardens that'd been willing to take me bandaged, stinking of smoke and sliding a credit card towards them across the reception desk.

I put down my newspaper. I'd been searching for mentions of Kensington through all the mentions of Soho and Waterloo Bridge. The death of Arthur Edmund Alexander Crane had gone mostly unreported. Diminished to a coincidental side note of a tragedy next to everything else. What was a house fire when there'd been an explosive terrorist attack (the idiots—hadn't they seen what I'd seen? There'd been so bloody many eyes!) and a massacre?

Esther took a breath and began.

'If you need somewhere to—'

'He's not dead.'

She flinched hard, her mouth doing an odd twist. 'God, please stop that.'

'No. He's not dead.'

'We've been through this.'

‘I’m going to find him.’ I waved two fingers in the air at a waiter, then went back to the newspaper.

She yanked the page down to see me. ‘They took a body from the rubble this morning, that’s not in your bloody paper yet, is it?’

‘It wasn’t him.’

‘No,’ she frowned. ‘You’re right; it wasn’t. But even three weeks later, and they’re still finding—’

‘They won’t find him.’

‘But they will, Ben. They *will* find Arthur. And even if they don’t...’

‘He’s alive.’

For some reason, hearing me say Crane was alive was a harder thing for Esther to bear than me saying he wasn’t dead. It conjured a present, real image like he’d just popped to the restaurant bar and, any moment now, he was going to return, scraping a chair over to join us. He’d notice the tension and try to break it somehow, by making a joke or just a cheerful tried-and-tested, ‘Farthing, stop being a dick.’ Because it was always my fault.

Crane and I had a friend who was an actor. Once she’d arrived at the pub looking tired. After her third pint, she told us that she’d just spent the day being informed by junior doctors that her fictional son had died. Forty times of: ‘I’m afraid your son is no longer with us.’ Each time she’d frowned; her job to press them into decisiveness, she’d feigned obliviousness. A different ward, you mean? He’s been transferred? ‘No, madam. No, he’s... He’s... I’m so sorry, but he’s...’ But even for a fictional son with a fictional death, ‘dead’ was too horrible, too final a word for most of them to deliver. Only a few got that box ticked on their feedback forms. I’d laughed at her story. ‘But

they knew he wasn't real?' I hadn't understood. I'd taken the actor's hand in my own and looked at her, all earnest, no faltering: 'Madam, your son is dead. I'm sorry, it was tragic. A car ploughed right into him, and the paramedics are still out there now, making sure they've got all of him for you to kiss goodbye.' I leant back. 'See? Easy.' Crane had looked at me oddly.

I refused to give Esther the official full stop.

'He's alive,' I said.

Sitting in my hospital bed, a bandage on my forehead and an oxygen mask over my face, the police had visited, not to ask questions about massacres or car chases or any of the things they should've been asking me about, but to inform me of the death of my friend. Because it was clear what'd happened, apparently. There were witnesses. The police had compiled statements, while I lay unconscious in the back of an ambulance, in the emergency room, in a ward. They had the first pages of a report written before the fire was out. The only question they had for me on waking was: 'Sir, do you know anyone who might've wanted to harm either yourself or Arthur?' To which the answer was obviously, 'No.' I was confident despite my coughing.

Faulty electricity, they decreed. Had I ever had problems? Not the first time a fire had started in old flats in the area. Common enough problem.

My building had been searched for days. I'd heard the work being done in my sleep; the pneumatic sounds of machinery lifting beams, the shouts to abandon ship when walls swayed. They found the first body under the rubble, and I pitied the poor bugger who'd lifted the back of a burnt wardrobe and found it underneath, twisted and skeletal, empty eye sockets, fragile black bones. It'd been pulled from the wreckage, put in a bag, driven away, then prodded and poked until the verdict came in. Yeah, dead.

Definitely dead. But it wasn't Arthur Crane. The body belonged to the resident of flat one who hadn't evacuated. He'd probably died when my bedroom collapsed on him sleeping soundly underneath.

The police were right; there was no way for Arthur Crane to have gotten out. Esther had left him there. There'd been a whole crowd out front. And out back? The other half of Selwood Gardens had watched the fire from their windows across the garden. But what did the police think, then? That Crane had been so finely dispersed by fire that instead of a skeleton, he'd dissolved into the city? His spirit would live on as a carcinogenic vapour, to be breathed in and absorbed into the bloodstreams of the residents of Kensington?

'Are you sleeping well, sir?'

That had been the most common question from the hotel concierge, not because he cared about the state of the beds, but because he was concerned for my mental health. I had, after all, spent more than enough time enjoying the hotel's bed. Bed was good. Bed was nice. Bed was buried at the bottom of the world. At first, it'd been dark, but even the bottom had muted light through the curtains on the cushions, the armchair and the flatscreen telly on the wall. And at first, it'd been quiet too, for those first numb days, but slowly the whole world had become a soundscape; plumbing and lift doors, cars on wet roads outside, the seismic rattle of the tube (imagined, I knew, but heard nonetheless), and the faceless Londoners – millions of them orbiting – laughing and crying, clogging up my dreams. They pressed in. Weighed the blankets down. Glued my limbs to the mattress. All dreams were full of black circles. My eyes rolled around their edges. Black holes with photons streaming from their borders. And I dreamt there was something wrong with the sky; something like the cracking of an egg, the

shattering of ancient glass, so the solar system crashed down to Earth, the planets the size of tennis balls, the stars a shower of sparks which hissed into the Thames and became dust, swept out to the English Channel.

No, I did not sleep well.

Three or four days. Maybe five. Then I got annoyed with the sheets. There was one between me and the duvet, tangling around my middle every time I rolled over. I dragged it from the bed and threw it to the carpet, and intended to climb right back inside, but from an outside perspective the bed, the curled nest of a man who'd been sobbing, sweating, coughing for a week, wasn't tempting. I stood in the shower instead, watching veins of water running down my arms. I'd forgotten about the pad of cotton wool on my head, covering the stitches, so was surprised when it fell off into the drain, the water deepening around it. I poked at my stitches. They felt alright. The hospital had also taken x-rays of my chest and had only released me when I stopped coughing up black stuff. When it was time to leave, they hadn't known who to phone for me because they had Crane down as my next of kin.

I shampooed my hair, lost count of how many times. I turned the water as hot as it would go, became dizzy from heat and hunger. I watched my skin turn red and wondered if I was feeling what Crane had felt.

'Shit,' I said.

Kicked the glass door. Hit it with my fists.

'Shit.'

The word was close in the small space.

I began to spend my nights ghosting through the quiet regency of Kensington. Occasional taxis pulled up and released people up the steps to their homes; people off

late flights, back from business; drunks who sang opera as they tugged their clothes straight and tottered to bed. Sometimes a doorman nodded at me, which was comforting, nice to know I still existed. I went, again and again, to Selwood Gardens, where the trees were turning yellow now, and blue and white police lines blocked off the steps up to my once-building, broken rafters jutting out into the sky.

I sickened inside with loneliness.

I learnt quickly that I wasn't believed. Mirrored men coming to kill and burn places where there'd been doors to other spaces? What rubbish, what bloody nonsense. And of course, the police didn't believe me because they were probably all in on it too. And what'd I been left with as evidence? Two burnt-out carcasses of buildings, a missing best friend and a device in my pocket which did god-knows-what.

'I suspect you imagine things, sir.'

The concierge was often privy to my thoughts. We'd bonded. He brought me late-night whiskeys, ensured food was sent up to my room, organised me a haircut and a new wardrobe of clothes, while I tipped him a lot and didn't bother to learn his name.

'Do you need something to help you sleep?'

'He's alive,' I repeated.

'Please stop,' said Esther, the words so dripping with emotion that I was unable to process them as being real. No, she was acting. Speaking that way only happened on stage. It was like the end of a love affair in a play. A painful, bitter, dramatic end. I supposed, for her, it was.

'I'm going to find him,' I said. Even if I drowned in the lake swimming after an impossible fallen image of him.

‘Stop,’ Esther begged, her hand to her heart.

‘I swear it. It’s only geography. I just need to figure it out.’

‘I can’t listen to this again, Ben. I’m sorry.’

Fine.

‘What’s in the bag?’ I asked, pointing at a large paper bag at her feet.

‘Oh, it’s...’ She struggled back to herself and lifted the bag onto her knees, peeked inside to remind herself, then folded over the top, and crushed it with her arms onto her lap as she leant towards me. ‘Please don’t be upset. I was going through our wardrobe, it must have got mixed up... I thought you might want it and, well, what with everything...’

I moved the terrarium to the side of the table, took the bag from her. Inside, was a folded suit bag.

‘You’re not meant to fold it,’ I said.

‘Sorry.’

‘Yeah.’ I put the bag under my seat. ‘I have a suit already.’

‘Yes, I see. It’s nice.’

That morning I’d woken, showered, shaved and given myself a pep talk not to be a bastard to Esther. The suit the concierge had ordered hanging on the wardrobe. I’d unzipped the bag. The suit was black wool, by far the heaviest I’d ever owned. I’d have to move to somewhere with a far colder climate to get full use out of it. I put it on, tucked in the white shirt. I’d put everything I might need into my new pockets. Wallet, phone, keys, travel card, and the mirrored man’s device, retrieved from where I’d kept it under my pillow. I knew the suit was supposed to be saved for another day, but wearing it made me feel better; I was wearing the uniform of capable men.

‘It’s going to be on the seventeenth, probably,’ said Esther.

‘What is?’

‘The funeral.’

‘Ah, right. But it’s not a funeral.’

Esther blinked. ‘Pardon?’

‘It’s not a funeral unless there’s a body, so whatever you’re planning is just a memorial service.’ I raised my hand to my mouth and whispered, as though imparting a secret: *‘It’s less real.’*

A waiter arrived with two whiskeys in cut glass, white napkins placed on the table, ice clinking. Esther downed hers.

‘Look, Ben. I’m sorry you don’t get to grieve him like I do. You knew him for four times as long as I did, and here you are; living in a hotel and ignoring everyone, and... And I can see you’re angry at me for getting all the sympathy and you being left alone here, but all I can think is that I’m angry at you for getting all the peace and quiet. But you need to promise me you’re not going to shut yourself up and do all this alone, okay? You need to promise that. When this is all over, you’ll come around for dinner, and we’ll just sit in peace and quiet, and we won’t ask each other moronic questions about loss and bearing up, okay?’

Silence.

She sighed. ‘Okay, fine. Have your way. Be a dick. Don’t think I can’t see how you’re protecting yourself. But there’s something I need to tell you.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘No really, this is important.’



‘You’re drinking, which means you’re not pregnant. And anything else you have to say is boring.’

‘Ben, I’m being serious.’

But I wasn’t paying attention anymore. I’d stood up from my chair, eyes on the hotel lobby, at the red bandanaed man who’d just come inside from the rain.

Redman’s face was bruised blue and purple, one of his eyes swollen shut, cheeks stretched, shiny, feverish. He leant heavily on a pair of grey crutches which bunched his shoulders around his ears. He looked around the lobby with quick-darting attention; at the palms, the flowers, my friend the concierge examining the state of him over steepled fingers. But he was searching for something, and he found me standing in the restaurant on a small-tabled island.

‘Who’s that?’ Esther asked.

Redman began towards me, making a strange rhythm of rubber thud, dragging squeak, rubber thud of crutches across the floor. The diners in the restaurant – not many, it was late afternoon, just coffee and cake – whispered and looked between us. Esther twisted in her seat to watch the homeless man approach. The concierge followed him at a distance. He stopped in front of me.

His voice shook, but it was loud. ‘You killed him.’

I passed a hand over my face, trying to hide my reaction – the diners murmuring, Esther staring – but I couldn’t help it: I laughed. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘I was finding him,’ Redman snarled. ‘I was seeing his head.’

‘Ah.’ I held up my hands, glanced at the confused faces around me, and explained: ‘He’s talking about a dog. Just a dog.’ To Redman: ‘I didn’t kill him. Why would I?’

‘I do not think you are liking dogs.’

I didn’t mean to smile. ‘That follows. I don’t like dogs, but I *do* like cracking their skulls and getting their brains on my shoes.’

Redman swung a crutch at me. Esther ducked, hands thrown over her head with a yelp of fear, and the crutch smacked against my upper arm. It hurt – it *really* bloody hurt – and I cried out in pain. He hit me again on the ribs; Redman becoming a Tasmanian devil of a tiny man. I tried to grab the weapon but missed when the concierge yanked him backwards away from me. Together with a waiter, they dragged him back towards the lobby. At first, Redman fought them, but then his batteries ran out, and he sagged in their arms, crutches trailing along the floor.

‘No, wait!’ I called. ‘I need to talk to him.’

‘He’s the guy you followed?’ asked Esther.

I ignored her and went after them.

In the lobby, the hotel staff tried to take Redman outside, but he wedged a crutch across the doorway, resisting all their shoves no matter how hard they tried, glaring at us all balefully. It took a while to convince the concierge not to call the police, but in the end, they left me alone with Redman in the lobby to hush out our argument over the sound of traffic on a wet street outside. I shut the doors into the restaurant, but everyone could still see us in the lobby through the glass.

‘What the hell happened to your face?’ I asked.

‘I was nearly killed.’

‘Join the sodding club.’ I nursed my ribs. ‘What happened?’

‘It was Mano—’

‘Oh god, shut up about the dog.’

‘I will not! He was being my friend. He was old and stupid and stinking, but he was being the last thing left of my life!’

‘Fine, tell me about the bloody dog.’

I waited, impatient.

‘Where is your heavy friend? Where is he? He is good; he will be understanding me, no? He was good talking to the shopkeeper to set you free.’

‘He’s not here, so crack on.’

‘The shopkeeper who hated you is seeing me when she is kicking out your friends and inviting me inside for English tea and music. I go in, and it is beautiful! All the lights, all the nice people. I have been outside that shop for a long, long time, but never *inside* before. It was beautiful. But Mano is noisy though, and even the nice people are looking at me, and so I am angry with him because I cannot hear the singing, and... You know I am not having the facilities to be easily explaining, maybe – but Mano is barking, and I am kicking him, only gently, to being quiet but he is not. So I am picking him up to take him outside, and as I am leaving there is a bright, bright light, I am struggling to see, but then there are...’

He shook his head. Bit his lip. Flinched with pain because it was swollen and raw. And he continued like I was his psychiatrist, and this was his darkest place:

‘There are *people on the other side of the glass*. They are *standing there* like they are being out on the street, but they are *not really out on the street, they are being in the glass, through there in somewhere else*. They are wearing masks like mirrors, and they are *horrible*, Farthing.’

I flinched. Crane had introduced me as Farthing, hadn’t he? He was the only one that called me that.

‘You saw the mirrored men?’ I asked.

‘Yes, yes. I was seeing! The door of the shop is opening and the little bell is ringing... And then... Then I am not sure. There is lots of light everywhere, and the shopkeeper is lying still, and I slipping and falling, and getting up, but I am being nearly blinded and... You saw it in there afterwards, no?’

I nodded.

‘I was seeing it while it is *happening*,’ he whispered. ‘And I am running outside and running away very fast. A coward.’ He considered me unhappily. ‘I am very sorry for leaving you, you are a good man with your kindness to me with the shower, you are the first to say yes, but I was not much with thinking. I was not looking for Mano even. I am running. I am running through the city until I am remembering you and Mano both, and then I am running back again, and the shop is burning, so I am thinking you are locked in, and I am going in for you – see, I am a good man! I am not finding you, but I am finding Mano by where you were and...’

‘One of those mirrored men killed him.’

He nodded small nods. ‘I was not knowing there was a danger.’ His swollen face crumpled. ‘I am sorry I was sending you in there.’

In the restaurant, Esther was standing at the table, watching us across patron’s heads and through glass doors. I nodded at her; everything was in hand.

Why hadn’t I looked for Redman? I could’ve done. I didn’t even think to see if he was okay. I didn’t know what to say. He’d lost his friend. It was the first time I’d felt sympathy for anyone else in a long time.

‘Sounds like you’ve been through a lot,’ I said.

He nodded, still firm at his crutch-barrier across the door.

‘Look, mate,’ I said. I took the mirror man’s device out of my pocket and held it out to Redman on the flat of my palm. ‘Do you know what this is?’

Redman dropped the crutches. He swayed for a moment like he’d topple without them, then carefully took the device from me, held it to the daylight outside, turned it over and over, as I’d done for hours lying in the near-dark of the hotel room. The device was silver and sturdy like a pebble, but small enough to fit in the palm of a hand. It only had two features on the outside. The first was a display of four analogue numbers, each on a rotation so anything between 0000 and 9999 could be displayed. Redman examined the current number and read it aloud: ‘Three hundred and fifty-seven.’ The second feature was a tiny lever on the right. And Redman carefully, so carefully, did the same thing I’d done myself a hundred times; he half-pressed the lever and, like it pained him, released it before it clicked. Overall, it was very much like a counter I had in my top drawer at school, used to tally kids on and off coaches on school trips. Nothing special. Nothing alarming. I’d thought maybe it counted the people the man killed.

Redman looked at me, tears on his cheeks. ‘How?’

‘I took it from one of them.’

‘*You?*’ he said. ‘No, that cannot be.’

‘Oh, it be.’

He wiped his face with the back of his hand. ‘Why are you showing me?’

‘They took my friend. Will this help me find him?’

‘The heavy man?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh no.’ He sobbed but was unsurprised; missing friends was just the way of these things.

‘Will it help me?’

He nodded, thinking. ‘Maybe. But it is more likely it will be taking you to your death because they will be waiting for you, they will know where you will—’

There was a polite rap of knuckles on the glass. The concierge. Our conversation was due to be over. There were people waiting to leave. Esther was there, don’t look at her.

‘You need to go,’ I said to Redman.

‘I am always needing to go. People are always shooin me along. Please, you cannot make me leave, I’m having nowhere to go. Nowhere at all.’ He picked up the crutches, rearranged them solidly across the exit. ‘But,’ he said, realisation dawning. He turned sharply to me. ‘You need me to help you because you will be going nowhere without me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You have the key, yes, you do, you do – and you do not realise how many people would kill you for it, no? You have a key, but you do not have a door. The mirrored men have been burning away all your doors, I think, you have none of them left.’ He frowned, imparting his next information carefully, an extraction from somewhere deep inside. ‘But, you are seeing, I am having a door.’

‘You have a door,’ I said. Keys? Doors? The learning curve was steep and terrifying. And who the hell really was this Redman to know all of this? I rubbed my face. ‘You have a door,’ I repeated. ‘Where?’

‘You are a good man. I will take you to it if you will take me with you when you go, no?’

I looked back at Esther, with all that too-raw emotion of grief, knitting her brow. Making everything concrete and unsavable. *Bloody hell, Esther, stop looking at me like that, I thought. I can't get sucked back into other people's sadness and forget to save*  
*Crane*

'Agreed,' I said to Redman. 'Let's go.'

## Chapter 6

Redman had never been on the tube before; his attention darted around the carriage, taking in the LED display for the next stop, the map of the blue Piccadilly line, all the other passengers around us. He ran his hands along the fuzzy upholstery of the seats and stared into the next carriage, where parallel people bumped over bumps before us.

*Piccadilly Circus.*

‘You seem to be having a proclivity for running after danger,’ said Redman.

‘A *proclivity*?’ I repeated, amused. ‘I do not.’

‘You and your friend were following after me.’

‘You’re not dangerous.’ I rolled the counter over in my palms. *I hope.*

‘But this is dangerous, you are knowing that, no?’

‘Too dangerous for you?’

He shook his head quickly. ‘No. No. But I am having fewer things to lose. I have already lost everything, you have only lost one thing. And I know where I am trying to get to, whereas you do not, I think.’

I shrugged. ‘How many of these doors can there be? I’ll find him eventually.’

Redman laughed. ‘Your brain is small. So small. You have *no idea*. You are thinking these places are attached to your London somehow? Like a mushroom growing on a log?’ He smiled. ‘No. That’s too small, too small.’

‘Tell me then, where’s this other place? Where are they all coming from? Explain it to me in a way I understand.’



‘I am not knowing.’

I put the counter back in my pocket and leant towards Redman across the aisle, clasping my hands together. I kept my voice tight and low. ‘You’re knowing more than I do. So make an educated guess. Where are these extra places?’

Redman grimaced, waved his hands around to indicate a ‘here’ and a ‘there’. ‘I think it is being both very close to us and very far away. Very close for *them*, very far for us.’

*Leicester Square.*

I leant back, rubbed my face. ‘That doesn’t sound fair.’

‘Fairness is not often being the way of these things.’

‘What’s the difference between them and us?’

Redman smiled. He looked my thousand-pound suit up and down with a raised eyebrow, stretching his bruising. ‘I am thinking that money is being the difference. Money is making things easy for them, and very hard for us. They have ways, we do not have ways.’ He took out the travel card I’d bought him, held it up between finger and thumb. ‘Are you thinking about this very much? This miniature plastic thing that is magicking you around your city, from one place to another place?’

I frowned. ‘I guess not.’

‘Places are further when you are walking everywhere. I am sorry for you. Because this task is not being as easy as you are thinking. Many people are trying many years to do the same.’

‘I’m going to find Crane.’

He was rueful. ‘This is what you were saying of this Jack, no?’

‘Sod Jack.’ I snorted. ‘We both failed on that one.’

‘I was not failing. I was not looking for your Jack; I was looking for where he came from, and that I discovered very well, and I will—’

He stopped talking abruptly and pursed his lips as if he was going to throw up.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked.

He shook his head.

I crossed the carriage to sit next to him. ‘Redman?’

He spoke below the rattling of wheels on tracks. ‘We are being followed.’

‘What?’

‘We are being—’

‘Yes, I heard you,’ I whispered. ‘Who?’

He brushed his mouth to hide the words. ‘The woman at the end.’

*Covent Garden.*

The train cleared enough to give me a view straight down the car. A woman in her fifties leant against the end wall, rocking with the turns and bumps in the track, skin the leatheriness of someone who’d spent a life outdoors. She wore an old pair of walking boots, jeans, and an orange T-shirt torn at the neck to show her collarbones. She was staring at the train window where the glass was dark; just tunnel wall and power cables wavering along outside. No, she was watching our reflections, I realised.

‘You’re right,’ I said. ‘Who is she?’

‘I had been thinking I had been losing her, but—’

‘Is she dangerous?’

‘If she is knowing what we have, she will be being dangerous, yes.’

I glanced again at the follower. There was an excited energy in her eyes, almost feverish. ‘She saw it,’ I said.

*Holborn.*

We hurried from the train onto a platform full of sarcophaguses for the British Museum above us, and down a pedestrian tunnel, Redman clipping everyone's ankles with his crutches. I pushed him onto the escalator and got on behind, forcing him to climb. 'Go on, get up,' I said. 'Move the bloody-hell on.'

We came up into a subterranean atrium where people from the Piccadilly line merged with Central. The ceiling was low, claustrophobic, the walls tiled and covered in tube maps. It was all congestion. Hundreds of people crisscrossed the space. Escalators were going up to ground level, half-obsured by the ceiling. I hurried Redman across the atrium, into a tunnel which led back down towards Central line. A mass of French-speaking students blocked the way, oblivious to the funnelling commuters around them. We squeezed past, then stopped beyond, using them for cover.

'I do not like this place,' Redman said, his voice shaky.

Past the students and their bright backpacks, I saw that our follower had entered the atrium. She was agitated, her hair flying as she searched for us, full of indecision.

'We went up the escalator,' I whispered to her. 'We're up there. Go up. Go up. You know you want to.'

She got onto an escalator, receded away, and was gone.

Redman was panicking, unable to keep still. 'They all will be being... Oh, no. She will be telling them all! This is bad, no? This is bad.'

'It's okay, she's gone.'

'No, no. She is being one of many, and now they will all be looking. They are... No, they *were* being my friends.' A wave of defeat passed over him. 'No longer. No.'

'What are you talking about?'

‘My friends. I am telling them what happened to Mano, and those mirrored men. They are not liking it very much. They are scared, and they are chasing me away. You see, I was telling you; I have nowhere to go.’

‘These friends are the ones that hurt you?’ I realised. I’d thought the bruising on his face was too recent, and he hadn’t been beaten up in his earlier story.

Redman twisted his face sideways. ‘Yes.’

‘That’s why you’ve been dithering us all round the place.’

‘I was not being sure what to do!’

‘You need new friends.’

‘They are not bad, they are only stuck. This city is a trap.’

A surge of people came down the tunnel, a swirl of chatter and the tinny hum of headphones preceding them: a woman with a guitar case, a man in a waistcoat and converse trainers, a group of school-age kids running, laughing. When they were gone, I asked: ‘Would your friends hurt me?’

‘Oh yes, I am thinking yes, and—’

I shoved Redman against the curved wall. ‘Then bloody tell me where this door is, so we can get out of here as fast as possible.’

He squirmed, his one openable eye wide with surprise. His crutches clattered to the ground. The synapses of his brain began firing in a different direction, moving him from trusting me to hating me again like the dog-killer that I wasn’t. He pulled an ugly face, his cheeks puffing out red, as he tried to think himself out of the situation. But he couldn’t.

‘The Mill,’ he managed at last.

‘The what?’

‘The Mill,’ he spat. ‘A factory. Very old, very ruined. It is full of people *milling*, because that is all we are able to do, no? There is nothing else for us here. This city is not hospitable.’

‘Where’s this Mill?’

‘I am not knowing the names—’

‘Describe it.’

‘East of here. Uh, ah, being on a big road. By the small brown river that is moving very slowly.’

‘A canal? East of here? You mean over Limehouse way?’

‘Yes! That is sounding like a word I am hearing.’

‘And where in the Mill?’

‘In the warehouse. By a big pile of tyres.’

Tyres. I knew where he was talking about. Knew precisely where.

I let go of Redman, picked up his crutches and shoved them at him. He eyed me nervously, but he followed. We headed to the nearest platform and took the next train that came in, and then argued over our route, Redman insistent that *we are wanting to go east, so we should be making them think we’re going west* argument which took us through Tottenham Court Road until I’d had enough.

*Oxford Circus.*

I dragged him onto a white-tiled platform. We moved too slowly, Redman in pain from running on his leg, and followed a pedestrian tunnel which ran parallel to the trains. I navigated us through plaited walkways, to a platform where the display board claimed a train to Brixton in two minutes. It wasn’t the fastest route to Limehouse, but I couldn’t think straight, and Redman’s geography was so weak, he’d never know. The

platform was busy. There was a woman in high vis shouting at us to move down if we didn't want to get packed onto the train like sardines. Redman was in a bad way.

Greying, sweating, coming to the end of his ability to be under the surface of the planet.

A girl in a heavy coat and baseball cap approached us with an empty coffee cup.

'Excuse me, sir, do you have any change?'

I ignored her, feeling the vibrations of an incoming train through the ground. The air stirred and windows, passengers and lights rushed past. The train stopped, the red doors sliding open. As passengers disembarked, I looked back for Redman. He was embracing the girl with the cup, they held each other tight.

No, she was holding him. He wasn't holding her.

Our follower had been one of many, he'd said.

'Get away from him!' I shouted, racing back to them, trying to pry them apart.

'You can come,' begged Redman. 'You can come with us!'

There was a commotion towards the entrance to the platform. Over the heads of the crowd, I could see our first follower approaching, her orange T-shirt darkened with sweat. She sprinted towards us, making no effort to hide the gun in her hand. A bloody gun, for god's sake, and the girl clutching Redman was yelling, 'Here, here, here!' as I jerked her and Redman towards the train. I stepped on board, trying desperately to pull them after me, still entangled. I used all my weight, pressed myself into the tight-packed carriage. Other passengers added their hands to the tug-of-war, some helping me, some battering at me to stop. Redman screamed for help.

The doors began to beep.

'Farthing!' Redman cried.

I wasn't going to do it. It was too late.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, and released him, his forearm and fingers slipped through my grasp, and the doors closed between us, snug into its rubber seal. Redman scabbled at the window, the girl still hugging his waist.

‘Farthing! My sister! My sister, please!’

The train moved off, Redman’s expression all heartbreak.

The girl abandoned her embrace, leaving Redman struggling to stand alone without his crutches, and the orange-woman shot at him once, twice, three times – white light turning the platform to high contrast, shadows deep, the same gun that mirrored bastard had! – and Redman fell sideways, out of sight onto the canyon of tracks, just cleared by the departing train.

The gun was turned towards the train. Towards me? Yes, me.

There were too many passengers for me to go anywhere.

‘Get down!’ I cried.

A bolt of light hit the side of the train, then another. The passengers around me screamed, scrambled for cover. The train sped away down the tunnel, but shots followed us into the darkness, slicing through the metal walls like butter, sparks skittering around the inside of the carriage, a stench of hot metal, burning plastic, burning holes into clothing, into flesh, setting hair on fire.

The shots ended. There was a hush.

Just train tracks clicking, white-water air rushing.

I raised my head. Intermittent showers of sparks, blue and cold, came from damaged electrics. I tried to pull myself up, but the handrail came away in my hand; a foot of sky-blue metal, sliced to a point at either end. The light had sliced through the train all over. It’d made scars down the walls, cutting through the happy printed faces of

people advertising holidays in Sweden, and through the map of the line, severing King's Cross St. Pancras from Highbury & Islington. The slashes in the wall let in the air which whistled, high-pitched. There was blood on the floor. I checked myself to see if I was hurt, hands up and down my suit, but I was numb, so it was hard to tell.

*Green Park.*

'Exit here for Buckingham Palace,' said the announcement, pleasant and barely audible.

The train decelerated, a new platform appeared, and when we jolted to a stop the wall of the carriage shifted, loosened, and detached itself to slip, grating, down the gap between platform and train. There it stuck fast, making a two-foot-high wall between the inside carriage and the outside world where the commuters on the platform gaped at us. Then someone started to scream, someone on the train I thought, a dam of fear collapsing around me everywhere until there were children crying and people shouting, and it was all cacophony, all melee.

I climbed onto the platform, forcing my way through people, alarms, whistles, screams, phone flashes, and sought upwards on an escalator up from the underworld. Security guards ran down the other side, shouting people out the way. Evacuation announcements began; polite ones which requested that we all please find an alternative route, sorry, thank you, kind regards. I hurried through the ticket barriers, following light and fresh air, up steps towards the street-level just ahead, where I gasped for air, a drowning man surfacing.

I was on a narrow street in Central London, where a red bus squeezed between tall buildings. The light was sickly, electronically charged, rumbles of thunder rolling under city noise. It began to rain, heavy and soft, the strip of sky above roiling with fast-



moving clouds, the coalescence at the beginning of the universe. People crowded the tube exit, where the metal grilles were being pulled shut to a lot of angry watch-checking and sighing from commuters, and stacks of *London Evening Standard* shrank fast. I discovered the length of Victoria line handrail still in my hand and dropped it, clanging into the gutter.

The Mill was an old industrial factory with a Victorian stone façade on its street-side, where the windows were covered with wooden boards and plastered with posters for circuses, gigs, DJs playing at club nights, colours faded in the sun. The canal was around the back. I was on the busy road, and the pile of tyres was there, huge under a billboard. It was the tyres that had given it away; they were a local landmark it'd turned out. Around the perimeter of the plot was a plywood fence topped with barbed wire, and beyond this, the factory-proper was derelict, outwardly abandoned. Round the back, I slipped through a gap in the fence, into a patch of stinging nettles in a courtyard. Brambles crept up the walls, and in through high windows. Nearly everything which wasn't building was blackberries, all the accessible fruit recently harvested to white nubs.

The fence wobbled behind me, and for a moment, I believed Crane had followed me through, cuts on his arms from the brambles. He wore the tartan shirt and jeans he'd worn to the open mic. He said, 'This had better be worth it,' almost cheerful.

'Everything good must be bled for,' I answered, as though it was a line from Shakespeare instead of something I'd just made up. *With someone else's blood this time*, I thought, trying not to think about it. I'd managed all the way through Central London, why start now? What good did it do the poor sod?

‘I’m going to find you,’ I told Crane.

‘Oh, no doubt.’

All the ways into the building were boarded up, except for one, which was almost swallowed under a curtain of ivy. I pulled the leaves aside. Inside was cold, damp. The ceiling above had rotted and fallen through, creating a space several storeys high, crisscrossed with girders. The floor was mounded with broken bricks, rubbish, stacks of wooden pallets. Old mechanical arms leant against the walls, like installations in Tate Modern. The place smelt of caves; of cold stone and standing water. The recent rain had pooled across the floor. I shivered. Crane would’ve put a hand on my shoulder, ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of, little man.’

The passage of people had made a clear route through the factory, through chains of space and darkness filled with cigarette butts, crisp packets and human piss dried on the walls. I followed the route, quiet as I could. Redman had said in the warehouse in the factory, but I didn’t know what that meant. What was I looking for? A door? There were doors everywhere. Look, there was a whole pile of them leaning against each other in a corner – did I have to try each one?

I rounded a corner onto a proper factory floor of rusted machinery –incinerators, or ovens or something else I couldn’t identify – so large there were grilled walkways hanging in the air around them, rusting stacks of plastic chairs and bathtubs beneath and, at the other end, silhouetted in the green light of a doorway, two men. Okay, calm, back away. I retreated, but now voices were coming from the other way too, and soon both groups would meet on the factory floor. Bugger. I shouldn’t be here. I should’ve waited. I should’ve hidden with my counter and waited and come back when... When what? When I’d given Redman’s friends a chance to track me down?

A wrought-iron spiral staircase took me swiftly to a walkway above, old paint embedding itself into my palms, and there I lay, back to the ground, looking at the rafters where tails of pigeons bobbed, instantly regretting not laying on my stomach so I could see what was happening. I couldn't turn around; the two groups had met below me, their words hard to make out over the drumming of new rain on corrugated iron. If they looked up, I'd be silhouetted through the grille.

'What's going on?' said a man.

'High alert, that's all we know,' said another.

'What's that mean when it's at home? They think we're their high-ops lot?'

'It means watch out, don't get killed.'

'They've come back then, you think?'

'I dunno.'

'Someone should get word to Redman.'

Above them, I flinched.

'How do we do that? I don't know how to get messages round this place. He'll look after himself.'

They moved off. When I could no longer hear them, I turned over, checked the coast was clear, and navigated back down the steps. At the bottom, voices began to return towards me, and I fled the machine-filled room, running on into the next where I tripped and fell hard into stale water, teeth clacking together. The smack of my stomach into the water, the grunt of air leaving me; it'd been loud, it still echoed around the empty factory. I lay still in the water for a moment, listening to people calling to each other, then beginning towards me through the building. I scrambled to my feet.

Where the hell was the warehouse? Where was it?

‘Run Benjamin, bloody run,’ said Crane.

I ran through a series of smaller rooms strewn with mattresses, *What’s On* guides, used condoms, boxes of cereal, and into a narrow corridor with a square of light at the end... And there it was: a warehouse. I rushed into the grey, glorious space of it.

Pigeons in the rafters panicked.

‘Shush!’ I waved my hands to turn down their volume.

The warehouse was breezeblock walls, girders and a vast concrete floor. It was empty, barren like my flat had been. The only colour was graffiti; someone had painted the word ‘entombed’ over and over, and beyond that: ‘Fuk Lodnon.’ There were no doors in the place. Not a single bloody one, not even where I’d just come in. That shit Redman had led me into a trap. I’d bloody eaten the cheese, and the cage had fallen around me.

‘How are you gonna nibble your way out?’ asked Crane.

I forced myself to think, to empty my mind of everything that’d happened in the last few hours, the previous days and weeks... And what I was left with was the counter, gleaming silver at the bottom of my brain like a coin in a wishing well. I took it from my pocket. Looked at it. The metal was dull in the rain-light. I pressed the lever. The fourth number-dial turned; the seven moved, an eight took its place. The reading became three hundred and fifty-eight.

Nothing happened.

I didn’t know what I was looking for, but there was no rending in space, no spreading of light.

‘Come on,’ I muttered, pressed the lever again. ‘Please.’

I was rewarded by three hundred and fifty-nine.

I looked around. The warehouse was empty and still, the rain hammering metallically and annoyingly. I circumnavigated the space, trailing a hand along the breezeblocks. I wanted to knock and kick them, but that would be too loud. At the far end, a pigeon resettling made me jump and I looked up at them; nestled high in the rafters, hidden from the entrance so I hadn't seen it before, was a something. A substantial something. Straitjacket-packaged with black bin bags and gaffer tape. It was rectangular. Flat. It was suspended by a chain which ran across the rafter and down the wall to a winch. I hurried, releasing the chain with a grunt of effort, which rattled loud, too loud, as it raced free. The package fell through the air and jolted to a stop at the end of the chain, swinging wildly a few feet above the concrete. I approached as it calmed, grabbed the sides, stilling it. I pulled away the plastic, cast it aside. I revealed old wood, water-stained and peeling green paint; a door in a doorframe. It smelt of rot and woodsmoke.

I laughed with joy.

I pressed the lever on the counter.

Three hundred and sixty. 0360. Full circle.

The door vibrated. I put my hands to the wood, felt it moving. Deep and seismic through my palms, up my arms, a steady rhythm. I put my forehead to it so that my skull and teeth hummed. I could hear the vibrations like a double-bass. After a few seconds, it stopped, and the world seemed suddenly too still, too quiet.

'Ah, I've found a door with legs.'

The woman in the orange T-shirt wasn't loud over the rain, I only heard her because I'd already been listening carefully. I put the counter away, stepped from behind the door and looked down the length of the warehouse to where she stood in the

entrance. She was alone and didn't call for backup. She pointed the gun at me and grinned, ear to ear. She knew exactly what she'd found. The door. The counter. The way out of London. All neatly packaged, tied up with string, with only a posh idiot standing in her way.

'Get on the floor,' she said. 'Get down. Now.'

I didn't move. 'Are you going to kill me?' My tone fell into the defence of cynicism. Killing me was so obvious, my tone said. She should think outside the box, be a bit more sodding avant-garde.

She started towards me, cautious. 'Get down.'

I knelt on the concrete.

'Arms up.'

I put my arms up. The weight of the counter in my pocket was obvious, it pulled down one side of my jacket. It'd been a good suit, I thought absently; they should bury me in it.

'Arms up! Look at me.'

She was halfway across the warehouse, gun trained at my chest, coming to kill me and climb over my body out of London. The mighty lifted on the shoulders of others. I could so easily imagine the shots hitting my chest, bullets tearing cartilage and muscle and lungs, spraying blood out on the floor behind me. But no, that wasn't right. There wouldn't be any bullets, maybe that gun was from a place which had moved on from bullets and left them behind in the dark ages with axes and arrows. 'Bollocks,' I whispered, just for me. Just to express my distaste for an unexpected end. I wondered if what I was feeling was what Crane had felt that night. It was driving a car fast in the dark with a solid wall filling the road ahead. Stepping from a bridge and then changing

your mind... But it was also being full of adrenalin, it was having nothing left but stupidity, hoping it would pay off and transform itself into bravery.

I moved fast.

Rose to my feet. One hand to my pocket, pressing the lever. My other hand on the door handle, which hummed in welcome. Hinges grated as I pushed it open.

The woman ran towards me, I could see the movement of her past the doorframe, but my real attention was on the new place that was opening as I pushed at the door. ‘No!’ She fired, light pluming, the warehouse lighting up with fast-moving shadows of the girders. Birds took flight. The light hit the far wall behind me in a cloud of dust. She shot again and struck the chain holding up the door, which fell the last few feet, crashing to the floor. She shot again. Again. Again. Light. Light. Light. Near-blinded herself. The warehouse thickened with the smell of smoke and concrete-dust.

Maybe she coughed then, put a hand to her mouth, moved guardedly forwards, the air clearing around a pile of splintered wood sliced through with charcoal lines smouldering orange. She probably looked for man-flesh too; limbs and bones and blood spreading, but there wasn’t any of that.

**PART TWO**  
**JACK**



## Chapter 7

I stepped out onto the deck of a ship where it was night-time and the world around me was choked-thick with heat, shouting, gunfire, smoke, and so much chaos it spun me around. The ship was harboured in a broad crescent bay, embraced on three sides by steep lava rock and palm-edged beaches. The land was on fire: a small shanty town, rolling jetties, birds embering the sky, animals escaping down to the surf – all were burning. Flames twisted, roared, were deafening even from the water, with too much ferocity, far too much, as though supplemented by napalm. Beyond the bay, out to sea, was an archipelago of islands ranging towards the horizon, each one ablaze like a setting sun.

There were two other ships in the harbour; floating villages like British navy warships, their grey decks sprouting radio antennae and oversized satellite dishes. Both were tipped sideways – one to port, the other to stern – and sinking fast into the water, lit portholes submerging one by one. And there were humans out there, thousands of humans, filling up the corners like the painted soldiers in Jack’s Napoleonic battlefield, a different scene played out in every direction: lifeboats lowering at an angle, bristling with crowds inside; people in the water, dark flotsam on the swells, cries for help on the wind; bodies nudged up the shoreline by tropical waves.

The ship I was on was safely level, but the deck was pitted with craters and swarmed with crew in blue coveralls, numbers increasing as lifeboats were hauled up.

Those who weren't working were either dying – bleeding out right there on the deck – or were stilled by shock.

I put my hands in my hair.

Not a mushroom growing on a log, then. Not a picture gallery. Not an aircraft hangar. But a whole ocean-filled, burning, war-consumed landscape, just a step away from London. Where was I? Hawaii? Fiji? Why wasn't any of this on the news? What the hell was going on?

The counter was in my hand.

I should leave. Go back.

But I couldn't; death was waiting in London too.

I was on a balcony overlooking the main deck, and behind me was a bank of salt-crusted windows of an empty command room. There was a door from command out to the balcony; a metal, watertight door, with a high yellow and black striped step. That was the door I'd just come through, nothing at all like Redman's door. Inside the command room, computer panels blinked, and green radar flickered on a nearby screen. I pressed my face against the glass, cupped my eyes, and saw a display with something like latitude and longitude, but I couldn't read the numbers.

I tried the door and it opened, so I stepped inside. There was a spilt cup on the floor: coffee, I could smell it. A handheld radio was shouting for help, someone on another ship was trapped in a flooding hold and, dear god, send help, there are children down here! On the computer screen, the three warships were flies trapped in the radar web onscreen, and as I watched, one of the lights blinked out. My ship's position read as  $23.75643^{\circ} N$ ,  $25.94183^{\circ} E$  which, if it was true, should've put me somewhere in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

I laughed. What the actual hell?

Voices were nearing. I swore and hurried to the door onto the balcony, but I didn't make it before a barrage of people poured into the command room. Most of them were smoke-stained and tracked with sweat, half of them smartly uniformed in once-white, the other half dressed in the shirts and jeans of civilians. They paused at the sight of me.

'Who're you?' demanded a man in a scorched jumper and glasses.

Before I could answer, the movement of the ship on the sea became too much: I slumped backwards, swearing as I went – 'Oh, crap' – and slid down the door to the floor. I clamped my hands over my mouth, in a useless attempt not to vomit all over myself and the floor, my onlookers as surprised as I was.

'He's with them,' said the man, angry. 'They left one behind!'

'No,' said a uniformed woman. She came forward for a closer look at me. Her face was blistered, weeping with recent burns and a handgun threatened from her hip. The scene billowed like cloud shadows racing over a landscape. I closed my eyes tight, listened to the woman say: 'He's not got a mask.'

I shook my head, instantly regretting it for nausea's sake. 'No,' I said. 'No... I only...' I rolled sideways, threw up again, then struggled out: 'I'm only me.'

'Get him up out of here,' said a new man, older, voice gravelled from smoke. He had a black beard and moustache, which stood out against close-cropped silver hair. 'Put him in holding. We're moving out! Everyone back to what you were doing. We leave immediately.'

Someone turned the pleading radio off.

'There's still crew in the water, captain,' said the woman.

‘Either some blood or *all* blood has got to be on my hands. Which one would you like it to be?’

‘But they won’t be back,’ said the man in glasses. ‘We’re ruined already.’

‘Better to ask what damage a thousand witnesses are,’ said the captain.

‘Did they come from the ship or the island?’ asked the woman.

A new voice said, ‘The sky. I saw.’

A general pause, before: ‘Will relocating help?’

No one answered.

‘Get rid of him, I said!’ ordered the captain, and I was so sick I couldn’t move when I felt hands under my arms, and someone else collecting up my ankles. I was carried through the command room and down into the teeming, humid corridors of the ship, which was full of people, their shouting and crying and order-giving, and deep into the vessel until the smell of fire was replaced by the stench of stale saltwater. I was taken through a low hold of crates and steaming pipes, and finally moored by being thrown into a small room, where bilge water sloshed against the curved bottom of the ship, and the walls ran thick with water and green moss. I tried to speak but was kicked with a hard-booted foot in the stomach, which left me winded and roiling.

The cell was closed, locked, and all became black except a strip of dim light beneath the door, which echoed up through brown water.

I failed to stand.

‘Come back,’ I pleaded, then louder: ‘Come bloody back!’

But no one did, and I fell again to retching.

Turbines started to spin their deep mechanics, and the ship began to move, grating across a sandbank out of the harbour. Soon it reached open water, and my cell rolled back and forth. I braced myself against the soft wall, spat bile into the water.

The stowaway was forgotten for a long, long time.

Illness made me feel every moment.

The weather grew rougher and rougher, until the weight of the ocean pounded on the other side of the steel I leant against, rolling, thundering, trying its very best to drown us all. It had to be a storm. The tumbles downhill. The smacks as the hull crashed back into the water. I lay in the deepening bilge water, thinking that I'd grown up in a world where the ocean had been lost, where the seas had been reduced to the smooth blue surfaces of globes in classrooms, their edges brackets of continental coastlines, as uninteresting as the empty space nestled between planets. But my seas hadn't been tamed, just successfully hopped over and avoided for the last few decades.

Once, the cell door opened. There was another boot to my stomach, but this boot was kinder, it only wanted me to roll over onto my back. I obliged, barely conscious, lying on my side for long enough to feel small beneath someone standing over me in a worker's coverall. The sailor searched me, each pocket – trousers, jacket, inside and outside – then dragged me up to sitting to pour fresh water into my mouth and press bread into my hand, before leaving me alone to roll on through the chasms of storm.

*You've really messed up*, I thought, chuckling at how inadequate a sentence that was. *No one's ever coming for you here.*

But once the world was still again, they did. The captain stood in the doorway, white trousers dirtying in the water, now up to his knees, and he watched as a chair was

brought into the small space, and rough hands tied me to it. I was splashed in the face, water running from my hair, my nose, as I lolled forwards. Men surrounded me with the brutish determinism of school ground bullies, insignias on their chests giving them the authority to do whatever they pleased.

*Who are you?*

Benjamin.

*What are you?*

I'm nothing important.

*Why are you here?*

I'm looking for someone.

*Are you a stowaway?*

No.

*What's this uniform you're wearing?*

It's not a—

I'd never been punched in the face before. It didn't hurt as much as I'd expected; a quick pain which dulled to a tightening of the skin. But a punch on a punch was another thing.

I'm not here. This isn't me.

Instead, it was Jack tied to the chair in my place, a spotlight shining down on him like in all the best gangster movies, while I was cool, collected, sleeves rolled up, so I didn't get blood on them when I clouted him encouragingly in the face. 'This is your fault, you know?' Clout. 'You sent me down this shitty rabbit hole.' Clout. 'Who the hell are you? What is this you've got me mixed up in?' And more and more quickfire questions, until his blood was red on my knuckles and smeared across his unflinching,

pondering face. He didn't give any answers, my imagination didn't stretch that far, though I could taste his blood in my mouth.

'Why did you come here?' asked the captain.

I looked up at him and almost cried. 'I really don't know.'

'How did you find us?'

I discovered I was angry. 'For god's sake, let me go!' I shook the chair. 'I haven't done anything. It wasn't me that sodding napalmed you. I don't know what the hell's going on. I'm from London. Just London. England. The United Kingdom. I'll go back. Let me go!'

They backed off and called me things then which I didn't understand, discussed the use of torturing me, but dismissed it as a waste of their precious time. *Look at the fool, what's he spouting on about now? Lurn Durn? Inglund?* The captain looked at me with an expression which decreed: *He's a cretin. I'm bored.* And he walked away.

They pulled me up by the collar and laughed at the state of me. Vomit and piss and blood and stagnant saltwater? Not this man's finest hour, eh? They put my hands together and handcuffed me, painfully tight, and rag-dolled me up to the deck, where I was hit with the weather. Clouds were banked overhead in a three-dimensional sky, raining squally rain which kept passing over the ship, releasing it for a moment of yellow sunshine, before returning. There was no land in sight, and no other vessels; only endless navy, white-capped water. The deck was overloaded with people with nothing to do, their lips chapped from water rationing. And I wasn't the only one who was sick.

'Where are we going?' I asked the man prodding me forward. 'You can't do anything to me. I'm a civilian.'

‘You’re an unnecessary mouth, that’s what you are.’

Pushed roughly, I staggered towards the back of the ship.

Among all the people on deck, I thought I saw Crane’s face. He lifted his hand and mimed something to me – like he was holding a lighter up at a gig, he lit it repeatedly with his thumb. Press something? What? Oh, use the counter you mean? I glanced around. The command tower was in the middle of the ship, looming solidly. There was a set of metal steps leading from the deck up to the balcony where I’d come in from London. I looked back at Crane, who was shooing me towards the way out with both hands.

Twisting myself out of my captive’s grasp, I fled down the deck, running between people, jumping over others who were lying down. I was lucky not to fall; balancing was difficult without arms to steady myself. The steps clanged as I raced up them. Up, up, muscles thick after days to atrophy, up, and finally on the balcony. At the watertight door, I patted my pockets awkwardly, and discovered that both the counter, ‘No, no! *Shit!*’ and London, were gone.

I was gathered calmly back up and taken down to the main deck and through the crowd – staring as I passed, some laughing – to the back of the ship where I was cattle-driven to the edge of the deck to a place where the wall was low for loading, and I was shoved overboard.

It wasn’t an invigorating fall like into a fjord, but a struggling, tumbling fall, down past the metal side of the ship, where bolts rusted orange beards and portholes were fogged with salt. I hit the water and plunged deep, a comet tail behind me. My shoes filled with ocean, the wool of my suit instantly heavy, dragging me down.



I'd always imagined drowning to be a calm thing, but it wasn't. It burnt, ached, quick agony in my chest. I struggled hard against the cuffs and shouted out the last of my air in muffled swearing as I sank, eyes wide, willing myself back up to the zebra lines of light on the surface. But the cold got to me fast, stilled my limbs, turned my blood to treacle, and pulled me down, down.

*Sorry Crane, mate. I tried.*

'This is why you're crap at computer games,' he said. 'You ignore diplomacy, and reckon charisma and bravery are going to win every time.'

He was sitting on a deckchair on the rooftop in Kensington, eating fish and chips from greasy paper on his knees, while I struggled in antigravity a foot off the ground next to him. I couldn't respond because I didn't have any air left, but I wanted to say something like: 'How do you even know that? You never give me a chance to play.'

He laughed. 'You spend too long designing characters.'

I rolled my eyes.

'Then one fight, and it's game over.' He looked upwards. 'Ah, watch out, Farthing. You've got company.'

Above, a shadow on the surface of the water became a figure bulleting down. Headfirst, hands together, having just executed a great dive, the figure sank towards me and, when I was reached, surrounded me with arms and legs, embracing me. A face looked into mine: brown eyes, bubbles caught in eyebrows and eyelashes, black hair seaweeding in the current. *A mermaid*, I thought, more romantic than logical. And the mermaid brought with her a rope, an umbilical cord to the surface, and she tied it around my middle, tugged twice, and we were raised slowly upwards. Lungs ached, consciousness flashed, but soon there was air. Glorious air. I gulped it in, and barely

noticed the heaviness of my waterlogged self or each time it slammed into the side of the ship. The mermaid and I were hauled back onto the main deck, pulled over the side by rough hands, and deposited together in a spreading puddle.

A lot had changed during my offstage scene.

The captain had emerged and was barking orders to his crew to help us. But he hadn't had a miraculous change of heart – oh, that Lurn Durn fellow isn't so bad after all, let's save him from the fishes – instead, the captain was on his knees, being persuaded by his own handgun pressed against the back of his skull. The gun was held by a golden man in his thirties; grey-suited, rain beading on his shoulders.

'Jack,' I spluttered.

Jack's attention darted between me, the captain and the crew, but he managed half a smile and a quick nod for me, old acquaintances passing in the street. He was the same. Precisely the same, like his hair hadn't even grown in the weeks since I'd last seen him. His immaculate cleanliness was emphasised by the exhaustion of the people around us.

'Please could you take those handcuffs off him?' he asked.

I was pulled to standing, and the cuffs were undone, leaving ridges of pinched skin. Jack said, 'Come and stand by me, Benjamin,' so I went and stood by him. He assessed me quickly, the sodden, swollen-faced state of me nothing other than expected.

'Are you alright?' he asked.

'Of course,' I said, although I was beginning to shake.

'Hey!' he shouted, swinging the gun quickly towards a woman who'd been edging up behind me. 'Back!' And he returned the gun to the captain's head before any

escape was possible, while I wondered when my narrative had become one where all transactions between characters involved a gun to the head.

‘Thank you for looking after my comrade,’ Jack said to the captain, without a trace of irony. ‘I can only apologise that the situation required such a swift and indiscreet response, I hope you understand that I wouldn’t usually resort to threats.’ He sighed and continued low enough for only me and the captain to hear: ‘This incident doesn’t require logging. Do you understand?’

‘No log,’ agreed the captain.

The captain was livid but controlled, and when Jack handed the gun back to him – for a moment the captain holding the grip with free access to the trigger, and Jack with the barrel pointed towards his own stomach – he didn’t take the opportunity to shoot.

‘I’m sorry. Really,’ said Jack. And he really seemed it.

The captain blinked, confused, but withdrew the weapon to put it back in the holster at his side.

Jack turned and pushed through the crowd along the deck to the steps up to the command room. People moved to let us through, but there were still half a dozen guns on us; any signal from the captain would’ve been enough, but the captain was still, and when someone asked him the question, he shook his head tightly.

‘Benjamin?’ Jack called, and I hurried after him.

‘How did you...’ I began, but he shushed me.

‘Not here.’

I followed him up the steps and, on the balcony, turned for a last look at everyone below, and out at the strange sea, clouds, sky and ocean. Was it real? Would it all fall away into stage sets as soon as I left? Would the hundreds of extras below desperate to

go on lunch break? Was the sun overhead actually a light mounted on a boom? The clouds were probably projected, right? If I looked close enough, I'd see the crawling shadows of moths on the filters.

The catch of the door clicked, and Jack pulled me backwards.

## Chapter 8

And I was standing in a dilapidated ballroom, in the middle of a black marble dancefloor, wearing only – yes, I checked, nothing underneath it – a white cotton sheet, my breath clouding as I looked around.

‘Jack?’ I called.

The ballroom was beautiful and vast like I’d stepped into something abandoned by the Romanovs. Large fireplaces long-cold, no furniture, no art. Where once there’d been chandeliers, now there were only holes in the ceiling in a mural of golden angels and mountains of decaying cloud which rained gold leaf. There were piles of plaster on the marble, underneath glimpses through the ceiling to rooms up above. The room was white-washed by light through tall windows which were covered inside with a skein of feathered ice. It was bitterly cold; I tightened the sheet. My white feet had left a long trail through dust over the marble; I’d entered the ballroom through large doors into the ballroom.

I couldn’t remember walking across the room, or how I’d lost my clothes. Or where this place was? Or why I was there? My brain was vague; like returning to social interactions after being alone for a week or after oversleeping. Jetlag. That’s what it felt like.

I went to the windows and rubbed away ice with the heel of my hand.

Outside, the white mountains rose up steep, close and avalanche primed. Birds wheeled, and the wind whipped snow from mountaintops like white castle banners. The

mountains cupped a frozen lake of polished blue ice, miles across. In the middle of the lake was a small rocky island. Everything about the landscape was old, everything weathered and pitted, with waterfalls deep in crevasses, and lower mountain slopes covered in deep-rooted forest – pines, tall and military-straight – down to the lake’s edge.

‘Am I in Switzerland?’ I asked the landscape, then turned to the room: ‘Or Russia?’ Then louder: ‘Is anyone here?’

I left the ballroom the way I’d come in and found myself in an entrance hall. A wooden staircase curved away up to the floors above, where shafts of light from upper storey windows were crystalline-solid. The doors to outside were large enough to have smaller service doors built into them. There was evidence in the dust of people coming and going between the entrance and the stairs and everywhere were the prints and grey hair of dogs. I passed through the space, looked up the stairs, and fleetingly recalled: *A bedroom with a fireplace of embers and a fourposter with a colourful patchwork bedspread, where I’d slipped down the side of the mattress before my feet had touched the floor.*

What? How long had I been here?

I was nauseous.

I felt like I’d been looking for something.

A doorway opened from the entrance into a dining hall where the walls were covered with murals of hunting parties running through a forest. It was strange, Medieval art where the perspectives were wrong; people walked from left to right, with their hands and faces were turned towards the viewer, and everything had two shadows, one from a small golden sun, another from a large pale moon. A blackwood table ran

the long length of the dining hall, gouged with axe-marks where someone had failed in taking it for firewood. At the far end of the table, five camp chairs were clustered around a gas lamp on top of an upturned saucepan. I could hear a clatter of pots. Kitchen sounds from somewhere nearby, reaching me on another wave of memory.

*Warm, sat in a too-small copper bathtub, knees islands in a brown sea. Soap smelling of cardamom. Next to a low fire, in a hearth so large that the whole tub had fitted inside.*

Sniffing my arm, I could still smell the soap.

I found the way into the kitchen, an outline of the entrance cutting through painted trees. I went in. The fire had been built back up from how I remembered, now it roared hot. The bathtub had been emptied and pushed to one side, and was now filled with blue-headed pheasants awaiting plucking. The rest of the room was flagstone floors, wooden tables, white walls where copper pots shone. Unlike the barren landscape of the rest of the place, this room had all its contents.

A man was pounding dough with his knuckles. He was in his forties, brown-skinned and bald, with a pair of white-rimmed glasses and a leather apron which made him look more blacksmith than chef.

‘Who are you?’ I asked, laden with *God, I need a coffee.*

‘I’d say good morning, but we’re coming along to evening now,’ said the stranger. He threw the dough onto the table, clapped his hands together, and looked up to take me in for the first time; my pale limbs, thin sheet and blueing skin. He chuckled, openly amused by me. ‘I left clothes by your bed.’

‘Oh?’

I wondered what time it was in London. Wherever London was. God. I'd forgotten how far I was from home. Was I even further now? Was I *deeper in*?

The man tilted his head and smiled. 'You here with us?'

'Yeah. Look, I'm sorry; but who are you?'

'Musket.' He pointed to himself, leaving a fingerprint of flour on his chest. Then he pointed to me. 'You're Benjamin.'

'I am.'

'Good,' he said with a smile and a nod. 'You know me. You met me last night. Your jaw's looking better than it was.'

I reached up and felt my face. It was swollen and painful. I leant against a table, exhausted and shivering and spotted that, next to the fire, my jacket, shirt and trousers had been washed and stretched out to dry, my shoes each shoved onto a peg on the wall. I crossed the kitchen, to take a handful of jacket. The wool was still wet.

'That's good cloth you got in a state, man. Sit down. Get warm. Kid, get him something to eat, will you?'

Musket nodded towards a boy, who I hadn't noticed before, sitting on a bench inside the fireplace, under the flue. He was seven or eight years old, clearly his father's son, and grinned at me from the folds of an oversized woollen jumper. The boy hopped up, and I took his place by the fire. I hugged the sheet around me and glanced up the chimney to a spot of light high above. The building was tall above us.

'You with us, man?' Musket asked again.

He came to lean on the lintel, the fire caught in his lenses. Funny, I thought, how different fire can be in different places.

'You here?'



I attempted to neaten my thoughts. Tap the deck of cards on the table and discover which card was on top. ‘I’m looking for Crane,’ I said.

‘Your friend, yeah. A good man by the sounds.’

‘He’s got the muddles,’ said the boy, peeping from a cupboard.

‘Shush, you. Give him a minute.’ To me: ‘Last thing you remember?’

‘A ship.’

He frowned.

‘No, wait. A bath.’ And, just coming to me: ‘Before that a blizzard.’

*A green flare exploding in the snow above us, lighting the ice up green, making an eerie cave of glow-worms and fireflies rushing, leaning heavily on another man as he helped me through the snow.*

‘Ah, man, that’s not too bad then,’ said Musket. ‘That was here, out on the ice, only last night. We brought you both in from the door on the island before you froze, and here you are now.’

‘Why can’t I remember?’

‘Jack didn’t warn you about the effects of travelling? You came a long way.’

‘You know Jack? Where is he?’

‘Can’t say.’

‘Come on!’

‘He said you’d likely get worked up. There’s no need to, we’re friends here. Yes, I know Jack, although he was gone a long while this time. Had that look to him, when he brought you in, which means he won’t want to speak to anyone for a while. I understand that, what with everything that’s been going on – but he won’t have long before he’s needed again.’

‘But where’s he now?’

‘He’s gone out, man. I don’t know when he’ll be back.’

‘He’s gone out,’ I repeated.

‘Out,’ Musket confirmed.

Jack had bloody done it again. Slipped away like an eel escaping a fishmonger’s basket and slithering through the gutters back to the Thames. Maybe he’d known what violence I’d planned for him.

The boy returned with a pewter plate of fatty game, a wrinkled apple and white cheese. I stuck a hand out into the cold to take it before he retreated to safety, pressing his face into Musket’s side.

‘This here is Kid,’ said Musket. ‘We go by names here that remind us of belonging to something. It helps us remember. He’s my son, and I won’t let him forget it. I’m Musket because once I went for a soldier. That’s what’s in my blood.’ He straightened up and went back to his dough. ‘London, you said?’ (Although I hadn’t, so that must have been last night too.) ‘Well, we’ll remember that for you.’

‘What’s this place?’

‘This here is what we call Hall. That’s all that’s left of the name of the place over the doors out front – you can go look if you want – so that’s what we call it. It’s a backwater. A refuge, now.’ He laughed in anticipation of: ‘People that don’t like us would call it a nest.’

‘It’s big for a backwater,’ I said, setting the full plate down on the flagstones.

‘Depends on the size of the water.’

‘People live here?’

Kid sat at my feet and edged the food back toward me.

‘We’re not living, we’re hiding. But yeah. You’ll meet the others tonight. Nice little community we have.’ He said that like he wasn’t convinced. ‘I’m sure Jack’s man’ll fit right in.’

‘I can’t stay.’

Musket sighed, heavy, and stopped what he was doing. ‘Look, I didn’t want to be the messenger here, but it seems like I am. We’re not going to be letting you leave, understand that now. There’ll be no wandering off again to get yourself in another jam. You’ve not got the constitution for it, be honest with yourself, man. And far as I understand, you’ve got no means to leave either. Grind your teeth all you like. You’d die out there if you make a run for it.’

Musket shaped his dough and put it gently on a tray.

‘I’ve been told,’ he said, nice and amiable. ‘To expect new people coming in, so there’s work for you to do. Clearing out the spiders and scraping down the mould – Kid’s not tall enough to reach it all. Or there’s wood to be split if you’d prefer the outside? Why don’t you go get some clothes and come back?’

Hall was quiet. No radios or television. No traffic. No seismic rumbling of the tube. No hum of electricity. Just the rasp of wind, the creaking of timbers ageing. It was built around a central courtyard, where a huge chestnut tree spread wintry branches against the inward-looking windows and grew a crop of icicles. But inside Hall, there was little of anything, as empty as my flat had been; just bare stretches of marble and long-cold fireplaces big enough to roast an elephant.

I found my assigned room by following my trail of footprints back up the stairs – they were easy to distinguish from the other prints on account of the toes. It was a large

room on the first floor with embers in the hearth and a high fourposter with a patchwork bedspread, as remembered. I found a jumper and a pair of jogging bottoms and socks. The room faced out over the lake.

I refused to go back downstairs. Instead, I explored my new prison. It was just the sort of place I thought I might find a portrait gallery somewhere.

The building wasn't sound, any health and safety official in their right mind would've condemned it. There were holes in the stairs, holes in the ceilings, holes in the floors. Opening the door to the bedroom next to mine had led to a long drop straight down to the ballroom below. Swathes of plaster curled to the floor, the roof lifted in the wind, snowmelt ran down the insides of walls, creepers came in through broken windowpanes, cobwebs hung thick over the windows and tore apart, ends floating upwards in the draft, when I pushed through heavy doors. Here and there unreachable treasures had survived; sagging chandeliers, high portraits of men posing with telescopes and globes, a row of books on a high shelf without a ladder, and on the stairs was a collection of antlers. Walking through Hall, my imagination populated the blank canvas with people floating around in finery, drinking from fluted glasses, eyeing me as I tried every door I came to, yanking them open, moving on to the next when they revealed nothing more interesting than another empty room.

There were dogs everywhere. Almost-wolves of grey and white, their eyes like blue enamel, their breaths hot and steaming. They had the run of the house and made good use of it. I found them curled in patches of evening sunlight and soon had most of them trailing me, helping suss out the rooms I exposed, eddied around me with frantic energy, swirling the dust of decades, so close I could barely walk. Redman had been right: I wasn't liking dogs.

I climbed up through the floors, swapping ballrooms for bedrooms then servant quarters, and each level lowered its ceilings, shrinking until the windows were cramped right up underneath the roof. There was no gallery. Nowhere. Not a sign of it. If it was here, it was tucked away into a fold of geography.

After an hour of exploration, Kid appeared down the corridor, an empty plate and a pewter flagon in hand.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked, emboldened by suspected wrongdoing.

No answer available, I didn’t give one, and instead smiled an interview smile.

‘Do you know if Jack ever sleeps here?’ I asked.

He hugged the flagon to himself. ‘Sometimes.’

‘Can you show me where?’

The boy was reluctant but persuadable, and he finally showed me up to a small, low-ceilinged room on the top floor and left me to it. Servant’s quarters. It smelt of ozone, wind and rain, and was by far the cleanest room I’d come across. There was no bed, but a thin mat and a sleeping bag, neatly zipped. A gas lamp on the windowsill had a fresh white wick. On the floor, there was a pitcher of frozen water, a bowl, a toothbrush, comb, razor, but no sign that any of it’d ever been used. It was the squatter’s equivalent of a B&B, everything useful, nothing personal; perhaps he kept everything he owned up his sleeves and pulled things out like a magician. I was disappointed. The room gave me no clues at all about who Jack might be. What he might *do*, what he might *think*.

No, wait. Between the pillow and the wall: a book.

I pulled it out and examined a slim grey paperback. On the front, there was an embossed gold moon about the size of my thumbnail, but there was no indication of title

or author. I flicked through the pages. The writing was small, the paper thin, and the words weren't written in an alphabet I recognised until, that was, I hit the appendix which was all numbers, but it looked like it was only a list of geographical and population statistics. Life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy, blah blah blah.

I put the book back. It was all useless. The man was a sodding ghost.

What'd happened when we left the ship?

I forced myself to remember; the shapes of memories were inside me. *Leaves. Sinking into a sofa. Cigarette smoke...* I tried to fall into them, like remembering a dream or a piece of music. It took a long time of hard thinking, but once I'd got the first few chords, the rest came back in a rush.

We'd been in a sizable greenhouse lit by dim, watery light which made Jack an old man. The glass was dirty, like the inside of an aquarium, and the plants were an overgrown tangle of miscellany, like the Temperate House at Kew Gardens would be, if left to its own devices for years. Tree ferns had grown tall enough to press against the ceiling of glass twenty meters up, and everything else was leaves, a thousand different sizes, a thousand different greens.

'This isn't Limehouse,' I'd said quietly. Then to Jack, 'This isn't London.'

'No.'

He pushed through leaves and disappeared.

I followed, angry. 'Why the hell isn't this London?'

'London isn't safe anymore.'

I was hit sideways with another wave of nausea and staggered, almost fell, lurching like the planet had just abandoned its freefall towards the sun and struck off

alone into space. Both hands on the furry trunk of a tree, I doubled over and retched uselessly. Jack came back through the leaves.

‘Leave me alone,’ I said.

He waited until I’d regained control and wiped my mouth on my salty sleeve, then led me into a glass-ceiling clearing. It’d once been a work area; a trestle table was full of terracotta pots and paper packets of seeds which had grown and spilt over to spread along the ground. An old brown sofa had been dragged from somewhere, and a fire pit created by pulling up a paving slab. There was rubbish everywhere and full ashtrays made from tin cans. I got to the sofa and collapsed in a puff of dust which stuck immediately to my wet clothes. I leant over the armrest to spit.

‘Seasickness,’ I said.

‘No, it’s the travelling. Some people struggle.’

God, I hated him then. I looked up, ignoring the heaving motion of foliage all around. There he was. Jack. The same as when he’d fallen into my garden, except maybe he looked more tired. I’d spent hours punching that face.

‘Who are you?’ I demanded.

He smiled, rueful. ‘I’m Jack.’

‘You’re not Jack. I saw the bench.’

He grinned, like he was proud of me, but then: ‘But my friends call me Jack, I’ve been Jack for years.’

‘I’m not your friend.’

‘No? A shame.’ His tone was playful.

‘So, *Jack*, what’s going on?’

‘I’m rescuing you.’

‘I don’t...’ I closed my eyes against the tides of me rising and falling.

‘Put your head between your knees, that’s right. Better? I followed you, which was easy – you didn’t leave your city subtly. I’d heard there was violence. People killed, houses burned.’

‘My flat.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ His was a genuine warm sympathy, and his expression was pained like he’d lost something too. ‘You would have been happy there.’

Yes, I bloody would’ve been.

‘That was weeks ago,’ I said. ‘What took you so long to get here?’

‘I was delayed.’ Suddenly he was telling me off: ‘Why did you leave London, Benjamin? And through an untried door, of all things?’

‘They took Crane,’ I said.

‘What’s Crane?’

‘Who. *Who* is Arthur Crane.’ I noted Jack wasn’t confused by the ‘they’. ‘Crane’s my friend.’

‘I see.’ Again, that sympathy as understanding hit him.

But was that all Crane got? An ‘I see’. Like Jack had just understood a new puzzle of philosophy? I rallied my rage and raised my head again to glare at him. *Come on Benjamin, you’ve rehearsed this. Quickfire questions. Maybe punch him if you’re up to it. I doubt he’ll fight back.* ‘This is your fault; don’t you see that? You sent me down this rabbit hole. Who the hell are you, Jack? What is this you’ve got me bloody mixed up in?’



He sat down on a plastic crate across the ashes of the firepit. ‘Be warned,’ he said, kind. ‘I have a pathological disposition towards the truth, which means there are questions I’m simply not going to answer.’

‘What were you doing in London?’

‘Yes, that’s one of them.’

‘What are you?’

‘A human boy.’ He was enjoying this.

‘Where’s the gallery?’

He gestured around to leaves. ‘Not here.’

‘Are you taking the piss?’

‘Nope.’

‘Are you dangerous?’

He laughed and waved his hand to indicate ‘so-so’.

‘To me?’

He frowned. ‘Not on purpose.’

Jack’s room filled with green light. I’d fallen asleep on his floor. Through the window, I caught the last coloured sparks of a flare drifting down over the lake. I remembered that from last night; it must mean a friend had arrived. It was dark out there now, overhead was a black sky with a few stars shining alone and distant. From somewhere above, a bell rang out, loud and sonorous, like church bells on Sundays. I went to the window. Far below, a man I hadn’t seen before was wading through the snow, shouting for the dogs. He was bulky in a coat of furs, and his hair was wild and grey, but that was all I could see. He selected a few dogs and attached them to a sledge – a simple wooden

thing with a seat up front to drive and room for supplies in the back – which was waiting at the shoreline tied to an ice-locked jetty, and they all quickly diminished to miniatures on the moonlit lake. I hurried downstairs to find Musket in the kitchen surrounded by the smell of roasting game.

‘Cutlery’s in the top drawer,’ he said. ‘We’re four as Kid’s up on watch duty. Your clothes are dry.’

I changed quickly and laid the table for the camping chairs in the dining room and waited by the windows for the sledge to come back, my impatience like sickness again. Musket filled the table up with food behind me, and the sledge’s return was finally accompanied by all the remaining dogs running to the front door. Two people walked up to the building from the shore. The first was the large man in the furs, the second wasn’t Jack.

Sounds of an argument preceded them as they came into the dining room. Not-Jack was a woman a few decades my senior. She had a spherical build, which didn’t become less spherical when she shed her thick coat onto the floor. Her face was plump mahogany, her hair greying from the roots but, by gaslight, she was a deity: maternal, wise, pissed off.

‘Did you expect me to bring them with me today, Hahn?’ she asked the man in furs. ‘You’re all goddamn immediacy. Have you never heard of a tab? It’s what I keep when someone owes me something; there’re smoother relations between seller and customer if every time they talk, there’s no money exchanging hands. That’s why my establishment was the goddamn best – I waited to get paid.’

The old man Hahn said nothing. He sat heavily in a camping chair, his furs rolling off the sides, stinking like the flesh had never been scraped off them. Up close, his face

was pitted with disease, and his hair and eyebrows were clouds coalescing on a mountaintop.

The woman noticed me by the window. 'Have we hired ourselves a waiter?'

'This is Jack's man,' said Musket. 'I'm calling him Mr London.'

She assessed me quickly; lips pursed, nose wrinkled. It was the opposite of a British assessment, there was no veiled nicety or handshakes.

'My name's Benjamin,' I said.

'Now that's one too many names.'

'Well, I choose Benjamin.'

'Too late.'

I laughed, unsure if I was meant to. 'And you are?'

'Providence. A big name, I know. But it's my only one.' She smiled as she settled herself down at the table. 'Welcome, Mr London. A friend of Jack's is a friend of ours.'

Hahn snorted a laugh.

I hovered before I joined them, flicking through all my limited options of action before deciding that rebellion was useless on an empty stomach. Providence watched me fill up my plate, as though gaining psychological insight from my selection of potatoes. I took half as much as I wanted.

She turned to Musket. 'Does this one know he's our prisoner?'

'We touched on it.'

To me, she said, 'You don't want to leave. It's cold out there.'

'I need to save my friend.'

'Ah, there it is; his story of woe.'

'It gets repetitive,' said Musket.

‘Your friend got taken by people in mirrored masks?’ asked Providence. ‘He did, I see. Well, I’d be more sympathetic, but those same bastards killed my family and burnt my livelihood to the ground. So we’re all on the same page here, son. Let’s not pretend we aren’t.’

She returned to her argument with Hahn. As they ate, their talk was quick and coded, but I learnt things fast. Musket moved his chair closer to mine and whispered explanations at me. One: there was war and death all around us, and we were hidden, tortoisising, in a bubble of dereliction in the backend of nowhere. Our conditions here, I gathered, were excellent – we had food, ceilings (ish), and a relative unlikeliness of being murdered, but the only thing keeping us safe was the sheer volume of other possible hiding places. And make no mistake, we were being looked for. Two: I hadn’t stumbled into a war of sides, but a war of the law against the people, and only one side had an army. Three: the mirrored men? They had a name – the journeymen.

‘Journeymen?’ I raised a cynical eyebrow. That sounded stupid to me.

‘A bad translation.’ Providence waved a hand, dismissive.

But the bad translation had stuck, despite only fifty per cent of them being men, and I didn’t make them less terrifying. They were the police of a thousand worlds. Border control, man. Set up to stop a catalogue of errors from all the people wandering through places. But that was hard to do, like trying to stop water running through a sieve, so they’d begun to substitute violence for effectiveness: doors kicked down, nests of travellers and muttering radicals cut to pieces and burnt up. You know, the usual.

‘Why are you bringing people here?’ I asked.

‘To plan a revolution,’ said Providence.

‘Oh well, of course.’

‘This isn’t a student protest with placards and face paint, Mr London. We’re fighting to survive.’

‘No,’ said Musket. ‘Revenge is the point now.’

‘Don’t be a dolt,’ said Hahn. ‘You think we’ve got any time for revenge? You think they’ve stopped their violence now?’

‘We’ve got no proof otherwise.’

‘That’s because they hide it,’ said Providence. ‘Even from themselves. One of those journeymen kills a man, and she’s told she’s the only one that ever did it and gets slurped back into the good cause, fighting the good fight.’ To me, she said, ‘They’ve accused us of war crimes. Of crossing borders we’re not allowed to cross, of teaching new philosophies and planting societal unrest.’

‘And of genocide,’ said Musket.

‘Genocide?’ I was surprised.

‘They’ve got a point on that one, don’t they?’ he asked the others. ‘The journeymen are afraid, man, terrified of what can happen by us if they don’t stop it first. Because something terrible *has* happened, know that, Mr London.’

‘What?’

‘Two decades ago there were billions of dead. A whole place was destroyed. A planet. It was ripped apart from the incorrect use of doors. They don’t want that repeated.’

‘Fair enough,’ I said.

‘But their way to stop it is to slash and burn,’ said Providence with feeling.

‘We’re an infestation to them.’

The conversation moved on and left me behind. My brain swam with new information. I sat back and thought hard. Was Jack involved in these politics? Had these journeymen somehow known the two places he'd been in London? Mine was the house that got smashed by the avalanche from Jack running about high up in the snow?

The oil in the lamp was getting low, the tall flame guttering our overgrown shadows onto the wall. Outside, the snow was oddly luminous. Crane stood by a window nearby. He ran his hand down a curtain and examined the decay that came off onto his fingers.

I turned my camp chair and called, 'What do you make of all this, Crane?'

'I know those journeymen are bloody terrifying, whatever else they are.'

I nodded. 'Yeah.'

'Can you get away?' He directed a hitchhiker's thumb across to the island.

'Not without a counter.'

'Best play along then. But with your cards close to your chest.'

I turned the chair back to the table.

'We need all the bodies we can get,' someone said fiercely.

'I'm a body,' I said, interrupting, so all three of them turned to me.

'We can't,' said Musket. 'Jack has—'

'Jack's not here,' said Hahn.

'He'd blow a shitting gasket, man!'

'Are we afraid of ruffling his feathers?'

'Look,' I interrupted. 'It's true I'm not here to support your revolution, you've guessed that much. I'm here to save my friend, and that's pretty much it, and I'm certainly not going to abandon him to sign up for a war I don't belong to.'

‘It’s everyone’s war,’ growled Hahn, but I ignored him.

‘If you’re worried about what my motives are, that’s it all on a platter: I need to save my friend. And don’t get me wrong; as soon as there’s a glimmer of a pathway to Crane up ahead, I’m gone. Off like a rocket. For the meantime, though, you have me here, and I’m sure you can put me to better work than sweeping out spiders, no?’

Providence laughed. She leant back in her chair. ‘That was an admirable attempt at regaining control of your life, Mr London. Well done.’

## Chapter 9

‘You’re a body, you said? Well, get your body up, man. It’s your watch.’

My nightmare tattered – black dust and my front door and Redman’s heartbroken face – and I rolled from bed to follow Musket through Hall. It was pre-dawn, and everything was blue and sickly. He took us to the top floor to the corridor where I’d met Kid the day before, and he pulled open a door which had been concealed by wooden panelling. We went up a tight twist of stairs, coming out into a tower which rose up above the rest of the building. The space had a conical roof, from which there hung a bell. It was open to the elements on all sides but had a wood-burning stove in the middle which resulted in the perpetual warming and cooling of the space, and large stalactites hung along rafters, each housing a distorted view of alpine landscape and snowy rooftops.

‘What am I watching for?’ I asked.

‘People coming in.’

Musket handed me a pair of binoculars and nodded towards the lake. I wiped grease from the eyepieces, I guessed Hahn had used them last, then looked out. In the middle of the lake, a mile from shore was an island. It was low and rocky, probably a plug for a volcano. At the centre of the island was a freestanding stone arch which housed a wooden door. If the same people who’d built the castles of Britain had also built airport security, I imagined that doorway would look something like it.

‘What’s stopping anyone just walking in?’



‘Nothing. That’s why the door’s put out there. See anything, ring the bell. Likely it’ll be Providence coming back, but always ring the bell. You going to manage this job, man? It can get lonely.’

I smiled, pursed my lips against the humour of the situation. ‘I have prior experience of rooftop surveillance.’

The shifts in the tower were long because there were so few people to cover them. Cold fingered its way through my clothes. There was nowhere to sit down, so I paced around the wood burner and almost choked it by putting too much fuel inside. Halfway through the morning, Kid brought me bread which steamed one minute and was cold the next, and that was all the action there was for hours.

I watched the door with fervour. The wind buffeted my face – drying my eyes, chapping my lips – and filled my ears with a cocoon of white noise. And I pondered that Hall was a trap of smiles and ‘would you like another portion of potatoes to wash down that bitter pill of imprisonment?’ and ‘Look, we trust you! Sit right there and freeze your eyeballs solid; we’re bored of it ourselves.’ And there was no way out. I was in a place between places – like being in an airport and not being able to get onto a plane because I didn’t have a valid passport. Fine. That was the way it was, there was little use in me wishing it was different. I needed to test their boundaries, find how far I could get before someone reeled me back in. Perhaps there was a chance there. Some wiggle room for me to get a chisel inside and lever the lid of this whole place to stop the tugging feeling in my diaphragm for a moment.

‘Have you noticed the moon?’ asked Crane.

‘What?’

‘Look at it.’

I found it in the sky. It was tissue-paper thin against the lightening sky, almost full. I focussed on it through the binoculars. When it came into view, my gut twisted with the strangeness of it. The craters were all wrong, and there were no seas of tranquillity or serenity. I turned my head to try and make sense of it another way up, but it didn't work. Despite the cold, I was suddenly sweating.

'And what d'you think's off behind those mountains?' Crane asked.

I didn't know.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, it began to snow, which distracted me long enough to miss Providence's return before her flare went up. I rang the bell, metallic and loud – damn, it was loud; my eardrums thrummed like wasps – and below, dogs barked, front doors opened, Hahn spilt out. His journey across the lake was curtained with snow, so I could only periodically see him and, when he was returning with Providence, I almost entirely missed a lone ranger appearing on the island behind them.

Binoculars up and focusing with stiff fingers: the newcomer was wrapped against the cold in a blanket which anonymised them, and they struggled against the wind to keep upright. I rang the bell again, not stopping until the sledge had turned a full loop around on the ice and started heading back to the island.

Musket arrived in the tower, winded from racing upstairs.

'We've got incoming,' I said.

He snatched the binoculars from me; maybe this was a clever Mr London ploy. But, incoming confirmed, he handed them back – 'Keep your attention on the doorway, no matter what's happening on the ice; don't forget the door!' – and left, slamming the door.

'Yessir,' I muttered.

I flicked my attention between doorway and action, focussing and refocussing the lenses. The newcomer had made it onto the lake, but had fallen and now lay still, the blanket flurrying around. I watched as they were promptly collected, bundled into the back of the sledge and brought into Hall. Hahn carried them inside while Providence set the dogs free.

Next, Kid arrived in the tower.

‘I’m here to take over, Mr London. They want you in the kitchen.’

I hurried downstairs, nosed at by dogs as I passed. As I reached for the kitchen door, it opened and out came Providence, pushing me back into the dining table. She was furious. Her words weren’t a question, but an already-decided accusation. ‘You told her we were here?’

‘Who? What? No! I don’t even know where here is.’

‘And now she’s asking for sanctuary!’

‘Who is? I don’t know who you’re talking about.’

‘She says she knows you, Mr London.’

‘Me? No.’

‘He didn’t tell anyone, Providence,’ said Musket from the door. ‘He couldn’t have. He came in here arse over elbows and spitting up like a newborn.’

Providence relented to logic. She ushered me into the kitchen and sat me down opposite a bundle of shivering blankets where a strip of face revealed the brown eyes, thick brows and sun-darkened skin of a young woman. Her only sign of any sickness like mine was a bit too much blinking.

‘You think you know me?’ I asked.

‘You’re drier now.’

‘What?’

‘I saved you from the sea. You’re welcome.’

I leant back. ‘You’re the mermaid.’

She smiled at that; the tops of her cheeks coming into view.

‘You know her, then,’ said Providence. ‘How did she get here?’

‘I’ve got no idea.’

‘She got here,’ said the newcomer, ‘because she followed him. She’s Ingrid, by the way.’ A small hand emerged from the bundle and proffered itself to Providence but was ignored by the older woman.

‘And why did you follow him?’ Providence demanded.

‘I’ve been stuck on that ship for years waiting for someone to arrive, and I wasn’t going to give up my chance to leave. Only, I didn’t know where to go and following his slug trail seemed as good a direction as any.’ She beamed with sudden realisation. ‘I’ve stumbled into an important place here, have I? That’s exciting. Are you a nest?’ And then, with deep emotion: ‘Have they ruined your lives too?’

‘Journeymen attacked her ship,’ I informed Providence.

‘Yes, of course, they did,’ said Ingrid.

‘You know a lot more than you let on, Mr London,’ said Providence. ‘What is this we’re talking about?’

I explained fast about the ships and the burning islands and woodsmoke which still clung to the fibres of my suit, despite its washings. And then Ingrid took over and described the night before I’d arrived – the merriment of sailors in port, the sudden arrival of planes overhead, and the unrelenting bombs along the shore, flinging up sand, the trees burning, cracking the decks of ships.

Providence shook her head; the story wasn't fitting into any of the slots she'd prepared for it. 'Tell me about these ships. What were they up to?'

'Only research,' said Ingrid.

'Explain.'

'I don't know all of it. I was an engineer, I looked after the dishes. Cleaned them. Salt, that was the worst, it lined the surface with granules that'd make your fingers bleed.'

'The dishes?'

'Satellite dishes,' I said. At Providence and Musket's blank expressions, I added. 'For sending and receiving information. Signals... You know.'

'Signals from where?' asked Providence.

'Waves from the sky,' answered Ingrid.

'You mean radio astronomy?' I asked.

She turned to me. 'Mr London, you are knowing about these things, eh?'

'A bit. I've read stuff.'

'Really? And my friends thought they were being so exceptional.' She looked back to Providence. 'He's right. We were mapping the sky. We would go to the darkest places on the sea, wait until the water was glass, and the ships moved out in a circle, widening, all taking pictures of the same little spot in the sky. It was only the start though, a grain of sand.'

'A pointless endeavour,' said Providence. 'A game for people with too much peacetime and money. So why would they come for you?'

'You people,' said Ingrid, 'were in the wrong places when they came for you, no? You and your families were breaking the rules; stupid rules you maybe didn't know

existed, but nonetheless... The same happened to me, years ago, which is how I know more than my colleagues were, I think. But those ships? They didn't break any rules. They were even affiliated with the journeymen, I'm thinking. Somewhere high up in that cloud of scientists, those bastards were navigating the way.'

Musket stood up. 'She's saying they slaughtered their own.'

'I am not one of them,' said Ingrid, offended.

Providence sat down. 'The journeymen themselves don't know where they end yet. This sounds like the pruning of excess branches. But it's big. Bigger than I thought. Would you bear witness to it, girl?'

'I would.'

And quick as that, Ingrid won over Providence and was welcomed into the bosom of Hall. When she was warm enough to reveal herself to the room, she was olive and lean, and her seaweed-hair was dreadlocks; not the neat ones populating Camden, but proper dreadlocks earned by years of wind and rain. She wore a blue coverall and seemed as though the recesses of her brain were full of practical, sensible, mechanical things. And she slotted neatly into the silhouette of the sailor who'd searched me while I was sick.

The first chance I got was on the stairs while the others walked ahead (the official tour, an honour I'd not been awarded):

'Give it back,' I said. Quiet, just to her. She paused on the stairs, hand on the rail, and smiled at me. I smiled back. Neither of us meant it. 'Give it back, and I won't tell them you're a thief.'

'I'm not sure I like you.'

'Best be rid of me then.' I held out my palm.

‘Are you wanting to leave?’

‘I am indeed.’

She glanced up at the others ahead. ‘I don’t think you will get very far, friend, but you can try if it’ll amuse you to do so. I’ll say nothing, as payment for the loan.’ And with a show of great lament, she pulled my counter from a pocket and handed it over, her cold hand lingering on mine.

I examined it; she’d added fourteen to the count. Was that how many places Jack had brought me through?

‘Thank you,’ I said, doing an excellent job at hiding my escalating excitement.

*Ha! Sod you all, I’ll be off then. Cheerio.*

‘It’s still my watch,’ I said loudly, as though suddenly realising it. ‘Better get back to it.’

I raced up the stairs to overtake Providence and Musket and lurked on the top floor with my prize until the tour had been sucked up by corridors, and I fled down the stairs again. Outside, I edged around the building, wading through drifts of snow so Kid wouldn’t see me, before running, blessedly unspotted, to the treeline and away through the forest. I flew to squeaks of snow and the rasp of cold breaths. The canopy was sunny, the trees waving their arms in the wind overhead. I kept the shoreline of blue ice within sight. After a while, hand to my heaving chest, I looked back; there wasn’t much to see of Hall, only a segment of the roof through the trees.

My plan was simple: hug the shore under cover of trees until I got a good way from Hall, then run like billy-o to get to the island. Only, bloody hurry, Benjamin, because it wouldn’t be long before they knew I was gone. I rubbed my hands together, white and bloodless with cold.

It'd been years since I'd gone so far without coming to a fence or road, without passing someone else, or having Crane by my side. Maybe I was further away from other human beings than I'd ever been. And other such ridiculous thoughts as I ran on, deeply regretting never joining Crane at the gym.

After a mile or so, there was a jut of land that edged a hundred metres into the lake, and that's where I was headed. It would be my only chance to get to the island ahead of the sledge. The ground became rocky, and the trees thinned to reveal Hall clear as day, but surprisingly small under the scale of mountains. If Kid turned the binoculars on the shore, he'd see me running from trunk to trunk.

Where the offshoot of land ended, there was a ruined building, reduced now to only walls covered in ice frozen like wax, the floorplan a series of rectangular ice rinks. I passed a broken gas lantern and waded through a pile of mouldered bedding, to come out of the building and slip down onto a narrow pebble beach. Paper-thin ice cracked under my feet. I slipped out onto the lake proper – the smooth surface difficult in shoes designed for carpets and pavements – to where the ice was dark and metres thick, rift with white pressure cracks and decorated internally with frozen bubbles.

The bell rang out into the basin of the landscape, clear through the cold air.

'Bugger.'

No more pretence; I ran flat out.

The sledge was hitched up quick, I watched it in my periphery, growing closer way too fast. I discovered that the ice was easier once I'd picked up speed, but I still fell once, twice. I was almost there. *Almost there, for god's sake.*

'Come on, Farthing!' called Crane from the island like a dad at sports day.



But too soon I heard the blades of the sledge whistling towards me and was abruptly in the midst of enthusiastic dogs who forced me to slide to a stop. Breathing heavily, throat sore from cold air, I said, ‘Afternoon, Hahn.’

‘Get on.’

‘I’d rather not.’

He sighed, leant over the seat behind him and brought out a cudgel. Long and hefty, it ended in a nasty knot of wood. ‘Sled. Now.’

I backed away. ‘No, now, come on, look, let’s be—’

‘Get on the fucking sledge, you yellow-livered refugee. Else I’ll kill you.’

I believed him. I could so clearly imagine the red spray of my brain matter flying through the clear air, and my body left sprawled on the blue ice.

‘Jack wouldn’t like that,’ I said.

‘Jack can fuck himself.’

They took my counter off me and locked me in the larder. More of a cellar, actually. I was led down a flight of stairs from the kitchen, where Musket had unlocked a door into blackness – the cellar key hidden, Crane and I noted, under the copper bathtub – and shoved me inside. They hadn’t given me any light, but I felt my way around and drew a mental landscape of three aisles of metal shelves, stacked with tins, bags, bottles and boxes of food. I slumped at the bottom of a wall and wondered what I’d done wrong in life to end up bouncing between prison cells. I felt sorry for myself until I remembered that Crane would be somewhere worse, so I imagined us both on the Kensington rooftop with deckchairs and beers. We were looking over the garden, and it was pleasantly sunny.

‘Well, Farthing, looks like a tricky one,’ he said. ‘If it was me, I reckon I’d be shouting for help.’

‘No, that’s not what you’d do, that’s what I’d do.’

‘Oh. I’m not sure what I should be advising, in that case.’

‘Something like: sit still, shut up and play along, you muppet.’

I stood up from the deckchair and spread my arms to the London skyline, where suddenly the sun was setting orange.

‘I think I’ve missed something, Crane. Right now, you’re my subconscious, so you might be able to tell me what it is.’

He thought about it, took a swig of beer. ‘I don’t think I’m your subconscious.’

‘Of course not. A subconscious can’t be self-aware.’

A new voice said: ‘You’ve been asking for me?’

‘Have I?’

‘Are you awake, Benjamin?’

‘Play along,’ said Crane. ‘Remember; cards close. And don’t hurt him. Not that you ever would actually.’

I opened my eyes to the cellar and discovered Jack crouching next to me inside an orange orb of from a gas lantern. His face was still red from the cold outside. He was wary, bouncing on his toes like he might spring for the door any moment, and I wondered if he’d slept in the last few days; there was a brittleness to him which suggested not.

‘He doesn’t look how I’d imagined,’ said Crane.

‘You were asking for me,’ Jack repeated.

‘You abandoned me.’

‘I’m afraid there was something that needed doing.’

‘Again? That happens a lot. Why are we here? Who are these people?’

‘Didn’t you ask them?’

‘I did, but I... Is this place safe?’

He smiled. ‘It’s safe. They’re friends. Or, I supposed in your case, allies for the moment. They’ve helped me in the past, and I’ve helped them too.’

‘But they’re keeping me prisoner,’ I whispered. Us against them.

‘Yes, under my instruction.’

‘But *why*?’ I feigned shock. ‘I have to leave. I need to find Crane. He’s still alive, I know it, and if there’s even a chance, I need to do everything I can to help him.’

‘Benjamin—’

‘I know!’ I held up my hands. ‘I’m doing a shit job of it at the moment. Yeah, I know. But Jack, I’ve learnt my lesson, and I’m not going to go off again without you. I swear there’ll be no more Mr London jumping into danger.’

‘Mr London?’

‘That’s what they’re calling me here. That or Jack’s Man.’

‘Mr London is better,’ he said, amused. Was he ever not cheerful?

‘Well, whoever I am, as I said, I won’t be running off again. That lesson has been bloody well learned. Well learned indeed. I’m only just recovering. But if I’m going to find Crane, if he’s alive, I’ll need help, and you... You seem like you might be willing to help – or so you’ve implied – so maybe in a few days, tomorrow maybe, we can go and get him? We’ll just go and get him and take him back to London. And he can be reunited with his wife, and everything will be lovely. Hunky-dory.’

Jack was quiet.

‘Well?’ I pressed. ‘Where is he? Why are you smiling?’

‘I’m entertained by you, Benjamin. Though I’d hoped you’d be better than this. You’re not the only person who’s lost someone to the journeymen. But a word to the wise; you stop your mediocre attempts at bending everyone to your will.’

*Okay then, I’ll expand the altruism.*

‘You mean there’s nothing any of us can do? For any of them?’

‘There is, but it’s not as direct as you’d like it to be.’

He sighed and sat down properly on the floor and crossed his legs. He set the lantern down between us.

‘If Providence were here,’ Jack said, ‘she’d say you should join up and work with us. That you’re among friends here. That we’re all striving towards the same goal.’ He saluted, apparently capable of a little cynicism.

‘But what do you say?’

‘I say *stay safe*.’ This was earnest, encouraging rebellion. ‘Providence believes there’s protection in knowledge and numbers. The more of us who understand the threat, the better we can protect ourselves.’

‘You mean she’s recruiting an army.’

‘That’s not her intention, but I know the people she’s dealing with better than she does, and it might well go that way. A by-product of the journeymen’s activity is a lack of knowledge across the board. All we can see is our own cordoned off area – you’ll like all this, its geography – but there are other worlds out there, many with their own muttering of rebellion, no doubt. Keep us all separate, and we’re nearly useless. Keep us separate. Make those other fictional people who live far away in the depths of other

universes where there's no concreteness to their pain and deaths or their crumbling cities where children litter the streets.'

I was alarmed by his fervour and wanted to say: 'Shut up, that's other people's suffering, not mine.' But instead went with, 'Is that it, then? War everywhere in every direction?'

'Not everywhere,' he answered, and I guessed he was probably an authority on such things.

We were silent for a bit. Jack seemed happy to just sit and rest for a moment. I wondered if the cellar door was locked, or if there was anyone upstairs in the kitchen...

'Don't,' said Crane, who was leaning against a stack of shelving, hands in his jean's pockets. 'I'm interested in what he has to say.'

'I need a drink,' I said, and got to my feet. I found a few old bottles of wine and, behind them, a screw-top bottle of something clear which, upon investigation, tasted like electricity. I winced.

'Musket said travelling places was dangerous,' I said.

'Yes, and more for some than others, like some people get sick at sea and some don't. It's mostly short-term effects, as you've discovered, but there's a confusion which can build up, and even trained journeymen have to keep a close track of their crossings.'

'He's talking about the number on the counter,' said Crane. 'I'd wondered about that. It's like a radiation badge that warns them when they need to stop. You came through fourteen worlds to get here, no wonder you got the muddles. I wonder what happens if you go too far?'

'Jack,' I said. 'How do all these places all match up?'

‘There’s no way to answer that, not in the way you want. Everyone creates a different picture to settle it in their mind.’ For the intuitive leaps of Jack’s mind, that was enough said, but I waited until he continued. ‘For example, then: imagine a string of beads, each universe leading on into the next. Or imagine a mess of bubbles, all different sizes, all vying to become the right shape and pressing into each other. Or a great sphere, all the universes as layers that go down and out forever, nothing but glass separating them. Or lone marbles knocking around in infinite blackness. Or a solid gravitational system of universes that orbit around each other like planets around a star. Or a tangle, all wrapped around each other like snakes in a pit. Or everything layered thinly over everything else, a veil of reality between each one, as though if you crossed your eyes, or somehow learnt to see, you’d glimpse into other places. The branches of a tree, always spreading and always growing.’

‘Offer him a drink,’ said Crane, joining us on the floor, and it was almost cosy with him there as well. He was fascinated by what Jack was saying.

I offered Jack the bottle, reluctant; the liquid glowed as it was presented across the lamp. Jack took it, smiled, and drank. For some reason that surprised me.

‘Which theory is the right one?’ I asked, taking back the bottle.

‘Most likely, none of them.’

‘Then all that’s useless.’

‘Not if it helps people understand their surroundings. Fictional, yes, but not useless.’

‘So I should just pick one and go with it?’

‘That would assume all fictions were created equal.’

‘You are incapable of straight answers, sir.’

Jack smiled. 'The problem is human beings don't have a particularly good history with imaginary spaces. If all answers are wrong, then people select the answer which benefits them the most, the one which panders to their sense of superiority.'

'You're talking about the journeymen?' I asked.

'Of course. But not only them.' He paused for effect, on stage delivering a lecture to a hall full of students. 'What do you imagine, Benjamin?'

I smiled grimly. 'Honestly?'

'Honestly.'

'That Crane's in the underworld and I'm working my way down through the layers of hell towards him.'

Crane chuckled. 'So that's why you're convinced you can find me alone? All you have to do is go downwards. Is that it, Farthing?'

'I see,' said Jack. 'Every layer taking you closer to fire and brimstone, evil and devils. Down here lives are worth less than the larger, stabler lives of those living up in the real world of your London? Careful with that.'

'Got it.'

'Tell me what happened to your friend.'

I looked at Crane. 'Should I?'

He shrugged. 'No harm in it. Get him on side.'

So I did. I told Jack everything about that night in London, all the details I could give, from what a dog's crushed skull sounded like, to how it felt to run up smoke-filled stairs imagining your best friend's skin turning to crackling. Halfway through, I had to screw the top back on the bottle. I left opportunities for Jack to explain all the bits I didn't understand, but he didn't. His only contribution was to flinch when I told him

about the journeyman running from Waterloo Bridge into the aircraft hangar to be dragged off by his colleagues. 'They'll have killed him for that,' Jack said. 'For being in such a populated place when he sent out a distress signal to go home.' And then, in the end, he said 'Benjamin, don't tell anyone else about what you saw on Waterloo Bridge. You witnessed new technology, and the fact that journeymen can now step out of thin air at any time isn't something Providence and I want to be publicised. The journeymen are already feared enough.'

'Alright, but in exchange, you tell me how I can save Crane.'

'You don't,' Jack said. He wasn't cruel in his tone, but it felt cruel anyway. 'If Providence's revolution succeeds, then he might be saved. Not before.'

Crane frowned. 'Ask him where I am.'

'Where is he?' I asked.

Jack shook his head, which I guessed meant he didn't know. But he leant forward across the lamplight and looked ceremoniously at me: 'I swear to you, Benjamin; I will do everything in my power to help your friend. For me to do that, you need to trust me when I tell you that staying safe in Hall is the best thing you can do for him.'

I nodded. He'd cast one of his spells of earnestness again, and I believed him. It was a relief, I realised, to have someone alongside me who'd seen all the impossible things I'd seen, even if he was mysterious and confusing.

The bell started ringing in the tower high above.

'Someone's coming,' I said.

Jack sighed and got to his feet like a worker coming to the end of his break. 'That's why I'm here,' he said with false enthusiasm. 'The cogs turn, the multitudes coalesce.'



## Chapter 10

Hundreds of people, thousands of them, trooped across the lake, dribs and drabs, clusters and loners, spreading themselves out in a line bent against the wind, sliding their feet over the ice. They frothed and teemed into Hall, pouring into the corners like water. Most people weren't in a good way, they were half-starved with their skulls too obvious. But there was joy. People were greeted unexpectedly by those they knew, arms flung around each other, excited shouts of names across large rooms.

I was let out of the cellar and tasked with helping Kid show people to upstairs bedrooms, where they rolled out mats and sleeping bags, or comfortable expectations of floorboards. The stack of firewood in the courtyard depleted in the space of a few hours, as every fireplace in the place was lit.

I categorised the new people all into four different types. The first type was military; dressed in brown with rifles at their backs, they were worn, exhausted, glad to be somewhere still for a while, and they'd blink a few times after being given an order, their processing power reduced after weeks, months, years of duty. The second was civilian; they were the surprised-to-be-here people and their surprise the only thing which united them. Otherwise, they were gathered from all possible walks of life, like two thousand people had been randomly selected from Earth to go to a party on the moon, and now pinstriped presidents and Amazonian tribespeople and shoe shiners and cinema projectionists and actuaries and rice paddy workers all floated together, gently bumping into each other. The third category was the nomads; lonesome, raggedy men

and women who'd been travelling through worlds for a long time, distinct in the same way Redman had been distinct, who arrived at Hall with instruments and calm eclecticism like they'd arrived at Woodstock. Finally, there were the children; they ran and laughed around underfoot, and played outside in the snow, surprised by it, licking it from their hands.

Those that couldn't walk, we took to an infirmary set up in the largest room at the back of the ground floor. Panelled in blackening mirrors, it'd been commandeered for those needing immediate medical attention. Mats were laid in rows around the edges of the room, and care was being given by a group of young doctors who all knew each other well – they laughed together and spoke in shorthand – and were dressed in combinations of stained scrubs and ward uniforms. They were sewing and scalpelting and ripping clothes from wounds with an efficiency which suggested being used to a nomadic practice, a plague of healers who descended on the weak until there was nothing left to interest them. There was plenty for them here. Sickness was everywhere. The kind from living in places too cold and too wet for too long. Whooping coughs and red eyes, chills, seizures, gangrene. Contending for attention were those unfortunates with bits cut off them. There was a multitude of severed limbs. You'd make a thicket if you gathered them all together.

When I was no longer needed, I joined Jack and Providence on the steps at the main entrance, underneath the crumbled name of the building carved into stone: *Something Hall*. Jack was taking the hand of every person who entered, even the babies and the unconscious, and even the ones that stank the most and were surprised to even be addressed by anyone, let alone by someone smiling and golden. No one seemed to notice how much it cost him through all his hearty warm welcomes and smiles. He was

so *pleased* to see them here. They were so *brave* to have come so far. He couldn't *imagine* what they'd been through. They were *so* welcome. His seriousness brought tears to their eyes and love to their hearts.

Providence was watching the newest arrivals on the ice through binoculars at his side. Most of the newcomers were civilians, but the last few hundred on the ice were all military; they dragged supplies across the ice, hundreds of rope-pulled cardboard boxes.

'Order is that no one leaves without permission, so there's no good trying.'

'I wasn't going to try.'

'Of course not.'

'Are you waiting for someone?'

She handed me the binoculars. 'He's just arrived.'

Through the eyepiece: the last man came through the door, bringing up the rear, and he closed it behind him. Despite the cold, he wore only a brown T-shirt and rolled up brown trousers. His skull was shaved with a single shock of hair rising in the wind like the feathers of a cockatoo. His left hand was missing. And his left leg had been replaced with an aluminium prosthetic. I watched as he smiled in grudging admiration of the blue ice, currents of wind-whipped snow, and the thousands of humans sliding towards a distant mansion that sent a dozen curls of wood smoke into a blue sky. He adjusted his pack, lit a cigarette between his teeth, and began across the ice towards us.

'Who is it?' I asked.

'Lieutenant Rose,' said Providence. 'He's the person we've been speaking to all this time. Well, we've been talking to lots of people, but behind them all, always, was that man.' Her tone denoted distaste. 'We get that one man there to back us, and we

have ourselves a revolution. Problem is, he's an idiot. Oh, brilliant in some things, but a mule when it comes to what we need him for. Are you a praying man?'

'Nope.'

'Shame. Me neither.'

'What's he lieutenant of?'

'Nothing anymore.'

'Mercenary?'

'Except no one pays him.' She glanced at me. 'Since you're here, Mr London, you can make yourself useful. Stay by me, stay quiet, and do whatever I tell you. This guy is simple enough to be impressed by a subservient well-dressed man.'

I might have protested, but I was curious. We went down to the shore to meet the lieutenant, leaving Jack with his greetings, to where children were using a copper frying pan as a sledge. Upon sighting Providence, Rose hurried up the bank, prosthetic sinking deep into the snow, and pulled her into an embrace which lifted her off her feet.

'I thought you were dead, ma'am! Last I saw, you were lying in that office covered in glass and blood.'

'Nonsense. I've been sending you messages for months. And you've been replying to them. What you doing, bringing all these people? It's too many.'

He set her down. 'You wouldn't've been the first of the dead to be sending me messages.'

She frowned. 'Come inside, you're cold.'

He was, he shivered where he stood, but the lieutenant had been distracted by spotting Jack in the doorway behind us. On seeing who'd arrived, Jack paused in his welcomes and came down the bank towards us.

‘Well, hell,’ said the lieutenant. ‘Holy crap, Providence. Interesting company you’re keeping, eh?’

‘You’re Lieutenant Rose,’ said Jack.

‘I am indeed, sir.’

He slapped Jack on the back in greeting. Jack winced.

‘I’m Jack.’

‘Jack?’ Rose rolled the name around his mouth. Smiled. ‘I see.’

‘I’m glad you approve of each other,’ said Providence. ‘But we—’

‘Three days,’ said Rose, spinning on her. ‘You have me for three days of making plans and teaching me what propaganda you want teaching to others. Not *at least* three days, you understand. *Up to* three days. I’ll leave if I want to. And know this too: I’m not here for you except in gratitude for what you were able to teach us. If you make sense, that gratitude may well turn into a fight on the terms you set out, but just as easily it’ll turn into nothing at all. My attention span is short, and I dislike politics, so I suggest shortness and clarity. Play down all your cards right away, and I’ll judge what’s best to do with them in the game.’

‘There’s sickness in these people,’ Providence said.

Rose shrugged. ‘I suspect there is. You surprised?’

‘Why did you bring them?’

‘You’ve got medicine here, you said?’

‘I hope enough,’ said Jack.

His watch began to beep as it’d done in London. He swore softly and slapped a hand over to silence it. He hesitated for a moment before Providence dismissed him and

he hurrying up the steps into the building. I thought he went up the stairs inside. To his room, I guessed.

Mr London followed Providence around for the rest of the daylight, running errands when she needed me to, but otherwise not learning anything interesting while doing a passable impression of the hotel concierge in Kensington as I waded through the teeming froth. A few individuals rose to the surface – an elderly woman with a leopard cub in the folds of her coat, a man who stooped over a laptop until his battery died and then sat tapping his fingers on the lid, a trio of teenagers who took the role of the chorus in a play – but they soon sank down again. Humans from other worlds were different, I thought, despite being physically composed of the same raw material as all the people I was used to seeing on the tube. Individuals weren't unsettling, but together they were a mass of oddness.

'Is it as simple as they've seen different things, and lived in different places with different styles and ideas?' I asked Crane as I followed Providence through the crowded ballroom.

'Different zeitgeists,' he said.

'Good word. Yeah, that's it. Different times lighting them up differently from the inside out.' I lowered my voice. 'They seem simpler, don't you think? Despite all their complicated talk. Oh, don't look at me like that. They're simpler in an *enviable* way. They're shocked and upset, and they're showing it. No airs or pretences. Imagine that. Shit, Crane, imagine not being cynical! Was London ever like that? Full of people surprised by the failings of humanity, rather than waiting for them to happen?'

Darkness long, long fallen, Hall a golden-lit box as night mantled, the place stinking of underarms and cheap tallow candles, I was finally released by Providence

and, Jack nowhere to be found, I walked through the huge rooms, filled to the brim with music and talking and feverish excitement like a crammed crowd at a music festival right before the biggest act of the weekend hit the stage, and went to sit with the nomads outside. There was a glut of them sitting together out in the snow discussing the philosophy of a thousand worlds in shorthand. They'd each read a million books and remembered every word. I found them reassuring – people thinking *outside* the boundaries of society were all the same, it was the *inner* circles that were different, I decided.

They sat around an oil drum fire on the lakeshore. Ingrid was with them, and I sat next to her. ('Good escaping,' she whispered. 'Sod off,' I retorted.) Their conversation turned to those we'd lost. Lovers, parents, mentors, children. No names shared, just the relationship and how long they'd been parted. An unbroken chain of loss linking the circle together. Ingrid's turn:

'My family,' she said. 'All dead, except my brother, but we got separated six years back.' She smiled at the memory of him. 'He's got his dog though, so he's not alone.'

'Redman?' asked Crane, who'd been pacing around outside the circle as there wasn't a seat for him to join.

I wasn't surprised. Ingrid and Redman had the same face, and the same way of listening to me talk impatiently, already full of their next sentence, and she'd been waiting for him on the other side of the door.

Ingrid turned to me, expectant. My turn.

'My friend,' I said. 'The journeymen took him a few weeks ago.'

But that wasn't an exciting story, it didn't garner the same sympathy as a lover or a child, and I was passed over quickly.

Three days of talking. Long, aching days of impatience. Stay in Hall, stay safe, Jack had said, but doing nothing was agony. The first morning was the worst for idle Benjamin because the only action was long, private talks held behind closed doors in Providence's rooms, around the cardboard box of a revolution-planning table – Rose, his second and third in command, Hahn, Musket, Jack when he could be found and even, once, Ingrid. Bloody *Ingrid!* I wasn't privy to a single thing, and they let in Ingrid. I was reduced to wandering Hall with the rest of the cattle.

I went down to the shoreline, where Rose's people, when not needed elsewhere, gathered in a brown-clad cluster, smoking and laughing. This place was a holiday camp compared to what they were used to. They were defiantly casual, but it was clear enough from their glances between the lookouts in the bell tower and the island across the ice, that they were the front line of defence if we were discovered. But that only worked if you believed the journeymen would be forced to funnel neck through the one door out there.

Desperate to walk as far as my invisible chains allowed, I circumnavigated Hall, passing underneath the windows, under the snow. *Screw your revolution, I'll have my own. Round and round I go.* By mid-morning, I couldn't feel the feet in my shoes, but the way became more passable with each circuit, widening as the day progressed. Sometimes Ingrid walked beside me, though mostly I walked alone, and by noon even the dogs had given up on me.

Providence came out to have a word. 'Mr London, what are you doing?'



I'd read enough pop psychology to know that I was claiming my territory against the journeymen in the best way I could think of, short of pissing everywhere.

'Stretching my legs,' I said.

'You're making people worried.' She pulled her coat tighter around herself, struggling to keep up with me. 'They get uneasy every time you pass their windows. They're asking me what you're up to, and I don't have an answer.'

'Tell them I've gone mad or something.'

I stopped and turned to watch Providence huff out a cloud of white. She looked defeated by the last forty-eight hours of negotiations. Sunlight glared from the snow and reflected warmly from the side of the building.

'Are you sleeping well?' she asked.

Ah, that old chestnut. 'Yes, of course.'

'You shout in the night. Do you know that?'

No, I didn't know that. I knew I had nightmares – those same ones again of the billowing blackness in the night sky, burning away all my flesh – but then, my life had dramatically increased in difficulty recently, and it made sense that there'd be a consequence.

'That's why I've got you roomed alone,' she said.

'I see. Sorry.'

She took a breath, steeling herself. 'I don't care who's got your back in this place, sort yourself out. I can't have you slipped away into madness.'

'I'm not really, though.' I ran my hands through my hair. That wasn't true at all. I was there, I was solid. I couldn't remember a time when I'd felt more tangible than between those mountains, under that odd sky, my jacket filling with the wind, with

Providence telling me off. ‘Maybe, I’m afraid,’ I said. ‘That’s it. Of course. That why I’m having nightmares. But why the hell isn’t *everyone* afraid? I mean, I know why the people inside aren’t afraid, because they don’t know what we know, do they? What the journeymen can do? That fire, death, chaos could leak out of the air and cut us all in half, so our guts spill out onto the floor. But why aren’t you afraid? Why isn’t Jack? Hahn? Musket?’

‘We’re safe as houses.’

‘For god’s sake, we’re not safe anywhere! I know what the journeymen can do, and I—’ I realised I was shouting. There were faces at the windows now, listening to every word. ‘I’m sorry,’ I called to them. To Providence: ‘I’m sorry!’

‘Another word, and it’s the cellar.’

I bobbed my head to show understanding.

‘Farthing? Mate?’

‘What?’ I snapped and spun round to Crane, his summer clothes odd with him knee-deep in the snow.

‘You need to pull yourself together.’

‘I know. It’s this place. I hate not doing anything to help you.’

‘You can learn. You don’t know where I am yet. Learn that.’

‘Jack said he didn’t know.’

‘Jack’s one of two thousand.’

So I went back inside and tried to spread golden light everywhere and talk to people. But couldn’t make any sense of the interplay and reactions between them. I didn’t know who to copy, or what to do to be liked. The obvious answer was to just be myself and get on with it, but I was too used to *not* being myself and exploiting the

system around me, tugging on the little strings of humour and amiability and witticisms to draw people into thinking I was a decent chap. It was useless. Now the lines were all tangled, and I was reduced to becoming withdrawn and disgruntled until I discovered that card games were the same everywhere and joined Ingrid who'd settled with the guards at the end of Providence's corridor to play endless hands.

Her coverall sleeves pushed up, Ingrid's forearms were covered in words and diagrams, like she'd recently been cheating on an exam. Each time she put down a card, I tried to decipher the markings, but only managed to confirm they were permanent before she caught me looking, and said, 'We all need a way to not get lost, Mr London.'

'It's a map?'

She ran a finger over them. 'More like instructions for getting home.'

'Do you know where the journeymen take people?' I asked.

She shook her head and gave me a long look which made me twist with discomfort; the last face I stared into like that was her brother's when I'd him up against the wall on the tube.

*Oh god, Redman; I'm sorry.*

'Are you getting attached, Mr London?' asked Crane. I put down a card and raised my eyebrows towards where he lurked across the game. 'She's your sort. Smart and nice-looking, with no need of you.'

'Shut up.'

I was saved by Jack leaving the council session and closing the door quietly behind him. He had the distant look of someone with a fully saturated mind.

'What's going on in there?' I asked as he passed our game.

‘Rose has decided on a democratic approach,’ his tone was approving, ‘so there’ll be public discussions tonight to catch everyone up on the state of play. He wants to put everything to a vote which is going to take a lot of time.’

‘Oh dear, democracy ruins everything, hey? Are you storming out in defiance?’

‘They have things to discuss without me. Come on,’ he beckoned for me to follow him downstairs. ‘Providence wants us to find something for you to do. I have an idea.’

Jack took me to the infirmary. They already seemed to know him there; he was greeted fondly by the doctors and patients alike. Why? Was he a doctor as well as a philosopher and a wall-climber and a botany enthusiast and the leader of a rebellion, now? He introduced me to a doctor there; she was calm and stern with tightly coiled yellow curls that bounced as she shook my hand, and I suddenly all my time and energy had been handed over to her, and I was sweeping floors and scrubbing blood off mats and taking suspicious heavy, dripping packages out back to a bonfire reserved for medical waste. Jack didn’t abandon me there, he spent the afternoon stitching people up, changing dressings and often glancing at his watch. He talked to anyone who was around and laughed often and generally made himself even more beloved among the people with his understanding and wisdom and charm and profundity. He drew out stories of mothers watching their toddlers get diced by journeyman gunfire through locks, of protestors marching to journeymen headquarters and all disappearing, of people gone in the night, of traps waiting on the other sides of doors, of rats paid to give away their nests, of teenagers taken to swell journeymen ranks, of doors moved to the bottoms of lakes, so anyone passing through drowned, or out into a desert, so they radiated trails across the dunes which all ended with the dead.

Some of the kids had taken to copying Jack's accent, which made Crane try it out too: vowels short at the back of the mouth, 'lov' instead of 'love', 'blod' instead of 'blood'. *Blod blod blod*, repeated Crane until I threw a roll of bandage at him. Jack pulled stories out of patients like unspooling thread, and when a kid needed a bone reset, he disappeared to return with a group of nomad musicians who played a tune to distract the girl, while Jack led a song about Hall being a beacon of hope; he was making it up as he went along to an anthem well-known among the refugees, and others joined in on the chorus that had a lot of joyful *haul away together ohs*, mixed with stuff about never, never, never being able to go home, and just like that, the bone was back in place.

He loved them, I realised. Jack loved every single one of the people in Hall. I couldn't fathom it; it was the opposite of me. Where my problem was learning to like people at all, his was giving too much time and self to them, because as the afternoon progressed, he grew more and more exhausted and covered it up with more and more smiles, but occasionally when he thought no one was watching, he'd grimace like something was paining him, just like my mum had done towards the end. And people whispered about him, I noticed. There was a lot of whispering.

That evening, as promised, the private talks became public and were opened out to anyone who wanted to attend, which was most people through want of any other entertainment. But there wasn't space, for all the vast rooms at their disposal, large enough to hold everyone – a good enough practical reason to not have a democracy, I thought – so discussions were held out in the courtyard. Under the chestnut tree, fires were lit in oil drums for light and warmth with fresh pine which hissed and spat. It was snowing again, but most melted before reaching the crammed-in congregation. More

people watched from the windows on all four sides or sat on the sills where the glass was missing. A makeshift stage had been erected during the day around the trunk of the tree. It all made for a unique outdoor theatre, where the acoustics bounced around every word and cough. I stood squashed in the back, pressed against Ingrid, her arm warm against mine, who'd closed her eyes to listen because she had no hope of seeing over heads.

In the absence of Jack (the crowd was disappointed, but he once again had urgent business elsewhere, Hahn had taken him away over the ice to leave Mr London friendless for the evening), Providence was up first with an official welcome ceremony which wasn't nearly so grand as the 2012 Summer Olympics but was cosy enough. 'You're all welcome, yadda yadda, shared experiences, shared humanity, make this a place of respite, etcetera', before she moved into a flurry of updates and information on their situation. Who'd been killed? Who was still answering messages? Who was positioned where? What ways were open? I tried to understand it, but it felt like arriving new to Earth, switching on the six o'clock news, and being expected to follow all the half-formed narratives.

'Are you following?' I asked Ingrid.

'Barely.'

'She's trying to keep the conversation elite,' said Musket as he joined us, squeezing through people, sweat-gleaned from working hard in the kitchen all day. He cleaned his glasses on his apron, but leather didn't make a good job of it. 'How many people are here, do you think?' he asked.

Ingrid looked around. 'A thousand? They're not all here.'

‘Right.’ Glasses back on, the blinking of a tired man. ‘That lieutenant claims he didn’t know this was going to happen, but he thought ahead; we’ve not made a dent in what food his people brought in across the ice. He’s good to them, for all that Providence dislikes him. He got them fed; she wouldn’t have been able to.’

The stage was open now, anyone could take to the pulpit under the tree. They did, and it was all emotions and clutter and jeering. I’d thought they’d be arguing about the best way to deal with the journeymen, but they hadn’t even made it that far – but there were Muskets in the audience, who wouldn’t let the good works of the journeymen go unmentioned. *Sure, the journeymen might be a bit rotten around the edges, but who wasn’t? No, they’re bad, they killed my family! Greater good, don’t you know?* The possibility of Providence’s revolution receded, it pulled back across the landscape like the outgoing tide, exposing the ugliness of wormy things before they pulled themselves back underneath the sand.

What was Providence playing at, letting the people speak? I was there for less than ten minutes before even I could see it was useless. They had diminished to squabbling, there was no one at the reins. Providence wasn’t even there anymore. There was no sign of her.

Lieutenant Rose had claimed a corner of the courtyard for his mercenaries nearby, and I eavesdropped on his quiet orders to his crew, but they mainly seemed to be about shifting supplies and keeping people on watch in the tower and at the door. After a while, he spotted me and beckoned me over with an abruptly-ending forearm.

‘Mr London, right?’

‘Right enough.’

He offered me a cigarette, which I waved quickly away because it was too many memories, and he returned the pack to his pocket.

‘What do you make of them all here?’ he asked.

‘Careful,’ warned Crane.

‘I’m new to all of this,’ I said.

‘You mean you’re green,’ Rose agreed. ‘Providence said you were nearing the deep end. But you’re a good man, are you? Never thought you’d end up here? You look nicely war-free and soft. This is all a bit of a shock, is it?’

I said nothing.

‘Whereabouts is this London? Is it on the outskirts?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Many people?’

‘The city or the planet?’

‘Planet.’

‘Seven and a half billion.’

He whistled, impressed. ‘Must be then, to have that many people and not know anything. Do you understand what they’re discussing here?’

‘Revolution.’

‘That word does have a good sound to it. But I meant what we’re truly talking about? On ground level? You don’t, I see.’ He lowered his voice, so I had to stand very close to hear him. ‘Death, Mr London. The people here are already dead, sure as morning – some of them realise it, some of them don’t – we’re voting on what we’re going to do with the time we have left.’

‘I’m not dead.’



‘Yeah, you are.’

I didn’t like that.

‘It could be worse, though,’ I said. ‘We could’ve been taken by the journeymen.’

At that, Rose changed his mind about needing a cigarette and pulled one out, put it between his teeth to light it. Two inhales before. ‘You’re right there.’

I made a guess. ‘The journeymen have got someone of yours?’

‘My wife.’ He smiled proudly. ‘She gutted one of the shits after they cut me to ribbons. She’ll think I’m dead.’

‘Where is she now?’ I asked.

‘The block.’

‘The block,’ repeated Crane. ‘That sounds... I don’t know.’

‘What’s the block?’ I asked. At Rose’s frown, I added, ‘They took my friend.’

‘Shit me, you don’t have a clue, do you? Mr Green. How’s that Jack man let you stay this clueless? The block? That’s how this used to work; we’d be caught and dragged away to the block kicking and screaming never to be seen again. Maybe it made the journeymen able to convince themselves that they’re peacekeepers and we’re troublemakers. Who knows. All this killing you’re seeing is new. They never did that before. Do you think there’d still be so many of us if we’d had this reaping for long? No, this is how decimated we’ve become in a few months. In seventy-four shitting days.’

He scowled, scratched hard at his tuft of hair.

‘Imagine a room,’ he said. ‘A cube, huge and high. And on the walls and floor and ceiling, are doors. A hundred by a hundred on every side. Now I saw your face light up at ‘doors’, but this isn’t the good kind. Each door is made of glass, and behind it is a

coffin of a cell made out of cold steel. If you're put into a cell in a wall, you lay there, still. A cell in the floor means you have no choice but to stand. But the block moves. One rotation every twenty-four hours, or thereabouts, I hear. The people on the ceiling don't start on the ceiling, and up there, you're upside-down in your own crap with nothing to see except a hundred-metre drop.'

'My friend would be in there?'

'Where else would he be? You have no shitting clue, do you? Everyone else knows this, why don't you? It's where they put people to forget about them.'

'Get me out,' said Crane. 'Get me bloody out of there, Farthing.'

When I heard a rumour that Jack was back, but gone to bed exhausted, I went straight up to his room. I'd sodding batter his door down if I had to, the lying git. He'd known about the block and not told me. I ran and up all the stairs to the top floor, Crane lagging behind, telling myself over and over to *be nice, be nice, don't be angry, don't be angry, you're better than this...*

But the door to Jack's room was open already, flickering gaslight inside. There, Jack was kneeling on the floor. He was crying. It was a shock. Providence had her arms tightly around him, his forehead bouncing against her shoulder with each sobbed breath. The last time I'd watched a man cry like that had been my dad, pressing my mum's cooling hand to his lips.

'Consider it fully,' said Providence, soft. 'In exchange, we could call for a ceasefire. It would give us more time – lord knows we need more time with all this shifting.'

‘No.’ Jack clenched his fists by his sides, his voice calm despite the rest of him.

‘We go ahead. Tomorrow’s all planned.’

Providence took a breath to argue, but her face softened, and she stroked his hair, soothing him like her own child. ‘But if it doesn’t work, you need to remember that you’ve made promises to us as well.’

## Chapter 11

‘I understand,’ called Jack from the stage in the courtyard. He was smiling and back to golden. ‘I do! They threaten you on every side, but you are brave. You’re small and surrounded, they’re squashing you into corners, but still, you resist. They murder you, but you live on. They torture you, but you face them in the eye. And you’ve done nothing to deserve it, I know that. You’re innocent. You won’t be safe until the journeymen have gone.’

The courtyard grew loud with easy assent. Providence had saved Jack until the last morning of talks, and he’d solidified the crowd’s following them in the space of five minutes, because how could they fail to love the man who’d sewn them all back up and sung silly songs to children?

‘There’s no use in talking of saving the journeymen,’ he continued, a kindly professor giving a lecture. ‘They must be destroyed. The journeymen are cruel. Their view has narrowed to see nothing except evil. They hate.’ Here he lifted his voice, and something in it changed. ‘They’re teaching their children to kill you. And they don’t feel the same things you feel. They’re not human beings in the same way *you’re* human beings. There’ll be no justice until they’re gone. There’ll be no good! No liberty! No freedom!’ He was wide-eyed at the cheering crowd and the fists in the air. ‘We’ll massacre them,’ he said finally, and his own words repeated to him from all sides and high in the windows, hundreds of people calling for violence.

‘Damn...’ said Crane, looking around.

‘Wait for it,’ I whispered, unable to believe it of Jack.

On stage, Jack looked out at the people before him, turning slowly to take in the full crowd. His expression was an odd one – pained, but also like a man who, against his wishes, had just been proven correct in his own predictions. He was inaudible over the uproar, but the shape of his next word was clear enough:

‘No.’

He sought out Providence, who was sat on the sill of a ground floor window, hands gripping the edge, and to her alone, once the courtyard had quietened enough, he shouted: ‘No! There shouldn’t be violence, not if the reasons are these. I won’t endorse a confrontation like this. These people must learn not to do things out of fear or rhetoric. Make them better, Providence, *then* we talk about leadership.’

He’d whipped up the people’s allegiance so easily, only to flip it over and expose the wriggling underside. The courtyard was stunned. The only noises: the wind through the top of the chestnut, the coughs of sickened lungs, the dogs, the children. I watched people turn to their neighbours to protest, but they couldn’t. The bastard was right.

‘Told you,’ I said.

‘Is he mad?’ asked Crane. ‘Didn’t he want this revolution? We’re only hours away from their vote.’

‘It’s a show,’ I said, and Rose, who stood nearby, looked at me, appraising. I’d taken to standing by him for all the talks – my role of Mr Green, and his of my teacher had proven invaluable. ‘He’s making them understand his point, if he’d just said it, they wouldn’t have understood the same.’

It was a young woman who spoke out for everyone else; twenty years old, maybe, she was wrapped in blankets against the cold. ‘We’re not wrong to fear them,’ she said.

‘The things they’ve done. The things I’ve seen... What many of us have seen.’ She looked around for approval, which she got. ‘They killed everyone I knew, and what’d we done? Lived freely, never bothered anyone else. It was above a coffee shop in a city of a hundred thousand, no one cared who we were, anything went, and the journeymen sought us out because we’d crossed *their* imaginary boundaries and dared to claim a life we wanted.’ She walked towards the stage. ‘I witnessed the dismantling of each person I loved. Limb from limb. This,’ she grabbed a handful of white skirts, to show an edge of staining at the bottom, ‘is their blood. I say let the journeymen’s blood run through their own homes and out onto their streets too.’

There was agreement, but it was a dowsed, embarrassed kind of agreement.

‘A gallon of their blood for a gallon of ours?’ Jack asked. ‘Fight fire with fire? An eye for an eye?’ He was shouting now, as though emotion had gotten the better of him. Movements quick, hands all over the place, face ugly, and the whole courtyard had no idea where this passion had come from in the nice gentle man.

‘He’s bloody Shakespearean,’ I said to Rose, who didn’t understand.

‘A life for a life?’ continued Jack. ‘A bullet for a bullet? Shall we count up our lost limbs and ask them to send us over what they owe? You need to be more than a mirror! That’s the whole point, we need to be better than them. If we do go to the city, how – *how*, tell me! – How is that different to them coming for us? My god, this is so simple. Why are we still discussing this?’

He left the stage, hurrying down plastic crate steps, through the crowd which parted before him, and was absorbed by the building. The crowd was left murmuring and hurt like they’d just been unexpectedly slapped in the face by a good friend.

Into the void of the stage, up stepped Ingrid. She was apparently anxious, deeply troubled by what had just transpired. I smiled. Had their talks upstairs been all of them learning lines for this? *No, no, Jack, that's a little too much, people will see right through it – copy Ingrid, yes, that's right, you see how she's mirroring the emotions of the crowd? Oh, and that nervous shaking out of her hands... Masterful, masterful!*

Ingrid gave us a beautiful rendition of the bombing of her ships. She described the burning islands and the animals, the drowning men and women, the creaking of metal and flickering of electrics as the ships sank, but she made no mention of what the ships had been doing. It was snowing hard now, blizzarding down through the branches. The courtyard listened to her, attentive, but it also watched the shifting expressions of everyone else, judged the mood of the place, made guesses, placed mental bets of what was coming next. I took the last of Rose's cigarette from him and thought that the last time I'd smoked was outside the registry office to help calm down a groom with comradery.

'But you see, the thing is,' Ingrid concluded, 'I'm thinking I can't know the whole story, can I? What started all this for the journeymen? I'm sorry, no, I'm taking your valuable time, this isn't the place for my ignorance.'

She made to leave the stage.

*Less masterful, Ingrid dear, but it's worked anyway.*

'I've been sitting here myself on that bit of history,' shouted the woman with the leopard cub in her coat, 'and I haven't known what to do with it.' She was helped to standing by the people next to her, but it was too much to expect her to get to the stage, and the whole crowd shifted its leaning towards her like wheat in the wind. 'I remember

the storm of faeces that was twenty years ago; anyone who was on the circuit then remembers living through it.'

There came murmurs of agreement.

'There was a lot of fear and a whole lot of confusion. A lot of bodies, they tell us. A whole world *gone*.' She clicked her fingers on the word, and the leopard twitched. 'There's no denying that since then the journeymen have kept us safe from any repetition. And let's not lie to ourselves that back then wasn't a whole lot worse than what we're exaggerating into a *reaping* today.'

I noticed that Providence was smiling. She leant forward on her windowsill, eyes darting from speaker to speaker. How much of this script had she written?

'The journeymen blame us for that,' contributed Hahn from where he stood near Providence, his voice foul. 'That's the problem. Whatever happened back then – does anyone know? I don't – was the fault of a few, not the mass of us. The journeymen are fucking cowards. They're afraid we're going to kill them again. That's what we're seeing now, a fucking culling. The order to kill us is coming from the top.'

'Who says it's coming from the top?' asked someone from a second level window. 'All I see is rotting around the edges. But prove otherwise, and I'll vote for your shitting war.'

There was agreement again, and Providence almost clapped with triumph.

It was Rose's turn for action: at Providence's nod, he sent his people out to gather up Jack, and it didn't take them long; Jack had probably been waiting for his cue just offstage, and he was led, apparently confused and still simmering, back towards the stage, where Providence joined him. Standing side by side, they didn't look much like



the villains of the piece. They had a quick private exchange ending in Jack's poorly concealed disbelief. 'You can't honestly want me to?'

'I do.'

A small token of the fear I'd seen in Jack the other night fluttered over him, and I thought it was real. He tilted his head to Providence, a plea.

'Come on, please...'

She gripped his arm and turned him to the people. 'This man is risking his life to be here with us. A few of you've guessed, but most of you haven't because you only recognise the uniform of the frontline. Our friend here comes to us direct from the journeymen.'

'Aw, mate,' said Crane.

'Shit,' I said, letting the building behind take my weight.

Jack was a journeyman? How? I thought about the masked journeyman in Soho who'd cracked Mano's skull just for the fun of it and thought that Jack was the opposite to that in nearly every way. He couldn't be. I knew he'd been putting on a show for everyone else, but I didn't think he had been for me.

The courtyard erupted into jeering, and the stage was pelted with things from above, mainly toiletry bottles on hand in the bedrooms, anything that could be flung at the journeyman there.

'Rose?' called Providence over the noise.

Rose signalled for his people to move towards the stage. 'Settle down,' he roared. 'We didn't need to tell you, but we did. Show us the same respect, please!'

‘I’ve known Jack for five years,’ shouted Providence. ‘And he’s as good, if not better, than most of you. He’s proven himself to me and this cause. Has he proven himself to you, Lieutenant?’

‘Aye, he has. So settle down, I say.’

And things did dampen down, slowly, but surely.

‘You, up there,’ Providence tried to find the person in the second-floor window. ‘You asked for proof that the journeymen’s violence is coming from the top? Why don’t you ask one of them yourself?’

A short pause, and then the question echoed down from above. ‘Well, is it?’

‘Yes,’ answered Jack.

‘That’s not enough,’ said Rose quietly.

‘The violence comes from the top. And it’s not only directed at you, it’s—’ Jack stopped. Providence squeezed his arm, either in threat or reassurance. He lifted his chin and began again. ‘The journeymen are a multi-world organisation. They come from different cultures with different ideas, and there’s dissent in the organisation. I could talk to you for days, weeks even, about all the politics of it, but there’s no time here. To combat their quarrelling, the violence of the journeymen is currently directed inwardly, as well as outwardly.’

‘Show them,’ said Providence.

Jack looked at her in surprise, breath catching, so his answer made a denser cloud than usual. ‘Fine.’

Despite the still-falling snow, he took off his grey coat, folded it, laid it on the stage next to him. He tried to take off his shirt but had difficulty, so he went down to one knee, allowing Providence to tug it up over his head. There was a murmur, but I

couldn't see what everyone else saw until Providence stepped out of the way and Jack rose again to his feet.

'Nicely played Providence,' said Rose softly.

Jack was covered with bruising. Black, purple, red blooming over his abdomen, his ribs and in the soft parts of his sides, like lichen, and there were the green and yellow of old injuries underneath the new. He was a patchwork of injuries with an untouched face. He shook silently while hundreds of retinas gathered the inverted image of him.

'Yes,' said Jack. 'The violence comes from the top.'

'Poor guy,' said Crane.

Jack's jaw was set, and I wondered if he was trying not to run. Providence saw it in him, too; she clutched his arm to keep him by her side for what she deemed an appropriate amount of time. Then she allowed him to put his shirt back on and held out his coat, helped him slip his arms through. Dressed, Jack left the courtyard as fast as he could, Ingrid close on his heels, and the courtyard gushed into talk, split again into the usual factions, but there wasn't much animosity between them now. They were becoming single-minded. A lone man's bruises turning the tide.

'I take it you didn't know that either?' Rose asked.

'No.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'I knew as soon as I saw him. Sure as morning.'

'How?'

‘There had to be something making him risk what he’s risking. When you know what it is the journeymen do to people and start looking for the signs, it’s not hard to spot. He holds himself too carefully. Barely touches people even when he’s stitching them up. Providence was never going to have me believe the only thing swaying that man was good common sense.’

‘Some of it looked new,’ I said.

‘A few days, I’d say,’ said Rose, squinting across the distance. ‘There’re years of it on him. And, you know, they’re not stupid, they’re not going to beat him black and blue every time. They’ll have found other things to do too. I’ve heard talk of electricity and slicing between the toes and around the groin. Things that don’t show on a nicely dressed bloke. Teach him how to stand straight again. Inject stuff into his spine so he can still walk around.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Crane, cringing.

‘Why, though?’ I asked.

Rose dropped the cigarette with a hiss. ‘They need him, but he’s not theirs.’

I found Jack later at the back of the building, between the bright windows and the pines, burning bandages from the infirmary in an oil drum. He was alone, working fast in the blizzard. Even Ingrid hadn’t had the tenacity to stay and watch him in the weather.

‘Hello, Benjamin.’

‘Crane’s in the block.’

‘Ah.’ He raised his brows: not the topic he’d expected. ‘That’s true.’

‘You’ve always known? You lied to me.’

‘Technically, I didn’t answer.’ He threw a bundle into the flames.

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘For your own good.’

‘You think I’m going to run headlong into a journeyman torture chamber?’

He smiled. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘I...’ I didn’t know. ‘Where is it?’

He stopped what he was doing. ‘Because if there’s one thing I can advise about, it’s attempting to not brutalise yourself with thoughts of the things you can’t change. Would it have served you to know he was in cell five one four nine zero?’

‘I already knew he was somewhere bad.’

‘No. You suspected he was, which is very different.’

‘For god’s sake! You tell me to be patient, but what is it I’m meant to be waiting for? Were you ever going to tell me where he is? It’s my decision if I want to try and get him, not yours. Don’t treat me like everyone else here. Don’t try to keep me safe. I don’t want to be bloody safe!’

He didn’t rise to the bait of my anger.

‘Have you considered, Benjamin, that it’s you who’s dangerous here? By going off alone, you’d be scrabbling across political scree, and that’s dangerous territory, not only for you, but for everyone else downhill of you. I don’t want that avalanche yet. So I’m asking you to please stick to the path.’

‘What path?’ I shouted. ‘What bollocking path?’

‘Calm down, mate,’ warned Crane.

The snow began to fall in earnest, the wind whipping it one way, then the other, penduluming between us all.

‘Be patient,’ Jack said, but this time like he knew how pathetic it sounded. ‘Trust me.’

‘You’re a bloody journeyman,’ I said. ‘Why should I trust you?’

‘There we have it.’ He huffed a laugh and walked away towards the edge of the forest. At a woodpile, he pulled back tarpaulin and picked up as much wood as he could, which wasn’t a lot.

‘What do you do for them?’ I asked. ‘Do you have a mask?’

He came back to the oil drum.

‘Do you kick down doors and kill families and set fire to their corpses?’

‘No mask.’ He threw the wood onto the flames. ‘I write speeches. Propaganda.’

‘God, that’s worse.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Propaganda? So those people in there...?’ I pointed towards Hall, where we could see nurses quietly tending patients in the infirmary. ‘Everything you said on that stage, all that singing and shaking hands? Did you twist them into voting the way you wanted them to? Because it worked, you know, they’re going to vote for revolution, of *course*, they are. They’re all very confused by you and sympathetic. Their poor golden man has been beaten up. What even are you? A double agent? A spy? A mole? Not a good one if they’re torturing you already. No, don’t look like that, *I’m* not giving you any sympathy. You can obviously walk out any time, but you keep going back to them.’ A thought struck me. ‘That’s what the watch is for? When it beeps, time’s up?’

He nodded.

‘It beeps, and you go in for your daily dose of being kicked in the ribs?’ I ran my hands through my hair, tugged it hard, trying desperately to stop myself from punching

him too. 'Who are you?' I demanded. 'Are you the sad man? The friendly man? The warmonger? The philosopher?'

'I'm all of those, am I? Which is your favourite?'

'The man I met in London.'

'Of course. He was easy to speak to? I'm fond of him too. Very friendly.'

The wind shifted the blizzard, blowing smoke into our faces.

Jack continued, 'It's fascinating how far a belief in comradeship will take a person. Did you know that the journeymen have been around long enough now that there's a whole generation of them who've never known anything else? Thousands of young men and women who weren't even born when it all started, who've joined themselves up, not out of fear this time, but simply because it's the spirit of their times.'

'That's no excuse.'

'I'm not giving them an excuse; I'm explaining how people could fall into doing terrible things. And for the others, people like me who've been there since the beginning? We weren't always bad. Most of us aren't now. Of course, we weren't bad. What public organisation in the history of humanity anywhere ever thought of itself as being evil from the outset? I've yet to come across one. Do you really think everyone who's ever helped with genocide was a madman? The problem is that fear's involved. Even if fear's rational – and know this, Benjamin, if nothing else; the journeymen's fear is based on the true rationality of a dismembered world – then fear can slip into evil.'

'Turn people into murderers, can it? I don't see how it's that easy.'

'You genuinely want to know?'

'Yeah.'

He took a step towards me. ‘They tell you it’s them or us. You don’t want it to be us, it’s that’s simple, so you fight. The first time, you crouch behind a wall, watching the humans you’re going to kill, you’re shaking. The second time, you close your eyes and remember that you made it through the first time. The third time, you don’t think about anything, but you stand between your comrades and train your gun at a human being’s back. The fourth time it’s all almost muscle memory. The fifth time, you laugh at the jokes your comrades make. The sixth time, you make the jokes.’

‘Is that you?’

He didn’t reply.

‘You’ve killed people?’ I asked.

His answer was soft and angelic: ‘Haven’t we all?’

‘No, we haven’t.’

That was funny, apparently. ‘But you would, to save Crane?’

I flinched at the question. Of course, I would. I’d murder a whole platoon of those bastards if it helped.

His watch began to beep.

‘You have to go,’ I said, and I left him to it.

Sure as morning, the people of Hall voted for a revolution. Of course they did. My own coin, a 10p piece with the queen’s head on one side and a lion on the other, which Ingrid admired, held it aloft in the weak sunlight before I took it back and dropped it into the jar for war, surprised by how easy it was, and there the coin mixed with all the other currencies. Rose and his second made the count in the middle of the courtyard where no one could complain of meddling. The numbers came in as the day slipped



away, the burning oil drums sending shadows up the walls and into the lower branches of the chestnut.

964 against.

1079 for.

‘Anyone who wants can leave now,’ announced Rose, knowing full well these people had nowhere else to go, leaving meant edging backwards into the meatgrinder of fringe violence. But the nomads packed that same hour, nearly all of them ‘against’, they would make the trip across the ice in the morning. But when I asked them, they had no destinations in mind.

I stole a lantern and went upstairs, and found Providence waiting for me in my bedroom. She knelt beside the grate and stoked the flames of a little fire she’s built there; she and Jack were so similar, each staring into a fire as soon they became morose. What was wrong with her? She’d won, hadn’t she?

I closed the door and joined her on the floor. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine. Thank you, Mr London.’ She’d looked at me, then back at the fire. ‘You’re a boy who never grew up, aren’t you? My girls were the opposite. They were centuries older than me from the get-go. This was all theirs, in the beginning. It was them who wrote pamphlets and held meetings in the bar. I’d rolled my eyes at the.’ She paused. ‘I came to ask you to do something for me.’

‘Absolutely.’ I dripped with false cheer.

‘Burn this.’

She handed me a sepia photograph which showed two young women in a convertible car. They were beautiful, joyful, their bare summer arms wrapped around each other.

‘Your daughters,’ I said.

‘That’s right.’

‘Is this all you’ve got of them?’

She was surprised by my sadness.

‘You’re someone mercurial, aren’t you?’

‘That’s a brilliant word.’

She sighed, looked at the pictures. ‘Tomorrow is a new age, Mr London, and my family aren’t in that age. I was never afraid of anything before they came along. Love breeds fear more than anything else I’ve come across. Beware that. But now... This was always their fight, not mine. I need to get us back to the right tomorrow, so I need to be braver.’

‘I see,’ I said, and it was almost true. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why me?’

‘I thought you’d be easiest to convince.’

I looked at the photos. Providence was right, something about family had never appealed to me. The falseness of *I like you because you happen to be my mother-father-daughter-brother, not because you’re you.*

I threw the photographs onto the flames. The coating burned away first, an edge of blue passing over their faces as chemicals burned across noses and mouths, before blackness reigned, consumed, and the two idealistic women were gone.

‘We’re all afraid, Mr London,’ said Providence. Then she sighed, got up, brushed her knees and left, closing the door after her.

We’re all afraid.

I was impatient, I knew that. And god, yes, of course I was afraid! With all these journeymen stepping out of the air everywhere, and the immense swathes of happenings that were entirely out of my control and that war which was looming ever closer... and what would that war even look like? Hall had voted for revolution, but what was that? Strikes or a coup? Barricades or battles, or sieges or assassination? God, Rose was right, I was so green. I didn't have a clue about anything. But whatever it was, I knew I'd be in the middle of it.

I went to the window and cleared ice from a pane with my sleeve. The room behind me was reflected in the glass: the polished posts of the bed, the brass doorknobs, the colourful edging of the bedspread, the flame-shaped glass of the lantern I'd left on the floor by the fire. The rest of the room was invisible, but I examined for movement behind me, waiting for journeymen, almost seeing the shifting colour of their mask... I was nudging at the edges of my fear, testing it, and I knew I was navigating myself along a narrow band of sanity, tightrope walking over a thousand feet of nothing. I closed my eyes tight, told my heart sternly to slow down, and opened my eyes to the glass again.

Of course, there was a man in my room. He was a wide-eyed, hollowing man with silver in his sideburns. He looked at me with the face of a Shakespearean madman who waddles onto the stage after a tragedy to tell a few jokes. That was me. I was the idiot. I was the fool. Maybe I'd get a few lines of profundity before this was all over, but what else did I have to offer these people? What else had I ever offered Crane?

There was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' I called.

Reflected in the glass: Ingrid's silhouette in the doorway.

‘How may I be of assistance?’ said my inner concierge.

‘I need to talk to you.’

‘I’ve done a lot of talking today. Maybe I missed a trick being a teacher instead of a psychoanalyst. Diagnosis: everyone’s bonkers. But please, do come in and share the particular way in which you’re also bonkers.’

‘Don’t be horrible.’

‘No, no, everyone’s voting for war, but don’t be a dick, Benjamin.’

‘You voted “for”. I saw you.’

‘To help my friend.’ But I was guilty.

‘You think everyone else voted because they like the idea of death?’

I sighed. Thought about being golden. I turned from the window into the room.

‘Why are you here?’

The real Ingrid steeled herself. ‘Mr London. You need to be *here*. Properly here. Fully with us. Not trying to race off all the time. There are bigger things happening we need you for. Your friend... Crane, is it? You need to understand that he’s dead.’

I was too tired, too afraid, too anxious to protect myself from the word spear she threw at me. It sank deep into my flesh. I put a hand to my stomach, felt everything quickly rotting there.

‘Your friend,’ Ingrid repeated, moving into the firelight to present the dreaded full stop. ‘He’s dead.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘He’s been in the block for weeks. He’ll be dead.’

‘Oh.’ Pure conjecture. Thank god. I released a breath and looked to Crane, who stood behind her in the shadows. ‘Are you dead?’ I asked him.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, feeling his arms and torso, before muttering something which sounded like, ‘Schrodinger,’ which was a poor joke, even for him.

‘What did he do to get in there?’ she asked. ‘You never said.’

‘Do? He didn’t do anything. He’s innocent.’

‘No way. An innocent man would be killed, if he’s alive, he was doing something to really piss them off.’

That was quite enough. I yanked the spear out of my stomach and flung it back across the room at her. ‘Your brother’s dead too.’

‘What?’ Her turn.

‘I knew him,’ I said, cruel. ‘He called himself Redman, but he had your face. I was with him on my last day in London. We were going to leave together, but some friends of his got wind and tracked us down and were trying to kill both of us. The last I saw, they were shooting at him down on the rail tracks.’

‘No.’

‘He’s dead.’

Ingrid blinked. ‘You abandoned him.’

‘I did. Yep.’

‘And used our door.’ Her tone was dangerously soft.

‘Yeah, I did that too.’

I expected Ingrid to come and hit me, to scream *you bastard you let him die he trusted you*, to rail and scream like I’d seen Esther doing while I was being loaded into the back of an ambulance, but she didn’t. Instead, she sat on the floor and quietly hugged her knees. She was crying. It was an odd thing to see, she seemed such an

unlikely person to cry. Part of me was disappointed; I'd wanted to be yelled at. I looked for Crane for advice, but he was useless.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'You ever want to just stop?' Ingrid whispered. 'I can feel the end coming. It's racing up towards us, can you feel it?'

Yes. I could. That was exactly what I could feel.

I went to Ingrid and knelt in front of her.

I remembered how my mum used to say we made our own time, that it flowed out of us like radiation. New Age bull. But right then I tried to make the time around me longer, anyway so I could think – I hadn't thought clearly for days about what to do, what to do, what to do – but I didn't manage it, time was still white-watering away from me. I couldn't make more. What about slowing down what I had, then? But how the hell do you slow down time? Maybe you could double it by sharing someone else's. I tried it. I put my hands on Ingrid's shoulders, but shoulders aren't all that potent, so I moved them to her neck, and up until I held her face in my hands. Yes, that worked a bit. A little time snapped and reeled away from the future violence, back into the moment we were in.

She kissed me so hard our teeth clicked together. Her lips were tear-salty, and she smelt like a bonfire. An unexpected wave of desire almost buckled me with its urgency.

*Go away, Crane,* I thought.

She stopped, and we looked at one another, so close I couldn't make sense of the landscape of her face. She clung to the front of my shirt. I took a breath to clarify my position, but she got there first.

'I don't like you,' she said.

‘Right,’ I said. I pressed my forehead against hers. I could feel the warmth of Ingrid’s thoughts inside. ‘Good.’

We were both desperate, both felt the tugging of lines towards the people we loved. They pulled us hard. Made us ache all the bloody time. Begged us to travel into impossible places, forwards into war and death, spiral down into hell. *Ignore that, Benjamin, think instead about helping her get zips open, unbutton buttons.* Her undressing me, me undressing her, suit and coveralls discarded on the floor, was about trying to claim some time in a smaller world and fool ourselves that our longings – for friends, for kin, for honourable and solid love – could be eclipsed for a while by immediacy.

She pulled me, insistent, to the patchwork bed, where mouths were quick along jawlines and collarbones. She’d been to more universes than I’d known: across her chest and stomach she had routes detailed in a fine, strange alphabet. I kissed them, skimming over her breasts and ribs, her pitching stomach. But I was fumbling and useless, so she upturned us and was suddenly on top of me, her weight pressing down, and she pushed me into her. I closed my eyes, concentrated, wanted to feel more, was afraid of being left behind.

Around us was a room full of clear night, a house full of angry minds, a lake, high mountains, a door, Hall’s universe with its own nebulas and star systems and background radiation, all of which could open at any moment, journeymen stepping through and killing us, and if that happened Crane, the real Crane who was somewhere else now, alone in his own filth and frightened and in pain, the real Crane would never know that I’d tried to save him because I’d be naked and dead with my eyes glazing. I pulled Ingrid to me and kissed her.

\*

A few minutes before midnight, I left her in damp sheets and went outside into the snow. There was a red thread, imaginary maybe, leading from the centre of my chest to the door on the middle of the lake, billowing in the wind. Beyond that door, it would lead all the way to Crane, I knew. I ignored the thread, circumnavigated Hall for an hour or more, winding the thread around the walls, shaking the cold from my fingers, concentrating on footfalls, footfalls, footfalls, tramping out the last bits of new snow which had gathered along my route.

It wasn't just me; the whole of Hall was anxious. I could see them through the windows. Because although no one was saying it, we all knew that for some, these were some of the last lights of humanity before their stories slipped away into tragedy and they were forgotten. War did that, I thought, forked humans down different paths, towards either victory or death, and it was easy to tell which path people thought they were on. The people convinced of victory were drunk, their eyes gleamed, teeth flashed, blinkered to tomorrow. They played music and gathered in their hundreds to celebrate the vote in the ballroom, half the food Rose had brought being opened at once and the dining table being laid with a feast of cold tinned food. But the people who thought they were on the path to death? They filled up the edges of the rooms, pulled their knees and children close. They wanted to say profound things but couldn't think of anything to say. They turned away from me as I passed by the windows; I was friends with the devils, after all, who'd been prodding them forwards with their pitchforks.

I thought of Ingrid and hung for a moment in the good feeling. This was it. The golden light I'd been missing. I needed to distil it and spread it all over Hall and work harder to become a better human being.



I rounded the building and stopped.

A mirrored mask.

The journeyman took long steps up the slope of the lake's shore, past the remains of the nomad's bonfire and the children's snowmen and stopped, stood in the snow, very still, watching the people inside the ballroom. It was a woman. She stood there for a long time. I didn't move either. She checked various devices about her person, pointed them up to the sky and down to the ground. Then she put them all away, and continued watching the party – the drinking, music and joyful spectrum – standing just far enough away from the windows for those inside to not see her, her shadow repeated a few times into the gloom.

She was alone. A journeyman scout?

I moved towards her, the snow silencing my approach. A low line of hedge marked the path between the main entrance and the jetty; I crouched and hurried along behind it, out of sight, until I came level with her and could see her through the gaps in the twigs, my hair branches, my eyes winter berries.

The journeyman clawed at her neck, unclipped her mask. It fell to her chest and revealed the real three-dimensional plain of a real face. She was angry, twisted with it. Of the two of us, her and me, why the hell was she the one angry in this situation?

I needed to kill her. Detain her, at least. Before she went away and reported us. My muscles tensed for leaping and tackling, but then she pulled out a familiar gun.

I stopped still, watching for her next movement, knowing I was a coward and that it would be my fault when she started shooting through the windows. But the windows weren't where she pointed it. Instead, she swung the barrel upwards, and I thought for a

moment she was going to direct it at the man behind the hedge, but it settled in her own mouth.

‘No,’ I whispered, surprise overriding sense.

The journeyman whipped around to face me. She removed the gun and called something, and although I didn’t recognise the language, the sentiment was clear:

‘Who’s there?’

I stood, hands up, and we looked at each other, her mask hanging from her collar like the upturned case of a beetle.

And then she was gone.

A doorway of light opened around her, like the one on Waterloo Bridge, but much smaller, and she blinked out from standing in the snow, gone too fast for me to see the look on her face as she comprehended that she was being drawn back, leaving me alone with her fresh footprints.

## Chapter 12

In the main hall, tallow-light flickered people to black silhouettes and music played from a battery-powered radio, loud and tinny. I found wine on a windowsill and downed a quarter of the bottle. It didn't calm me, just made my face hot.

How much time did I have before journeymen began popping up into the corners of the room and firing in all directions? I needed to find a sodding counter. No, I needed to locate Jack. It was hours since he'd last left, surely he'd be back now? But all I wanted to do was shut myself in a cupboard, rest my head on my knees, wait until everything was over... My god, I was a coward; I needed to be braver. I was in danger of starting a panic now, which would mean hundreds of people running to the exits, and then I'd be trapped in the same net as everyone else. I wasn't going down with this ship.

Find Jack.

The infirmary was full of people-clusters around beds. I caught the arm of the doctor who I'd worked with before, her yellow curls messy, her eyes glassy from alcohol.

'Jack,' I said. 'Have you seen him?'

Her expression told me I was holding her arm too tight, so I let go. 'Not today.' She turned to the room. 'Hey, has anyone seen the journeyman?'

There was a murmur of 'no sorry', which was pathetic because he'd mopped their brows and reset their bones, even as his own bruises had blackened, and his ribs had grated together inside him.

‘We’ve not seen him,’ the doctor said.

I continued through the rooms and revellers, imagining that somewhere in a different world, a journeyman was running through corridors to her superiors, crying out that she’d found the motherlode. As I pushed open the door to the kitchen, she too pushed through into chamber after chamber of people set to kill us. But no, she’d pointed the gun at herself. She hadn’t wanted to tell on us? Did they know anyway? There was no one I knew in the kitchen, although it was full, food being prepared everywhere, the fire roaring, with a goat or something hanging over it, and the next stop, the courtyard, was dim and empty. Upstairs was cold, empty and more desolate than it’d been for days. I opened doors and walked in on people who’d be embarrassed for a little while before they were dead. I called out for those I knew. Sometimes people answered, but it was never the right people. Time disintegrated fast. I’d used up too much of it already tonight.

I went to Jack’s bedroom, but it’d long been commandeered by someone who actually used it. ‘Jack!’ I called, just in case he was hiding. I sprinted up the hidden stairs to the bell tower, took them two at a time. But, for the first time since I’d arrived in Hall, the tower was empty. The only movement was the snow being flurried by gusts of wind, and the cord on the binoculars fluttering.

Who was meant to be there? It was often Hahn at that time of night. Whoever it was, they’d only left recently; the wood burner was still fierce, and half of the bench was free from ice.

The bell was heavy and still, a patina of frost across the bronze. I touched it, felt the tug of cold metal on my fingertips. I should ring it. But there’d be panic, disorder, hundreds of people pouring out over the ice. How long had it taken for all these people

to come into Hall? Hours. It'd be the same going the other way, except that it'd be dark in a fresh layer of snow. The people in the infirmary would be left behind, and at the door on the island, people would bottleneck, trample, fight for their lives, and the journeymen would sweep them up. But some might get out, and they might live. They might get somewhere safe and live small, tidy, quiet lives until old age claimed them.

I wrapped the rope around my hand, braced to pull with all my weight, so the bell would swing up and continue ringing as I escaped back down the stairs.

Or. If people escaped, they might lead the journeymen on a chase through worlds, revealing one nest after another, to bring down a thousand pockets of resistance in a single night. And that'd be the quick, brutal end of everything.

*Ring the bell. Be better than this.*

Yes, yes; I know.

But there was movement out on the lake, and I left the bell unring and snatched up the binoculars, expecting to see an army. The ice was bright, and the other-world stars were shining. There was no army. There was nothing. There was... No, wait. A lone figure was coming in from the island, walking along the sledge tracks.

Jack.

I met him a few hundred metres from the shore, where he walked over the ice as easily as taking a stroll down a country road, one hand holding his coat tight at his neck, face pale in the icelight. He seemed pleased to see me, before:

'We're leaving,' I said, grabbing his shoulders and spinning him around. 'We're going. I'm sorry I was a dick; I don't care you're a journeyman. We're leaving.'

He put a foot out to stop his sliding as I pushed at him. 'They're here?'

‘No,’ I said. It wasn’t a lie, but he was too astute to fall for it.

‘They’re coming,’ he said.

He shook me off and faced the light of Hall. The moon hung low over the mountains and lit the pine trees to thickets of silver spears. The people inside needed to turn out the yellow lights, shut up tight. Cower.

‘Let’s go,’ I said.

‘Why isn’t the bell ringing?’

‘Please.’ I was no longer above begging. ‘Please, let’s just go.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You can! Of course, you can. Yes, yes, look at me like that all you want; I know I’m a coward. Let’s be cowards together and leave.’

‘I have to—’

‘You think you can save everyone?’ I demanded, my words probably audible across the whole lake. ‘You think the journeymen aren’t going to notice a few thousand people escaping across the ice? Because we’ll be bloody lucky if they don’t notice two. Those people back there are dead.’ I gestured with force towards Hall. ‘Sodding dead! Unless you think you can knock up a quick speech to sway all the journeymen to our cause? “Uh, hi, look into my pretty eyes and let me unbutton my shirt a bit, that seemed to work well for the last crowd.” They’ll just shoot you and... No, hey, come back... Wait!’

‘The journeymen won’t kill me,’ he called back.

‘How do you know?’ I shouted after him, ran to catch up. ‘Won’t they cut you down in the mass before you get a chance to do the secret handshake? What if Hall turns against you? What if they try to barter you over?’

That gave him a moment's pause. 'They should do that.'

'Bloody hell, Jack. Now, come on.'

But he was determined, his brain focused on higher, more honourable things than mine was capable of. The quiet radicalism in him. Probably thinking of all the treasures waiting for him in heaven or some nonsense crap like that.

'Look, I'm sorry,' I said. 'I know I've been shit. I'm sorry for what I said. But what about *me*? It's your fault I'm here, and I can't go back in there. I can't.'

'Then don't.'

That surprised me. Both because I hadn't expected Jack to give up on me that easily, and because it hadn't crossed my mind to give up on him.

'But without you...' I floundered, then landed. 'How will I save Crane?'

'With me or without me, you won't save him.'

'What?'

'I hereby declare you free to leave, Benjamin. Go. Run away.'

He reached into a pocket and pressed his own counter into my hand. It was like mine, only sleeker and more straightforward; an advanced model. The number on the dial read ten thousand, six hundred and nine.

God, the temptation of it. I'd leave them. I'd plough on alone into hopelessness and... Probably vomit up my spleen and forget everything I was.

'No,' I said. 'I'm staying. I'm going to be a sodding limpet, you won't be able to get rid of me. And we'll do whatever mad-hat plan your brain is cooking up, save the bloody world and so on, but then – then! – you're going to help me find Crane.'

I gave his counter back to him.

'You're doing the wrong thing,' he said.

‘Wrong for who?’

‘Please go.’

‘No.’

I followed him up the bank, up the steps, back inside. He went straight to the kitchen, but Providence wasn’t there. Back through the thickly-peopled dining room where we climbed up onto the long table to get through faster, stepping over plates, bottles, outstretched arms of sleeping people, and nobody paid us any attention. He navigated us to the top floor, where the rooms were low and small, to Providence’s council chamber, where she talked long into the nights with Rose. There was no one inside, only red embers in the fireplace.

‘She’s not here,’ I said.

‘Let me think. Let me think.’ He put fingers to his temples. ‘Benjamin, how long has it been? There was a scout, I presume?’

‘Yes. She left maybe ten minutes ago.’

Jack nodded. ‘There’ll be more scouts out there in the trees now. They’ll arrive properly when they’re sure of success and have worked out that most of us are civilians. Then they’ll squeeze us in from the edges. But we have a bit of time yet.’

‘If they don’t work all that out as fast out there as you just did in here.’

‘That’s the hope.’

There was a rumble. Something very loud and close vibrated the whole building. It was a familiar sound, but so out of place, it took me a moment to recognise it: an engine. I tracked the sound across the ceiling, followed it through the building until I came to the well of the main staircase where windows looked out on the lake and mountains. Blue lights appeared in the sky, brightening the frost on the windows, which



belonged to an aircraft. It hovered over Hall, then moved out, steady, out over the lake. I recognised it. It was one of the fighters that'd been lined up in the hangar on Waterloo Bridge; fixed wings, grey, sleek. It flew low across the ice towards the island, which it circumnavigated once, twice, and then manoeuvred away upwards to hang against the stars.

The lake exploded, a chain of detonations going off in a ring around the island. The explosions cracked the thick ice, sent slabs big as buses into the air and crashing back down, thundering with a yawning, geographical sound of glaciers crumbling. The sound hit Hall a few seconds later, the windowpanes rattled, and people cried out in surprise. A wave of water spread over the ice, made it all the way to the banks of Hall before receding, freezing as it went, back towards an uncrossable moat around the only way out of Hall.

'I didn't guess that,' Jack said, beside me at the handrail.

'What do we do?'

Outside, there was a light like a fallen star hanging over the ice. It supernovaed and grew and spread so familiarly, and a hundred journeymen were waiting on the other side to step through. They were bulky with body armour, each face mirrored, every gun trained on the building and ready. They formed a quick line across the lake and into the forest on either side, a circle of them around Hall. The way behind them closed, leaving its imprint on my eyes. A shout went out, and the journeymen began to advance on Hall, tightening the noose.

Inside, the building erupted with panic. Someone had a handgun and fired useless shots from the front door, but a few quick flashes – dashing across the tightening circle

like spokes on a wheel – stopped him, and he staggered back to die in the entrance beneath us.

The journeymen made their way up the bank.

People surged up the stairs towards us. Hundreds of them; children carried, families and friends calling out to stick together. Jack and I were buffeted against the rail. With the entranceway emptied, there was no one to stop the journeymen moving into the building, and in they came, guns up, knees bent, expecting a trap we hadn't thought to plan.

Jack crouched, watching through the bannisters.

'Jack, we need to move,' I whispered, urgent.

'We have time.'

He listened to the chaos beneath us, the screaming and death repeating itself over and over. It took just a few minutes for the ground floor of Hall to be silenced, nest quelled. Already, smoke billowed from the dining room and orange light flickering. We watched survivors being herded through the entrance hall below, out into the central courtyard, those who couldn't walk were dragged by those who could, and the journeymen relaxed, their guns balanced unconcernedly on their forearms, gesturing for people to keep moving, gentle and docile, mustered into the paddock.

Ingrid. She didn't go quietly. She was held aloft between two journeymen, struggling viciously, her clothes half burnt away and still smoking, patches of bubbled flesh along her stomach, tattoos burnt away, whole worlds become unknown. 'Look at what you're doing!' she shouted, 'Don't you see?' before she was gone into the courtyard.

'Jack, please, we need to go,' I pleaded.

He nodded, and we retreated down the corridor to where it was still, quiet and pitch dark. The people in the upper levels were keeping their heads down, gaining themselves a few extra minutes. We found an empty bedroom, which had belongings jumbled over the floor and a window onto the courtyard.

‘Ingrid,’ I said.

‘I know. I’m sorry.’

‘God, that was so quick.’

‘They’re well practised.’ He went to the window and looked down.

‘They’re going to kill them out there?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘You’re right not to look. I’ve heard people claim these things are worse in the imagination, but I don’t think that’s true. They’re lining them up along the wall.’ He was lit white by a flurry of shots from outside. He took a breath and swallowed. ‘My real name is Niklaus Ferðasson, so you know.’

‘Niklaus,’ I repeated.

He turned to me: ‘I have to go down there, I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be an idiot!’

‘You’ll take the key and—’

There were heavy, hurried footsteps outside the room. I spun around, stood between the door and Jack, with just enough time to pick up an abandoned thermos flask and brandish it as the door was flung open.

Providence rushed inside. She wore a fur coat, scorched and stinking of burning hair. Closing the door, she leant against it, a hand to her chest. ‘You’re safe,’ she said, winded, but calming. I noted she spoke only to Jack. ‘Come away from the window now,’ she beckoned. ‘I saw you, others could too.’

‘You said they wouldn’t find Hall,’ said Jack.

Another series of flashes outside made us all flinch. Jack practically pressed his face to the glass to watch, before Providence took his arm and yanked him down to her level, her face close to his.

‘Listen to me,’ she said. ‘You *must not* be seen by them. You hear me? You hear me, damn you?’

‘If I go down—’

‘You’ll die.’

‘Not if I—’

‘Either way, the person you are now will cease to exist, and so will everything we’ve been working for. Do you understand me? You are all we’ve got left. So now’s not the time for any of that. Now we wait. We see if Rose is able to pull off what he’s promised.’

‘If he can’t?’

‘We reconsider.’ She released him.

Jack was fast. He dashed between Providence and me, neither of us fast enough to stop him. He opened the door and would’ve made it down to this cosy honourable death but, instead, he found Hahn standing in the corridor, guarding the room. Hahn grabbed him, lifted him clean off his feet, no regard for the pain caused to wounded ribs, and clapped a large hand over his protesting mouth. Jack was carried, kicking like wildfire, back into the room. Providence closed the door and went through his pockets until she found his counter.

‘You have this set to somewhere safe?’ she asked him.

He struggled against Hahn.

‘Providence, what are you doing?’ I asked.

Providence deftly worked the counter, and a bright doorway of light spread open from nothing. I stared in surprise. Mine couldn’t do that. White-light edges crackled around a dense forest at night; mist, humidity and fern fronds spilling into the cold room. Jack’s eyes widened, his cries muffled. Hahn carried him towards the rainforest and threw him into the fog and foliage.

Jack stumbled, turned around, struggled back towards us through plants. He reached out and called, ‘Providence, don’t! Leave him—’

The doorway closed, and where Jack’s outstretched hand had been, two fingertips fell to the floorboards.

I spun on Providence. ‘What the hell are you doing?’

‘Priorities, Mr London. We’re keeping him alive.’

‘You can’t do that.’ I looked at the nubs of flesh and nail on the floor. ‘He didn’t want to go!’

‘Calm yourself.’

‘I will not bloody calm myself!’ I shouted. I saw Jack’s counter glinting in her hand and rushed her, but Hahn grabbed me by my jacket and threw me across the room, where I crashed into a wall.

‘None of that, now,’ Providence dismissed my rebellion. To Hahn: ‘Can you get us down the back way to Rose?’

Hahn nodded once. From the depths of mouldering clothing he took out his old pistol, blood already collected in the pattern work on the bone handle. He pointed it at me on the floor.

‘Get up,’ he said.

We left the bedroom, hurrying together towards a set of service stairs at the back of the building. I was sent first, the most expendable. There were bodies everywhere, including journeymen with bullet holes in their helmets and mirrors cracked like eggshells. As we passed the stairs up to the bell tower, a journeyman discovered us. Hahn shot him once, twice. They weren't clean shots, the man screamed from the floor, clutching his abdomen, and Hahn paused, listening to the shouts coming towards us from throughout the building. Soon, they'd be on us, expecting at least one human being with a gun. He grunted with annoyance, then pushed me and Providence towards the hidden stairs up to the bell tower and slammed the door on us. Providence held me still.

Outside, Hahn soon ran out of bullets. I could hear the desperate clicking as he pulled the trigger. He shouted in frustration, threw the weapon away to bombard his enemies with a string of curses, and roared as he lunged at them. There was a flash around the edges of the door, and Hahn bellowed in pain. I heard him stagger a few steps, before he toppled, felled. I pressed my face to the crack of light around the door, could see a thin sliver of the scene: they'd sliced through his meaty calf, his foot abandoned in the middle of the floor. The next shot cut down through his collarbone, taking his arm and half his chest. They left him there with the inside of a lung exposed to the air, his heart's blood red as it poured into his furs.

Providence tugged at me, her finger to her lips. I followed her up the stairs, silent as I could, blinking through the dancing lights of the gunshot in my vision.

The bell tower again. Mountain air filled with smoke and stars. For a moment, it became the rooftop in Kensington, with its deck chairs and fairy lights, and there was Crane with his back to me, blowing cigarette smoke out over the green treetops of

Selwood Gardens. I went to stand beside him. I wondered how far away Crane was from me in navigable miles, and whether he was technically closer or further away now than Jack.

‘This has all happened before, you know,’ I said.

‘What d’you mean?’ Crane asked with a half-smile, as though I’d made a joke he didn’t get. He finished the cigarette and stubbed it out on the brick wall.

‘I make a home, and the journeymen come and burn it down.’

‘Mr London, this is not your home,’ said Providence from the other side of the tower, watching me.

‘They’ll find us up here,’ I said.

‘Not for a while.’

‘Use Jack’s counter. Let’s bloody leave!’

‘That’s not what I have in mind.’

‘Give it to me! I can’t die here, Providence. I need to find my friend!’

She held the counter out over the roof. If I moved towards her, she’d drop it to slip down sloped tiles into the courtyard.

So I moved to stand underneath the bell, and I grabbed the rope.

‘No!’ she cried, shocked by my audacity.

‘Your choice,’ I said.

‘I can’t—’

I would’ve pulled it, I really would’ve done; with both arms, using all my weight, my shoulder screaming in protest from where I’d been thrown against the wall, so the bell swung high, before falling in a wide arc and ringing out, metallic and distressed...

But below us, front the courtyard, an explosion sent shockwaves over Hall. Light and smoke billowed up from the courtyard, and across the other side of the chestnut tree, at the back of the building, Hall crumbled in on itself, the roof buckling, collapsing, falling masonry and splitting wood, leaving behind a valley of empty space, pine trees standing sentinel on the other side.

‘Rose,’ Providence said, the epitome of relief.

Then there was gunfire. The hard sound of metal bullets, fast and steady from quick-firing guns. The clatter of them against the stonework, the silence of them against flesh. Bullets meant our side; Hall was rallying.

‘You’re no longer required,’ said Providence. She used the counter. The air crackled and opened, and a wave of green spilling from a rainforest.

‘Thank you!’ I grabbed Providence’s shoulders, kissed her cheek. ‘Thank you!’ I stepped through and turned to help her across, but she’d retreated, her back pressed against the wall. From there, she threw the counter into the forest with me, disappearing into the undergrowth.

‘Take care of him,’ she called, more warning than request, and Hall disappeared until I was swallowed by air black-thick as treacle.



## Chapter 13

Since first light I'd been looking for the counter, running my hands unsuccessfully through the undergrowth as everything turned to mud. Far above me, clouds sagged with an ocean of water which fell so fast it roared onto emergent greenery of kapoks and giant red cedars. In the canopy, frogs and glossy-billed birds sheltered in palms, snakes hugged branches, and water ran down the trunks of a quarter-million trees into an underworld of vines, lichen, moss and ruined spider webs, towards the insect-ridden dimness of the forest floor, where there were two men deep at the bottom of a fjord.

Jack leant against the stilt-roots of a walking palm. He was soaked through with rain and clutching his hurt hand to his chest. He'd bandaged it with a piece of grey silk, once the inside of his pocket. His sleeve was soaked with blood. With moss in his hair, he looked like the man I'd discovered in Selwood Gardens.

His watch was beeping.

'Can't you turn that bloody thing off?'

He'd found me in the pitch of night, after a long time of shouting each other's names, and our reunion was confused by not being able to see each other a metre away and him trying to steer clear of my vomit, but he'd grabbed my shoulders, and asked, 'There's no one else? It's only you?' Only me, I'd confirmed, and he'd sworn. Livid. The darkness allowing him the freedom to switch off cheerfulness and rail long and hard against Providence, emotion heightening his accent, making him fast and breathless. *How dare she not let him help?* 'She saved your life,' I'd said, ignored. *How*

*dare she think her plan was more worthy than his?* His anger had stoked mine, and I'd shouted back that, for Jack's future reference, dragging me into a massacre and not telling me that he'd got an escape route up his sleeve, was an extremely shit thing to do! But, as the forest had grown light and the vertical lines of trees appeared around us – like waking up in a nature documentary; a closeness of smells, sounds, heat, stickiness, a *fullness* of everything – we'd left anger behind and lapsed instead into quiet dread.

I found the counter at last under a wide-leafed fern. It wasn't Jack's as I'd expected, but mine; Providence had upgraded herself and downgraded us, which meant we couldn't just step back to Hall, but we needed to find an existing doorway out of a rainforest. Brilliant.

Jack took the counter from me and struggled to work it one-handed. Finally, he announced, triumphantly, 'There's a doorway forty-one miles away.'

'Through this?' I looked around, unable to see further than three metres in any direction. 'How d'you even know that?'

'You can put it on a different setting by holding down the—'

'Fine, got it. Which way?'

'It gives distance, not direction.'

'Right. Brilliant. Maybe if we wait here, Providence'll come back for us?'

'I'm not waiting.'

'It'll take days to walk that far. And when we get there, where will the door even lead?'

'We'll have to press on to somewhere I recognise.' He sounded unsure.

'You mean we'll walk through infinity with a hope and a prayer?'

‘Yes, Benjamin. I mean to have you walking for the rest of your days. You’ll die an old man crawling by my side on your hands and knees.’

He was smiling. How could he? Didn’t he understand that time was so precious now? Crane was withering away. Maybe it wasn’t a real smile. Maybe he thought I *needed* someone jovial.

‘Every extra day...’ I began.

‘I know. Everything will be starting without us.’

‘God, you just want to get back to your revolution! You’re in such a sodding hurry to die!’ At the sudden weariness in him, I softened. ‘We should leave. How long do you need?’

‘Ten seconds.’

‘Okay.’

And for ten seconds his face crumpled. Head hung. I could almost see the refugees running through the corridors of his mind, being shot at from behind, dragged to the courtyard, made to scream. Then Jack raised his face to the racket of weather and life overhead, fixed his most convincing smile to the lower half of his dripping face, and off we set.

Day one. We climbed over fallen trees, under cascades of vines. The understory was mostly dark, but soon the sun shone again on the canopy overhead, and leaves jewelling and swaying a hundred feet above, and we were offensively tiny in the world. Motes filled the air so thick it was like breathing water, and everything else was mushrooms, mould, spores and rot. We sank with each step into a thousand years of decomposition. Trees came apart in our fingers as we passed. The whole forest was unnerving; I didn’t

trust any of it. There were birds in the trees which screamed like children. And it was hot, so bloody hot. I carried my jacket but only lasted five minutes with my shirt off before constellations of insects gathered all over me. The most concession Jack gave to the heat was to undo the buttons on his cuffs.

The counter read forty-one miles for over an hour before it hit forty-two and we gruffly changed direction to follow our own trail of damaged vegetation and then push new arcs through the forest. We were at forty miles by the time the day was too hot to walk any further. We waited out the heat. Then set off again. Our progress was slow, aching, desperate. It was worse than in Hall; I was sick with impatience. Now I knew where Crane was, but I'd been cast out of the one hopeful narrative that had been working towards helping him.

When it grew dark again, there was nothing left to do except lay cradled in damp black with all the animal noises around us.

Into the night, I said, 'I wonder if I'm awake.'

'You sound like you are.'

'No, I mean, for all I know you're actually a burglar who knocked me out back in Selwood Gardens, and I'm asleep now while you're whispering over my body in a hospital bed, saying you'll kill me if I identify you.'

'I wouldn't do that. I'd just kill you,' he joked.

'And therefore; what are all these places I'm visiting? What is it in the depths of my brain which requires working to the surface? Why a frozen place called Hall? Why a rainforest? Or maybe you did kill me, and I'm actually working my way down through the layers of hell.'

'That again?'

‘Sure as morning.’

He chuckled. ‘You stole that from Rose.’

‘I did. I like it.’

There was no sleep on the horizon, and nothing to entertain us except each other’s voices, so we began tentatively to swap memories like children sharing toys. At first, I gave Jack anecdotes I’d already honed over many tellings; stories of things which had happened to Crane and me in dodgy bars in politically questionable countries or halfway up a mountain (that one had a helicopter!), but Jack wasn’t interested. Instead, he cared about the mundanity of my life, so I reduced my stories to descriptions of my school, of the tube, descriptions of evenings spent with Crane *et al.* in a pub. These enraptured Jack. But what, then, had his life been? Had he ever had a job, been on public transport, or had friends to spend his leisure time with? What was a life otherwise?

So I asked him what the life of a journeyman was like. He told me about all these people and places he’d seen and had me hooked on their strangeness: towns in trees, crystal-filled caves, free-diving two hundred metres to wreckages, worlds with arches of orbiting rings in the sky or more than one moon, and barren planets where no human was left alive or ever had lived. The places projected themselves into the night above me. Redman had accused me; ‘Your brain is so small. So small,’ and it had stung enough to not forget it, and I felt it then as Jack spoke. His experience was so big. I’d never have guessed how big. There were suns, moons, cities, philosophies swirling inside him, and the only way to have known was to look down his throat with a stick on his tongue, make him say, ‘Ah,’ and find a collection of galaxies inside him.

‘Mate, he’s duping you. He’s not telling you anything about himself.’

Crane was right. All I'd got from Jack was a montage of unexplained fragments and understanding him from them was like trying to spot a theme in a modern art gallery or a narrative in an experimental film. I could think of three reasons why he was so unforthcoming. One: he was setting himself up as a puzzle, a challenge to distract me from the business of encroaching death. Two: he actually was a fragmentary person, confused by his own experiences, which orbited in clusters around a black hole of something that he wasn't telling me. Three: he was an asshole.

Day two. I was woken by Jack early because I'd been sobbing in my sleep; I wondered how long he'd listened before he couldn't take it anymore? I'd been trying to ring the bell at Hall to stop the mountains and lake from crumbling into the belly of the earth, but I couldn't do it; the cord slipped from my grasp, or it disappeared, or the bell was soft and squid-like, or someone shot me before I could, and Hall fell into the chasm.

Thirty-eight miles to go. We walked. We walked. We walked. The day too hot, the night too dark, so we made our best progress moving at purple dawn and orange dusk. We found a stream, narrow and deep through the rich soil. We drank until our stomachs were hard, and then followed the water, the mileage on the counter moving slowly, but unquestionably, down. I went first, the icebreaker to Jack's damaged ship – holding up branches for him, helping him over fallen trees. As the stream joined other streams, our journey became easier, and soon we waded through the water itself, half a metre wide and growing with every hour. We rolled our trousers to our knees and trudged along with our shoes full of water.

Jack was tenacious to a fault. The man wouldn't stop. Even when I was catching my breath, he'd stand nearby waiting, impatient for me to get going again. He was

afraid, he said, that if we stayed still too long, we'd be grown on by lichen and sucked into the death of the landscape. But the feverish sheen to him showed another cause for urgency.

'We need to make a fire,' he said, more to himself than to me, surrounded by a sodden world.

I knew the names of some plants and trees, and I taught them to Jack as we went to distract him. 'Over there, see that? That red-spiked starburst on the ground? That's bromeliad. And there's probably a whole ecosystem in that pool of water it's collected. See, things are wiggling around. And that up there's an orchid.' And there were elephantiasis-swollen barrigona trees, rubber plants, mahogany, the pleats of lupuna, and disappearing heights of kapoks. I'd never seen them all together before, but I knew their faces. I'd learnt them as a boy in my mother's shiny-paged coffee table tomes. I spent so much time looking around us that Jack got into the habit of warning me about obstacles, but it meant I recognised mangoes and avocados when we passed under them, and we feasted. Jack struggled with the peel and juice; his hand had begun to smell.

Day three. Another day of walking. Our stream became a river and Jack became a wobbly, weedy mess of a man.

Late evening, we left the undergrowth and were presented with an unexpected open view, like two astronauts escaping Earth's atmosphere to the empty black. Bisecting our path was a tectonic rift in the landscape, our side hurtled skyward by two hundred feet. The cliff had us on a height with the canopy, which spread like a meadow ahead where bats and birds were making use of the last light. Our river plummeted down through trees, so loud we'd heard it for miles.

We spent the night on the cliff edge, the sky purple, then black; the arch of a galaxy much like the Milky Way. Jack found wood dry enough to burn, and together we managed to construct a fire. If there were any humans around, we'd be seen from leagues away, but we were too tired to care. When the flames were high, Jack took off his belt and placed the metal buckle into the fire. When the buckle was hot, he pulled it out to smoke on moss and unwrapped his fingers, the silk hardened. He pressed his index finger hard down on the metal. It sounded like bacon dropping into a pan, smelt like the bacon had turned sour.

'Mate, that's awful,' said Crane, hand to his mouth.

Jack peeled his finger off the metal and put the buckle back in the fire. He glanced at me. 'What are you sitting there glowering about, Benjamin?' he asked, lace-winged flies settling in his hair.

'All I'm thinking about is rainforest.'

'Nothing else?'

I thought about it. 'Crane, of course. And now you, I guess. Bacon. Water, mangoes, scratching insect bites. Repressed panic.'

He laughed. 'There's more than that.'

'Is there?'

'You're right. Best not to share. Imagine if your skull and brain were made of glass and everyone knew when you were swearing at the back of my head, or having apocalyptic meanderings, or remembering having sex with—'

'Don't,' I warned him. I'd done very well not thinking about Ingrid the last couple of days, I wasn't going to start.



Jack pulled the buckle from the flames and pressed his second finger to it. He snarled at the pain until sweat tracked his face.

‘Now,’ said Crane. ‘While he’s distracted.’

‘You want me to kill him?’ I asked, vaguely surprised.

Crane boomed a laugh. ‘No, I mean he’s got secrets. Try and suss them.’

‘How did this all start for you?’ I asked Jack.

‘Weak,’ commented Crane.

But Jack took me by surprise by actually answering. Sort of.

‘The beginning? I was sitting at a wooden desk.’ He traced the parameters of a small desk in front of him with his uninjured hand. ‘I was only four years old. There was a heavy lid.’ He mimed opening it. ‘I could’ve kept schoolbooks and apples in there if I’d been that kind of child, but as it was, I’d collected six brown pine needles. One for every time I was let outside. And I remember that I longed to open the desk one day and have green needles tumble out over my knees.’

He smiled at the memory. Caught in momentum, like the beetles which passed us in the stream, he continued.

‘I don’t think that’s the beginning you were after, though? Another then. Fifteen years ago, I was reading the front page of a newspaper. It was reporting the results of a census which revealed how many people weren’t in the worlds they were supposed to be in. I remember the author had made a careful note of the perimeters of the figures’ fallibility: as though knowing where you might have gone wrong ensures you go right. I remember the grating of trapped sugar under my coffee cup, and that I’d looked around at the other customers drinking tea in the street with me and it was the first time I realised what I’d done; those newspaper numbers were too high for those other

customers to ignore. And I remember leaving the café with my guard, thinking that the tip I'd left on the table was one hundred times greater than the reported percentage that was going to get people killed.'

'I don't understand, what'd you done?'

Too late, momentum over. Jack examined his fingers in the poor light, then wrapped them up in the fresh pocket-silk.

'Rose's wife is in the block,' he said.

'I know.'

'And yet Rose hasn't walked into enemy fire believing it's going to get her back. And he's had the opportunity. More than once. Your friend—'

'His name's Crane.'

'I know. Sorry. Why are you so desperate to find him?'

A fortress of ash collapsed and sent embers dancing into the sky. I was tired. Drunk on exhaustion, I glanced at my imaginary Crane. 'Providence says I'm mad.'

'You're not mad. But you do have an interesting set of priorities.'

He smiled.

I ran my hand through my hair, so grimy it stayed in place. I thought for a while, before, 'Everyone's calling me Mr London, but I'm not that at all – I'm nothing to do with geography. Yeah, well, don't laugh. I teach it, taught it, but that's it. What I am really is Crane's friend. He's known me since I was a kid, we shared the best times of our lives together, and he sat alongside me at my worst. Without him, there's nothing in the world that knows me at all. I cease to exist.'

'I see. To save him is to save yourself. He's your mirror.'

'It's selfish.'

‘It is.’ Jack smiled. ‘And it isn’t.’

Crane said nothing.

‘You know,’ I said. ‘You were right. Back in London, I mean. Before all this happened – before all this fun *death* to contend with – I was shit-scared Crane was forgetting me. He’d gotten married to this woman Esther, and I was acting like an idiot. I was such a prick. Now I’m being a prick to everyone else. I don’t mean to. I’m trying not to. I’ve always had this voice inside my head that tells me off. Sometimes I manage to listen to it.’

Jack didn’t reply. He stared at waves of heat rolling along logs, clutching his hand to his chest.

‘He’s sad,’ said Crane, surprised. ‘Why’s he sad? What’s he thinking about?’

I took a breath, about to take a leap; maybe if I told Jack something secret, he’d tell me something valuable too, because he’d never answer if I just asked, I knew that much. I’d been pondering what to offer up for the whole day of walking, the problem was Jack was astute enough to know everything about me already, wasn’t he? Just like he’d known me in London. Just like he saw through all my tricks. It couldn’t be a trick then. It had to be real and something he might not have guessed.

‘I see him,’ I said. ‘Crane. He’s sitting right by there.’ I nodded towards an empty spot at the fire where my imaginary friend sat in his tartan.

‘Whoa!’ said Crane. ‘Unexpected.’

Jack looked at the empty space. ‘Hello,’ he said.

‘Hey,’ said Crane, with a wave. ‘Good to meet you.’

‘What was that about me not being mad?’ I asked.

Jack smiled. 'I'm not sure many people could look at you and not see that you're carrying someone with you, Benjamin.' Back to Crane: 'How do you think I can get him to trust me, do you think?'

Crane chuckled. 'I wouldn't worry. He does. Always has, which is part of the problem; he feels bad because that's how he lost me.'

Jack nodded thoughtfully, like he could hear the answer.

'Are you carrying someone with you?' I asked Jack, leaning a bit closer.

'He sees things when he looks, doesn't he?' Jack said to Crane, who agreed. Jack faced the sky then, like that was where he kept all his memories or whatever heaven he'd been cast out of. 'It was a long time ago,' he said eventually, like that meant it didn't mean anything.

'You're not going to tell me?'

He sighed. 'I lost a lot of people, Benjamin.'

'How many?'

'All of them.'

'Any favourites?'

'God man, what a question!'

'I didn't mean—'

'Crane, tell him I'm not answering any more questions tonight, will you?'

He got up and walked away along the clifftop until he was tiny, I could only make him out as a small hollow against the stars. He stood looking out over the landscape for a long time.

'You botched that,' said Crane.

'I know.'

But I was thinking that whatever it is was that Jack was navigating our conversations around, it was big enough to distort what was left, like discovering black holes by the interaction of stars. I had to listen to what he didn't say, as much as what he did, and it was hard because we thought so differently.

Crane laughed. 'Not true, Farthing. He's just done more thinking than you have.'

Day four. Jack returned at first light, excessively cheerful because he'd found a way down the cliff. It was a hard climb in direct sun, slipping like mountain goats over scree and we were so tired and sunburnt but the end of it, blistered and red, that when we rejoined the river, we waded straight in where the water was deepest under the falls and floated there like dead men.

Eighteen miles remained, and that evening we walked five of them down the widening river and passed, as day tipped into night, into a cathedral grove of kapok trees. Their roots grew tall, massive, dense, before being absorbed in the twist of the main trunk thirty metres up. High branches were hung with vines, falling towards us like rain. Trees the size of rocket ships, straight out of the ground. And Jack and I made up a long story about the rockets to pass the time, about climbing aboard and travelling past crazy planets filled with whatever monsters leapt into our minds first, and it was fun, this talking about nothing for hours, like I'd done with Crane on cross-country trains across Europe.

Day five. Early morning, there was lightning. It woke us, rattled us. It flashed through the canopy, so close there was no gap between light and sound. *They've found us*, was my first thought. The rainforest strobed. Smouldering branches crashed into the

undergrowth. I pressed myself down into river-mud, drew my arms and legs as small as possible, the racket of the end of the world working its way into my bones until finally, the storm diminished, working away through the forest.

‘Alive?’ I called.

‘Alive,’ said Jack.

And it began to rain.

By morning the river, which was usually so clear each step stirred slow silt like walking on the moon, had become quaking opaqueness. Ten miles. Nine. Eight. Soon we’d be out of this place and soon wasn’t soon enough. I had enough neurosis to contend with, without the creeping apprehension that the landscape itself was beginning to revolt against me.

It rained all day. The water rose inch by inch. Seven miles to go now. Six. The miles were made longer by the toing and froing of the river course. Two miles to go. But night was falling. Jack was moving fast ahead of me, hurrying against the failing light, kicking water into peacock fans. He rounded a bend ahead and stopped short.

‘What’s wrong?’ I called.

‘Nothing, it’s just...’

‘Are you laughing?’

He was.

I waded to join him. Ahead, the river widened under a low ceiling of greenery. In the middle, under trailing vines and with driftwood collecting as water rushed underneath, was a red double-decker bus.

‘Bloody hell, that’s from London!’

‘I doubt it.’

‘How did it get here?’ asked Crane, who’d taken to walking on the surface of the water. ‘Ask him how it got here.’

I ignored him and splashed towards the bus, ready to read a destination on the front like *Tower Hill* or *Archway* to prove Jack wrong, but instead was faced with strange alphabet I couldn’t understand. I pried the mechanical doors open and clambered in. Inside was half-filled with growing things. As expected, there was the large steering wheel, a slot for coin collection and rows of seats, but the safety signs were all in another language, and the word ‘stop’ on the buttons for the bell was wrong.

Jack climbed onboard, water pouring off him. He checked the counter. ‘This isn’t the door; we’ve still got a way to go.’

‘This bus isn’t from London,’ I said. ‘How’s that possible?’

‘That would be the commonality of human imagination.’

He ducked under creepers and claimed a row of seats to lay out flat, legs bridging the aisle. The rain was loud on the metal roof. He was even greyer than he had been that morning and shivered despite the heat.

‘Go on, then,’ I said, smiling. ‘Spout wisdom.’

‘It’s the idea that everyone thinks the same thoughts. Or thereabouts.’

‘That’s depressing.’

‘The further you travel, the more you see the same patterns everywhere. Monotheistic religions and polytheistic religions. Capitalism and feudalism. Communism. Liberalism. All cities and societies constructed by similar minds which have never met. I find it comforting.’

‘Sounds like how we always went to find an Irish bar on the first night in a new country,’ said Crane.

‘What did he say?’ Jack asked. ‘You laughed. Crane said something.’

I smiled. ‘I’m not sure you’d get it.’

We were quiet for a bit, lapsing into exhaustion. In my periphery, I watched Jack pull up his sleeve. The fire hadn’t worked. The infection was spreading up into him, his veins tracking pink. He pulled down his sleeve.

‘Ask me something,’ said Jack. ‘I need a distraction.’

I settled on a seat, flicking away insects. ‘How do you get away from the journeymen?’ I asked Jack. ‘To get to Hall, I mean.’

‘Good question,’ Crane approved.

And apparently so did Jack.

It’d taken a long time to mastermind, but in the end, he’d only needed one person to help him get out, and that was quickly done. Charm one guard. Jack didn’t even need to bring her over to the side of the revolutionaries, but only to convince her of the higher authority of propagandist Niklaus Ferðasson and the importance of the games he needed to play. After that, it took them a year to execute the surveillance recording; he knew he was being watched and that a week of recordings would fool no one longer than another week. But who was going to remember that he’d spent an afternoon reading in his armchair for the same length of time a year ago? And so, for a year, he ensured he was always slow and careful, so if he was supposed to be in pain, it would look as though he might’ve been. He held books in his lap so they couldn’t spot the same covers repeating and cultivated habits: eating, sleeping, and eventually crapping at the same time. He declined offers of entertainment in his rooms. He didn’t listen to music. He never opened the windows in case it was raining when it was supposed to be sunny. He spent a lot of time in bed. Hours staring up at the ceiling, hands behind his



head, ankles crossed. Jack made himself boring until, eventually, he could set a watch by the times he'd be visited by the people who came to remind Ferðasson who he was (maintaining a small, serviceable amount of rebellion, so they wouldn't think he'd gone quiet). He imprisoned himself more than he'd ever been imprisoned by the journeymen. And then, after a year, his guard hit play, and Niklaus Ferðasson abandoned the journeymen most days, leaving behind a ghost of himself stalking through his rooms.

'That's actually quite clever,' I said.

'Thank you.'

The first time he went out: he'd heard that there'd been violence done by the journeymen and wanted to see it for himself – always drawn to prodding where it was painful. He travelled alone through worlds. He described vividly how afraid he'd been, the feeling in his chest at any noise, the weakness of fear at imagined breathing. But he got to where he was going without incident and found himself in a town. It'd been dusk, and the place was quiet. There was a scent of smoke on the wind, which he followed through the streets. I asked him what kind of streets they were, and he described greengrocers and bookshops and cobbles, so I imagined him in some sort of suburb of Paris where shops were crammed in together, but that probably wasn't right at all. There, he found a burnt-out building. He described it as a 'black thing simmering', and I filled it in with my flat in Kensington. He'd walked up to the doorway – the lintel and frame still just about standing by themselves – and investigated the rubble inside. It'd once been a bar. Bottles still lined a smoke-blackened mirror. There were brass taps and stools and broken glass. Beer mats were strewn like confetti. And there, he'd met Providence. It was easy to imagine. Providence: alone, but for bodies, in the tumbled

mess of her daughters' dreams of revolution. Jack: a silhouette of a man in the doorway.

Had her children put up posters of journeymen on dartboards? Had he worn a mask? How had she recognised him as a friend? Had there been enough light for her to see his unassuming face? And what version of Jack had presented itself to her? Had it been the friendly Jack, the scared-boy Jack, the philosopher-priest Jack? Or had he offered her a facet of himself which I'd never seen? And how had he stopped her from killing him right then and there? How had Providence's devil turned himself into her ally? Perhaps he'd cheerfully said: 'Will you help me start a revolution?' And she'd said: 'Yeah, alright then, you bastard.' His explanation was: 'We shared an aim.'

'But it's all over now,' said Jack. 'I haven't returned. They'll have discovered the trick.' And a lot later, when I was nearly asleep, he whispered in his fever, 'We travel so far from world to world, but we're still land-bound.'

Day six. The last day. The river had crept up to the windows of the bus and was streaming through the gaps in the door. To get out, we had to jump from a broken window on the top deck and swim to the bank, although the bank was now a flexible concept. We arrived so far downstream that the bus was no longer in sight. But two hours later, counter in hand, Jack said, 'We're here'.

But it was the same landscape we'd been walking through for days, dense, endless vines, trees, undergrowth all around. Not many doors.

'There's nothing here,' I said.

'There must be.' He wrapped his arms around himself, teeth chattering.

'Are you alright?'

‘We need to get out.’

We searched. Pushing through leaves and feeling around, knocking hopefully on tree trunks, jumping up and down on the ground to find hidden hatches. The river crept ever outwards, disturbing the ants and millipedes and sending them swarming up the trees and humans to higher ground. Pushing through vegetation sent snakes off looping through the water. I wanted to sob from being too surrounded by heat and dampness and life.

Jack found it in the end: a mound of earth overgrown and subsumed into the forest. We tore away creepers and discovered a stone wall beyond the roots of a young mahogany, and a metal-bolted door, long rusted. The tree roots made it impossible to push the handle, let alone open it. I would’ve suggested we built a fire and burnt the tree away, but the water was up to our knees now. The only wiggle room was in the stones the door been set into, which were pushed apart and holed out by insects. I dug my fingers in and manoeuvred one of them out. Then another. And behind it was only soil, so I dug it out and got my hands behind to pull away more stones. Jack watched. The day grew hotter, and my hands bled. With both of us, we loosened the door enough to move it back in its setting, a prisoner being shoved away from the railings.

*Please let me out, kind sirs.*

*Hold still, we’re blooming trying.*

Jack pressed the counter and opened the door, but there was nothing unusual on the other side except etiolated roots.

‘Inside then,’ said Jack, and he squeezed himself through roots into blackness.

‘Anything?’ I asked.

‘I’m in a tunnel; there’s another door further on.’

‘Hang on, I’m coming in.’

But the floodwaters were moving fast now; they loosened the soil and whisked away portions of the building, an incoming tide collapsing a sandcastle, and as I pushed my weight against the roots to get through, everything began to give. The mahogany above creaked, shifted, then fell – trunk, branches, leaves – on top of me, driving me down into the water in a flurry of lights.

‘Benjamin!’ Jack called from somewhere far off.

I struggled, spluttered, but somehow managed to untangle myself and get up.

Crane sat nearby outside on a barstool, the velvet seat just above the waterline, but the river didn’t eddy around him in the way it did me. He pulled another stool up from the depths, and I sat down, the current scraping the wooden legs across the riverbed. He offered me some of his pint, but I declined.

‘Maybe Ingrid’s right and I’m dead,’ he said. ‘I’m haunting you.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Have you seen you’re unconscious?’ He nodded towards the fallen tree, where a black-suited figure bobbed in the flood.

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘I’ve been thinking, Farthing.’ He was using his serious voice, the one he used when I had a backlog of overdue rent. ‘You should be alright with Jack.’

I rubbed my forehead. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I trust him.’

‘Can we not do this now?’

‘It’s clear enough to me that he’s fighting the good fight, whatever side he’s on. I don’t get their sides and stuff, but he’s good.’

‘Everyone thinks that, don’t they? Anyway, stop it. I don’t need his help, I’m going to find you myself.’

‘I’m not sure you are, mate.’

Next to Crane, a window appeared. It was latticed with yellow glass; a proper pub window. He undid the latch and pushed it open onto a Central London street where the sky was grey, the air was cold, the road was filled with traffic – black taxis, cars, bicycles – lights changing from red to green. Pedestrians walked past the window, so close I could’ve touched them, talking into phones about trying to find a babysitter for the weekend. My gut ached with homesickness; it was all I could do to stop myself climbing through.

‘It’s not real,’ said Crane. ‘But Jack and I have had a few chats while you were sleeping—’

‘A conspiracy?’

‘—and I wanted to show you what you’re really up against with an illustration of somewhere you know.’

The buildings across the street began to crack, teeter, crumble away and, from our stools, we watched distant skyscrapers falling into clouds of dust and blocks of the city sinking down into the ground, water mains blossoming into waterfalls. Crane put a hand over his pint to keep the dust out. Crowds fled outside, streaming past the window, their faces blurring like paint spread across a canvas.

‘Stop it,’ I said. I slammed the window closed.

‘No Farthing, you stop. Me hanging around isn’t doing you any favours. And Ingrid’s most likely right; I’m dead. So I’m asking you to stay with Jack. I’m leaving you in his capable hands. And I want you to stop looking for me, okay?’

‘Don’t you dare go.’

‘This is the last time you’ll see me.’

‘Please, Crane.’

‘I’m gone. Forget me. Be good.’

## Chapter 14

My ears were filled with the loudest ringing, an orchestra tuning up in my ear canals. And god, they had a long way to go; someone play a bloody A note for them already. There was someone close, a hand hitting my cheek. ‘Come on, now. Open your eyes, Benjamin.’

I did, grimacing at the light.

‘You’re alright,’ said Jack, as though only now believing it.

‘Yay!’ I said with false enthusiasm, and then. ‘Crane?’ I called, but he didn’t materialise.

Jack pulled me up to sitting. I blinked a lot, and the world became a bit less offensive. I was sitting on the ground, my limbs all floppy, legs outstretched in the kind of position that old bears favour. Jack crouched before me. He was grimy with forest filth and ash, and the front of him covered in mango-coloured vomit. There was no one else around; Crane had gone.

Around us, the world was a shamble of broken beams and joists, black and scaled with char. Providence’s burnt-out bar? But no, that had been years ago, and the ground beneath me was still warm. Walls towered around us, the struts of burnt-out floors above framing a sky where pink and orange clouds moved fast, made me feel ill to watch.

‘This isn’t a rainforest,’ I said, looking around.

‘We’re in Hall,’ said Jack.

‘Brilliant! Good work.’ But Jack didn’t mirror my jubilation. This was somewhere I knew, somewhere I’d been before. Happiness glazed my world. ‘How did we get here?’

‘Dragging, mostly. You’ve been out for a long time.’

‘You don’t look so good yourself.’

He looked terrible. His skin was like poorly moulded clay. But he managed a smile and said, ‘A cure for all things is looking after someone worse off.’

‘You dragged me across the lake?’

‘That door’s gone. But I know Hall’s location well enough to find where the new one opened.’

He gestured to a blackened wall with a door in it, but a new one? What did he mean? Did he mean when one was destroyed another one appeared nearby? That was too confusing, like setting up new rules to a game halfway through.

‘What room are we in?’ I asked.

‘The dining hall, I think.’ He stood up and pointed. ‘Yes. Look, there are parts of the mural still on the wall, and the table is under the beams. The door we came through is the one into the kitchen.’

Awkward and calf-like, I got to my feet and picked my way across the ruined room, ending at an arch of once-window where the wind howled through. I crossed my arms to keep the chill at bay. It was the same window where I’d first watched Hahn and Providence return across the lake, hoping they were Jack. The landscape of ice and mountains was now lit golden by the underbellies of clouds, the evening sunset behind the peaks.



The easiest way into the courtyard was around the back through what'd been the infirmary and was now a steep-sided trench of tumbled stone leading from the pine forest to the burnt chestnut. The other exits and entrances to the courtyard were blocked, some with rubble, but most with once-humans piled high and dense, like a tangle of driftwood which had been deposited again, again, again against pier walls. There was a kilter to the courtyard; not usually noticeable but made apparent now by a sheen of compost tea running downhill from the dead. When we arrived, two of Hahn's dogs were nosing at the meat; we chased them away, watched them run away up and over the rubble.

I didn't know any of them. Not that I looked too closely. Faces and half-faces that were untouched by fire, stiffened and grey. I scanned, looked for the familiar, but there was nothing, and I was glad. But there were children, and that wasn't nice. One of Rose's men was a metre away from me, face dark with old blood, arch-backed over a dead woman, his final view an upside-down one; the smoke and night sky his ground, the flagstones his ceiling. There was a tattooed arm sticking out from underneath a pile of rubble and ballooned with dread as I hurried to it, but, thank god, the tattoo was a coloured shoreline and peaked waves and a compass pointing north, and I let out a shaky breath, because it wasn't Ingrid, wasn't her. Just some other map on some other arm.

The stones of the courtyard were still fearful, I could feel it in them. There were slashes from light guns and bullet holes on the walls and the thick trunk of the tree. That rectangle of space would always be filled with tragedy now, an implosion of sadness and rottenness, that let nothing else escape its edges.

The chestnut: its brown winter leaves and smaller branches had burnt away,

leaving only the black, bare outline of the trunk and main branches, crooked and thick, as though drawn onto the scene with a blunt piece of charcoal. There were bodies in the tree, rope-strung up – around the necks, under the armpits, from the ankles. That had taken time to do, it'd taken malice and dedication. The bodies which hadn't burnt away or fallen as rotten fruit to the ground, clustered like chrysalises. They were too high to cut down; otherwise, I would've tried, if only to rid myself of the expression on Jack's face.

I turned my back on them and walked to the other side of the courtyard, where I slipped down a wall and nursed my head.

Over fallen pieces of tree, I watched Jack moving around, slow and calm, like a coroner doing the rounds. Every few steps, he bent to touch someone with his uninjured hand. Maybe he was closing their eyes, touching cheeks, smoothing hair, collecting souls. The man needed a stiff drink.

The thought of Ingrid fluttered around me. I waved her way.

I staggered to my feet, supporting myself along the wall, climbing over the rubble and made it quietly back through the dining hall, pushing open the blackened service door (which with a counter now led elsewhere) to the remains of the kitchen. Only the chimney breast remained, the other walls had fallen like stage sets, and ash floated on the air. Copper pots were black, filled with rockpools of debris, the pewter crockery had morphed into messes.

I lifted the bathtub, heavy with debris, and took the cellar key from underneath.

The door to the cellar had been reduced to kindling; I knocked the rest out, before heading down the stairs. At the bottom, there were no signs of fire at all, and the lock grated, cellar opened into a dry, gloriously un-fire-scented shelter full of food. I found

wine, pulled at the cork with my teeth and gulped back half the bottle before thinking better of it. I managed to get outside before throwing it up.

On my way back to get Jack to share in my food quarry, I went through the entrance hall and discovered a boy standing there, carrying a lantern. He was ten years old, maybe. Blonde. Around his shoulders, he wore the patchwork bedspread that'd been on my bed before the fire. His nose was bleeding, blood running into his mouth to drip into the ash and snow. It made sticky little craters. I knew him. He was the giant boy in the sky who'd stoked the fire of my London flat. As I watched now, he knelt and set his lantern on the ground.

I looked at Crane, 'What is this?'

But Crane had abandoned me.

Up close, the boy was almost transparent, like a boy printed onto acetate. There were pine needles on his bare feet. His expression was wild, and not quite there, like he'd woken recently from a very deep sleep.

'Who are you?' I asked, but I wasn't sure he heard me.

I would have stayed longer, gotten him to speak to me, but there was shouting coming from the courtyard, and it sounded like Jack. I ran wobbly lines through Hall, clambering up and down over rubble, to find Jack knelt in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by the dead, displaying a level of sorrow I'd never witnessed on anyone before, not even Esther. On his knees in the ash, Jack milled his forehead into the ground, bellowing with rage.

'Bloody hell,' I muttered, before avalanching down to him. 'Stop it!'

I yanked him up, head off the ground, grey now with dirt. I tried to get him to his feet. He was breathing hard and fast, chest expanding collapsing, expanding, collapsing.

‘This place...’ he began.

‘You’re losing it, stop.’

I got him to standing, but his attention was on the bodies at our feet.

‘My god,’ he said. ‘My god.’

‘I know, but hey, stop, don’t look at them.’

Jack closed his eyes, freezing like a child at a party when the music stops. Don’t move, or you’re out.

‘We’re alive,’ I said. ‘We’re okay.’

‘No, Benjamin.’ He shook his head and spoke in short bursts as his breathing allowed. ‘I don’t matter. We don’t matter. Not on a humanist or a... A logical or a... Mathematical level, do we matter. Two people alive... Out of how many? You’re so quick to... Forget other people.’

‘I’m not,’ I said, terse as I lied. ‘Mate, calm the hell down already.’

‘You think all these different places... All the different worlds you’ve seen... Give us endless opportunities to... To have a go at creating the right type of world? Ah, we messed up here... But there are thousands of other worlds... To experiment with, no? No! That’s not it. Everything’s connected. Everything is one. To mess up here is to... Mess up everywhere. We can’t simply... We can’t close the doors behind us. They fester. They leak. They—’

I shoved him hard, so he staggered backwards to the ground. From the ashes and flagstones, he opened his eyes to stare at me in surprise, but it was my turn for a speech.

‘I don’t forget people!’ I shouted. ‘I just haven’t gotten around to thinking about any of that night – any of this! – because we were rainforesting, and then I died, and then I woke up and now I’m here in front of you, and you haven’t given me a chance to

think, have you? Maybe you shouldn't think either? Stop all your bloody philosophising. Philosophy's for comfortable places where no one's lives are depending on you.'

I rubbed a hand down my face.

'Look. Sorry. We'll go and eat. And I'll... I don't know, I'll make us a cup of tea, or something. We'll stay here tonight. Sleep. Figure out what to do.' *So come on now. Repress that guilt faster, will you? Trample it down, there you go. That's better, isn't it?* 'It wasn't our fault, Jack. Providence made the decision for us. There was nothing else we could've done.'

Jack drew a breath, nodded once, and together we waited while his breathing slowed. The sky grew dark above us, shadows crept, ice stretched. Finally, he moved. It was a strange ritual he performed then, like he'd done it a thousand times before: he held his hands out in front of him and examined his palms, the backs of his hands, flexing them like trying on new gloves. Then he opened and closed his jaw, clicked his neck back and forth. Resettled his person in his body. And then he rose, almost golden Jack again, standing there in the ruins, in the wind and the cold. He laughed, clear and bitter.

'Okay, then,' I said. 'Sorted.'

We retreated to the cellar, sat either side of a gas lamp, as per tradition, its flame burning high to give us a bit of warmth. We opened tins and found cold stew inside, which wasn't tempting. The building above us, despite not being there, still reverberated with phantom echoes of life moving around; severed limbs itching into oblivion. The husk of the building cooling, settling into its final ruined state. Tomorrow, the forest

would rush up to it, until all that remained was an oversized chestnut amid the pine. *And anon methought the wood began to move!*

Jack was quiet. He'd walked, talked, cried himself dry. But I forced him to tell me what was going to happen tomorrow. Tomorrow? We'd attempt to follow the survivors. Survivors? There had to be some! There were only four or five hundred dead. Only. That left over a thousand unaccounted for, which was too many for the journeyman to have taken in. and there were ways he and Providence had for finding each other. There'd be some sort of trail left for us, a pathway through the labyrinth made of carved half-moons, he said. He didn't know where it would lead us, the people of Hall might have been chased anywhere. And it wouldn't be an easy road for me, no, not at all; we both knew I travelled through worlds like a candyfloss-filled amnesiac on a merry-go-round. We'd think about that tomorrow though. Let's sleep.

But I had another question.

'You and Providence have a deeper plan to win this war. There's something solid under all this revolution crap. I can see it. I want to know what it is.'

It was a while before Jack said, 'We've begun to differ.'

'What's Jack's plan then?'

He didn't answer.

'Okay. What's Providence's?'

'I'm not going to speak for her.'

'I heard her say that you have something which could be bargained with the journeymen to save lives. You argued with her and refused to use it. Has today changed your mind?'

He faded, perhaps realising precisely which scene I'd witnessed. 'It hasn't.'

‘Could this thing, whatever it is, help Crane?’

‘There won’t be a bargain, Benjamin.’

‘But if there was, could it help Crane?’

His silence was answer enough.

‘Right, I see, good. Great, even. But the problem is you’re not going to tell me what it is, are you? And I’ve been wracking my brain, struggling to come up with something that might be worth any amount at all to the journeymen.’

‘You’ve been thinking on this?’

‘There’s been a lot of time walking. But, actually, it was today which gave me my idea – which I’d like you to hear me out on, because I’m quite proud of it – when I realised that you don’t actually give a flying crap about anything, apart from people, do you? You’re secretly, deeply, embarrassingly in love with humanity. So why not save some of them, if you could, whatever the price? Unless – and this is the good bit – it was another human being or set of human beings you were trying to save? Am I right? Someone you’re more partial to than everyone else? Your favourite?’

Jack laid down his tin of stew. He rearranged himself to sit cross-legged, the management of his limbs buying him time to think of a response, but even then, the best he could come up with was:

‘I didn’t say I had a favourite.’

‘Ah, but you do though, right?’ I grinned. ‘Male, female? Brother, sister? Best buddy? Lover? Mum? Dad? Got any kids? It doesn’t matter really. Only, why would the journeymen give a crap?’

Something in him twisted, snapped, bobbed up to his face as a grimace and then all was calm waters again.

‘Do you really want to know the answer to that?’ he asked.

‘I’m right, aren’t I?’ I was very proud. ‘Yes, I want to know.’

‘You don’t.’

‘I do.’

He spoke then like he was reading out loud in English lessons, a detached and difficult text: ‘There’s one thing which the journeymen have been searching for as avidly as their utopia, because as perfect as they deemed themselves, they aren’t yet past revenge. They won’t ever be able to forgive that colossal world-ending crime which set them on their political path twenty-one years ago.’

‘You...’ I began. ‘I mean, are we actually talking about someone who murdered billions of people?’

Jack nodded. ‘We are.’

‘But they’re a criminal. How’ve they never been caught?’

‘Oh, he nearly has been on a good number of occasions. And again, quite recently. I’ve told my colleagues everything about him, you see – his name, occupation, address, eye colour.’ A bitter laugh. ‘They’re forceful, and I’m not strong.’

‘Then they have him?’

‘Not quite.’

‘But you know where he is now?’

‘I do.’

‘Bloody hell, Jack. The journeymen are wrong about a whole lot of stuff, extremely wrong, but wanting to hunt that tosser down isn’t one of them. Why the hell are you protecting him?’

Jack leant against the wall. He was the saddest man I’d ever seen, again, the one



I'd seen being comforted by Providence. He'd been cast from sadness; as a child been dipped into it by the ankle.

'Because he was the person who's loved me the most in my life. Granted, there haven't been many. And because he did it for me.'

'What d'you mean?'

'What I say.' He was weary.

'I don't understand.'

'I was there when it happened.'

'The end of the world?'

'It was my fault. I watched that planet get torn up and flung into nothing, with all the people blasted away.'

*Bloody hell.* 'But you didn't do it yourself?'

'No. That's why I was allowed to live when they caught me. God, and I was just a child.'

'Who caught you?'

'Arguably, they were good to me.'

'You mean the journeymen.'

'If the disaster had been my fault, I would've killed myself, almost certainly. It would've been easier, I think. But all those people died *for* me, so I could escape them. But I didn't manage it in the end. Now I have to live, no matter what's done to me, because they're all with me, all the time, all of them. Their skin under my skin, hands in my hands, faces beneath my face. They're with me every day. They've never left. I'm heavy with them.' His tone remained reasonable, like what he'd said didn't make him a lunatic. 'They weren't good people, though. It wasn't only me they hurt.'

‘A world was destroyed for *you*?’

‘You say it like that? Of course, you do. It’s surprising I’d be worth that to anyone.’

‘I didn’t mean that. But, come on...’

‘Providence wants to give him up in exchange for a ceasefire. A good plan. One life for many. A game of numbers where she’d come out well.’

‘She’s right, you know.’

‘Benjamin,’ he said. ‘Please don’t think I’ve not tried to make amends. But I’m torn between promises and to give him up would only make the journeymen’s cause ideologically stronger – they’d finally have the real, living, guilty incarnation of a person to blame, and it would make their ideas concrete in the minds of so many of them. I can’t let that happen. At the moment, so many of them are unsure about what they believe. Most of them are simple border police, they don’t see how they’re all linked together into a federation of worlds that don’t talk to each other. They have leaders and systems and operations, but the most tangible form of their ideals is a manifesto and a leader on shaky ground in the current climate because even he doesn’t seem to know what he’s talking about.’ He smiled, desperate. ‘There are hundreds of good people whispering, burrowing away at the foundations of their own systems. The journeymen are fractious and fearful, increasingly violent, increasingly disparate. Give them a good shove at the right time, and I believe – no, I hope, I can’t believe anything – that it will all come tumbling down. But look at you, you think I’ve done the wrong thing.’

‘I do. And I think you’re talking bollocks,’ I said, patience gone. ‘All that is just nice logic to cover up your own selfishness. You can’t keep him—’

‘I can!’ he shouted, the sound too loud in the cellar.

He got to his feet.

‘Oh, I can,’ he was wild. ‘You’ve got no idea what I’ve done to keep him safe. I’ve re-written maps, I blocked his entire world, I’ve burnt down a hundred doors. I’ve killed. So I’m warning you, Benjamin, stop talking now.’

‘You’re a sodding hypocrite!’ I shouted, furious, standing too. ‘It was you – *you* who literally just said that two people don’t matter. So why the sod are you allowing all these people to be slaughtered for this one guy? Why the bloody hell is this different?’

He put his face in his hands, then looked at me. ‘I never claimed the strength of character to follow my own advice.’

‘You’re making decisions that are too big!’

‘Leave it.’

‘Jack!’ I cried. ‘You can’t decide that someone who destroyed a whole bloody planet has more right to life than everyone else.’

‘I can. I did.’

‘What about all those dead people outside?’ I demanded. ‘Would a ceasefire have saved them? You cry over them, but you essentially killed them, didn’t you?’

‘Please...’

‘What about Crane? I have a favourite too.’

‘Benjamin—’

‘How come yours is more important than mine?’

He laughed. And his words – his oh-so-careful reasoning – when they came, were slow, his tone light, as though making a casual remark to a room full of friends, an anecdote or a punchline, though to no one in particular, waving a cocktail in the air. ‘I

think you know,' he said. 'You did it.'

'No,' I said. 'No. You can piss right off.'

I took up the lantern and vacated the cellar, leaving him in darkness, emerging up the steps into the night, and I crossed through the ruined building inside a swinging globe of light. I clambered over the remains of the dining table, through thickets of steaming rafters, through the battlefield until I stepped down through the ash and lost my leg for a moment into nothing, scraping my shin as I pulled it out and there, in a room I didn't recognise, I swore and stopped, surrounded by blackened walls.

I was so, so far from home. For the first time, I felt the full truth of that. London had been tugging at me just as much as Crane had. I longed for my own bed and a cup of tea and someone, *anyone*, to sit close next to me and tuck in the covers and tell me it was all going to be okay because you're home now Benji love, you're home.

I took a breath.

Straightened my jacket.

I struggled out of the landscape of Hall with its fire-stench and frozen dead people and walked a long way down the shore of the lake clacking across the pebbles to where the grass was edging through thinning snow. Spring was coming. There I sat down in the cold. I turned down the lantern until the flame went out and warmed my fingers on the glass. The stars were bright over the ice.

I'd known, hadn't I?

Not any facts, but the shape of it. Every act of goodness or kindness I'd ever done was a struggle against myself; really, I was black inside. I'd tried and tried, but there it was: the truth. The sentence. The decision. I was bad. Rotten to the core. Irredeemable.

It was the worst feeling I'd ever felt. To have that black core of yourself turned inside out and spread out before you with no going back.

But no; god, Ben, come on! It wasn't true, of course, it wasn't true!

I couldn't remember anything, I wasn't guilty, I was *good*, I tried every day to be good, that made me good, and Jack was lying, bloody *hell*, was he ever lying; he was piling on the layers of distraction, layers and layers of confusion, what wouldn't he say to keep me away from his journeymen? That had been it from the beginning, hadn't it; *keep Ben away from the journeymen everyone, oh sure, he might complain, but who actually gives a crap about him or his little pal?* So it wasn't true.

But I'd betrayed Redman, hadn't I? Then I'd betrayed Hall.

'Crane!' I cried, desperate. 'Come back!'

I waited.

'Please!'

And waited.

I was alone, and my mind rotated fast, pulled over and over between two different poles. There were too many, too many thoughts, they came streaming out of me like beams of light, and I was a pulsar, spinning radiation and light out onto the crumbled walls of Hall, onto the trees, onto the sides of the mountains, to see me from space would be to see a flickering, incessant radiance getting faster and faster and faster until it filled the whole of the caldera and probably exploded with such force that the mountains trembled and the birds a hundred miles away took flight.

Jack had fallen asleep where I'd left him. He looked horrible and sick and wanting of a good meal and cheerful company, and like he needed more sleep even as he slept.

Someone needed to go inside his dreams and tell dream-Jack to head to bed and stop pacing around, worrying about things. But that wouldn't be me. My polarity had, tonight, aligned itself opposite to that of Niklaus Ferðasson's, and no force of nature would ever be able to force them back together.

I put the lantern on a shelf and waited until his eyelids stopped flickering and his breathing was deep, before taking my counter from his pocket. I left the cellar. Closed the door. Turned the key in the lock.

Inside, Ferðasson was up fast at the sound, throwing his little weight against the wood. *Don't leave me! Don't go. They'll kill you, Benjamin!* Etcetera, etcetera, and on and on, while I remained silent and finally, when Ferðasson had stopped, I went to find the first carved moon.

**PART THREE**  
**BENJAMIN (SUMMARY)**

**Due to this submission's word count, the final part of *Mr London* cannot be included has been included as a summary.**

### **Chapter Fifteen**

Benjamin abandons Jack and travels on through worlds alone. Tracking the people who escaped Hall, he follows a trail of little moons carved on doorways. It is a chaotic and muddled journey. Benjamin passes through old towns, stadiums, woods, abandoned cities, and hospitals, but he feels like he is floating alone in the spaces between planets. He is losing himself, unable to remember, curling in on himself. Often, he reminds himself who he is by looking over items in his pockets, and takes to writing messages on his hands, reminding himself that he's looking for Crane. Once, he discovers he has written the words 'You're a fucking murderer'.

Finally, Benjamin is discovered in a train compartment, covered in vomit, by three travellers who are also following carved moons. One of these travellers is Redman, who is looking for his sister, Ingrid. Redman is excited to see Benjamin. Redman brings Benjamin back to himself by reminding him of London and Crane, 'his heavy friend with the beard'. Redman explains that doors to and from London opened soon after Benjamin left, and everyone trapped there has finally managed to leave. Benjamin guesses this is because he was no longer in London to keep safe, so Jack reopened the doors.



Benjamin joins Redman's team, and they all travel on together, with Redman keeping Benjamin 'safely him'.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Benjamin and Redman catch up with the people who escaped Hall, who have made a base in an old bank full of vaults and vast marble atriums. Benjamin realises he's made a mistake in entering this new 'nest', because if Providence finds him, she will give him straight to the journeymen. He keeps his head down to avoid being recognised but begins to panic.

They pass by a window which looks out over a river and a city. They are told that they are in the middle of the journeymen's city. One of Redman's team panics at this news, fleeing back the way they came, and Benjamin takes the opportunity to slip away and hide in a tight alcove between a pillar and a window. He struggles not to panic as he stares out over the city.

Hours later, nighttime now, Benjamin's legs are numb from hiding in the alcove, trying to work out what to do next. Ingrid – who Benjamin is overjoyed to see is not dead – comes to find Mr London. She thanks him quietly for bringing her brother back and describes how journeymen had followed the people of Hall from world to world until there were only a few hundred of them left. Providence had brought them here in desperation, believing that the journeymen would not want to commit a witnessed crime on their own doorstep. There has been a stalemate between them for a week.

Ingrid tells Benjamin that the prison where Crane is being held, the block, is across the river, underneath a glass-domed parliamentary building that they can see from the window, and she wishes him luck in trying to get there. But before she leaves,

a siren goes off across the river, and planes arrive in the sky to bomb the city. There is, apparently, another rebellion going on parallel to the refugee's own. Ingrid leaves to go down to safety in the cellars.

From his hiding place, Benjamin watches the raid until it is over and dozes.

In the night, he wakes to find a taut red thread trailing from his abdomen, leading him out of his hiding place and away down the corridor. Benjamin follows the thread down into cellars below the bank, stepping over sleeping people until he reaches Providence's private room and wakes her by putting a hand over her mouth. Benjamin steals back Jack's counter and escapes as Providence raises the alarm.

Soon hiding again in an apparently empty room, Benjamin finds himself surrounded by bodies of people killed by the refugees when the bank was taken over. Among the dead, he is pleased to discover a mirrored mask.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Benjamin escapes the bank using Jack's counter and, wearing the journeyman's mask over his black suit, hurries to cross a bridge to the other side of the city. Here, buildings are rubble or burning fast, and everything is darkness, flicking light and thick smoke. The world is hellish. Benjamin is afraid but presses on. Ahead of him is the glass dome of parliament, which looms like a setting moon.

The red thread leads Benjamin to a closed underground train system. He has to break the gate to get inside and draws attention to himself. He is chased by two journeymen down to an empty platform, and Benjamin jumps onto the tracks to escape down the train tunnel. The red thread leads him to hide in a maintenance tunnel as

journeymen race on by. Benjamin uses this maintenance tunnel to travel deep underground, finally arriving at an outlet to a vast underground cavern.

This cavern is the aircraft hangar Benjamin once saw into from Waterloo Bridge. The far end is a hewn rock wall, where doorways made of light open and close onto a variety of other skies, letting journeymen jets in and out. There is a battle going on somewhere, if not more than one, and the hangar is full of people working frantically to equip fighters and get them out to combat. The red thread unspools straight across the hangar to a tunnel beyond, and Benjamin, heart in his chest, walks unnoticed through chaos.

After much unfruitful and quietly frantic searching, Benjamin discovers a hidden door, guarded by two armed journeymen. He uses Jack's counter as proof of status and gains access, to step into a lift. He travels downwards for a long time and arrives in a dark, low cave filled with a lake. There is a walkway across the lake, and Benjamin follows it to enter another cave with another lake. He passes through a dozen similar caves, until, finally, he reaches a cave that, instead of a lake, has a wide abyss going down into the earth. Benjamin descends a spiral staircase.

At the bottom, there is a way to the left and to the right. Benjamin chooses to travel right because he hears shouting coming from the left. He travels down through increasingly rough cave systems, and eventually arrives at the block. The block is a vast mechanical sphere like a moon trapped deep underground, surrounded by a ring of walkway. Benjamin is afraid and jubilant, but a masked journeyman discovers and confronts him. The men fight. Benjamin kills the journeyman and pushes the body from the walkway down a crevasse between rock and moon. He is pleased to have gained a journeyman's gun.

Benjamin enters the block. The smell is horrendous. Inside, it is a dark cube of thousands of glass panels, each an entrance to a cell. Benjamin can hear people knocking on the glass beneath his feet, see their finger smears in faeces and the whites of their eyes watching him. He is overwhelmed with disgust and fear. He calculates that Crane's cell is currently on the ceiling and, with difficulty, manages to work out how to turn the block to reach Crane. The block turns with Benjamin still inside, slipping down the slopes and scrambling to Crane's cell when it hits bottom. Benjamin opens the cell, but it is empty.

The lights come on in the block as two journeymen enter. Benjamin hurries to hide in the empty cell, standing in filth, his London travel card stopping the catch from locking. The journeymen converse above him. Benjamin learns that, in the city above, the journeymen are holding a parliamentary session in the middle of a new air raid. Soon, the block will be flooded to hide the evidence of violence should the city fall, and that the important prisoners have been moved elsewhere.

When the journeymen leave, Benjamin climbs out of the cell and lies there, willing himself to move, not to give up. He recalls the angry voices that had prevented him from taking the left-hand path, and he decides to check to see if that was where Crane was taken. Benjamin drags himself out of the block, through the tunnels, back to the bottom of the spiral staircase. Gun up, he goes down the left-hand tunnel.

Benjamin finds himself in a pleasantly furnished room with a sofa, pot plants, desk, and a dead man. There is evidence of journeyman guns being recently used on the walls. Beyond this, he finds a questioning room and holding cells. One of the cells is open and empty except for a pile of rags, which Benjamin slowly recognises as Crane.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

Crane is barely recognisable. He is half starved, and his beard has been shaved off. He is hurt, broken and afraid. During the recent skirmish, he was stabbed in the stomach by quarrelling journeymen. Benjamin tries to stem the bleeding.

Crane begs Benjamin to leave, explaining he was mistaken for Benjamin back in London all those weeks ago; he has given his life to save his friend, only to find them both in the same hellhole in the end.

Benjamin refuses to leave. To his horror, Benjamin realises he lost Jack's counter in the block. He forces Crane to stand, despite his friend's agony, and pulls Crane onto his back, far less heavy now. With great effort, Benjamin gets them both out of the holding cell, through tunnels to the bottom of the spiral staircase. They hear bombing overhead, and Crane asks who is bombing London?

In the slow journey up the staircase, Crane drifts in and out of consciousness. Benjamin climbs. The friends whisper memories London, particularly all the smells they miss, from fox piss to beer. Benjamin can feel Crane's blood on his back. Halfway up the stairs, Crane dies.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Numb with grief, Benjamin decides to present the journeymen with evidence of their violence. He drags Crane's body up the remaining stairs, along walkways over underground lakes, and towards the aircraft hangar. The hangar is eerily empty of people, and rubble rains down from the continued bombing. Benjamin continues up through the journeyman base, looking for people. The base around him becomes

increasingly grandiose, like a palace. Finally, he hears a crowd of people and carries Crane into the parliament of journeymen.

The parliament is a large, cathedral-like space, much like St Paul's cathedral. It is filled with thousands of nervous journeymen. Benjamin carries Crane down the aisle towards the cathedral's centre, where a group of senior politicians sit in circles around a lone man giving a speech. The man talking is Jack. Jack is currently Niklaus Ferðasson, a more significant figure to the journeymen than Benjamin had known. Jack appears anxious of an elderly politician sitting close by. At Jack's insistence, Benjamin is allowed to walk to the central stage and lay Crane's body down. Jack shows no signs of recognising Benjamin.

Benjamin is forced to kneel and listen to Jack's continued speech. Increasingly afraid, he retreats into his imagination and finds himself on the rooftop in Selwood Gardens, listening to Jack's speech through a radio. Esther is there, and she comforts Benjamin, commenting that the man on the radio sounds like him, with all his talk of the stars. Together, Benjamin and Esther listen as Jack informs the assembled journeymen of the number of rebels the journeymen have killed, 'offhandedly' confirming the widespread nature of the journeymen's violence. The unease of the crowd hisses through the radio. Esther becomes concerned and asks Benjamin where he is.

Benjamin reopens his eyes onto the cathedral, where the crowds are restless and horrified, and the bombings continue. Jack is still speaking. Esther has followed Benjamin from the garden and, on seeing the situation, is terrified on his behalf. Benjamin begins to panic, shouting at Esther to shut up, interrupting Jack's proceedings. Esther disappears, and, with the attention of the cathedral drawn to him,

Benjamin shouts that he hates them all, gesturing around to the sickening world they've created. In so doing, he brings the crowd's attention to the glass dome above them, where a distant figure on a balcony suddenly ducks out of view and fires a gunshot at Jack.

The shot misses, but the cathedral is thrown into temporary chaos. Many of the journeymen flee through doorways they create in flashes of light. The shooter up in the balcony is captured by guards and brought down to kneel before Jack. The shooter is Providence. Jack is at a loss, in shock. Once again, he shows no signs of already knowing her. Providence is put to kneeling next to Benjamin. She seethes with hatred towards Jack and warns everyone that revolution is in the city and is coming for them. More journeymen flee. In the commotion, Providence suggests that, to stop the oncoming violence, Jack needs to give the angry people outside something to blame and destroy.

Benjamin realises that, once again, they are arguing about whether or not to hand Benjamin over. He is exhausted and can barely bring himself to care that Jack seems to be agreeing.

Jack takes a gun from a guard, and Benjamin believes he is going to be killed. Instead, Jack puts the gun to Providence's head. She warns him that, if he kills her, her people will come for him. Jack accepts this and shoots Providence. She splits down the middle from the light of the weapon and slips to the floor. Jack angrily kicks at what's left of her.

Violence breaks out throughout the cathedral, with surges of journeymen trying to detain Jack, appalled by his violence, while others protect him. A swarm of guards

surrounds Jack to remove him from the cathedral, and Jack orders that Benjamin is brought too. Benjamin is dragged away from Crane's body.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Outside the cathedral, corridors are a battlefield. Benjamin and Jack are defended by loyal journeymen, who die for them, one by one. They are taken to Jack's living quarters at the top of the building, which overlook the city. While the journeymen guard the outer rooms, Benjamin and Jack are locked into a large room. Here, the walls are covered in portraits, and Benjamin realises this is the gallery he stepped into from his rooftop in London. All those weeks ago, he'd stepped right into the middle of journeymen hell, before Jack had pushed him back out.

Benjamin is terrified of Jack now. Jack tries to calm Benjamin, as disgusted as Benjamin is about what happened to Providence, claiming that she told him to do it. Benjamin does not believe Jack and grows increasingly wild.

Jack tries to explain that Benjamin just ruined Jack and Providence's attempt to remove Jack as the journeymen's figurehead through assassination.

Jack explains that, years ago, he wrote the manifesto of the journeymen. He had been a boy, and it had been in the aftermath of witnessing a world being destroyed. He had been angry and afraid. Although they were written by a child, the journeymen took up his words and reprinted them as the grey book with the moon on the cover. He explains that 'journeymen' is a rough translation of his own name, Ferðasson, 'son of the journey'. Jack is ashamed of the manifesto, calls it vile and immature. For years he has been working to undo his influence. His plan had been to remove Ferðasson as the journeyman's figurehead. This plan ruined, their second plan, hastily constructed while



Providence knelt in the cathedral, was to unequivocally show the journeymen that Niklaus Ferðasson wasn't worth following.

Suddenly, there is fighting outside the gallery, and Benjamin and Jack listen to their loyal journeymen being killed. The door is unlocked and opened. The elderly politician from the cathedral, who Jack had been so anxious of, enters with two masked journeymen. He has come to kill Nicklaus Ferðasson for conspiring with the rebels. The journeymen lift Jack up, carry him across the gallery, and pin him against latticed windows. The politician begins to hurt Jack, cutting into his forehead and mocking him for his failed plans and his childish pursuit of friendship. The politician knows who Benjamin is, and mocks Jack for having ruined all his own careful plans of self-assassination; Jack gave himself away to the politician by visiting London to say a final goodbye to Benjamin.

Benjamin is appalled by Jack's fear and fragility. He thinks Jack looks like a child and remembers a glimpse of their first meeting as children: Benjamin crying in Selwood Gardens, asking what Jack's name was and, upon not getting an answer, naming him the boy Jack from a bench in the garden.

Back in the gallery, suddenly overwhelmed with fear for Jack, Benjamin shouts at the journeymen to stop hurting him.

A bomb drops on the gallery, taking a wall of portrait with it, turning the gallery into a stage set looking out over the city. Benjamin hurries to pull Jack out of the destruction. The politician and journeymen are under the rubble or fallen to the street below. Jack is bleeding from his forehead, but otherwise unharmed.

Benjamin looks out over the city which is now swelling with incoming revolutions from a dozen different worlds, alongside different factions of the

journeymen adding themselves to the revolutionaries' cause. People are massing outside parliament in the square below, waiting to swarm into the building. For the first time, Benjamin believes that he is to blame. He admits to Jack that he believes he destroyed the world although he still can't remember. To stop the violence in the city, Benjamin and Jack decide to hand themselves over.

Leaving the gallery, they walk together back through the building down to the cathedral. The cathedral is empty but full of so many dead, Benjamin can't find Crane. Together, Benjamin and Jack wait for the crowds to come. When they do, Benjamin realises things have already escalated too far. He and Jack will die without anyone knowing who they are, their deaths providing nothing of the political catharsis they had imagined. The revolution rushes across the cathedral, and the two men are about to be swallowed up.

Through the glass ceiling of the dome, an ocean of water smashes down onto the crowds in the cathedral. In the tumult, Benjamin quickly loses Jack and struggles not to get swept away. He clings to a pillar with white water rising fast around him, thinking that all the worlds are trying to drown him for what he did as a boy. Too exhausted to hold on, Benjamin slips beneath the surface.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Benjamin remembers a summer afternoon when he and Crane were eighteen. Crane just got his first car, and they go for a drive together, intending to leave London, but instead repeatedly circumnavigating the M25. They make plans to travel the world together.

Benjamin wakes alone in a tent. He is bruised, battered, depleted, but alive. Outside, there is a pine forest filled with other tents and bonfires. Benjamin can hear

music and goes towards it. At a campfire, strangers celebrate and feed Benjamin, which he numbly eats.

Redman, who has a new dog, discovers Benjamin and gets Ingrid. They lead Benjamin through the forest to a lakeshore, and he realises that he is back at Hall; the ice has thawed and it's now spring. They head around the lake to the ruin of Hall, where people are making pyres to burn bodies. Here, they find Jack, who Benjamin hugs, extremely relieved. Jack is glad Benjamin remembers him.

They tell Benjamin that Ingrid stole a counter from a dead journeyman and opened a doorway in the sky above the cathedral and let the water in, dowsing the escalating violence. The journeymen are disbanded, the refugees currently free to live as they please, although no one knows what might happen next.

Benjamin and Jack walk on around the lake, arriving at the small, ruined building Benjamin came across during his failed attempt to escape Hall. They sit, and Jack finally recounts the story of what happened to them as boys.

Aged twelve, Benjamin was in Selwood Gardens, crying because his mother had died. Jack entered the garden through a (now bricked up) door in the garden wall. It was an accidental meeting, Jack venturing through worlds when people's backs were turned. The boys took an immediate liking to one another, and Jack offered Benjamin an escape from funerals and sadness, with a trip to Jack's home: Hall.

To Benjamin, Hall was a wonderland of green summertime. The boys spent their days in the forest, swimming in the lake and sleeping under the stars in the ruins, where the two men now sit. The boys spent hours talking together about space and became firm friends. However, every evening Jack went back to the main building to meet with some adults who arrived through the island's door, crossing the lake back and forth in a

little boat. Jack stayed with them every day for a few hours. Benjamin was forbidden to follow. Upon questioning, Jack said the adults are scientists.

One night there was a storm, and Benjamin was left outside alone. He went to Hall seeking shelter and walked up through the empty rooms, to finally discover what had been happening every evening to Jack. The scientists had been using Jack to try and work out how to open new doorways, the origins of the technology that the journeymen perfected a few decades later. But there was a terrible side effect to this. (The side effect is a secret kept between the two men, private even from the reader). Benjamin became so enraged on Jack's behalf that he took a prototype counter, swam across the lake after the scientists – Jack chasing after him, begging him to stop – and followed the scientists into their own world. There, Benjamin opened a doorway in the sky, stretching it so large that the moon was set off kilter and started to fall towards the planet. Benjamin immediately closed the doorway, but it was too late. He fled as the moon disintegrated and rained inferno.

Jack dragged Benjamin home to Selwood Gardens, where he was chased away by Benjamin's angry father. Jack got absorbed back into the aftermath of catastrophe and resultant political movements. After a week of sleep in his own bed, Benjamin woke to remember nothing at all. Two weeks later, he started high school, met Arthur Crane, and poured all his need for a lost friend into him.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Benjamin is lying with Ingrid in a tent. They are both sad. Ingrid is guilty about the people she killed with the ocean, including Rose. Benjamin recalls the recent burning of Crane's body on a pyre of portraits taken from Jack's gallery, and the chain of similar

fires all around the lakeshore. Jack had stood by him and gently suggested he should go home to London, but Benjamin refused.

Ingrid agrees to help Benjamin leave Hall; he wants time alone to grieve. Ingrid and Redman walk Benjamin to a quiet spot in the woods to say goodbye. On the way out of camp, Benjamin sees a golden tent and is lured towards it. Jack is inside talking to a gathering about his dreams of stars and space travel. It is the same dream that so hooked Benjamin back in Kensington. Benjamin resists going inside, although he is tempted. Ingrid opens a doorway, the counter previously set to 'somewhere safe' by Jack. She promises to open the way every evening, should Benjamin want to return.

Benjamin arrives in a cold, scrubby world of brambles, finally alone. He is full of relief and sorrow. He follows a trail and comes to a valley spanned by a concrete bridge. Underneath, a group of men and women huddle around a fire for warmth. Benjamin joins them and talks half-madly of his experiences until he recognises a rumbling above and realises he is sitting beneath the M25. Jack has tricked him, sending him home to London.

Walking into the city, Benjamin is alarmed at how small London feels and that it's already Christmas. He walks the miles to Finsbury Park, arriving late at night. He knocks on the house he once shared with Crane. Esther answers. Benjamin finally tells her Crane is dead.

Esther invites him inside. Benjamin is unable to speak about his experiences. He feels a new fondness for Esther because she comforted him in the cathedral. He tells her the story of the man swimming into the lake to save the moon, asking her if she thought he was stupid for trying. Esther responds by asking why he'd thought he'd had to swim out alone.

Benjamin cannot stay in London; the police have linked him to the massacre in Soho, the explosion on Waterloo Bridge and the incident on the London underground. He decides to return to Jack, imagining himself slipping into the golden tent and sitting in the audience to listen to his friend talk about the stars.

# **EIGHT TROPES OF FRIENDSHIP NARRATIVES**

# Introduction

When writing *Mr London*, one of the biggest challenges was creating a bond between characters, through all their struggles and arguments, which was recognisably friendship. Friendship seemed to have an ethereal quality which was not easily pinned down or concretised – as soon as it appeared in a scene, it began to disappear again. As this essay explores, friendship not necessarily easily definable from one context to another, due to it being an abstract form of relationship, often existing only in the heads of the participants. Therefore, not only is it a struggle for friendship to define itself structurally, both in real life and in fiction, but, once defined, the very goal of fictional friendship seems to be to transfigure itself once again into something else, something higher and more spiritually abstract.

And yet, clearly fictional representations of friendship do exist. There is friendship in folklore from all over the world, including Loki and Odin in Norse mythology, Damon and Pythias from Greek mythology, Karn and Duryodhan from Hindu stories, David and Jonathan in the Bible, and King Arthur and his knights in Celtic mythology, and in these stories friendship is something of honour and ‘brotherhood’, often elevated above all other forms of relationship (Barnard 74). There is much commentary written on the friendships found classical antiquity: in *Beowulf*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and the Homeric epics (Grayling 3). Meanwhile commentators have identified many different clusters of friendship fiction in more modern times; from



romantic male friendships in American nineteenth-century literature (Nissen 4), to the intense comradeship in literature of First World War (Cole 2), the prevalence of friendship in twentieth century children's literature (O'Keefe 39), and twenty-first century literary representations of online friendships (R. Adams 153), to name a few. This essay therefore seeks to understand how a writer might go about asserting a fictional representation of friendship through understanding friendship's tendencies towards certain plot devices and tropes to express itself so that a reader might recognise characters as being friends at all. Further than that, the essay seeks to understand how, through using these devices, the nature of friendship itself might be explored.

In chapter one, "What Is Friendship?", there is a brief exploration of the field of friendship discussion, particularly drawing from sociological and philosophical viewpoints. There is a discussion of the importance of context to the formation and understanding of friendship, before turning to models of friendship from classical antiquity – Platonic, Aristotelian, and Ciceronian – which still bear much relevance to modern discussions of friendship, setting up discussions of fictional representations in subsequent chapters.

Chapter two, "The Quest of Friendship", explores the commonness of the quest plot in friendship narratives, examining how this plot structure is used by authors to solidify expressions of friendship in fiction through the friends' shared journeys and goals. The chapter differentiates between the geographical dependence of literal quest narratives, and the importance of time in metaphorical journeys, and how each supports the expression of friendship. This chapter, and subsequent chapters, looks to three literary texts whose portrayals of friendship were the most influential to the writing of *Mr London*: Alain-Fournier's 1913 coming of age novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, J.R.R.

Tolkien's 1954 epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*, and Hanya Yanagihara's 2015 literary fiction novel *A Little Life*.

Chapter three, "The Tropes of Friendship", identifies and explores eight common tropes of friendship narratives: cohabitation, feasts, other realms, confessions, oaths, battles, sacrifice, and leave-taking. There is a discussion of the different ways each of these tropes display themselves in literature to not only solidify fictional representations of friendship but to explore and comment upon friendship itself. Ideas for this chapter were formed from looking at a range of friendship narratives recommended by booksellers, academics, writers, and storytellers as literary examples of where they recognised strong representations of friendship. The chapter continues to examine the tropes in the essay's three key literary texts, as well as discussing how the tropes are each used in *Mr London*.

The final chapter, "Disappearing Friendship", examines friendship's tendency to fade away from fiction. It discusses how this disappearing can be used as a dramatic re-enactment of friendship's abstract and spiritual goals through an act of ascension and through an elegiac idealisation of friendship. Finally, the essay considers how friendship is used as a narrative device to concretise the selfhood of characters, and how the final disappearance of that friendship can either complete or unravel this process.

At the end of each chapter or section, the essay returns to an exploration of *Mr London*, and how each discussion informed its creative choices, specifically around the use of narrative structure and story tropes to concretise and explore the friendships between Benjamin, Crane and Jack, but also around the novel's use of friendship itself as a device to form Benjamin as an individual.

Before beginning, it is worth explaining that, while the narratives structures, tropes and real-life experiences of friendship discussed in this essay are arguably relevant to friendships within many different contexts, the examples of friendship narratives discussed here are predominantly of male friendships within a white Western narrative. The essay looks in particular at three main texts – Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes*, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* – as three examples of novels dealing directly with both depictions of and an exploration of male friendship within each of their contexts. These texts were first selected for the projects because, upon casual discussion of friendship literature with other readers, they were among some of the most commonly mentioned novels as having produced strong emotional reactions around their portrayals of male friendship within the texts, and it was this strong recognition of friendship which I wanted to examine and emulate in *Mr London*. Additionally, these were three texts that I had personally engaged with before starting to write *Mr London*, and I was consciously aware while writing the novel of each of their impacts on my own work.

## Chapter One

# What Is Friendship?

While there is no such thing as a definition of friendship that holds true across all times and cultures, or even across the individuals within those times and cultures, the friendship that will be discussed in this essay can be broadly defined as a reciprocal, loyal, intimate and voluntary relationship between two or more individuals, which sits both alongside and apart from more formal societal ties such as family, marriage or nation (Konstan 1). As this chapter will briefly consider, attempts to define friendship much further tend to dissolve, not only into friendship's acute dependence upon the context within which it is found, but also into the ambiguity and paradoxes within friendship itself.

Friendship is what anthropologists might call an 'achieved' relationship, rather than an 'ascribed' relationship, such as family, marriage or ethnicity, meaning that friendship is theoretically free from any 'prior formal connection such as kinship or ethnicity' or the 'constraints' of biological urges (Konstan 1). This apparently voluntary nature of friendship could be considered one of friendship's greatest attributes, with friendly affection and trust being proven by the fact that it is bestowed in the first place, and that each friend is socially free to walk away at any time, but does not (Denworth 64). However, friendship is never entirely free – social boundaries might prevent

friendships from starting, and friendships' formation will also be dictated by the social patterning of factors such as age, gender, and class (Allan, *Friendship* 121).

What is fundamental to our understanding of friendship for the purposes of this essay, however, is that friendship is commonly considered to be a relationship based on more of an abstract than a biological basis (Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* 17), as described in C.S. Lewis' often-quoted passage from *The Four Loves*:

Friendship is – in a sense not derogatory to [friendship] – the least natural of loves; the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary. It has least commerce with our nerves; there is nothing throaty about it; nothing that quickens the pulse or turns you red and pale... Without Eros none of us would have been begotten and without Affection none of us would have been reared; but we live and breed without Friendship. The species, biologically considered, has no need of it. (70)

This abstract quality of friendship means that it can be added to other types of relationship without conflict (Digeser 41), and Ralph Waldo Emerson calls friendship a 'fine ether' that covers the whole family of humanity (205). Friendship can be laid over the top of pre-existing ascribed relationships, perhaps a father and son, or a married couple, and it will only deepen the connectively of relationship, not negate it. Indeed, much of the confusion between erotic love and friendship, as discussed in depth by many commentators (Grayling 89-94; Lewis 77-79; Nehamas 80-83), seems to stem from the commonality of both being found in the same person.

It is perhaps because friendship is abstract and not bound by societal rules that makes friendship both particularly difficult to define from one context to another, and particularly reliant upon its context to give itself any structure at all (Adams and Allan 4). Rebecca Adams and Graham Allan discuss the essential importance of context on understanding friendships: '[friendships] are constructed – developed, modified, sustained, and ended – by individuals acting in contextualised settings' (3). This is a simple, but very important idea for friendship, because it means that, for example, studies of friendships between married women in Britain in the 1990s (Harrison 82-116), show friends expressing and understanding their friendships very differently to, say, the intense male friendships in the trenches of the First World War (Cole 3). Neither formation is more or less friendship, but instead friendship's shapeshifting is a natural response to the different pressures put onto it. Even within the same time and place, parallel contexts for friendship can exist, and influences such as class, ethnicity, and age can create different spheres of friendship has been well-documented (Adams and Allan 8-9; Denworth 185; Sharp, *Friendship and Literature* 67). Gender, in particular, has produced historically separate spheres of friendship experience, with the apparent relative ease of female friendship compared to male friendships in modern Western culture. Sociologist Stacey Oliner attributes this to the shift towards individualism in nineteenth-century society having a markedly different effect on male and female spheres, with male individualism focussing on self-interest and competition, while female individualism nurtured self-expression and intimacy (22-24), while philosopher Alexander Nehamas suggests that male friendships have been eliminated from the public sphere thanks to Christian utilitarianism suggesting that all men should be treated equally, thereby banning displays of friendship within the public sphere (70-

71). Examples such as these begin to give a taster of the complexity of discussing any definitions of friendship.

This context-based construction of friendship goes far to explain why different ‘pockets’ of friendship might exist, where we find friendships that would not necessarily make sense within another context, and this remains true whether we are looking at real life or fictional accounts of context-based friendship. Many scholars, for example, have noted that the famous friendships in the Homeric epics are, to a modern reader, seen as so political and obligatory, devoid of all affection between the men, as to barely seem like friendship at all (Millett 121). Likewise, the intimate letter-writing friendships in the nineteenth century between Ralph Waldo Emerson and his friends, might to modern readers seem sickly sweet to the point of over-sentimentality and falseness (Barnard 111). Meanwhile, modern online friendships and their ‘demise of territorial determinism’ even now are obscure to older generations within the same time and culture (Adams 154-156).

Importantly, Adam and Allan’s discussion claims that both the external and *internal* understandings of friendship are affected by context, meaning that the individual’s interior structure for, understanding of, and motivation for friendship is also dependent upon context, and therefore any definition of friendship is accurate to that one context (9). However, to claim that the internal constructs of friendship differ from friendship to friendship, context to context, is a controversial one, as the idea hints at friendship not having any common core experience or pattern underneath the shifting currents of historical, sociological, and cultural understanding (Nehamas 57). For friendship to not have a core structure, that means not only do we understand friendships within different contexts through the veil of our own understanding, but the

friendships themselves, without a core, might well be a very different thing. David Konstan warns us of overdetermining definitions of friendship through a single context alone, writing that ‘it is not impossible that certain concretizations of a complex term like friendship should even appear contradictory’ (11). He refers to Aristotle’s observations that enquiries of this sort into social matters often have “‘great discrepancy and deviation, so that they seem to exclusively a product of custom rather than of nature’” (11). This leads to the question of whether or not friendship, underneath its complex relationships with context, has any basis in ‘nature’ or basic model which might be common across all friendships; if the definition of friendship itself is only relevant to a particular context, as soon as we look outside that particular context, friendship itself would begin to disappear.

While it is relatively easy to come up with definitions that account for part of friendship, Mark Vernon notes that it is ‘much harder to find one that does not exclude any of its facets’ (*The Meaning of Friendship* 3). Throughout all the fluctuation around defining friendship, it is impossible to miss the influence that ancient philosophers – in particular Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero – had on many discussions of friendship. Throughout the centuries of discourse around friendship, Western writers from many different periods and disciplines have traditionally turned to these ancient philosophies, perhaps because the definitions and explanations they offer of friendship, although none of these is unproblematic, strive towards universal, rather than contextual, definitions of friendship (B. Russell 453). It is therefore worth a brief examination of each of these three models as the most consistently discussed.

For Plato, friendship is almost inextricable from philosophy itself, in a complex and much-discussed relationship, which Mary Nichols summarises as: ‘Only by



experiencing our own as other do we become aware of our need or incompleteness that leads us to pursue wisdom; only by experiencing another as our own do we have any reason to suppose that learning is possible' (1). In the simplest sense, Plato examines the core value of friendship (*philos*) as being the feeding off of the ideas of one another and promoting higher thinking in philosophy. Plato holds any definition of friendship lightly, with Socrates exclaiming at the end of *Lysis*:

O Menexenus and Lysis, how ridiculous that you two boys and I, an old boy, who would fain be one of you, should imagine ourselves to be friends – this is what the bystanders will go away and say – and as yet we have not been able to discover what is a friend!' (Plato, *Dialogues* 32)

Here, despite never arriving at a conclusive definition of friendship, Plato is modelling a pederastic structure of friendship, in which an older mentor engages in a relationship with a younger man. Michael Pakaluk notes the strange disparity between modern definitions of Platonic love and the writing of Plato himself, where the modern understanding tends to be a love between two individuals where erotic passion is non-existent or has been sublimated, while the love originally conceived by Plato was first motivated by passion – erotic or otherwise – for the individual, before ascending *through* that passion towards contemplation of the universal and ideal (Pakaluk 81). In the *Symposium*, the character Diotima sums up the argument:

This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from

beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is what it is to be beautiful. (Plato, *Symposium* 493)

While this may seem an exclusionary model for any universal ideas of friendship, Tom MacFaul writes that through this educative pederasty, Plato is revealing friendship as a ‘primary means through which humanity develops beyond mere biological need... Our affections guide us to transmit our ideas’ (8). In this way, the Platonic model of friendship closely aligns itself with models of philosophical pursuits. Just as family units look after creating and caring for the next generation, Plato’s suggestion is that the universal purpose of friendship is to foster and hand down the ideas and intellectual engagements of that generation.

With a rather different take on things, Aristotle famously defined three distinct forms of friendship in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. First, were friendships of utility; those friendships between people who find each other useful, whether for political, financial, or practical benefit, and who remain friends only so long as the benefit remains mutual (204). Second, were friendships of pleasure, which were friendships focused on shared pleasure from an activity, interest, or even erotic endeavours (204-205). While Aristotle dismissed these first two types of friendship as utilitarian and transitory, almost accidental attachments, he did allow that they were still friendship. However, he was in favour of the third type of friendship: true friendship based on goodness (205-206).

Aristotelian true friendship is characterised by a mutual appreciation of the virtues the other friend holds dear, rather than any utility or pleasure they can provide, and notably does not require the crucial step of desire for the friend found in Platonic love. It is the people themselves and the qualities they represent that provide the two friends' incentive to be in each other's lives.

It is those who desire the good of their friends for the friends' sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is, and not for any incidental quality. Accordingly, the friendship of such men lasts so long as they remain good; and goodness is an enduring quality. (Aristotle 205)

Alexander Nehamas writes that the type of 'good' Aristotle refers to here is an absolute good (*haplos*), a type of good that is indisputably positive for anyone who experiences it (Nehamas 17). For Aristotle, examples of *haplos* include the virtues of character, beauty, and philosophical contemplation (Aristotle 102-103). Nehamas writes that these 'goods' were far more universally good than we might consider them today, due to a widespread belief in ancient Greece in an actual solid realm of perfection, towards which the goods in our own physical realm are aspiring (17). In contrast to this perfection, Aristotle writes that the second type of possible good is a contextual good (*tini*), such as laughter, joking around, or certain types of food, essentially a type of good which is good for one person, but might not be good for another (Nehamas 19). By looking towards *haplos*, the universal good, true friendship is focussed on idealism and perfection which was believed to be truly attainable, and not based merely on the more the fickle goodness of *tini*, which friendships of pleasure and utility strive

towards. As such, for Aristotle, true friendship was a kind of love even greater than any other type, including romantic or familial love (Pangle 23).

Aristotle's ideas were viewed by contemporaries as politically progressive, as most previous definitions of friendship had fashioned friendship into little more than a political tool used to gain an advantage in commerce and war (Pangle 5). Aristotle was, for the first time, directly proposing that friendship must be ethical as well as highly advantageous to the participants with its concentration on striving towards virtue, and he asserted that the attachment between true friends must be so strong that each man would sooner harm themselves than their friend, with each man so highly evolved morally and spiritually that they would die for the other (Aristotle 209).

When Cicero later came to write *De Amicitia* in ancient Rome, he used many Aristotelian ideas, although, for Cicero, only true friendship could be counted as friendship, with friendship of pleasure and utility not only being inferior to true friendship, but false versions of it (MacFaul 7-8). While Aristotle allowed for a more complex web of other, although inferior, friendships to coexist with the ideal and allowed that the term friendship covered them all, Ciceronian friendship was a single, homogenous entity that was false as soon as it strayed from the very particular Aristotelian ideals of true friendship based on virtue (Price 131). Cicero's discussion of friendship is written as a dialogue between three friends as they discuss the nature of friendship, in which one friend, Laelius, exclaims:

It's virtue, virtue above all... that creates and preserves friendships. Virtue is the source of compatibility, reliability, consistency. When virtue advances, extending its torch, and sees and recognises itself in someone

else, it moves in that direction and receives in exchange what it finds in the other. (Cicero 106)

It is this Ciceronian friendship which inspired Michel de Montaigne to famously extoll his friendship with Étienne de La Boétie in the sixteenth century as not only the greatest of loves, but the greatest thing life has to offer, although Montaigne went one step further, dismissing previous descriptions of true friendship as too weak to describe the emotions he felt for his friend (Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* 71). Montaigne claimed they ‘...fostered so perfect and so entire [a loving-friendship] that it is certain that few such can even be read about, and no trace at all of it can be found among men of today’ (2). True friendship, the only real friendship, was apparently so rare that it barely existed once in a generation.

Philosophical commentators have noted that, through the centuries, philosophical discussions of friendship have moved away from these idyllic and grandiose models (Wardell 42). For example, Friedrich Nietzsche considered friendship as potentially valuable to society but likened the good friend to a good enemy in *Human, All Too Human* (181), and Søren Kierkegaard entirely rejected friendship as unchristian due to its inescapable preference of one man over another in his *Works of Love* (137-139). In philosophical discourse, at least, friendship apparently dwindled to something which was, as Lewis described, ‘thin and etiolated; a sort of vegetarian substitute for the more organic loves.’ Meanwhile, however, others argue that the easy friendships between individuals as we might be more familiar with today are a relatively new addition to Western culture. David Konstan writes that scholars suggest that a new, easier, more affectionate type of friendship might have arrived with the Enlightenment or as late as

the nineteenth century (2), and quotes Furbank's note that looking back at historical political and much boasted classical friendships has 'depressing overtones' due to their lack of ease and affection – although Konstan later argues at length for friendships from the classical world containing just as much affection as friendships from other times. However, examining the importance of context on friendship, Adams and Allan argue that friendship has not evolved from an undeveloped early form to a matured modern form, or vice versa; instead, there is a complex push and pull of all sorts of influences on friendship, as we have seen.

Due to friendship's dependence on social and historical context to define it externally, and philosophy's struggles to define any satisfactory universal model of friendship, our understanding of friendship has become laced with ambiguity and paradox, a palimpsest of different cultural interpretations. We might think that this abundance of differing definitions and experiences of friendship throughout history would make it appear everywhere, but often the opposite is true – without a solid core, friendship can disappear and reappear depending on who is watching, because they are viewing that friendship through the lens of their own understanding of friendship (MacFaul 7). Similarly, the same is true of those critics writing about how friendship displays and expresses itself in fiction – where one critic sees loyalty as the central motif in friendship narratives (Jusdanis 71), another might see gift-giving (Sharp, *Gift Exchange* 250), or the sharing of time (Nehamas 57). This essay can therefore only seek to identify the ways in which friendship presents itself to contemporary readers, although some of these presentations may be common across other contexts

The discussion of friendship in this chapter has been kept relatively brief; the purpose not being to provide an in-depth analysis or review of friendship itself, but to

give enough context to the field to allow for its further discussion throughout the rest of the essay.

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While the original contextual arena for friendship in *Mr London* of friendship is white middle-class male friendships in Britain in the twenty-first century, the project quickly became less interested in portraying the specific complexities of friendship within this particular context, and more interested in examining the wider field of friendship itself. At the beginning of the novel, therefore, Benjamin – notably without family or romance – has been purposefully portrayed as a character who is dissatisfied with the state of his own friendships and relationships, his friend and housemate Crane having married and forced Benjamin to move into the friendless zone of Kensington. Throughout the novel, Benjamin's desire for a different, perhaps more spiritually oriented, type of friendship leads him to look outside his personal context to seek a different model of friendship, one which better fulfils his requirements.

While Crane remains a representative of Benjamin's social context of friendship, the appearance of the character Jack, to whom Benjamin is immediately drawn, follows the Platonic model of friendship – where the friendship is first motivated by passion, erotic or otherwise, for the individual – before ascending *through* that passion towards contemplation of the universal and ideal. For Benjamin, this transition happens within the first chapter, his intrigue for the new stranger Jack very quickly transforming into a discussion of shared dreams of the expanse and solitude of bouncing around on the moon. It is precisely because Jack so quickly displayed another model for friendship that leads Benjamin's obsessive search for him when Jack then disappears. Crane is roped in for assistance, but something has changed between Benjamin and Crane now,

with Crane part of an old model. However, as will be explored in the following chapters, Crane and Jack each prove their firm friendship in different ways throughout the novel, suggesting that there is, in reality, no such thing as a superior model of friendship.



## Chapter Two

# The Quest of Friendship

In his examination of male friendship in the works of Shakespeare, Tom MacFaul notes that ‘friendship is hard to put into a plot; friendship has an illusion of permanence because it has no apparent teleology, and therefore has no obvious plot paradigm’ (20). Without a concretized model for friendship itself, as we have seen, it is not immediately easy for any friendship to be displayed in fiction – whether in drama, poetry or literature – because friendship itself remains indefinable. The abstractness of friendship has been noted by many writers as creating immediate difficulties for both the creation of fictional depictions of friendship and the recognition of friendship in fiction (Barnard 201; Berndt, *Friend of Foe?* 34; Renzi 45)

Alexander Nehamas goes so far as to argue that novels, as an artform, are incapable of discussing friendship as a central topic due to their conflicting structure with that of friendship itself (57). He claims that it is in the nature of friendship to expand into the non-action of people’s lives and that friendship lacks the cultural rituals in which both romantic and familial relationships excel, such as weddings and christenings. According to Nehamas, this means that friendship does not obviously lend itself to any artform which relies on shorter scenes or structures, because friendship lacks the cultural rituals over which to drape itself, and be culturally recognised, as true love’s kiss or a wedding might do in an artistic depiction of romantic love. He gives the

example of a painted portrait of two friends depicted side by side who cannot express their bond through visible exchanges such as a kiss or embrace, so a viewer of the art cannot easily understand whether or not they are friends (61). In the case of literature, he argues that there is not enough *time* in a novel for friendship to develop into something believably and recognisably friendship, while there is not enough *action* in the friendship itself to create a satisfactory plot or sense of progression (63), although he does allow that some story forms can depict friendship, picking out the traditional epic form and serial novels as two examples of literary forms with enough space and time to allow friendship to expand fully into the downtime (68).

While it is clear that novels actively depicting and pursuing the theme of friendship do exist and exist in abundance, it is worth further examining Nehamas' comment about the epic form providing space for friendship as it is indeed true that friendship narratives have a tendency towards the epic, quest or journey plot. In the ancient epics, there is friendship in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and in *Beowulf*, while friends go on adventures together in mythology and aural storytelling from all over the world: Loki and Odin in Norse mythology, Damon and Pythias from Greek mythology, Karn and Duryodhan from Hindu religion, and in the legends of King Arthur and the Round Table. Elsewhere, the pattern is repeated in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker observes that:

A distinctive mark of the Quest is the extent to which, more than in any other kind of story, the hero is not alone in his adventures. The story does

ultimately centre around the single figure of the hero. But more consistently than in any other type of story, we are also made aware of the presence and importance of the friends who accompany him. (73-74)

While it is untrue that friendship narratives cannot exist outside the quest plot, an examination of friendship's prevalence within this quest structure is elucidating concerning friendship's role and structure within fiction.

Booker differentiates four different ways in which a quest narratives traditionally treat a hero's companions (75-76). Here, it is important to firstly note that we are not yet talking about friends, as companions are not necessarily friends, yet or ever, and secondly, these categories of fictional companionships are found in all plots, not just the quest, but are, as Booker clarifies, simply found most commonly in the quest plot. The examples are given to elucidate Booker's categories and therefore include non-quest plots and a variety of literary forms.

- (1) *The companions may be a mass of 'undifferentiated appendages'.* We see this in the ship's crew in Homer's *Odyssey*, the dwarves in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and in the army in the traditional old Norse tale of Thorkill, where Thorkill journeys to the land of the dead with hundreds of men and, after many horrors, returns with only twenty men.
- (2) *The companion may be an alter-ego to the hero, whose sole character trait is their faithfulness to the hero.* Here, we might think of Samwise Gamgee accompanying Frodo Baggins to Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*; Horatio weeping over the body of his friend in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; Edmund Talbot

writing to his distant uncle in William Golding's *Rites of Passage*; or even the horse, Gringolet, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

- (3) *The companion may be a different type of alter-ego, whose role is to display characteristics opposite to those of the hero to highlight the hero's qualities or failings.* Such as Enkidu in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*; John Watson in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; or Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.
- (4) *The companions may be fully realised characters themselves, becoming a group forming a unit around the hero, together becoming a 'whole'.* Such as the four New York friends in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, or Harry, Ron and Hermione in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, or the collection of heroes standing outside the gates of Troy in Homer's *Iliad*.

The prevalence of companions in the quest plot might be suggested by a note made by Axel Nissen: 'Leaving home for the first time, the beginning of the quest narrative, be it male or female, often follows close upon the loss of one or both of the heroine's parents.' (115) Here, Nissen is discussing nineteenth-century American fiction, but what he is describing is a familiar pattern across many different forms and genres of literature, from fairy tales of orphans to new-realist fiction (Thomas 125). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins is orphaned at a young age and in the opening of the story loses the father figure of Bilbo when he disappears unexpectedly from their joint birthday party. Meanwhile, the friends in both *A Little Life* and *Le Grand Meaulnes* all start their journeys in boarding schools, where both home and parents are absent. Graham Allan notes that, generally speaking, in fiction, as they are in real life,

homes and domesticity are often associated with kinship and romance, and represent a private sphere of ascribed social attachments, creating a boundary against the more communal and achieved relationships, such as friendship (*Private Sphere* 83). In fiction, by removing kinship through removing the parents, and domesticity through removing the home, you have created a character primed for friendship, as ascribed bonds have been lost or left behind. This so often goes hand in hand with the quest plot because the quest spends so much time journeying outside domestic spheres, with characters rarely returning home until the end of the story, if at all (Booker 78). The quest plot, having abandoned ties to the domestic, welcomes friendship instead.

The quest plot itself also has structural similarities with the Platonic and Aristotelian models of friendship discussed in the previous chapter. According to Booker, at its simplest, the quest plot centres around a desirable goal a distance away from the hero, and the hero, accompanied by companions, must seek out this while overcoming many hurdles along the way (73). While there is much written on the quest plot, with each narratologist giving their own definition (Campbell, *Thousand Faces* 67; Thomas 45-46; Vogler 12-15), for all the quest's many subtle variations, at its core are usually three central pillars: a goal, a companion or two, and a journey. If we compare this threefold structure to the simplest Aristotelian structure of true friendship, which emphasises the appreciation of the virtuous 'good' in a friend and the seeking of each friend to come closer to that virtue, or the Platonic structure whereby the friend is used as a conduit towards philosophical appreciation of Beauty, each could be summarised as friendship being a journey towards a goal.

While friendships in real life might not require any goal other than the friends themselves, friendship narratives would appear to often rely on an external goal to

sidestep stagnancy in the plot. If this goal is positioned *within* a friend, such as their academic achievements or simple charisma, then a tale of friendship becomes little different from a tale of romance; to own the friend, enjoy them, and live within their good company would be the story's goal (Nehamas 63). However, if the friends seek some *external* goal together, the story becomes an adventure, a plot of friends moving towards the desired object.

The journey aspect of a quest narrative therefore becomes particularly important to fictional representations of friendship. When friends come together with a mutual goal a journey towards that goal, either literal or metaphorical, becomes inevitable. The journey is so important for a friendship narrative because it contains the narrative time and space for the friendship to spread into, space which Nehamas deemed essential for a reader's recognition of friendship (68). If the friendship narrative contains a literal journey, the space for friendship to expand into is granted by the literal traversing of a landscape, with every step concretising the potential friendship due to the longevity of the characters time together, while any difficulties along the way, if successfully overcome by the friends, provide further opportunities for the proof of friendship (Grieverson 144). In filmmaking – an artistic medium which usually relies on capturing the external displays of internal relationships – this literal journey is so important to friendship narratives that it has spawned an entire sub-genre of 'buddy' road movies, including *Easy Rider*, *Thelma & Louise*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, to name a few. Time and again, these literal journeys become a metaphor for the unseen and internalised threads of affection between characters, but, more than that, they could arguably be seen as a metaphor for the philosophical enquiry so encouraged by Plato. The metaphor of a journey in

friendship narratives becomes a stepping out together into the intellectual unknown, shown as a literal journey to faraway shores where the actual terrain – whether it is a desert, jungle, mountain, the outer reaches of space – matters less than the fact that, to the friends at least, this landscape contains elements of the unknown and simply by being there, they are growing together.

In literary representations of the literal journey plot, geographical landscapes are integral as spaces to be traversed by friends; if friendship is an invisible thing, an interaction that almost entirely takes places inside the participants' heads and therefore not easily described, then descriptions of landscape and geography seem to fill this literary void as a metaphor. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, every mountain pass, skeleton-strewn cavern, and moss-dripping forest is depicted with remarkable realism, the landscapes often becoming more complex than the characters themselves (Ellison 17). The particular type of geography is unimportant, but what is essential to friendship narratives is that the friends are alongside each other, experiencing the same scenery together. And so, stories of friendship inevitably become stories of places, even those stories of friends whose narratives take them on less literal journeys. We find examples of this in the opening chapters of *A Little Life*, where the four friends go together to Manhattan, their navigation through the city filled with, restaurants, empty flats and luxury apartments, all described throughout the novel in hard-rendered detail. Other literary examples include the autumnal university buildings of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* where the campus abounds with life and fallen apples, the clocktower presiding, and the nights are '... bigger than imagining: black and gusty and enormous, disordered and wild with stars' (16); or in the moving staircases, common rooms, dark forests, and hidden chambers of Rowling's Harry Potter series; or on the long winding

river in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In a sense, in narratives of friendship, these geographical spaces, so differentiated from the domestic spaces of home and kinship, are friendship itself.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's classic 1954 epic fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, literal journeys are used throughout to support, form and nourish friendship. Friendship is important in Tolkien's imaginary world, and as Martina Juricková notes, if fans of Tolkien know any one word from his multiple created languages, it is the Elvish 'mellon', which means 'friend' (33). Biographer Humphrey Carpenter notes the influence of Tolkien's personal experiences fighting in the First World War, as well as his friendships with fellow academics, on his interest in the fictions of male friendship formed in times of desperation (113), and these personal experiences are regularly given as the reason behind Tolkien's creation of a mythologised world full of male friendship (Craig 15). With that in mind, the novel charts the adventures of a fellowship of characters as they travel across Middle-earth to destroy the one ring, and the story is full of friendships, both the informal easy friendships of the hobbits in the Shire, to the more formal societally constructed friendship of loyalty and oaths between kings and liegemen. Little time is given in the novel to kinship or the domestic – this is a novel set in a time of war, and as such, home, hearth and ascribed relationships are left behind. Notably, Tolkien's fictitious friendships are, for the most part, friendships of feeling, not necessarily of ideas. Tolkien's writing lacks the psychological depth to explore the inner workings of the friendship between characters, and conversations between characters remain so simplistic as to have the novel regularly criticised for its two-dimensional representations (Juricková 34). Despite this, many writers have pointed towards the work as a key popular literary example of friendship, and at Frodo and



Sam's friendship in particular (M. Smith 16), and this is arguably in large part due to the use of the literal journey as metaphor for friendship and shared experience used throughout the novel. For example, the affection between Frodo and Sam is typically displayed by their actions in the story, rather than the reader's direct insight into their internal worlds. Sam refuses to leave Frodo's side – first following Frodo out of the Shire, then walking across the entirety of Middle-earth on his daunting quest to Mordor, and eventually carrying Frodo up the side of Mount Doom – and so the very active act of participating in the journey together concretizes their bond. Additionally, along Sam and Frodo's journey, there are glimpses of a more transcendental nature of Sam's affection for Frodo. For example, David Craig notes that Sam initially leaves the Shire, starting his journey, for two reasons, the first being his fondness for Frodo, but the second being his desire to see elves – 'Elves, sir! I would dearly love to see *them*' (Tolkien, 78). Sam's desire for something transformative and spiritual is revealed, allowing his character the possibility of stepping into the realm of Aristotelian true friendship, rather than just utility, by seeking out this experience alongside his friend (Craig 16).

The narrative goals of friendship journeys are as diverse as the friendships themselves. Fictional friends might go on journeys towards riches, towards a 'princess' or loved one, towards the promise of the path's next bend, towards unveiling a mystery or solving a crime. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, the goal is to throw the one ring into Mount Doom, thus destroying the evil Lord Sauron – it is a clear enough external goal to form the fellowship of the ring, and carry the characters through the journey of friendship. However, when fictional friends are operating in the highest realms of philosophical ideals, for example following the models set out by Plato, Aristotle and

Cicero, the goal towards which they are moving might be something altogether less tangible than earthly rewards. The problem with narratives of friends seeking these abstract goals is that they can never be reached—how does one, for example, actually reach Beauty? Indeed, if the abstract destination somehow ever was reached, George Haggerty suggests that fictional true friendship may dissolve in the manner of a fulfilled ‘lesser’ friendship of pleasure or utility, no matter how true it was throughout the journey itself (131). Therefore, narrative depictions of idealised friendship often show a striving onwards and upwards towards something indefinable, an ever-moving-forwards type of relationship, with narrative completion always over the next rise.

An example of friendship striving towards an abstract goal is found in Hanya Yanagihara’s literary novel *A Little Life*. The novel was written in New York in 2015 and yet is set within a strangely timeless version of New York, significantly without reference to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks or giving the names of any contemporary figures through which the reader would be able to pinpoint the years the novel takes place. The effect of this is ‘to place the novel in an eternal present day, in which the characters’ emotional lives are foregrounded and the political and cultural *Zeitgeist* is rendered into vague scenery’ (Michaud). Additionally, it is notably a novel depicting male friendship written by a female author, therefore written from a perspective outside the specific context of friendship it is depicting, placing *A Little Life* further away from the experiential reality of male friendships in New York in the twenty-first century, and more firmly in an abstract realm of theoretical ideals. The novel follows four friends throughout their lives, although not in linear order, as they meet at boarding school, before moving to New York for drug-fuelled parties in lofts, art shows, underground sushi restaurants, romantic relationships, jobs, chaos, arguments, betrayal, sickness, and

the revelation of horrific trauma. As Joseph Worthen describes, none of the friends are ever satisfied with their lot, despite rising through fantastical careers to become movie stars, artists, mathematicians, and lawyers, and throughout the novel, there is dark longing for something, anything, which is impossible to find, which each character finds himself in relationship with just as strongly as he is in relationship with his friends, if not more strongly (57). During a period of great suffering, the character Jude turns to mathematics as an expression for what he is feeling.

It assumes that if you have a conceptual thing named  $x$  it must always be equivalent to itself, that it has a uniqueness about it, that it is in possession of something so irreducible that we must assume it is absolutely, unchangeably equivalent to itself for all time, that its very elementalness can never be altered. But it is impossible to prove. Not everyone liked the axiom of equality ... but he had always appreciated how elusive it was, how the beauty of the equation itself would always be frustrated by the attempts to prove it. It was the kind of axiom that could drive you mad, that could consume you, that could easily become an entire life. (Yanagihara 654)

The novel follows the Platonic model of friendship, whereby characters move through desire for each other, a desire which is erotically realised between several of the friends, onwards and up through Plato's rising stairs through art and beauty towards the impossible goals (Plato, *Symposium* 493). The Platonic model is also hinted at in a passage discussing the relational difficulties after Jude and Willem's friendship becomes sexual, where the erotic is not enough or satisfying in the long term for either

party; instead, their friendship desires to move beyond physical desire towards something altogether more abstract:

[Willem] sometimes wondered if it was simple lack of creativity—his and Jude’s—that had made them both think that their relationship had to include sex at all. But it had seemed, then, the only way to express a deeper level of feeling. The word “friend” was so vague, so un-descriptive and unsatisfying ... And so they had chosen another, more familiar type of relationship, one that hadn’t worked. But now they were inventing their own type of relationship, one that wasn’t officially recognised by history or immortalised in poetry or song, but which felt truer and less constraining. (Yanagihara 569)

Throughout both *A Little Life* and *The Lord of the Rings*, friends are not only used as a companion in a journey towards a goal, but friendship is employed as a literary tool or device used to shape the characters of the individual friends themselves. As Booker noted in his descriptions of different types of companions in the quest plot, a key role of the companion is to act as an alter-ego to the hero, shaping both the reader’s understanding of the hero, as well as the hero’s understanding of himself (75-76). When writing about friendship in Shakespeare’s plays and poetry, Tom MacFaul notes that ‘[friendship], even when it is most self-sacrificing in ethical terms, is primarily a way of asserting an individual’s dramatic importance and giving us a sense of his character’ (12). Similarly, Allan Bloom writes that ‘one can almost always get guidance as to the character of a man by the kind of friends he has and how they behave with him’ (110).

This use of friendship to define one another in fiction is not restricted to Shakespeare, but is found in nearly every example of friendship fiction (Vernon, “The Ambiguity of Friendship” 9), and shares parallels with Aristotelian models of friendship which encourage the examining of the friend to discover virtues in one another. The very fact that one character is friends with another in fiction, immediately tells readers that there is something that the first friend deems worthy of friendliness in the second (Haggerty 16). For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the amenable nature of Frodo Baggins is not so much shown to us on the page, as given to us through the good natures of his friends, Merry and Pippin, as they go to incredible lengths to secretly insist upon accompanying Frodo on his quest, even when the goal of that quest is as yet unknown to them. Merry’s simple reasoning behind how they knew something was afoot, is simply, ‘After all, you must remember that we know you well, and are often with you. We can usually guess what you are thinking’ (103).

A similarly abstract longing can be found in Alain-Fournier’s 1913 novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, a classic French coming-of-age novel, completed just before Alain-Fournier died fighting in the First World War. The novel tells the story of Augustin Meaulnes, a bright and handsome young man, who disappears from school one day to return a week later with an unlikely and triumphant story about stumbling into a fantastical lost estate full of summer festivities and romance. Together, the schoolboys dream of the lost estate, longing for it, journeying to it in their imaginations, the estate becoming an unobtainable utopia where the boys store their yearnings, the goal of a shared dream transforming the schoolmates’ friendships into something decidedly more, with Meaulnes’s young friend François declaring: ‘O, my brother, my friend! O, wanderer! How certain we were, the two of us, that happiness was close by and that we

only had to start down the road to find it!' (105). Importantly, however, François is soon abandoned by Meaulnes, who goes alone to seek out the lost estate alone, leaving the novel and François alone and friendless. Although their friendship is fraught and problematic, ultimately the friendship between Meaulnes and François is concretized by their shared goal of refinding the lost estate and all the abstract longings it represents:

I am looking for something still more mysterious. I'm looking for the passage that they write about in books, the one with the entrance that the prince, weary from travelling, cannot find. This is the one you find at the remotest hour of morning, long after you have forgotten that eleven o'clock is coming, or midday. And suddenly, as you part the branches in the dense undergrowth, with the hesitant movement of the hands, held unevenly at face height, you see something like a long, dark avenue leading to a tiny circle of light... (Alain-Fournier 118)

Importantly, friendships in narratives, unlike friendships in real life, are rarely between equals. Allan Bloom argues that friendly characters who are too similar will not define each other through contrary elucidation, and characters who are too agreeable, will not challenge each other into narrative growth or character definition and, as such, remain two dimensional and psychologically shallow (97-98). In fiction, therefore, friends may either be 'unlikely friends', separated by age, gender, class or ethnicity, their inherent differences creating the space for psychological and narrative tension and growth or, for those friends who are not so obviously different, they will regularly take opposing sides on anything and everything, from the moral dilemmas and

themes authors have them discussing, to arguing about how they should overcome narrative hurdles. Given the many different sociological and cultural contexts of friendship, the possible differences between friends, especially in terms of fictional representations, are likely as varied as the friendships themselves.

We see this dualism between the four friends' different approaches to nearly everything in *A Little Life*, and it is the clashes between these friends' differences that creates much of the drama in the first part of the novel. In *Le Grand Meaulnes* the dualism is most apparent between François's fear and Meaulnes's eagerness to find the lost estate, and in *The Lord of the Rings*, the slithering evil of the ring itself pits friends and comrades against one another, in a more simplistic battle between good and evil. Christopher Booker notes that this pattern of dualism in friendship is so successful in narratives, that while friends might be more agreeable with one another in the real world, it is rare to find a pair of fictional friends who are *not* opposites in some way (Booker 98). As David Konstan points out concerning Platonic models of friendship, the difference in friends is key; for Plato, that difference was the pederastic educational system between older mentors and beautiful young men – it was this difference between the men which allowed them to learn from one another at all, so elevating their minds to the higher realms of philosophy (37).

Through the quest plot's comparative structure with the models of friendship from classical antiquity, this chapter has sought to elucidate some of the most common ways in which friendship can begin to assert itself in fictional narratives despite the hurdles of friendship's innate abstractness. The next chapter moves on from these overarching structures to look at how friendship can be further concretised by the use of narrative tropes.

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Many of the concepts discussed in this chapter come into play in *Mr London*, and at its simplest level, the novel is a quest for a lost friend, thereby making the goal of the friendship narrative the friend himself. As the novel begins, Benjamin seeks Jack after an impossible disappearance from a Kensington rooftop, and then, after the supposed death of Crane, the proper quest of the novel begins with Benjamin's desperate hunt for Crane spanning the majority of the narrative. In each case, the quest for a friend leads to a journey; Benjamin is accompanied by Crane across London to find Jack, and is later accompanied across different worlds by Jack in his quest to find Crane.

While it is true that the friendships are concretized by the sharing of these journeys, in *Mr London* this is not always a straightforward thing. Although we never see it, we learn that Benjamin and Crane's friendship has been characterized by travelling the world together throughout their twenties and yet, Crane joins Benjamin only reluctantly on the search for Jack at the prompting of his wife Esther, who understands the significance of the shared action to Benjamin and Crane's friendship. Likewise, later in the novel, Benjamin is often reluctant to allow or seek the assistance of Jack in his quest for Crane, he no longer desires friendship with Jack since it led to the abduction of Crane. It is purposefully only when Benjamin and Jack are trapped in a world together and forced to journey side-by-side for a week through the hostile environment of the rainforest, that Benjamin begins to accept their friendship once again.

But it is not only the literal men Benjamin is searching for when he is looking for friendship. He is also seeking something 'higher' and more transcendental and abstract, something that is only accessible *through* those friendships. So far as Benjamin is



aware, this is an unnamed yearning for an expansive friendship, and is represented throughout the novel by the image of the moon, a place just as idealised and even more impossible to reach than Meaulnes's and François's lost estate. When Benjamin discovers that Jack shares his own desire for the moon, he quickly recognises Jack as a potential friend. The men bond quickly by recognising that they are both looking towards the same goal and the depth of the burgeoning friendship is indicated by the depth of meaning the goal holds for each of them. Later in the novel, the image of the fallen moon drowning in the lake is used as an image for Benjamin's desperate attempt to save Crane, and the prison that Crane is kept in is like a moon trapped underground. In the climactic scenes of the novel, as Benjamin climbs the long stairs out of the block with Crane's weight on his back, the moon-goal and weight of friendship become heavier and heavier.

Once, I'd dreamt that the moon had grown and grown in the sky, falling silently towards Earth then England then London, coming to a rest in the middle of Trafalgar Square, where it hovered two metres from the ground. Nelson's Column and the black lions had all toppled and vanished, and the pigeons cooed for daylight. I'd walked underneath, the moon's charcoal surface close enough to touch, disturbing the dust with my fingertips, pressing my hand into it to leave my mark, watching fine powder floating in low gravity. But then the moon had begun to descend, groaning like an old lift shaft, narrowing a horizontal landscape until the rock pressed its full weight against my back, cracking my bones, and even that wasn't as bad as this.

As in so many examples of friendship fiction, for Benjamin, friendship and geography are inextricable. As a geography teacher, geography is the lens through which he sees the world, and it is not only the moon, but a far wider field of geography that he draws on to describe his friendships. For example, after meeting Jack, Benjamin tries to explain why he had liked him – it had been ‘something about the strange, cosy landscape of him.’ Similarly, Benjamin decides that Esther is unworthy to be his friend because she does not understand that stars are ‘technically geography’, and his description of the relationship between Crane, Esther and himself is: ‘Alpha Centauri A. Alpha Centauri B. And poor little Proxima Centauri. All bound together by gravity.’ Benjamin’s idea of geography, just like his ideas of friendship, extend beyond the normal boundaries and take him into a flight of fancy in the outer reaches of space.

Landscape and friendship are also two of the greatest challenges throughout Benjamin’s story; in taking strides to understand the easier of the two, geography, he attempts to sidestep around his unease around human intimacy by focusing less on the people and more on landscape. As Benjamin becomes increasingly emotionally and socially fragmented throughout the novel, the geography around him fragments too. After Crane has first been stolen from London, Benjamin takes to his bed and is full of dreams of breaking geography. ‘I dreamt there was something wrong with the sky; something like the cracking of an egg, the shattering of ancient glass, so the solar system crashed down to Earth, the planets the size of tennis balls, the stars a shower of sparks which hissed into the Thames and became dust, swept out to the English Channel.’ Later, when Benjamin is at his most desperate, having just learnt about the geographical calamity twenty years ago, the geography around him unmoors itself and he becomes lost between worlds where Benjamin must face the genuine possibility of

losing both place and self. And this section of the novel intentionally becomes dreamlike and maddening:

Travelling alone was like being in outer space, ship-less and spacesuit-less and trying desperately to return home. Only, home had diminished to an anonymous light among the stars, and I swam through the great vacuum of interplanetary nothingness without maps, boundaries, geography. Travelling alone was being submerged in blankness. It was going without witnesses. It was asphyxiation. It was fear. It was friendless.

The literal landscape around Benjamin has pulled apart and rearranged, his confusion and trauma over friendship leaking from his internal landscape into the external. In this way, *Mr London* has been designed to actively be in reflection on the field of friendship fiction itself. The geographical theme used throughout is a type of metatextual exploration of what it means to exist within a friendship narrative; Benjamin as a character has an innate understanding of the importance of quests, journeys, and landscape to the story of friendship, and as his own friendship story falls apart, it is geography that he clings to.

## Chapter Three

# The Tropes of Friendship

While narratives of friendship often tend towards literal and metaphorical journeys to express and explore the inner workings of friendship itself, the friends in these narratives also find themselves regularly playing out particular scenes. Ideas for this chapter were informed by reviewing a wide range of friendship narratives from a list compiled by seeking recommendations on strong friendships in fictions from booksellers, academics, writers and storytellers – there is a full list of texts included in the review at the end of the essay. The list includes epic poetry, short stories and plays, written across a wide variety of times and places, and in different literary styles – therefore the comparison of them here is less about learning how friendship was structured and perceived within each of the text’s original contexts, and more about how and why these particular texts appear to successfully display friendship to the readers from twenty-first century Britain who selected them.

As a result of this review, this chapter identifies eight tropes of friendship narratives, including cohabitation, feasts, other realms, confessions, oaths, battles, sacrifice, and leave-taking. Undoubtedly, this is not an exhaustive list of the tropes of friendship narratives, and neither are any of these tropes *exclusive* to friendship; the boundaries between expressions of different types of love are blurred.

Crucially, none of these tropes mean anything without the added dimension of affection. In her discussion of the nature of friendship, Elizabeth Telfer identifies that friendship must have reciprocal services, mutual contact, and joint pursuits, which she calls collectively ‘shared activity’, which we might say the tropes in this chapter belong to. However, while efforts have been made in this essay to explain how each trope functions to define, express and explore friendship, friendship cannot possibly exist with these tropes alone; it is conceivable that two people would perform these services for one another without being friends. It is not the *actions* of the friendship which matter, so much as the *reasons* behind them. Telfer calls these reasons the ‘passions of friendship’, which are composed of affection and a desire for one another’s company, but ultimately come down to the ‘difficult phenomena’ of liking each other (250), saying that ‘...in reality our reaction, like a reaction to a picture, is to a whole personality seen as a unified thing. This is why we often find it very difficult to say what it is we like about a person’ (253).

## **Cohabitation**

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes that cohabitation is the ideal situation for friendship, suggesting friends be given priority of geographical proximity, even over wives and children:

They who get on with one another very fairly, but are not in habits of intimacy, are rather like people having kindly feelings towards one another than friends; nothing being so characteristic of friends as the living with one another, because the necessitous desire assistance, and the happy

companionship, they being the last persons in the world for solitary existence. (Aristotle 214)

While friendship so often requires a departure from the domestic sphere of ascribed relationships to be able to fully establish or express itself, for characters in fictional representations, it seems that it is not a requirement of friendship to remain homeless, with friends living together in a new home made from achieved relationships (Allan, *Private Sphere* 83).

While Aristotle appears to have been entirely literal in his thinking about cohabitation, it is possible to live in another's company without sharing an actual residence, due to the abstract possibilities of friendship (Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* 111), and this is shown in the different ways the cohabitation trope might appear in friendship narratives. Firstly, friends may share a home together: Patroclus and Achilles share a tent on the beach outside Troy; Sherlock Holmes and John Watson live at 221b Baker Street; the friends in *A Little Life* all live together in Manhattan; François and Meaulnes live together in a boarding school, and even in the sparse dystopian future of *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are gathered together in a gymnasium and cannot help but reach out to one another across the semi-darkness between beds (Atwood 3). Secondly, friends may share a roaming cohabitation, where friends on journeys together might sleep around the same fire at night like Don Quixote and Sancho, share hotel rooms in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, or spend long days together walking across Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*. Or thirdly, friends may share an abstract cohabitation: here we might think of different spaces friends can inhabit together, such as the friendships found in the virtual games of

the novel in Earnest Cline's *Ready Player One*, among the war simulations of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, or the dark chatrooms of a suicide cult in Lottie Moggach's *Kiss Me First*, or in the epistollic cohabitation, notably full of descriptions of place, found in Mary Shaffer's *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. These scenes of geographical intimacy appear to act as an allegorical overlapping of minds – by sharing a home, suddenly a friend can see your unmade bed and old photographs along the mantelpiece – they can see the decoration of your inner space.

Importantly, cohabitation gives friends a chance to talk, which is so essential to Platonic understandings of friendship and the expansion of philosophical understanding, where friends aim to discover a subject's truth through conversation with others (Konstan 8). C.S. Lewis describes this type of active cohabitation between friends in *The Four Loves* as an experience just as common in real life as it is in fiction:

Those are the golden sessions; when four or five of us after a hard day's walking have come to our inn; when our slippers are on, our feet spread out towards the blaze and our drinks at our elbows; when the whole world, and something beyond the word, opens itself to our minds as we talk; and no one has any claim on or any responsibility for another, but all are freemen and equals as if we had first met an hour ago, while at the same time an Affection mellowed by the years enfolds us. Life – natural life – has no better gift to give. (86-87)

In narratives, these golden sessions between friends are usually more concerned with its characters' inner life than the outer world, so for these moments – whether they

make up an entire story or are a moment within a greater narrative – the landscapes friends travel through became less ocean, forest and mountain, and more grey matter and philosophy. Josie Barnard gives these same reasons when noting the prevalence of schools and universities in friendship narratives, concluding that: ‘Intellectual stimulation and meetings of minds within closed walls can have wonderful effects. Friendships made in such circumstances often feel transformative’ (109).

However, cohabitation between friends does not necessarily require any talking. Alexander Nehamas suggests that the two realms of fiction that friendship can expand into are space and time; if journeys are perhaps friendship’s narrative expression through space, then cohabitation could perhaps be seen as its expansion through time. What is key here is that friends cohabit the same space for an extended time in a voluntary fashion, thereby proving the affection of friendship simply by remaining next to one another. Nehamas points to the classic literary example of a friendship built through cohabitation in terms of the sharing of time in the stories of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson (Nehamas 70). Holmes is not a character best known for his friendliness, yet readers are in little doubt that he is friends with Watson despite his bullyish disdain towards Watson’s abilities and intelligence. The friendship is apparent to readers because of the length of *time* that Holmes and Watson are seen to spend together. Again and again, Holmes and Watson choose to spend time in each other’s company for no other reason than they are each other, best displayed through their famous cohabitation of 221b Baker Street. Nehamas argues that it is only because most of their adventures open with them sitting in their living room, Holmes and Watson reading newspapers, smoking, and enjoying a time of non-action together before the plot knocks on the door and cries murder, that readers recognise them as



friends at all. These quiet scenes of cohabitation are the small times that fit in around the story's action, but they are also the good feeling between friends, the joy, the 'what it's all about' (Denworth 328).

But the cohabitation of friends is not always easy. *A Little Life* opens immediately with an exploration of the cohabitation trope between romantic friends, Jude and Willem – not a romantic couple for years yet – searching for somewhere to live, touring a property in New York together:

The eleventh apartment had only one closet, but it did have a sliding glass door that opened onto a small balcony, from which he could see a man sitting across the way, outdoors in only a T-shirt and shorts even though it was October, smoking. Willem held up a hand in greeting to him, but the man didn't wave back. (Yanagihara 2)

However, immediately after Jude declares 'We'll take it!' (3), the friends' plans are scuppered by neither of them having parents alive to act as guarantors, and so the friends are sucked back into a nomadic existence, staying on the sofas of friends' family homes and being pushed between living situations as soon as existing roommates get new romantic partners. Carving a space for the cohabitation of friends in *A Little Life* is a difficult feat, continually up against the opposition of domestic spaces created by families and romance, and Jude and Willem's ultimate apartment, when finally they get it, is a 'shithole' (8) – yet they are excited, suggesting the importance of their friendship over the quality of the space they are inhabiting, even when it comes with significant challenges like the unreliability of the elevator, upon which Jude heavily relies.

Through these opening scenes, Yanagihara quickly pitches Jude and Willem's friendship above the other acquaintance friendships in their lives, over family, romance, and physical comfort – the cohabitation of Jude and Willem is not a position the friends have fallen into through want of other options, but it is hard fought for.

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While *A Little Life* begins with friends moving in together, *Mr London* begins with friends parting ways. Benjamin and Crane's cohabitation has come to an end, setting Benjamin adrift and alone in London after Crane's recent marriage. It is important to note that Benjamin is not jealous that Crane has found romantic love, but instead is disappointed that Crane has revealed himself as a false friend, after a decade of living together, by not sharing Benjamin's views on what position friendship should take in the hierarchy of relationships.

Towards the end of the novel, when Benjamin is carrying Crane, barely conscious, on his back up an endless flight of stairs, they each attempt to rediscover their shared landscape of cohabitation and friendship in London. The conversation is stilted, exhausted, but in the final moments before Crane's death, the men both try to return to times when their friendship was safe and concrete.

And I thought that Crane was filled with London. I was carrying a city, not a man. Inside him were all his places. His blue-windowed office in Canary Wharf. Finsbury Park tube station. His favourite spots in the pub; the fire in winter, the window in summer.

'Sometimes it feels close,' I said. 'Like I can smell exhaust fumes and coffee.'

‘Chip shops,’ he murmured.

Another step. ‘Weed,’ I said.

‘Fox piss.’

‘Rain on dirty streets.’

His turn, but he didn’t take it.

In this way, the trope of cohabitation is purposefully used as a way of longing for friendship, instead of confirming it.

## **Feasts**

Meals have long been used, both in fiction and real life, to confirm both solidity and change within societal groups. Gabriel Herman writes: ‘There is an essential notion in human cultures that the possession of a common substance is the basis of a mystical bond. And, in most rites of incorporation of communion, consubstantiality through eating and drinking is an ever-recurring theme.’ (66) Two specific historical examples often referred to are the sharing meals sanctified political and social supplication between allies in the ancient world, as displayed in the Homeric epics (Gould 83), and Medieval eating halls being arranged by strictly allotted positions to continually confirm the social ordering of superiors and inferiors (Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* 173). Likewise, the sharing of food has long and deep-rooted associations with generosity, cheerfulness, expansive love, and friendliness, with many ancient cultures, including ancient Greece, holding so strongly to the importance of a shared meal, that to kill a friend who has been welcomed under your roof with food or drink was a crime against the gods (Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* 174).

The trope of feasts can appear in friendship narratives in different ways, but the important thing is that the characters are sharing the experience, both partaking of an intake of something new, and whatever is being feasted upon is satisfying to body and/or soul, being incorporated into the new fabric of each friend, thereby making them each a little more similar to each other. In fiction, friends may have literal feasts, where there is the sense of raucous excess, a smorgasbord of options for characters to take their pick from, as accurate of the company as it is of the food, the boundaries of friendship only limited by how many people you can fit in the room. These are the grand feasts in Homeric epics; the great drinking parties in *Beowulf*; the magically appearing food on house tables at Hogwarts; the chaotic table of feasting for Peter Pan and his lost boys (Barrie 54); the endless food at Frodo and Bilbo Baggins' shared birthday party at the start of *The Lord of the Rings* (26-37). Elsewhere, however, friends might choose to have a quieter sort of meal together, where precisely who is invited is just as important as the food shared, or characters might find themselves unexpectedly taking meals together, the sharing of food, with all its significance of social bonding, bringing characters inevitably closer. Indeed, the feast trope can be so transformative to social bonds in narratives that it can also go terribly wrong; the delight of shared comradery can overwhelm morals, as we see this in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, where tribal feasts contribute to such strong bonds as the lost boys are led to a disturbingly violent melee, or in Alex Garland's *The Beach*, which culminates in a dark feast where an isolated community of backpackers, drunk on fermented coconut milk, are left frantically dismembering the corpses of their friends while the narrator flees.

Shared meals and friendship have a long tradition together, being particularly important to Greco-Roman understandings of the outplaying of friendship (Jamir 21). In writing about the ancient Greeks, Nicholas Fisher notes:

In most, if not all, societies, societal relationships of all sorts tends to be sanctified and solidified by a shared taking of food and drink; but in few societies have celebrations of shared eating and drinking been so highly valued, so idealized and stylized, so widely practiced at many levels, and so significantly used as occasions for philosophical, political and moral discussions and their reflections in poetic and prose literature. (2.1166-7)

The popularity of the shared meal is believed to have contributed to the symposium as a literary tradition, and can be traced back, significantly, to Plato's description of the gathering of academics and thinkers for a meal, and subsequent drinking sessions, to discuss various debates and philosophical issues, this forming the setting of Plato's most influential writing on friendship in the *Symposium* (Jamir 24). Likewise, Plutarch, following in the Platonic tradition, writes of symposiums:

... for a remembrance of those pleasures which arise from meat and drink is ungentle and short-lived ... but the subjects of philosophical queries and discussions remain always fresh after they have been imparted. (76)

Importantly, as with the trope of cohabitation, shared meals give friends a chance to talk, with the sharing and intake of ideas sometimes just as important an aspect to the

trope of feasting as the food. In fact, sometimes food is entirely absent, and friends feast solely on ideas: the characters of *The Secret History* gorge themselves over classical Greek grammar (36-38) or, in Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, the friendly giant proudly shows his little friend Sophie his collection of bottled dreams (75-81).

In the opening of *A Little Life*, alongside setting up the novel's ideas about cohabitation, there is also a scene of the four friends coming together and sharing a meal. It is the first meal of many throughout the novel:

They were at Pho Viet Huong in Chinatown, where they met twice a month for dinner. Pho Viet Huong wasn't very good—the pho was seriously sugary, the lime juice was soapy, and at least one of them got sick after every meal—but they kept coming, both out of habit and necessity. You could get a bowl of soup or a sandwich at Pho Viet Huong for five dollars, or you could get an I, which were eight to ten dollars but much larger, so you could save half of it for the next day or for a snack later that night. Only Malcolm never ate the whole of his I and never saved the other half either, and when he finished eating, he put his plate in the center of the table so Willem and JB—who were always hungry—could eat the rest. (Yanagihara 3)

This is not a feast of excess, but this shared meal is a struggle. Pho Viet Huong is one of the only restaurants in Manhattan they can afford, and careful consideration is required to eek the most food out of their limited financial resources, yet despite the terrible food and the threat of illness, the friends still meet regularly. It is clearly not the food that is

important to the shared meals in *A Little Life*. Instead, these regular, diarised meals are the friends' way of checking in and staying connected, it is the social basis from which all their other interactions come – they might see each other every day in the two weeks between meals, or they might not see each other at all, and, as we see later in the novel, to miss a meal is to dismiss the friendship. Throughout the first part of the novel, these meals are where the friends talk about their lives and situations, the novel often returning to these scenes as a type of running commentary on the state of the plot which, at this point, is the progression of their lives as young adults in New York; through these meals, the reader learns a great deal. It is also significant that the friends are talking about their growth and expansion as people; as Plutarch said, it is the ideas that remain after the food has been forgotten (76).

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In *Mr London*, it is intentional that the sharing of food and drink regularly coincides with increased friendly intimacy between characters, from the fish and chips shared on a Kensington rooftop between Esther, Crane, and Benjamin, to the shared avocados and mangoes between Benjamin and Jack in the rainforest. These are quiet scenes, where not much is said, and often come at a time when friendship is reluctant or strained between the characters – the act of sharing a meal is the act of wordlessly affirming or reaffirming the friendship.

Throughout the novel there are also several meals shared between a greater number of people: here we have the rooftop party of Benjamin's wider friendship circle in Kensington, the roasted pheasant upon Benjamin's arrival to Hall, and the wider celebration at Hall after the arrival of the refugees across the ice. Benjamin is reluctant to join any of these feasts, and while he might eat and drink, he keeps himself

emotionally distant from the proceedings, refusing to get sucked into the false, as he perceives it, friendliness of the communal gatherings – for Benjamin, the feast trope is a temptation to coerce him away from the purer, truer friendship of saving Crane at all costs, and he is wary.

However, at the end of the novel, once all the violence is over, Benjamin's willingness to perhaps become part of the community of Hall, or at least not to be their adversary, is indicated in a small private moment when Benjamin is alone walking through the festivities taking place in the ruins of Hall and approaches a bonfire surrounded by people eating, drinking, and dancing:

... a tin plate was handed to me as I approached the fire. Beans, rice, tomatoes. A feast which had been going on for hours. I took the food to the edge of the clearing and sat against a tree, balancing the plate on my knees, thinking *make yourself small, hide, become targetless* while eating with my fingers and watching everyone glow.

Benjamin's reintegration is intentionally private, unseen, and yet, to a reader who has been following him throughout the story, hopefully significant.

## **Other Realms**

The trope of other realms in friendship narratives brings friends directly into a shared and co-created world that runs parallel to the 'real world'. This imagined realm could be an entire world created by the characters, such as the fantastical forest kingdom created by the lonely children in Katherine Paterson's *The Bridge to Terabithia*, or Marco



Polo's tales of impossible and fabricated cities told for the emperor of the Tartars in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Elsewhere, the other realm might be represented in fiction as a real, visitable world full of potential friends, like Lewis Carroll's Wonderland or J.M. Barrie's Never Never Land. The other realm might be an imaginative veneer laid overtop the real world, as in *A Little Life* where the friends play at creating new personas for each other when visiting a party, or the shared lies that shape character's entire lives in both Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* and *The Secret History*. Or the other realm could be a shared memory or hope between friends, such as in *The Lord of the Rings*, where Sam and Frodo reminisce about the idyllic Shire while waiting to die on the slopes of Mount Doom (934-937), or in Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, when Edmond Dantès and the Abbé Faria link up their dungeon cells and spend years together learning language, science, and culture, dreaming of the outside world and planning what they might do upon their escape (168-175). The most important aspect of other realms for fictional friends is not the world that the characters create, but the fact that characters are standing *elsewhere* in their minds *together*.

Alongside the journey narrative and the cohabitation trope, one might say other realms are another type of shared geography created between the friends, one which exists solely in the abstract. In friendship narratives, the other realm appears to be what happens when the abstract concepts of friendship become completely unmoored from reality, a fictionalisation and metaphor for the transcendental nature of Platonic friendship, where one moves through the corporeal and into the abstract (Lynch 134). This effectively concretises the friendship in fiction by further deepening the friends' shared mental or spiritual landscape on the page, but it also, in times of need, can serve to protect the friendship from outside distress. Josie Barnard notes Donald Winnicott's

real-life descriptions of children playing in the streets of London during the Blitz, where the children used old debris for their games, bannisters becoming goal posts, burnt out living rooms serving for hopscotch, and their games would be full of great narratives of war and heroism (244). Friendship and shared other realms can become the process through which distress is managed and, emotionally at least, bested.

In Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, Meaulnes describes, in exquisite detail, his discovery of a summer festival in a lost estate to his friend François in boarding school, which takes up several chapters as the adult narrator François later retells it to the reader. The adventure is introduced by François:

That night, my friend did not tell me all that had happened to him on the road. And even when he did make up his mind to tell me everything, during some days of unhappiness that I shall describe later, it was to remain the great secret of our adolescent years. But today, now it is all over, now that nothing is left but dust *of so much ill, of so much good*, I can describe his strange adventure. (Alain-Fournier 36)

Meaulnes tells François the story at a moment of unhappiness, suggesting the power of a shared story to combat distress, but, more than that, Meaulnes' account of the lost estate, a mixture of memory, fantasy, and romantic longing for a girl named Yvonne, becomes the centre of the novel – variously representing childhood, friendship, romance, and an unspoken yearning (Jones 19). While the lost estate is a real place, it becomes unmoored from reality because it cannot be found again by the boys, despite their searching, and so it takes on a mythical glow in the novel. Once François and

another boy in the school, Frantz, have heard the story, Meaulnes' secret revealed, all of them swear friendship to one another in their dormitory one night, tightly banding around this other realm which swells with meaning each time the story of the lost estate is told. The other realm acts as a place where the boys can come to explore their ideas of romance, adulthood and adventures in the big wide world – an imaginary microcosm of a world which they can safely access without leaving the school.

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In *Mr London*, there are several different ways that the trope of other realms has been used. Similar to Alain-Fournier's lost estate, the gallery which Benjamin steps into and then disappears from his rooftop is a geographical space that unmoors itself and moves from reality into imagination. The search for it unites Benjamin and Crane in a common purpose and goal, and the fact that Crane takes part in the outlandish search is an indicator of his friendship for Benjamin more than his belief in what his friend is saying.

Later, when Benjamin leaves London and travels through worlds, he enters a wonderland which is full of both friends and enemies, but ultimately is representative of the shared landscape of friendship between himself and Jack – a realm which, when Benjamin finally makes it to Crane, Crane is unaware he has even entered, believing himself to be somewhere back in London. Only by leaving London, by leaving home, which has already shed itself of all ascribed relationships, is Benjamin able to access friendship with Jack, who belongs to this other realm of achieved relationships.

For Benjamin, there is also often a second layer of reality spread over the story's 'real' events: as Benjamin's flat burns in Kensington, he witnesses a boy in the sky stoking the fire; in the burnt-out ruin of Hall, he sees Jack as a child, 'almost

transparent, like a boy printed onto acetate'; and throughout the story, Benjamin holds regularly conversations with imaginary versions of Crane, Esther, and even himself. It is purposefully indicative of Benjamin's inadequacies in forming friendships that his other realm, one which revolves heavily around his friends and friendships, is almost entirely kept to himself. However, during one scene around a campfire in the rainforest with Jack and an imaginary Crane, Benjamin relents and unexpectedly lets Jack into his other realm.

'I see him,' I said. 'Crane. He's sitting right by there.' I nodded towards an empty spot at the fire where my imaginary friend sat in his tartan.

'Whoa!' said Crane. 'Unexpected.'

Jack looked at the empty space. 'Hello,' he said.

'Hey,' said Crane, with a wave. 'Good to meet you.'

This moment intentionally marks a significant shift in the friendship between Benjamin and Jack, one which ultimately leads to the novel's largest confession of secrets between the friends, and at the end of the chapter, the imaginary Crane says goodbye and disappears, leaving Benjamin in the distressing position of having to actually talk to and befriend a real person.

## **Confessions**

Truthfulness and the sharing of minds has long been recognised as a key aspect of friendship. For Aristotle, honesty and openness was a great virtue between friends (197), while in a letter to a lifelong friend, Cicero wrote: 'Know that what I miss most now is a man with whom I can communicate all the things that cause me any anxiety, a

man who loves me, who is wise, with whom I can speak without pretending, without dissimulating, without concealing anything' (*Selected Letters* 351). For Cicero, honesty is prized because it both separates the true friend from a false friend, and honest critique is a way of each friend further advancing their outer and inner lives (Konstan 78). However, several writers have pointed to a shift in the concept of honesty in friendship between ancient and modern times; honesty moves from a 'plainspokenness' between friends and freedom to express views, as described by Aristotle and Cicero, to an altogether more revealing and surgical type of self-disclosure (Konstan 14-15). It is this later type of surgical honesty between friends which is described by Francis Bacon:

A principle *fruit of friendship*, is the ease and discharge of the fulness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do cause and induce. We know diseases of stoppings, and suffocations, are the most dangerous in the body; and it is not much otherwise in the mind: you may take *sarsa* to open the liver; *steel* to open the spleen; *flowers of sulphur* for the lungs; *castoreum* for the brain; but no receipt openeth the heart, but a true *friend*; to whom you may impart, griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart, to oppress it, in a kind of civil shrift or confession. (145)

David Konstan notes that, in modern times, the idea of full self-disclosure seems to have become inseparable from friendship, with intimacy in friendship not even possible until concretised by mutual acts of self-disclosure (15).

In narratives of friendship, scenes of confessions between friends often seem to act as a dramatic representation of this honesty or self-disclosure. Confessions between friends can be as unique as the characters themselves, with fictional confessions ranging from relatively inconsequential to life-shattering. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, as the lava of Mount Doom flows around them, Sam confesses to Frodo that there is a barmaid back home, Rosie, who he would quite like to marry – a confession which is arguably constructed by Tolkien just to create a moment of intimacy between the two hobbits, as this is the first time Rosie is ever mentioned in the story (Juricková 33). Meanwhile, in *A Little Life*, Jude takes weeks to slowly, painfully recount to Willem the atrocious horrors of his childhood, and their relationship is solidified as a result: ‘Even his confession hadn’t changed Willem’s perception of him—in fact, Willem seemed to respect him more, not less, because of it’ (Yanagihara 604).

The confessional scenes where friendship is the most recognisable, tend to include three things. Firstly, the confession provides cathartic release, not only for the friend confessing, but also for the friend listening, as the truest of friends will rarely be surprised by a revelation, they will have seen the shape of it inside their friends as surely as being aware of a locked room in a house they cohabit – just as Willem was aware of the shape of Jude’s confession decades before he made it. Secondly, the confession is given due to the earned merits of the friendship – it is a reward for the solid building of an achieved relationship, and not given out of any duty to romantic or familial ties, as Sam’s confession was given to Frodo solely because he was his friend. And thirdly, the confession expands the internal landscape of the friendship – for Willem and Jude, the confession opens up years of experience between them, adding it

to their understanding of each other, while for Sam and Frodo, the confession reveals a potential new future, even if the hope is very slim.

Steve Duck writes that: ‘The main feature that stabilises, establishes and develops relationships of all types is proper and dexterous control of *self-disclosure*, that is, the revelation of personal layers of one’s self, personal thoughts, of even one’s body’ (87). It is not surprising then, that scenes of confessions between friends seem to function in a similar way to the physical intimacy between characters might in a romance narrative. Both friendly confessions and romantic physical intimacy are tentatively led up to in the plot, often approached several times in the narrative but backed away from before, eventually and climactically, the intimacy is realised.

*Le Grand Meaulnes* ends with a written confession from one friend to another. Since Meaulnes and François were boys together longing for the lost estate, the plot of the novel has become tangled with romance, secrets and betrayal. After searching for, but not discovering his beloved Yvonne from the lost estate, Meaulnes instead romanced Valentine, the fiancée of his friend Frantz. After later marrying Yvonne, in a fit of guilt Meaulnes leaves on his wedding night to correct the wrong, leaving behind his written confession for François.

On that same monthly composition book, he had quickly scribbled a few more words at dawn before leaving – with her permission, but for ever – Yvonne de Galais, his wife since the previous day:

‘I am leaving. I have to find the trail of the two gypsies who came yesterday to the fir wood and who set off by bicycle towards the east. I

shall only return to Yvonne if I can bring back with me Frantz and Valentine, married, and settle them in “Frantz’s house”.

‘This manuscript which I began as a secret diary, and which has become my confession, is to be the property of my friend François Seurel, should I not return.’

He must have quickly slipped this exercise book under the rest, locked his small, old schoolboy trunk and vanished. (Alain-Fournier 219)

Ultimately, the novel ends with Meaulnes expressing his love for Yvonne by marrying her, and for François by leaving him a written confession of his most guilty actions. Meaulnes may never see either his wife or friend again – indeed, Yvonne is dead by his return in the epilogue – but when he leaves, he leaves them each with proof of his affection. François is not wholly surprised by the confession, as the shape of a secret had long been clear, and it both expands François’s understanding of his friend’s story and resolidifies a friendship which, once it had reached adulthood, had begun to wane.

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In *Mr London*, Benjamin and Jack’s journey through the rainforest has been written as a building series of small confessions, as the trust and intimacy between the men grows. The first such scene is around a campfire where Benjamin admits that he is selfish in trying to find Crane, and in exchange, Jack reveals that his own family and friends are dead. The second scene takes place on a red London bus in the middle of a flooding river, with Jack revealing how he managed to escape the journeymen and join the rebels. The final confession happens once the men have returned to the ruin of Hall, with Jack finally confession that he and Benjamin had known each other as boys, and



that Benjamin was responsible for the destruction of a world, the confession opening up a vast new shared landscape between the men. When Benjamin then immediately chooses to abandon Jack, the act is all the more frustrating given the confessions Jack has just shared.

## Oaths

It is generally accepted that a universal pre-requisite of friendship is that each friend is loyal to the other (Konstan 12). This loyalty may take many different forms, but at its simplest, loyalty between friends is knowing that, should it be needed, each friend will be there for the other (Stieb 75). David Konstan writes that in Greek texts of the classical period, loyalty was seen as almost a contractual obligation between friends and this loyalty extended beyond Platonic and Aristotelian models of friendship to include guests and political alliances in this loyalty, so strongly that, in Homer's *Iliad*, two enemies put down their weapons upon discovering that their grandfathers were bound with these guest ties (Konstan 5, 13). These bonds of loyalty between achieved relationships were not legally binding, not as those between ascribed relationships might be, but instead were ethically binding (Herman 68). There is loyalty found through the literature of antiquity in *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and *Beowulf*, while nearly every Medieval knight is surrounded by oath-bound comrades (Sharp, *Friendship and Literature* 36). While the obligatory aspect of loyalty between friends is less prevalent in later understandings of friendship (MacFaul 12), loyalty is still seen as so essential to friendship that a friend who is loyal is proven as a friend, while a friend who is disloyal is proven to be false.

In friendship narratives, the oath trope is a dramatic outplaying of this loyalty between friends, and as such seems to fall into a few basic types, each functioning distinctly within a narrative. Firstly, there are spoken oaths between friends, where characters actively acknowledge a more formal bond between themselves, whether or not that ascribes to the social norms; in *Le Grande Meaulnes* the boarding school friends swear to be friends and keep the secret of the lost estate, and Alexander Dumas' famous use of the phrase '*Un pour tous, tous pour un*' ('All for one, one for all') in *The Three Musketeers* (115). Secondly, there might be a promise of a different kind made which is representative of the loyalty between friends; in *A Little Life*, the friends struggle to express their relationships for the lack of contemporary social descriptions to describe it, but often make promises to each other about everything else, the state of their friendships indicated by the keeping, or not keeping, of the promises. Thirdly, there are unrequited oaths, where troubled friendships find one friend honouring and making oaths, direct or indirect, while the other does not; this conflict often dooms the friendship, but not always. Here, we witness Falstaff's tragedy in Shakespeare's *Henry V*; Falstaff assumes that the bonds of friendship between himself and Prince Hal are sacred, but is brutally disappointed to find himself cast out after the prince's ascension to the throne (Bloom 108).

However, in the modern Western world and its wide context of different friendships, oaths begin to become problematic. Pat O'Connor writes that one of the key attractive features of friendship in a post-modern world is that they are 'relationships which can be chosen and re-chosen throughout one's life in a way which allows for a high degree of self-definition' (119). It is important, therefore, that friendship remains free of any social binding, such as oaths, that surround more ascribed relationships;

while friendly affection and trust are so often proven by the fact that each friend is free to walk away at any time, but does not (Denworth 34). However, at the same time, O'Connor's description implies that friendship is more about the requirements of the individual, rather than about the friends themselves, turning the whole relationship towards a more 'egoistic friendship' which some writers believe cannot be not real friendship at all, as 'without a less calculated commitment to another person's well-being the core of love and friendship seems unavailable (T. Smith 263).

Oaths are therefore also regularly problematic in fiction – acting at the same time as concretisation and a hurdle to friendship – and there are many examples of the oath trope being used to almost foretell the friendship's doom as readers do not expect modern characters within modern contexts to be able to keep their oaths. For example, in *A Little Life*, one of the four friends JB promises, as Jude's friend, not to exhibit a portrait JB created of Jude – but as soon as the promise is made, the reader recognises the inevitability that the promise will be broken, it being more important to JB that he self-defines himself as an artist, than keeps a boyhood friend. Elsewhere this making of oaths is used as a tragic device, as found in Willy Russell's play *Blood Brothers* and William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, which both result in the deaths of those bonded by promises of friendship.

The problematic oath is particularly explored in *Le Grand Meaulnes* as one of the major plot devices. As boys, Meaulnes, François and Frantz, a boy who has recently joined the school who knows about the lost estate and the girl Yvonne, swear together their loyalty as friends:

‘Be my friends,’ [Frantz] said, suddenly. ‘Look: I know your secret and I have defended it against everyone. I can put you on the track of what you have lost...[at the estate]’ And he added, almost with solemnity: ‘Be my friends, for the day when I am again on the brink of hell, as I was once before... Promise me that you’ll answer when I call – when I call you like this...’ (and he made a strange noise: *whoo, whoo!*). ‘You, Meaulnes, swear first!’

And we swore because, children that we were, anything more solemn and serious than real life appealed to us. (Alain-Fournier 99-100)

This oath between friends seems to only go one way – with Meaulnes and François swearing loyalty to come to the aid of the newly arrived Frantz, but not vice versa, immediately making the friendships veer towards the unrequited. This oath binds the honour of Meaulnes throughout the novel, and is a large factor in his later decision to leave his new wife Yvonne and travel away to undo the wrongs he did to Frantz through his romance with Valentine. The narrator, François, also points out the oath’s childishness, suggesting to the reader that this oath is not something that should be done between sensible people. While the oath seems to undermine the freedom of Meaulnes to love which friends he chooses, he is technically free to ignore it should he choose to, the social repercussions in dismissing the oath as a childish fantasy would not have been all that great, however, Meaulnes chooses to keep his oath, for reasons the reader can only assume are bound with ideas of honour, but also a sense of loyalty towards his friend.

Meanwhile, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien actively addresses the issue of the problematic oath by the fellowship of the ring not swearing one to one another before their quest begins. This is a particularly notable absence in the story, as Tolkien was so heavily inspired by mythology, medieval poetry and *Beowulf*, all of which are from literary landscapes in which oaths between friends and comrades are commonplace (Risden 197). Upon setting out on their quest from Rivendell, Elrond speaks to the company about the importance of the lack of oath between them.

‘The further you go, the less easy will it be to withdraw; yet no oath or bond is laid on you to go further than you will. For you do not yet know the strength of your hearts, and you cannot foresee what each may meet upon the road.’

‘Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens,’ said Gimli.

‘Maybe,’ said Elrond, ‘but let him not vow to walk in the dark, who has not seen the nightfall.’

‘Yet sworn word may strengthen quaking heart,’ said Gimli.

‘Or break it,’ said Elrond. (Tolkien, 280)

For whatever reason, perhaps to express a more modern type of friendship or to reflect his own experiences, Tolkien decided to move away from the structured oaths of friendships found in the texts he was drawing from. For the members of the fellowship, the voluntary aspect of both their quest and their loyalty to one another is kept intact, with the result that each member is ultimately forced into action by his resulting affections for the others. Notably, throughout the novel, when the end of their shared

quest is spoken about by the fellowship, it is often not in terms of defeating their enemies, but in terms of helping Frodo.

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Oaths are purposefully problematic for the characters in *Mr London*. As boys, Jack and Benjamin swore allegiance to one another, cutting their thumbs to bind the pact in a classic display of a childish blood ritual.

[Jack] had taken a knife, brought with dinner from the house, and sliced his thumb, then sliced mine, pressing the blood together. Even at eleven and twelve, it'd seemed childish. But *thrilling*, like we'd discovered something about humanity – about good and honourable love – that no one else knew. We each repeated the lines, like they were wedding vows and not something we were making up on the spot: 'I swear endless fealty to our friendship. I will be loyal to you above all others until the end of time and the universe.'

This fierce and immature loyalty soon leads them down a destructive path, with Benjamin destroying a world due to his loyal anger at Jack's grievances. In the twenty years between this incident and the start of the novel, Jack is consumed by the consequences of this oath, sheltering Benjamin and protecting his whereabouts in London for years, and attempting to take personal responsibility for his friend's actions on a large, political scale. Meanwhile, for Benjamin, the oath is entirely forgotten, turning a spoken oath as boys into an unrequited oath as adults. When all of this is revealed to Benjamin by Jack towards the end of the novel, Benjamin is dismayed that

all of Jack's actions were because of a promise, but Jack assures him that is not true – for Benjamin and Jack, at least, the oath was not the most binding part of their friendship.

## **Battles**

In friendship narratives, the battle trope can act as a way for friends to prove their loyalty to one another – these are the ‘times in need’ which friends swore oaths to be alongside each other for. More than that, however, Allan Silver writes that in classical antiquity, from where we get so many of our philosophical presumptions about friendship, there was no place for ‘disinterested’ relationships between people in a world where resources were not distributed through the structures of modern capitalism, and therefore everyone outside kinship and the domestic spheres was either a friend or an enemy (1484). This goes a long way towards understanding why the intricate networks of obligatory loyalty between friends were necessary. For Silver, it means that ‘the purpose of friendship was to help friends by defeating enemies’ (1487), and while this may seem calculating to modern readers, it does also indicate the importance of friendship proving itself through assisting one another, of which the battle trope is a dramatic outplaying.

Battles in friendship narratives give friends an automatic shared goal: to defeat the enemy, to survive. The battles they need to overcome may be a physical threat, an ideology, a beast, a bully, but each battle actively and aggressively threatens the friends' way of life and hinders their movement through the rest of their narrative. The types of battles the friends might face are familiar from countless stories, some literal and others less so. Firstly, friends might battle episodic monsters: in *The Lord of the Rings*, the

fellowship together face orcs, Ringwraiths, carnivorous trees, balrogs and giant spiders, while in *A Little Life*, the four friends face the episodic trials of alcoholism, arguments, illness, and violent ex-boyfriends. Secondly, friends might find themselves in a climactic battle: in *The Lord of the Rings*, the final battle is with the forces of Sauron at the gates of Mordor, and in the *Iliad* it is the fall of Troy. Thirdly, friends might find themselves battling internal demons, where the inner worlds of the friends themselves are in danger: here we see Sam battling against the One Ring's evil stranglehold on Frodo, and Willem's battling against Jude's depression. Finally, friends might battle the landscape they find themselves in, which may be a political, ideological, or literal landscape – either way, the friends must stick together or die. Sam and Frodo must cross the wastes of Mordor, while Willem and Jude must navigate the emotional landscape of living as adults amid an unhealthy New York society.

In battles, any lingering societal expectations that might prevent friendships from forming, have a habit of melting away. This is never rarely truer than when the battle trope extends throughout the friendship narrative to encompass the story with the background of war. Sarah Cole notes that, in times of war, when the world becomes a stark contrast of friends and enemies and nothing much in between, the societal conventions surrounding ascribed relationships, such as master and servant, elder or younger, ethnicity or rank, start to ebb away – at least temporarily (Cole 139). She quotes Sidney Rogerson who, remembering the First World War, wrote: 'In spite of all differences in rank, we were comrades, brothers dwelling together in unity. We were privileged to see in each other that inner, and noble self which in the grim, commercial struggle of peacetime is all too atrophied' (Cole 140). This intimacy often is expected to transcend the battle itself, and follow friends back into their lives afterwards, whatever



those lives may be, the profound closeness shared between friends in battles so powerful that it is remembered for decades afterwards.

The comradeship of this sort, if it is a form of friendship, appears to be an extreme and quick-forming thing, not easily forgotten. However, there is arguably a difference between the wartime comradeship described here and friendship, in that friendship seems to require the freewill of the participants to choose one another for specific qualities they each possess, whereas comradeship only requires people to be standing next to each other when the battle commences (Cole 145). In this way, the individuality of the friend matters less than their allegiance, and so long-term comradeship, especially as portrayed in fiction, can have individuals merging, overlapping, and replacing each other as they fall in battle. Literary examples of this include Tim O'Brien's U.S. soldiers trudging through the Vietnam jungle in *The Things We Carried* (7), the nameless comrades on Odysseus' trip home where the men face a battle on every island home, or the often-indistinguishable handmaids in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In *The Lord of the Rings* there are countless battles fought throughout the story, and the final book is set against a backdrop of war. Each one of these battles is used by Tolkien as a device to solidify affection and proof of loyalty between his characters, as they stand side by side to fight monsters or watch an approaching army. However, arguably one of the most moving examples of a charge into battle as proof of friendship is taken by a character who is facing that battle entirely alone. When Frodo succumbs to the whisperings of Gollum and abandons Sam on a pass through the mountains into Mordor, Frodo is led by Gollum into the lair of the giant spider Shelob, where he is

stabbed and wrapped in web, before his body is found and picked up by a group of orcs.

Sam follows:

Sam shuddered and tried to force himself to move. There was plainly some devilry going on. Perhaps in spite of all orders the cruelty of the orcs had mastered them, and they were tormenting Frodo, or even savagely hacking him to pieces. He listened; and as he did so a gleam of hope came to him. There could not be much doubt: there was fighting in the tower, the orcs must be at war among themselves, Shagrat and Gorbag had come to blows. Faint as was the hope that his guess brought him, it was enough to rouse him. There might be just a chance. His love for Frodo rose above all other thoughts, and forgetting his peril he cried aloud: 'I'm coming, Mr. Frodo!'

He ran forward to the climbing path, and over it. At once the road turned left and plunged steeply down. Sam had crossed into Mordor.

(Tolkien, 898-899)

In this scene, there are monsters and dangers all around, and Sam is preparing to wage many battles at once. As he runs to help his friend, he is running towards conflict with monsters, the internal demons which are taking over Frodo, the coercive power of the one ring, and the terrifying landscape of Mordor itself, which has so long been set up in the novel as a place of deep fear. It is only the love of his friend, the loyalty to his master, which cuts through all of these layers of narrative burden.

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In *Mr London*, there are also many battles. On behalf of his Crane, Benjamin runs into a housefire, fights for his life on the London underground, survives the journeymen's attack on Hall, and takes a long dark walk underneath the journeymen's city in a hellish underworld of fear and violence. As soon as Crane is taken, Benjamin willingly launches himself at everything standing between them. However, while this serves to display Benjamin's loyalty for his friend, Benjamin's enthusiasm to save Crane is purposefully not always displayed in the novel as a positive trait, but it instead slips into the obsessive and single-minded until, by the time he reaches Crane, Benjamin is desperate enough to kill a man with his bare hands – which speaks of the moral paradox of friendship in that by choosing a friend, we also choose our enemies (Telfer 252).

Significantly, Benjamin walks into most of his battles alone. In *Mr London*, the battle trope is not generally used to strengthen the friendship or comradeship of the participants, but is instead used as a way of Benjamin proving his loyalty to an absentee, making Benjamin notably very lonely in his friendship. It is not until the end of the novel when Crane is dead and the journeymen's city is flooded with violence, that Benjamin finally walks into a battle with another character by his side.

There was something in this. In this simple walking through to the end with someone. In this silent side-by-side. It was private and primeval. In an alternate dimension, Jack might've argued against me going at all, but he needed me, he leant heavily against me as we walked fast through the corridors. Somehow, he managed to be every measure the Niklaus Ferðasson the revolution was hunting for; chin held high, gleaming blood, pressing a pillowcase to his head, missing every other step through

faintness. Here was a man who'd walk and walk until the weight of politics pressed heavier than earth and stopped him dead.

'Once more unto the breach, dear friend,' I whispered, but he didn't hear.

It is at this moment that the reader is supposed to recognise that Benjamin and Jack have finally overcome the differences of twenty years and are once again friends.

## **Sacrifice**

Self-sacrifice on behalf of one's friends has long been a key ingredient of friendship. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asserted that the attachment between true friends must be so strong that each man would sooner harm themselves than their friend, with each man so highly evolved morally and spiritually that they would die for the other (209). Similarly, in *De Amicitia*, Cicero describes how, during a play, an actor playing Pylades declared that he was going to die in his friend Orestes' place, and the audience leapt to its feet with applause. Having already written that friendship comes from man's nature, and not from any benefit gained, Cicero explains that, for the play's audience, it was '... easy for to see what nature prompts men to do. Although they were not capable of doing such a thing themselves, they correctly judged its rightness when they saw it done by someone else' (*De Amicitia* 152). It was not uncommon in the dramas and poetry of classical antiquity for friends to make this ultimate sacrifice for one another (Digeser 14), with the life of a friend being given for another, yet Cicero makes it clear here that, in real life, this is not so common an act – it is only the best men, the most highly and morally evolved, who are capable for performing such feats of self-sacrifice.

This peak ideal of Aristotelian and Ciceronian true friendship is all but unobtainable, and therefore the displays of self-sacrifice between friends found in classical antiquity become less a portrayal of real friendships, and more a dramatic thought experiment, stretching the philosophical ideals of true friendship to their bitter end.

However, not all sacrifice between friends needs to be so dramatic, although the strength of the expression of fictional friendship is usually directly proportional to the size of the sacrifice. In friendship narratives, there seem to be two different types of sacrifice which friends can make for each other. Firstly, a friend might sacrifice their desires: here readers see a friend being willing to give up, or actually giving up, something which means a lot to them. This type of sacrifice might be different for every friend as it depends on their individual desires, and so what is a sacrifice for one, might not be for another. For example, in *Harry Potter and Philosopher's Stone*, Hermione proves her friendship to Ron and Harry in return, by breaking Hogwarts' rules and risking expulsion – a small sacrifice for the boys, but a huge one for Hermione (Rowling 172). Meanwhile, in *Le Grande Meaulnes*, Meaulnes gives up his new marriage to fulfil his oath of friendship with Frantz (Alain-Fournier 228), and in *A Little Life*, Willem gives up sex to continue to deepen his relationship with Jude, with Willem himself noting that 'to some people ... his own sacrifice would be unthinkable. It would have been once to him as well' (Yanagihara 561). Secondly, a friend might sacrifice their life or else be willing to walk into danger for the friend, where there is a real risk of hurt or death. For example, in Homer's *Iliad* is the infamous death of Patroclus, who takes the armour of Achilles and storm the city of Troy in his friend's place, to be killed by Hector (XVI:777-867). Less dramatically, but arguably no less a proof of friendship,

is Ron and Harry's first proof of friendship for Hermione when they risk their lives to save her from a troll in the girls' bathroom (Rowling 87).

The sacrifice trope is regularly found in co-existence with the battle trope, with every battle in fiction creating an opportunity for sacrifice. While the tropes often overlap and share many of the same logic in terms of how they appear to function to solidify friendship narratives, battles and sacrifice do remain distinctly different and can each exist without the other. Battles in narratives might prove the loyalty of the friend, since the friend turned up to fight, but there is a significant difference in the portrayal of friendship in battles scenes depending on whether or not there is also a risk of self-sacrifice – the more danger to the friend, the greater the friendship is proven. Equally, self-sacrifice can exist where there is no battle present, with characters regularly giving up things for their friends in times of peace, such as money, time, or romance.

An essential aspect of the sacrifice trope is that it involves giving something to someone else, without any expectation of receiving anything in return. Many writers have written on the importance of gift-giving in the creation and solidifying of social ties (Herman 14), including anthropologist Marcel Mauss who writes: 'If friends make gifts, gifts make friends. A great proportion of primitive exchange, much more than our own traffic, has as its decisive function this latter, instrumental one: the material flow underwrites or initiates social relations' (140). In the trope of sacrifice, the friends are giving up something of themselves, but also gifting something to their friend, or at least attempting to. Arguably, it is this twofold nature of sacrifice – the losing of something and the giving of something – which means that the power of sacrificial scenes in fiction are especially powerful as an expression of love (Sharp, "Gift Exchange" 251). The act of sacrifice, narratively speaking – especially when a character sacrifices

everything they have, up to, and including, their life – seems to have the narrative power to right nearly any wrong previously done between characters, as well as the ability to confirm the existence of friendship and affection once and for all.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, a member of the fellowship, Boromir, succumbs to the one ring's power and attempts to take the ring from Frodo, and in doing so breaks the truth and loyalty between himself and the rest of the party. However, a chapter later, when the fellowship is attacked, Boromir is thrown into a battle and sacrifices his life protecting the hobbits, Merry and Pippin. As he lies dying, Aragorn finds him:

Aragorn knelt beside him. Boromir opened his eyes and strove to speak. At last slow words came. 'I tried to take the Ring from Frodo,' he said. 'I am sorry. I have paid.' His glance strayed to his fallen enemies; twenty at least lay there. 'They have gone: the Halflings: the Orcs have taken them. I think they are not dead. Orcs bound them.' He paused and his eyes closed wearily. After a moment he spoke again.

'Farewell, Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed.'

'No!' said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. 'You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace!' (Tolkien, 413-414)

Despite Boromir's sacrifice resulting in a price being 'paid' and no technical benefit being received by the hobbits, Boromir's character is elevated through the giving of his life, his narrative conclusion shifting from having 'failed' to having 'gained such a

victory'. Through his self-sacrifice, Boromir's place in the fellowship has been restored, concretised, and immortalised.

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In *Mr London*, there are several instances of characters being willing to give up their lives for others, however, the key sacrifice in Benjamin's narrative is the one given by Crane, where Crane's loyalty to and affection for Benjamin – which was in question after his marriage to Esther – is proven in the climactic chapters of the novel. After searching for weeks, Benjamin finally makes it to Crane's side in the journeyman's prison, where Crane has been held captive after being mistaken for Benjamin. Upon reaching him, Crane has already been mortally wounded by rebel journeymen who would prefer to see Benjamin dead than in prison, and in their last moments together, Crane reveals that being mistaken for Benjamin was not an accident.

'They came to kill you,' Crane breathed like a dream. 'In your flat. They had your name and address and...' He sighed, closed his eyes, and then opened them again to take stock of his surroundings, remembering where he was, looking at me. 'I came out of the bathroom, and they were standing in your living room pointing guns at me, and... I'd never seen anything like them... They asked if I was Benjamin Farthing and... They said they were going to kill you, Farthing, so I said that, yes, I was you.'

'God, Crane.'

He grimaced. 'But they didn't kill you. They brought you down here. Asked so many questions. But I stayed you.'

'I'm so bloody sorry.'



‘Now you’re here.’ He smiled. ‘Making it all pointless.’

When faced with sudden and unexpected danger, Crane unthinkingly took the place of his friend, hopefully narratively proving that he cares more for his friend’s life than his own, and he continued this ruse through weeks of torture and starvation. His self-sacrifice and ultimate death, elevate him from a flawed friend and housemate to the ideal true friend that Benjamin has been longing for.

## **Leave-Taking**

In the collection of stories looked at, friendship did not often require the ultimate narrative union of the friends. Instead, friends are often led by their shared journey to different destinations; their narrative goal reached, or not, the friends take their leave of one another (Grieverson 147). In his review of romantic male friendship in American fiction, Axel Nissen also notes that:

‘While romantic friendship may have a glorious beginning, it has no predetermined or logical ending. This makes for a formidable artistic challenge in creating romantic friendship fiction, which authors meet in different ways. For what is the proper, probable, or even possible conclusion to a love story between two men? Of the twenty-one narratives discussed in the previous chapter, six end in marriage, six end in death, and three end in death and marriage. Only six end otherwise.’ (50)

By ‘marriage’, we might extend Nissen’s description to recognise that fictions of friendship seem to regularly end with the characters taking their leave from a realm of the achieved relationship of friendship, to return to ascribed relationships such as romance, kinship, or ethnicity. This type of leave-taking seems to present itself in a few different ways. Firstly, the narrative journey representing the friendship between characters might have simply come to an end – the battle is won, the goal is attained, the journey destination is reached – and so friends each return home to different front doors, in an ultimate return to the domestic sphere and their pre-existing ties of ascribed relationships. For example, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* epitomises this need for friends to shake hands and part upon completing a journey; after the novel depicts a road trip from Paris to the Festival of San Fermín to watch the running of the bulls, there is no way the friendship, so reliant on the shared journey narrative, can be brought home, no matter how much of a ‘swell time’ the three men had in each other’s company (Hemingway 250). Likewise, we see this ending in *Peter Pan* where the joy of freedom and adventure in the imaginary and friends-filled realm of Never Never Land must come to an end, with the children returning home to their family (175), or in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Prince Hal leaves the friendly microcosm of the Boar’s Head Tavern to take up his duties as the king of England (II.i.79). Secondly, are those friends who do, as Nissen described, take leave of each other due to marriage or a romantic relationship, such as David Copperfield moving from a narrative of many different achieved relationships to marry Agnes (Dickens 723), or Emma and Harriet Smith’s strangely lopsided friendship being set aside with each of their weddings (Austen 414-415), or *Le Grande Meaulnes* ending with Meaulnes becoming a single father (Alain-Fournier 238). Throughout these narratives achieved relationships, for whatever reason,

became, if not more important, at least equally important to, ascribed relationships, but this hierarchical order was only temporary, as the narrative seeks to move away from the chaos of plot back towards the stability of an ending and domesticity (Oulton 160). As for those friends who are separated by death, there are countless examples. Murder takes Patroclus away from Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, Jay Gatsby from Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald), and Hamlet from Horatio in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Sickness takes Don Quixote from Sancho, Armande Voizin in Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*, and Sebastian Flyte in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Car accidents take Willem in *A Little Life* and Annie and Michael in Sarah Winman's *Tin Man*. The landscape claims Kiowa in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Unn in Tarjei Vesaas' *The Ice Palace*, and Odysseus' crewmates in the Homer's *Odyssey*. While in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, George shoots his friend Lennie in the back of the head after one final recitation of their shared dream of one day owning a farm together. Death in friendship narratives is so common that George Haggerty writes at length on the elegiac tradition of friendship literature – especially those stories which contain the looking back on a lost friend and immortalising them through memory, as found in many of the examples listed above (Haggerty 13-63). For all the harsh realities and paradoxes of friendship, it is impossible to realise any friendship at its most perfect and seamless, anywhere except in memory.

However, there are some fictional friends who refuse to say goodbye. For example, Michael Chabon's *Gentlemen of the Road* sees companions Amram and Zelikman continue on their journey at the end of the novel in the 'solitude they had somehow contrived to share, while E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* ends with Aziz and Fielding begin a horseback journey in an attempt to recapture their friendship,

although the reader suspects this recapturing will not be possible due to social restraints in India at the time. Examples such as this feel both counter-cultural, in that achieved relationships are chosen over ascribed relationships, and also unfinished, in that the journey of friendship is not yet complete. Nissen writes that stories that do not end on marriage or death sometimes receive criticism on ‘aesthetic grounds’ for a dissatisfying ending (55).

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In *Mr London*, the fictional friendship of Benjamin and Crane is concluded with the death of Crane. Having reached the heights of idyllic true friendship through his sacrificial death for his friend, Crane’s story is ended before it can continue and become ‘mundane’ in a return to living in London with his wife and job in Canary Wharf. After Crane’s death, leaving Jack and the people of Hall to their festivities, Benjamin attempts to return to London by himself, in a return to home and the domestic as, while he has no ascribed relationships left in London, he at least has a duty to give Crane’s wife Esther the news of his death. However, Benjamin soon discovers that the police are searching for him and that a narrative return home is impossible. The only choice left to him is a return to his continuing narrative with Jack, a new setting out into the unknown realms of friendship, to re-join the quest towards their shared goal, as still represented by the moon and travel into far distant and impossible places.

Esther asked, ‘Where will you go, Ben?’

The question opened up a possibility, like a window opening from the kitchen onto a different world where I watched myself walking quietly back through pine forest where the feasting and singing was probably still

happening, to pull open canvas into a glowing bell tent. I'd sneak inside before the talks had even finished, stepping over people's knees to find somewhere to sit, and there I'd settle myself and look into the fire, watch it flicker with old stories, and listen to Jack's dreams of moonscapes and stars, and think that perhaps that shared dream, that place where the things we longed for were impossibly far away, that landscape I'd inhabited already for years, all alone, was more a home than London had ever been. And to Esther, my voice rough with salt and smoke, I said, 'I have a friend. I'll go with him.'

While this ending of the story for Benjamin and Jack might feel unfinished, it was essential to the ending of *Mr London* for Benjamin to find a narrative space for himself where friendship was the dominant form of relationship, as that was always the true goal of his personal quest.

## Chapter Four

# Disappearing Friendship

For the most part, this essay has so far examined how friendship appears and asserts itself in fiction, but it is equally important to examine the places where it disappears. Indeed, while some critics see the tendency for friendship to disappear from fiction as problematic (Nehamas 18), this final chapter seeks to argue that friendship's disappearances are not only of great benefit to the readers' understanding of the individual friendships, but are regularly necessary to complete the full portrait of friendship itself. Friendship might disappear from a narrative because a friend has died, a friend has married, or a friend has been reabsorbed back into some other ascribed relationships or a wider community, or the friend is simply never met again, but the most important thing to note is that a large proportion friendship in fiction does dissolve for one reason or another (Severe 56). This is not always a failing of friendship, but, as Tom MacFaul writes: '...in dramatic plots, however, friendship is presented as fleetingly in permanent, fragile, illusorily existing in the moment; its value is only fully recognised when it has passed. To be fully realized in a plot it must *end*' (196).

For friends to attain the best of what friendship has to offer, friendship must disappear from the corporeal realm and move on into a spiritual one. For Plato, fully realised friendship moved through the friend and onwards towards Beauty and in his account of Socrates's death, the women and children in Socrates's family are ushered

from his prison cell, where he is being kept before being sentenced to drink hemlock, and his friends are ushered inside. While the friends are saddened to see Socrates face his death – one friend begs him to escape with them – Plato portrays a gentle acceptance in Socrates and a dismissal of their fears which, with whom he engages in a final philosophical dialogue on spiritual matters, such as the purpose of philosophy and whether Socrates himself believes in life after death (Plato, *Death of Socrates* 67-81). This ending of the great philosopher's life is less an ending and more a transfiguration into the fuller realm of philosophy and friendship (Digeser 43). Likewise, both Seneca and Aristotle urge us that, should a friend die, we should not grieve for too long; instead, we should seek new friends. While this may seem callous, upon closer examination, the advice speaks less of the philosophers' coldness towards the departed, and more of their assumption of friendship's immortality (Pakaluk 90).

In the final pages of *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a clear example of this ascension of a friend into immortality when Sam has to say goodbye to Frodo. Standing on the Grey Havens' lapping shores, Frodo, sick and weary from carrying the one ring, has chosen to leave Middle-earth with Gandalf and the departing elves. Their leaving is a metaphorical death and an ascension into the next, more spiritual, and heavenly, realm of existence.

'Well,' [said Gandalf] 'here at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea comes the end of our fellowship in Middle-earth. Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.'

Then Frodo kissed Merry and Pippin, and last of all Sam, and went aboard; and the sails were drawn up, and the wind blew, and slowly the ship

slipped away down the long grey firth; ... Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water ... The grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. (Tolkien 1030)

While Sam is sad to see his friend go, there is a suggestion from Tolkien that, through ascension to a spiritual realm, friendship completes itself in a way it could never do in reality. Frodo ascends into a fully abstract realm – with the long-serving assistance of Sam, he has attained something of Plato's Beauty. Meanwhile for Sam, Frodo has been immortalised in an idealisation of friendship, attaining perfection that was not possible in reality.

The death of a friend as the denouement of fictions of friendship is such a common occurrence that David Halperin writes: 'It is not too much to say that the death is to friendship what marriage is to romance' (125). Perhaps referring to the sacrificial friendships found in classical antiquity, Alex Nissen explains that: 'A remnant of older narrative forms, closure in death is meant to form a capstone to an ideal relationship that would otherwise likely be disrupted by the mundane marriage of one or both of the parties involved' (53). As mentioned previously, one of the key functions of friendship in Plato's *Symposium* is to foster and hand down the ideas and intellectual engagements of one generation to the next but, more than simply handing things down, this is about the spiritual continuing of one friend through another, not all that far removed from the desire to have children. As Diotima explains:



All of us are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and soul, and, as soon as we come to a certain age, we naturally want to give birth ... Now some people are pregnant in body, while others are pregnant in soul – because there surely are those who are more pregnant in their souls than their bodies, and these are pregnant with what is fitting for a soul to bear and give birth.

(Plato, *Symposium* 498)

Here, through its passing down of friendship is fulfilling the human desire for immortality. As George Haggerty notes, the desire for immortality is not dissimilar to the desire for eros (152), and in fiction they often confused for or bleed into one another, or, in the case of *A Little Life*, become almost on in the same thing. Friend's desire to ascend can be just as passionate a driver of characters as physical desire, where they want not the friend, but the thing they can access through that friend. One might say that the friend's function is to provide a doorway into a transcendental realm, but once that realm has been accessed, the friend himself is no longer required. Having fulfilled his purpose, he disappears from the narrative.

Alongside friendship's ascension, the disappearance of friendship can also be used as a device to shape the self-hood of the remaining individual. In chapter two, this essay discussed how the use of friends in fiction can be used to help to give better definition to characters, a type of shorthand to tell the reader about a character through how well-liked they are, and how many and what type of friends they have. Since then, the essay has looked at many ways in which friendship in fiction can be used to explore past these exterior traits of a character, and into a shared psyche between characters, where each friend is learning and growing alongside the friend. So far, the essay has

mainly discussed how this psychological intimacy enhances and defines friendship, but here we explore how it enhances and defines the individual.

Stacey Oliker describes the importance of intimacy between friends and their sense of self-hood, where intimacy is defined as ‘the sharing of the inner experience, mutual self-exploration, and the expression of emotional attachment’ (20). For Oliker, it is friends’ internal sharing of worlds in a psychological and communication-based relationship as an act of self-definition that defines a particularly modern Western understanding of friendship, because this sharing of inner experience requires a culture of individualism, whereby the individual friends are celebrated as being unique human beings with complex inner worlds (21). David Konstan writes: ‘Friendship is thus imagined as the opening of a special window onto an interior self that is ordinarily opaque or hidden. Acquaintances, by contrast, know of the other only what he is towards the outside’ (16). In fiction, intimate self-exploration between friends can, as has already been discussed in this essay, be explored in many different ways, from outwardly displaying metaphorical representations through shared journeys, geography, cohabitation, other realms, and confessions, to a more literary psychological realism where the inner experience is discussed literally between characters.

In *Human, All Too Human*, in terms of the conversations between friends, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:

In the normal conversation each thinks he is leading the way, as if two ships sailing side by side and now and then gently bumping into each other faithfully believing the neighbouring ship was following or even being pulled along by it. (370)

This passage indicates how individual selfhood is an unignorable aspect of friendship – that friendship is not a single unit in and of itself, but it is a meeting of individuals who each have a push and pull on the friendship and individual desires about what they might get from it. Similarly, Nietzsche argues that one of the fruits of friendship is that it allows an individual to accept themselves – through the experiencing of our friends’ quirks, mundaneness, and darkness and learning that we accept them for it, we also can learn to accept ourselves (Nietzsche 149). It is through the differences between friends that each friends’ sense of self-hood is defined. Allan Bloom notes that in the *Symposium*, where an older man loves a beautiful and promising boy, the friendship is one based on opposites, where each participant learns about and appreciates something in the friend that he does not possess himself (Bloom 137). Just as friends who are equals of every sort rarely make a good narrative for want of conflict (97-98), friends who are too similar are unlikely to sharpen each other’s sense of self-hood as effectively as those who are different from one another. Perhaps more clinically, Mark Vernon talks about friendship being the ‘school of love’, whereby each friend practices the skills of affection, intimacy, and communication, before graduating from the friendship and applying the lessons learnt back towards the ascribed relationships of romance and kinship (Vernon, “The Ambiguity of Friendship” 6).

While friendships in real life may well be permanent, friendships in fiction are often impermanent. In a fiction dealing with the psychological realism of the characters, this impermanence means that the story becomes just as much about the individual as it is about friendship, as characters are forced to confront their inner world both with and without a friend by his side. It is only through the disappearance of the friend that the

lessons of selfhood learned through that friend can be truly realised. Tom MacFaul writes that through this disappearance of a friend, the friend left behind is forced into isolation in a tragedy, and social integration in a comedy (2), but either way, the character has been defined. In her autobiographical and philosophical notes on the loss of significant friendships, Nancy K. Miller notes that: 'However sad, the death of parents conforms to the order of things. Each time I lose a friend I am shocked beyond sadness. The world shrinks. So does my sense of what anchors me to it' (426). If the addition of a French to a situation expands our understanding of the world, their disappearance can shrink it, and it is this a narrative shrinking at the end of a friendship that is so formative to the narrative solidification of an individual character.

It is noteworthy, then, that *The Lord of the Rings* does not end with Frodo's departure, but instead shifts back to the perspective of Sam as he returns home to his wife and children in Hobbiton:

But Sam turned to Bywater, and so came back up the Hill, as day was ending once more. And he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap. He drew a deep breath. 'Well, I'm back,' he said. (Tolkien, 1032)

The final lines of *The Lord of the Rings* seemed to portray Sam as an individual who has returned from the adventure of friendship to the reality of domestic life, but this adventure was incredibly formative for his character. He left the Shire a gardener and servant, and returned to become a father, husband, and ultimately the

mayor of Hobbiton. It is only through the leave taking of Frodo that Sam is able to least faltered app and his new self, but it is also only through Frodo that this new self was possible at all, thanks to the lessons learned through the journey of their friendship.

However, this reliance on a friend for self-definition can also have tragic consequences. The final section of *A Little Life* charts Jude's downward trajectory after Willem's death, through dramatic weight loss and worsening mental and physical health, which leads to his suicide at the end of the novel. This section is narrated in first person by Jude's adoptive father, Harold; unlike the close third-person narrative from the majority of the novel which prioritised the inner thoughts of all four friends, Jude is now an outsider in the narrative. With the passing of Willem, he has become a character whose inner world is only accessible by his outward actions, the psychological intimacy with Jude in the novel is lost.

[Jude] was in his bedroom, and the door was slightly ajar, and when I saw what he was doing, I for some reason didn't call his name, didn't walk away, but stood just outside the frame, silent and watching. He had one prosthesis on and was putting on the other—I had never seen him without them—and I watched as he sank his left leg into the socket, drawing the elastic sleeve up around his knee and thigh, and then pushed his pants leg down over it ...But even I could tell something was wrong ... And then he reached down and tore off both legs, one and then the other, and for a second—they were still wearing their socks and shoes—it appeared as if

they were his real legs, and he had just yanked away a piece of himself, and I half expected to see an arcing splash of blood. (Yanagihara 724-725)

Throughout the novel, Willem played a large part in Jude's sense of self-hood, their psychological intimacy time and again cemented by the tropes of friendship narratives. However, after years of sexual and physical abuse, Jude does not have the strength to graduate from his friendship with Willem, and instead, without Willem there to observe and define him as a character, Jude loses himself. In the passage above, he quite literally is shown dismantling himself. Similarly, Nancy K. Miller describes her personal experience of this disappearing of self after the loss of a friend: 'When, while contemplating the loss of your friend, you discover that your position, secured among the living, is unstable, unsure. You may have imagined yourself safely on the side of the living, and then suddenly, like me, you are on the verge, possibly, of disappearing yourself' (Miller 430).

In *Le Grande Meaulnes*, the interconnectivity between friends as a way of shaping each other's character is evident throughout. In its simplest sense, the novel is a story about an individual character, Meaulnes, told through the narration of another character, François, and this shaping of another man's character through the somewhat lopsided Platonic friendship of a comparatively plain narrator is the same device used in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and E.M. Forster's *Brideshead Revisited*. Marian Gyles Jones writes that critiques of the *Le Grande Meaulnes* have generally minimised the narrator François's part in the novel to a device whereby the reader is 'better able to accept this story because it comes from [François], who is more ordinary than Meaulnes' (67), while Alan Pryce-Jones writes that François is little more than 'the foil for Meaulnes, the passive agency on whom Meaulnes works his vast activity' (xiv). However, the formation of character through

friendship is not quite so simple in *Le Grande Meaulnes*, as Martin Sorrell raises the point that François is not merely a device, but is an active agent in the novel as he is writing from the perspective of an adult in his thirties and is, therefore, a ‘co-author’ with Alain-Fournier, with his own reasons for presenting the story of his friendship with Meaulnes as he does (79). It is through François’s Aristotelian examination of and seeking of the virtue in his friend, that his own character is formed, and the novel becomes a story of ‘doubles’, with both characters being equally important to the formation of its ideas (79).

This chapter has sought to highlight two major ways in which the disappearance of friendship from fiction can unexpectedly solidify the portrayal of that friendship through friendship’s philosophical transcendence and its self-defining of the individual. In both cases, the disappearance of the friend acts to dramatise a key function of friendship, and while it is these disappearances that make fictional representations of friendship so elusive and difficult to craft, they also speak with the essence of friendship itself and create a narrative ending to friendship which is satisfying to the reader precisely because it is only friendship which would have allowed the characters to reach that destination.

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In *Mr London*, Benjamin’s strong desire is for the abstract, unnameable qualities offered by friendship’s promise of a type of spiritual immortality. He is a man who is ‘pregnant of the soul’ and longing for a way to express within a cultural context which does not necessarily encourage such desires. His strong desire for this began to shape much of the emotional content of the novel, and it is expressed time and again with a physical

aching desperation. This desperation is first described as a ‘tugging feeling in [his] diaphragm’, but it soon manifested itself more literally and a central image in the novel:

There was a red thread, imaginary maybe, leading from the centre of my chest to the door on the middle of the lake, billowing in the wind. Beyond that door, it would lead all the way to Crane, I knew. I ignored the thread, circumnavigated Hall for an hour or more, winding the thread around the walls, shaking the cold from my fingers, concentrating on footfalls, footfalls, footfalls, tramping out the last bits of new snow which had gathered along my route.

Later, it is this red thread that leads Benjamin through the journeyman’s city and down through the underworld, and finally leads him to the unrecognisable body of his friend.

... the thread was insistent, pulling so excruciatingly I wondered if it was actually made from my own arteries, my insides unravelling, and I’d no choice but to backtrack to the first cell because it wanted me to, and look for a second time into the gloom.

Similarly, there is much desire in both Benjamin and Jack for one another, but it is not necessarily desire for each other’s bodies. They long for the intimacy of a shared internal landscape because they have each found in the other a spiritual whittling stone which might allow them to each move towards the great expanse of immortality.



While much of the narrative of *Mr London* pertains to be about friendship, just as much of the novel, if not more, is purposefully about Benjamin's formation as an individual. Initially, the text was written in a close third person narration, but as the project progressed, the importance of Benjamin's individual landscape became paramount, and so it was switched to first person so that, throughout the novel, the reader is aligned extremely closely to Benjamin, not only watching him take part in the story, but seeing what he sees, feeling what he feels. The defining of Benjamin as a person is central, and the story charts his emotional fragility that he attempts to bandage with his friendship with Crane, and his defragmentation when Crane is taken away. In the rainforest with Jack, Benjamin confesses his awareness of his reliance on Crane for self-hood:

I ran my hand through my hair, so grimy it stayed in place. I thought for a while, before, 'Everyone's calling me Mr London, but I'm not that at all ... What I really am is Crane's friend. He's known me since I was a kid, we shared the best times of our lives together, and he sat alongside me at my worst. Without him, there's nothing in the world that knows me at all. I cease to exist.'

'I see. To save him is to save yourself. He's your mirror.'

'It's selfish.'

'It is.' Jack smiled. 'And it isn't.'

However, it is ultimately not Crane who is able to solidify Benjamin's selfhood, but instead Jack is the character who fills in the holes in Benjamin's psychological

understanding of himself by revealing the truth of the cosmically tragic incident from their boyhood. Jack quite literally pieces back together Benjamin's sense of self which even in his comfortable life in London, was never quite whole. By Jack helping to recomplete Benjamin's selfhood in this way he fulfils an essential role of friendship.

By actively creating and confront this conflict between friendship and the self, *Mr London* seeks to not only use disappearing friendships as a device to write friendship, but as a way of exploring this tendency in friendship, and its ambiguities of the push and pull between the individual and the friend. While it might not provide any answers, it is an attempt to watch a character confront the chaos.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of the essay, friendship was described as a reciprocal, loyal, intimate, and voluntary relationship between two or more individuals, which sits both alongside and apart from more formal societal ties such as family, marriage, or nation. The essay has since attempted to examine how such an abstract description can be displayed and concretised in fiction so that friendship is recognised to a contemporary reader. This essay has sought to illuminate some of the structure of friendship, using the tradition of friendship philosophy to help solidify some of the emerging architecture. It has explored the author's tendency towards displaying friendship through a quest narrative towards a goal shared by the friends, which often includes a literal or metaphorical journey, and how descriptions of landscape and place can be used to describe the shape of friendship. Through a literary review, the project identified eight tropes of friendship and explored their use and dynamics to concretise fictional friendships. Finally, the essay looked at the commonality of friendship disappearing from fiction, and how those disappearances can also be used to solidify both friendship and the fictional representations of the selfhood of individual friends.

Through this project, the exploration described above transformed *Mr London* from a piece of fiction about friends, to a fiction about friendship itself. The novel not only depicting friendship between characters, but, through a variety of literary devices, attempts to set Benjamin into a metatextual landscape of friendship itself and its

narratives representations uncovered in this essay. The novel uses friendship's tendency towards geographical metaphors to fundamentally underpin much of Benjamin's experience and understanding, and the goal of the novel shifted from a classic quest with an external physical goal (to save the world) to a desperate, physical search for the abstract impossibilities of friendship itself. Meanwhile each of the eight tropes described were used both to solidify friendship and to avoid friendship, with Benjamin actively reluctant to take part in or accept the ritual, and the tone of the novel shifted dramatically when rewritten in first-person narration in order to better explore the relationship between friendship and the individual.

Perfect and everlasting friendship between equal individuals is a fantasy, since it is not possible, but is nice to contemplate. Tom MacFaul goes so far as to suggest that friendship itself is a fictional relationship, in that it is artificially created by human beings, rather than a 'natural' occurrence (1). While the striving towards a such a fantasy in real life might fast become problematic, in stories, engagement with a fantastical friendship can be more than just wishful thinking. Stories can use friendship as a way of shaping human individuality, as well as exploring the possibilities of human connection by examining how characters feel about friendship, how they romanticise it and how they yearn for it.

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## APPENDIX: LITERATURE LIST

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- The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, John Steinbeck, 1976.
- The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, 1883.
- The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1892.
- The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain, 1875.
- The Aeneid*, Virgil, 19 BC.
- Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood, 1996.
- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll, 1865.
- The Amber Spyglass*, Philip Pullman, 2000.
- Angels in America: Millennium Approaches & Perestroika*, Tony Kushner, 1987.
- Anne of Green Gables*, Lucy Maud Montgomery, 1908.
- 'Art', Yasmina Reza, 1994.
- The Beach*, Alex Garland, 1996.
- Beowulf*, Anonymous, circa 725.
- The BFG*, Roald Dahl, 1982.
- Blood Brothers*, Willy Russell, 1983.
- The Book of Strange New Things*, Michael Faber, 2014.
- The Borrowers*, Mary Horton, 1952.
- Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh, 1945
- The Bridge to Terabithia*, Katherine Paterson, 1977.
- The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger, 1951.
- Chocolat*, Joanne Harris, 1999.
- A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess, 1961.
- The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexander Dumas, 1844.
- Cranford*, Elizabeth Gaskell, 1853.
- David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens, 1849.
- Dante's Inferno*, Dante Alighieri, 1472.
- Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe, 1592.
- Don Quixote*, Miguel De Cervantes, 1605-1615.

*Emma*, Jane Austen, 1815.  
*The End of Loneliness*, Benedict Wells, 2018.  
*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Anonymous, circa 2100 BC.  
*The Essex Serpent*, Sarah Perry, 2016.  
*Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer, 2002.  
*Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury, 1953.  
*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter S. Thompson, 1971.  
*Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk, 1996.  
*First Term at Malory Towers*, Enid Blyton, 1946.  
*The Fortress of Solitude*, Jonathan Lethem, 2003.  
*A Gentleman in Moscow*, Amor Towles, 2016.  
*Gentlemen of the Road*, Michael Chabon, 2008.  
*The Goldfinch*, Donna Tartt, 2013.  
*Good Omens*, Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, 1990.  
*The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925.  
*The Gustav Sonata*, Rose Tremain, 2016.  
*Le Grand Meaulnes*, Alain-Fournier, 1913.  
*Hamlet*, William Shakespeare, 1609.  
*The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, 1985.  
*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, J.K. Rowling, 1997.  
*Henry IV: Part Two*, William Shakespeare, 1600.  
*Henry V*, William Shakespeare, 1599.  
*High-Rise*, J.G. Ballard, 1975.  
*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams, 1979.  
*The Hobbit*, J.R.R. Tolkien, 1937.  
*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1902.  
*Howards End*, E.M. Forster, 1910.  
*I Capture the Castle*, Dodie Smith, 1948.  
*The Ice Palace*, Tarjei Vesaas, 1963.  
*If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi, 1947.  
*Iliad*, Homer, circa 762 BC.  
*Into the War*, Italo Calvino, 1954.



- Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino, 1972.
- Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, 1847.
- Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, Susanna Clarke, 2004.
- Kavalier and Clay*, Michael Chabon, 2000.
- Kidnapped*, Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886.
- King Lear*, William Shakespeare, 1606.
- Kiss Me First*, Lottie Moggach, 2013.
- Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders, 2017.
- The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis, 1949.
- A Little Life*, Hanya Yanagihara, 2015.
- The Little Prince*, Antoine De Saint-Exupery, 1942.
- A Little Princess*, Frances Hodgson Burnett, 1905.
- The Little Snake*, A.L. Kennedy, 2018.
- Little Women*, Louise May Alcott, 1868.
- Lord of the Flies*, William Golding, 1954.
- The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954.
- Love and Freindship: And Other Youthful Writings*, Jane Austen, 1790.
- The Magician's Nephew*, C.S. Lewis, 1955.
- The Martian*, Andy Weir, 2011.
- Master and Commander*, Patrick O'Brian, 1969.
- Matilda*, Roald Dahl, 1988.
- Mayflies*, Andrew O'Hagan, 2020.
- The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare, 1598.
- Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo, 1862.
- Miss Jane*, Brad Watson, 2016.
- Le Morte d'Arthur*, Thomas Mallory, 1485.
- My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Ottessa Moshfegh, 2018.
- Naïve. Super.*, Erlend Loe, 1996.
- Narcissus and Goldmund*, Herman Hesse, 1930.
- Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro, 2005.
- Nicholas Nickleby*, Charles Dickens, 1838.
- Northern Lights*, Philip Pullman, 1995.

*Odyssey*, Homer, circa 675–725 BC.  
*Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck, 1937.  
*Oligarchy*, Scarlett Thomas, 2020.  
*Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens, 1837.  
*On the Road*, Jack Kerouac, 1957.  
*Our Tragic Universe*, Scarlett Thomas, 2010.  
*The Outsider*, Albert Camus, 1942.  
*A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster, 1924.  
*The Patrick Melrose Novels*, Edward St Aubyn, 1992-2012.  
*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Stephen Chbosky, 1999.  
*Peter Pan*, J.M. Barrie, 1904.  
*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde, 1890.  
*Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen, 1813.  
*Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, J.D. Salinger, 1955.  
*Ready Player One*, Ernest Cline, 2011.  
*The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe, 1979.  
*Rites of Passage*, William Golding, 1980.  
*Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, 1719.  
*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare, 1595.  
*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Tom Stoppard, 1967.  
*The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett, 1911.  
*The Secret History*, Donna Tartt, 1992.  
*Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen, 1811.  
*Seymour - An Introduction*, J.D. Salinger, 1959.  
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Anonymous, circa 1400.  
*Smoke*, Dan Vyleta, 2016.  
*The Snow Queen*, Hans Christian Anderson, 1844.  
*Starter for Ten*, David Nicholls, 2003.  
*A Study in Scarlet*, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1887.  
*Submergence*, J.M. Ledgard, 2011.  
*Suddenly in the Depths of the Forest*, Amos Oz, 2005.  
*The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway, 1926.

*The Talented Mr Ripley*, Patricia Highsmith, 1955.

*The Three Musketeers*, Alexander Dumas, 1844.

*The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien, 1991.

*Tin Man*, Sarah Winman, 2017.

*Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Thomas Hughes, 1857.

*A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan, 2010.

*War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy, 1865.

*What Dreams May Come*, Richard Matheson, 1978.

*The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, Joan Aiken, 1962.