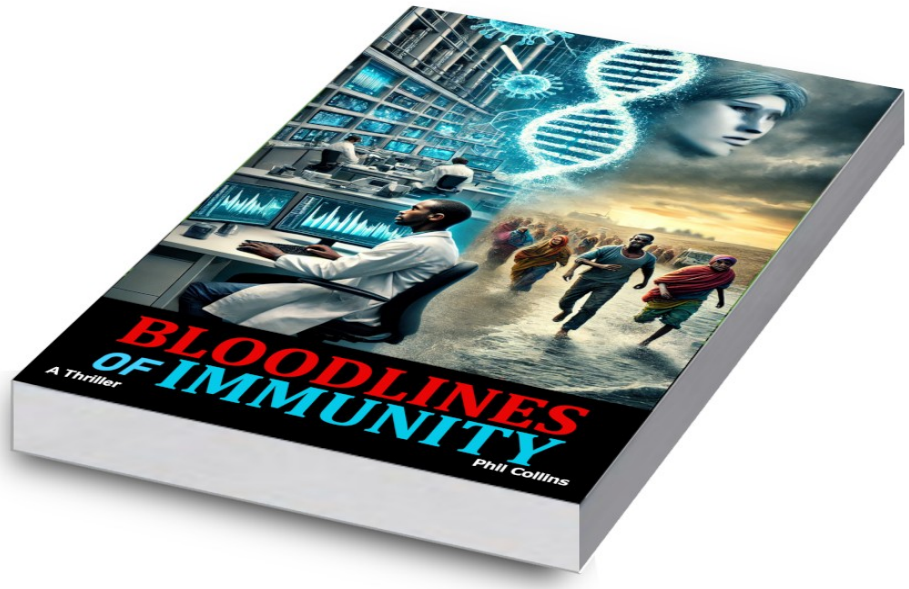
Gentle Reader,

As usual, this story is an outlet for my fascination for the complexity of life. But please feel free to speed-read or skip blithely over the details of biochemistry, or terrorism, or computer hacking. Because that is all peripheral. This is a story of two lives in transition. The first shaped by community, geopolitics, terrorism, violence, a flight to refuge, and the crashing of inherited belief into the real messiness of the world. The second life twisted and

distorted by bad reactions to bad actions and cherished resentment for past hurts. A life with a chaotic destructive past and seemingly an empty future. And the way that these two lives encounter each other in the most terrifying circumstances.

Phil



Prologue

Jeffrey was the only one to notice the guard stirring, his gun lifting steadily, targeting the girl. Without hesitation, Jeffrey threw himself forward, colliding with the girl and sending them both tumbling from the bed to the hard floor. Then chaos erupted in a sharp burst of gunfire—four rapid shots tearing through the air, then a single,

deliberate follow-up.

When the noise subsided, the room sank into an eerie stillness. The guard's lifeless body slumped against the wall, his chest and throat pierced with chilling accuracy. On the floor, Jeffrey and the girl remained motionless, drenched in blood that pooled and crept outward in quiet, crimson tendrils, staining everything in its path.

Chapter 1

Dorchester County Hospital. Monday 23rd August 2010.

Everything was a nauseous wash of yellowish pink. Then the memory bloomed with painful clarity in my head. The desperate dive. The crashing agony blasting through my right arm. The final dive ... her face ... The second thump just above my left collar bone. The scream that went on

forever must have been mine. Or hers?

Suddenly, a blow to the side of my head and then just nothing.

Then black. It felt like quite a few minutes had passed. I took a breath in. Black ants crawled across deathly pale sickly rose. The recollection of the torment was as intense as living it again.

Living it? Was I living it? I finally arrived at myself just as the question burst, flooding into my brain like an aneurysm left too late. I forced my thoughts to slow. I was lying down, face up. Chest heaving with fear. I

could hear what could have been a voice at a great distance. It occurred to me that my eyes were closed and I should open them. I squinted open a fraction and white hot pain flooded in, displacing all logical thought. *Okay, bad idea!* I thought, trying to force my eye shut against the white blazing intensity. Then everything shut off.

----------oOo----------

"Is he still with us?"

"Yes, blood pressure dropping though."

"Oxygen saturation, nurse? Sorry!"

"82%. It's Jan."

"Intubation now then."

"Got it."

"The kit?"

"Yes"

"What do you want?"

"What?"

"Propofol or ketamine?"

"Ket!"

"Head stable please, Kate!"

"Jon, laryngoscope in please."

----oOo----

I'm swimming. Deep below the surface. It's blue and cool and I'm confused because I can see the sun sparkling on the water above me, and the distorted shapes of what must be above the water. Unease begins to accumulate in the water surrounding me. The thought settles that I might not be safe down here. Instantly, fear wraps around my head and I can't breathe. So now I'm fighting my way up and out towards the sunlight. Someone is calling. I can hear my name. The water is warming as I rise. Suddenly I break through the silver surface

layer. The light is intense. It is immediately burning my head. The air is on fire. *Drown or burn? Great choice!* I have to get back down. And I'm back in the cool blue. Drowning seems better, although the circumstances are not ideal for considered judgements to be made. The calling is more urgent as well. Someone is screaming at me to come back.

----oOo----

"Vocal cords secure. OK, set at 100% oxygen."

"Breathing Jan?"

"Yes, bilateral."

"We're at 84%."

"ABG yet, Martin?"

"Do you have them?"

"Yes, just."

"Worst first then?"

"pH 7.21 acidosis."

"Ouch. Go on..."

"CO2 68, O2 49"

"Vasopressors, Kate, please, and let's up the ventilator volume rate ... yes, that'll do."

----oOo----

I'm face down, drifting lower into the darkness. Deeper. For some reason, I believe that I don't have to do anything, just relax. The blue is now thick, dark. Almost solid. There are more voices down here. It feels safe enough. I'm dropping really slowly now. Another rippling water surface appears below me. I register that I don't find that strange, and then I think, *Is that weird? Or is it normal? I really don't know! Come on, get a grip!* I break it, and in an instant, I'm floating on my back staring up at black amethyst. I can still hear

whispers. But all I can see from black horizon to black horizon arching ever higher above me, and tingeing at it's apex with dark purple is the dome of the firmament. Now the whispering has died away to total silence. It feels somehow like a cathedral.

----oOo----

"Kate, take the FiO2 up to 100%"

"Got it."

"Check that noradrenaline line, Jan."

"We're at point oh three."

"Okay, take it up to 0.035 micrograms."

"Done."

"Martin, how about we flip him."

"Prone for a while?"

"Well what do you think?

"Yes, let's do it, but prep for a CT scan. Watch your own lines then. Ready, Jon? One, two, three, turn."

"When do you want another ABG?"

"In five minutes. Plus Jon, CT scan then please."

----oOo----

The thought comes back. Am I living? There is silence now. I seem to be lying on the ground facing up. *Did I somehow flip?* The sky is a mass of flowing pitch black strands with streaks of faint deep purple, like a Goth hairstyle. I stretch out my fingers pressing my hands into the surface below me. It's solid. I can just make out someone talking. It is a woman's voice. She has stopped now. I wait, hoping to hear her again. Then another voice begins. I can't make out whether it is a man's voice or a woman's this time. It's getting louder. The

words are becoming clearer.

----oOo----

"Martin, heart-rate dropping! Forty three bpm."

Before Martin had time to respond, the monitor let out a continuous beep and flat-lined. He pressed the crash button.

"Flip! Ready?"

Eight hands pushed beneath Jeffrey's prone body.

"One, two, three, flip!"

After just twelve seconds, three staff from

the Advanced Cardiac Life Support team burst into the room. "What do we have?" asked Dr. Menon, taking in the scene with a quick glance. Martin registered his cool demeanour with envy. Either he didn't care about patients or he was excellent at conscious disassociation.

"Patient cardiac arrest seventeen seconds ago," replied Martin. He leaned across the patient's body, his hands starting compressions.

"Ready the defib. Charge to 200," Dr. Menon spoke calmly and clearly. Every

individual in the room had a position and a task. The moves were choreographed to perfection. The defibrillator pads were on the patient's chest within three seconds while the high pitched charging whine sounded.

"Clear!" Menon said, stepping back as the shock was given. Jeffrey's body jerked, but the monitor still showed a flat line, and the alarm continued.

"No response," Kate reported, her tone professional but tense.

"Half a milligram of adrenaline," Dr.

Menon's eyes never left the monitor.

"In the line?"

"No, inject."

"It's in."

Martin was continuing compressions,

"Jamie, take over compressions please."

The nurse stepped forward and continued with seemingly no break in the rhythm.

"Charged - clear!" Menon gave the second shock. Still, the monitor showed no sign of life.

----oOo----

The purplish black is lightening to grey. Now I can hear people talking. I try to make out what is being said, but it is too confusing. I can understand all the words, but not the sentences. The odd phrase comes across.

"We need to be ready."

"Yes, the intervention is ..."

There is a stream of words I can't make out.

Then, "We don't have long."

"How long?"

"It's hard to say."

The grey surround is starting to break up, and I get the impression I am moving forward somehow. There is a light coming from the direction of the voices. I can see someone walking slowly towards me. I don't know her. She is quite old. Around seventy maybe? She has grey hair pulled back off her face into a pony tail. Some might say she has a pleasant face, but I can see straight-away that she is going to interfere. She looks vaguely familiar. She is wearing a soft knit cardigan in cream over a fitted white top. She is wearing dark brown

trousers with a cream belt. On her feet she has some comfortable flat shoes. Who on earth is she? I feel I should know her, but I cannot for the life of me get a name to fit the face.

She stops a couple of steps away. Smiles.

"Jeffrey!" she says, as if she knows me, "Welcome! Oh, it is so good to see you."

Where on earth have they parked me - that's what I want to know. Maybe she knows. Mind you, she's pretty old. I start to say 'Just tell me where we are!', but nothing comes out of my mouth. Just the 'Just'!

Then an embarrassing croak.

And then she's gone.

Then suddenly a sepia version of her is back in view, but fading ...

----oOo----

"Airway secure,"Jan confirmed, standing by the ventilator.

"Another set of defibs," Dr Menon's voice was precise and calm.

"Come on, come on," Jan murmured, her eyes on the flat-line.

Dr Menon glanced at her reprovingly. He

preferred to minimise emotion while there was work to do. The whine reached the top pitch.

"Clear!" The body jerked. Those in the room held their breath. Then a blip appeared on the heart monitor. Then another. Then a long gap. No-one moved apart from Martin who resumed compressions. Then a blip.

Dr Menon looked at Martin. "Stop compressions."

Then a blip, and another, and another.

Martin took a deep breath, and blew it out

while raising his eyebrows. Relief washed around the room as the pulse returned, steady.

Martin smiled at Dr Menon and the ACLS team members. "Thanks, well done!"

Dr Menon inclined his head and a tiny smile momentarily crossed his face as he recognised the gratitude.

Martin leaned back against the trolley. He felt stressed out. Then he resumed control as the crash team exited, "Okay, monitoring the vitals still."

----oOo----

'Is he coming back?' wonders the grey haired lady.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 2

Dorchester County Hospital. Monday 23rd August 2010.

Jeffrey's respiration was reasonably stable. And after another hour he had regained consciousness.

The right elbow was a mess, the joint shattered. The bullet had passed out the back of the arm. The second bullet had glanced off the top of the left collar bone

and exited above the shoulder. What caused the concern was the results of the CT scan. Although the bullet had not penetrated the skull, the glancing blow had caused a coup-contrecoup. The shock wave had caused the skull to move violently sideways impacting the brain, and then the rebound had impacted the other side. Consequently the CT scan showed both bruising and bleeding and a slow but dangerous swelling.

The consultant neurologist was pessimistic. She concluded that the cerebral oedema

was exerting sufficient pressure on the brain to be life threatening and recommended a medically induced coma. The care team this time would include anaesthetists, neurologists, and critical care nurses.

The intravenous line was checked, and new bags hung on the stand.

Jeffrey craned his head to one side and glimpsed one of the nurses. She spotted his movement and smiled, "We are going to administer a sedative that will calm you down, young man." She adjusted the

regulator on the IV line, allowing the pale yellow solution to flow smoothly down the tubing.

Jeffrey tried not to sound anxious, "What are you putting in me?"

He slowly turned his head to watch the heart rate monitor, the grey figures standing out against the soft white background.

"What are we putting in you?" she repeated slowly, "Well, it's good you should ask. Because we always like to reassure patients that everything is ..." She broke off.

Jeffrey had already lost consciousness. She lifted her eyebrows, exchanged glances and nodded to the neurologist. "... that everything is under control," she continued, "It's Thiopental."

----oOo----

I could see the grey monitor screen fading and shimmering as the room darkened, until there was only a blurred square of soft grey light. As I watched, its edges faded and stretched until my whole visual field was a smoky shifting grey mist. Then that darkened to a deep purple as I slowly fell.

I'm seriously annoyed now. They have given me some kind of hallucinogen by mistake. Feels like I'm falling, and falling. I could do without this.

----oOo----

Jeffrey had always bored his clients with his theory of success in business. 'I'm very well connected,' he would tell them. He certainly was now! With the arterial line, electrocardiogram pads, intercranial pressure probe, electroencephalogram pads, pulse oximetry, ventilation, thermal probe, and sundry other connections, you could

hardly see the actual patient.

And checking was constant. Alarms would sound in the event of significant changes to heart rate or rhythm,

Multiple checks every fifteen minutes included blood pressure and oxygen level. Body temperature, CO2 level, renal function, and fluid balance was measured and noted every hour. Every two hours the ICU nurse would shine a light in each eye, and note the pupil response and size. Each day there were checks for nutrition, renal function, CO2 monitoring. The list was

never ending.

After 24 hours, the ICU team noted that Jeffrey had entered an unusually deep coma. His heart rate was on the edge of bradycardia at forty beats per minute. The EEG displayed very faint delta waves, but everything appeared stable.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 3

Somewhere. Coma day 3.

I must have dropped off. I lay still, my mind slowly piecing together my last impressions. I open my eyes slowly. Above me there are grey swirls of bright smoke, still with those purple tinged streaks. In the distance far off just above an invisible horizon, weak sunshine is slowly pulsing through the mist. I push myself up on my

elbows and try to sit, but a massive weight of exhaustion is sitting on my chest.

The atmosphere itself feels heavy, pressing down on all sides. The air is thick, carrying a faintly earthy aroma. I flare my nostrils and breathe in slowly. It smells like beetroot tastes. *'Not pickled beetroot,'* I tell myself. The absurdity strikes me. What on earth is happening? My limbs refuse to move, and simply breathing is consuming all my energy. I close my eyes for a moment, hoping that normality will be resumed if I gather my thoughts logically. Maybe the

weirdness will be gone if I just stay still for a while.

I'm absolutely going to sue the hospital as soon as they discharge me! What have they given me? Maybe it's worn off now?

I open my eyes. No! I'm still trapped in a deadening haze of mental confusion and physical unease. But the old woman who I met earlier is sat on the ground by me now.

I look off into the distance where I can perceive movement. A man is emerging from the fog up ahead. A young man, I assume initially, considering his gait. He

walks like a black guy, you know, kind of springy. And as he gets closer I can see he is in his mid thirties. He moves gracefully, his steps fluid as a professional dancer. As he comes closer I can see his bare arms, clear and tawny, with sinewy muscles running like cords beneath the skin. There is a glow of health, a kind of radiant strength about him.

He comes and stands by the woman, then smiles and nods. She returns the smile tentatively with raised eyebrows and wide eyes.

She returns her gaze to me. "Ah, you're back, Jeffrey," she says smiling, "My friend here is ... um"

"Eri," the man supplies. Then falls silent, simply watching me.

The woman carries on talking non-stop. Why is she talking so much? Who does she think I am?

And as soon as she started to speak, something started to crack. It was as though the ground deep inside me was splitting open, as I desperately tried to hold everything together. I was distracted,

completely caught off guard. Oozing acidity, like lava, welling to the surface, a series of unusually vivid recollections begin spreading into my mind. Inexorable. Unstoppable. First one, then another, then another, each one loading my mind with an unbearable mix of worry, bitterness, or shame. My dog, whimpering in my arms on the day I had to say goodbye. My father, his harsh words, the sharp edge in his voice that always cut deep. My first marriage, unravelling like a fraying thread. Nick - the great mistake - so utterly stupid! Stupid!

And then Kai, the pulsing blood, the remorseless anguish which never left me for a second. And the prison, the stench in that suffocating cell I've tried so hard to forget. On and on they go, relentless, each memory building on the last, adding more and more to the accumulated layers of pain, regret, or rage.

The girl! Her voice is distant now, drowned out by the tightening grip on my mind. It feels like the handle on some vice is being twisted slowly, methodically, and the jaws are moving closer together, squeezing my

thoughts until there's no space left to think clearly. My chest tightens, my throat constricts, and I start to gasp as the panic attack begins to engulf me like a wave. I am hyperventilating, struggling to hold on, but the memories don't just flood in—they swirl around me, merging and intensifying, becoming a full-blown storm that threatens to suffocate me. Each memory claws at me with sharp nails, dragging me down, deeper and deeper, into a pit of despair where the weight of the past feels unbearable. Every humiliation, every regret, every

excruciating moment rises up, one by one, gathering together, pressing down on my chest like a massive boulder. I can feel it settling deep, an anchor of all my mistakes, growing heavier with each shallow breath. It suffocates me under the crushing burden of years of unresolved guilt and misery, and I'm left gasping for air, struggling beneath the legacy of a life I can no longer escape. My lungs burn, my heart pounds—I'm hardly breathing at all—crushed by the mess I've made of everything.

But the old woman grasps my hand and

brings her face close to mine, "Jeffrey! Jeffrey, look at me."

"Where are we? What is this place?" I gasp, staring at the woman. "And who are you? Really?"

"It isn't really a place," the woman begins, her voice taking on a more serious tone, "Think of it as a moment. A moment where the past, the present, and a number of possible futures interpenetrate." She puts her hand over her mouth for a moment, then continues, "As for who we are... that's a bit more complicated. But for now, just

be assured we are here to help you."

I don't understand what she means by 'help you'. I check my elbow. I can remember it hurting like hell during the attack. I can't see any sign of damage.

I say, "Help me? What do you mean?" I feel under the neckline of my t-shirt. That's a bit strange. I was sure that I had a broken collar bone, but it feels solid. And there is no pain. But this suffocating weight within me is worse than any pain I know. This has to be the final stage of dying, surely. But the woman is calm, as if this is business as

usual. None of this makes any sense at all.

"Yes," the annoying old woman continues, "we're here to help you navigate through this. Everything is weighing you down, Jeffrey."

I shake my head, trying to process what she's saying. "But why me? Why now?"

The other person finally speaks. "Because, Jeffrey," his voice is calm and measured, "you've reached a point where you can't go on as you were. You have made some choices that need undoing."

I feel a ripple of hope, but it's quickly

swamped by doubt. "Undoing? How? What's already happened can't be undone."

I look back at the woman. She says nothing. Her whole face is smiling, but her soft grey eyes are filled with tears. She tilts her head back a little, then from side to side, to drain the tears from her eyes. Then several very large sniffs, and she has recovered enough to continue speaking.

"You don't have to deal with everything at once. We'll just take it a day at a time here."

'Oh good!' shoots through and lodges in my mind, all sarcasm and barbed hooks. But I

just mutter an indifferent, "Whatever!" Well, I have no idea what she is talking about!

"Jeffrey! The past is killing you. You are carrying your entire life. You've handed nothing over. Can't you feel it?" She spreads her hands, palms upwards and looks around, as if the oppressive atmosphere is my fault! "It is only by grace that you are able to stand."

"Stand? What are you talking about, woman? I can't even move my legs," I snap. I am only just still propped up on my

elbows, and they are hurting terribly.

"Nonsense!" The woman gets up and grasps my hand and tries to haul me to my feet. She fails miserably. She should have believed me, but no! There's nothing worse than a know-all woman. It feels like I am lying beneath bags of cement. There is no possibility of me standing.

"Oh!" she looks surprised and turns to Eri. Her companion looks down at me, his eyes sad, "I have say that this is not uncommon." Eri bends over me and for the first time I can focus on the face. It's what polite

people would call unusual. Strong, though. A wide face but tapering to a chin that is perhaps too narrow for a man. The nose is very flat and fleshy, with wide nostrils beneath. There is virtually no nose bridge. Any glasses would just slide down that nose. The thought strikes me as bizarre, and then my mind moves on. The hair is jet black, shiny and long, falling to the shoulders. The eyes are distinctly oriental, the inside corners sharp and pointing downwards, the outside corners tapering away into the temples. He's wearing a

simple grey cloak that covers a bottle green tunic.

Then an enormous, perhaps even delighted smile illuminates the face as he sees me watching him.

Eri is still looking down at me. His head is tipped slightly to one side as if he is considering what kind of creature I am. Beneath his steady gaze I feel myself trying to curl into a foetal protective position. But then he gives a small upward nod, as if to say 'Fine', before reaching down and touching my shoulder for a moment. Then

he simply bends and picks me up as if I'm a child, stands me on my feet. I frown, shake my head and make a few protest noises.

This is humiliating.

Then he lets me go!

'No, you idiot!' I think, as my legs collapse, but the man catches me before I hit the deck.

"I'll carry him!" he says in a quiet voice.

The old woman nods and smiles, "It's not far anyway." Then she blushes and coughs a couple of times. Eri looks at her with a grin, his lips pushed forward feigning a resigned

disapproval.

He shifts me so I am sitting on his hip, and holds me with one arm. I'm not happy! It feels ridiculous, a grown adult being carried like a three year old.

"Shall we go?" the elderly woman asks tentatively, "I'm guessing we have quite a lot to get through?"

Eri nods, and sets off. The old lady evidently defers to him. He's a man of few words, which suits me perfectly. She does enough talking for the both of them.

We proceed at a leisurely pace, Eri's steps

soft upon the ground, which stretches beneath us like a carefully manicured lawn. Although the grass is longer, wilder, and a richer green than usual. It's as if the grass itself yearns to escape the discipline of the mower and strimmer. To the side, small hedges stand, trimmed into amorphous forms that defy definition. Shapes they are, evidently designed by their definition, and yet somehow completely abstract. There's a subtle tension in the air, a sense of something unseen pressing against the edges of reality, as if the place holds an

unspoken irony, a paradox waiting to reveal itself.

The woman sees me looking around curiously and while still looking ahead says, "Don't worry about anything Jeffrey. It all gets a bit more normal in a minute."

I feel pretty apprehensive. Where are these two taking me? This guy carrying me is so strong! And huge. He's pretty intimidating actually. Why is this place deserted? And so weird?

I catch the old woman giving me a worried look. I glare at her, "Don't worry about

me!" I say with more energy than I actually feel, "Where are we?"

"All in good time," she chirrups brightly.

"Of course there is a possibility," interjects Eri, "that this might not be Jeffrey's idea of a good time!"

I glare at him, (as best I can!) not at all appreciating his frivolous tone.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 4

Somewhere. Coma day 3.

As we walk, the shape of a small building emerges from the mist. It appears to be a small square conservatory, single storey, all glass. It is maybe twenty feet on each side. As we get closer, I can see the roof overhangs the walls by possibly ten feet all the way round.

We walk up to the glass door and Eri grasps

the handle and slides it to one side. We cross the threshold. As soon as we are inside, I get unceremoniously dumped on the floor. I feel so incredibly heavy and powerless.

The thought crosses my mind that this must be something to do with gravity. It is stronger here. Then I realise that can't be true and berate myself for thinking it. I shake my head in an attempt to prevent any more nonsense brewing.

"What now?" I say looking up at Eri. I'm sitting on the floor. He inclines his head. It

could be interpreted as a friendly nod. "Welcome to our humble abode," he announces with a wry grin. "Feel free to enjoy the view—if vertigo is your thing." Then I realise that not only are all the walls made of glass but the floor is too. Not totally clear, but transparent nonetheless. Looking down, I'm astonished to see that we are actually in the top storey of what looks like a cross between a glass conservatory and a Japanese pagoda, in that there are multiple storeys with stacked roofs all the way down. It doesn't have the

curves, nor the oriental detailing. Like a pagoda, the floor area gets bigger the deeper you look. I can't see how many storeys there are below us. Anything beyond the fourth floor is not really visible.

I look back up at the old woman. She has given me the name of this Eri person, but not introduced herself. "So who are you?" I ask.

She looks momentarily discomfited, "Hmmm." She pauses evidently grappling with something. She literally scratches her head, then shrugs her shoulders. Still

looking down at me she says, "Well my *name* is Euphemia, but it's a bit of a mouthful. For the moment, call me Effie."

Effie straightens up, looks at Eri, then shoots me a warning glance, "This is going to get a bit ... well ... weird for the next few minutes. Don't worry though."

Immediately, we start sinking through the floor and are in the room below. I feel something move, maybe inside me. But we are already sinking through the next floor.

"Wooah! What's happening?!"

Neither of them says anything. By the time

we are passing through the third floor down, it becomes clear that I am getting lighter. I can already breathe easier. I still can't stand. The woman seems unaffected. Eri is standing bent over though, with his hands on his knees.

We pass through another floor, and I struggle to my feet. I'm standing on my own again, for the first time in ages. Down we go again through several more floors and I feel not only physically lighter, but happier and mentally clearer, as if I've got one of those crisp frost-clear mornings

inside me. By this time, Eri is sat on the floor, leaning over to one side. He has both hands on the floor too supporting himself sitting up.

And then finally we are evidently on the bottom floor. I feel, I don’t know... like a child? There a rush of hope. Maybe things can work out. I have no reason to believe that other than this feeling of lightness. I just feel like I'm together, whole, alive.

I realise I may have been a bit short with Effie and Eri. I can't really think of a way to lighten things up now.

Talking of which, the glass walls show only the darkness of the underground, but the room is somehow still bright and airy. It is lit from above.

All the regret, the rage, the bitterness, the black pessimism of all those memories that had weighed me down have gone.

I feel almost euphoric for the first time. But it can't last long, can it?

No-one says anything for a while. Eri looks up at Effie. She tilts her head questioningly, then turns to me.

"Whisper," says Effie sombrely, "Tell us

about Whisper."

I hear the sound of a door slamming,

somewhere off in the distance.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 5

Earlier. Winterborne Whitechurch, Dorset. 1973.

"What have you done," screamed the man. He was standing, thrusting his face at the woman, his spittle spraying her. His left fist clenched and unclenched as he struggled to contain his violence. He was holding a small black and white puppy by the scruff of the neck and shaking it to emphasise his words.

"He needs a dog!" The woman retorted. "He's all the time up in his bedroom on that Nintendo, and he never goes out."

"We can't afford to feed this thing!" An extra shake and the puppy whined.

"Jeffrey needs a life beyond playing video games staring at a screen all day, and listening to you and I shouting at each other!"

"We don't need this." The man flung the dog to the ground. It scampered away and hid behind the settee.

As the man turned to stalk out of the room,

his wife had the final word, "And I'm beginning to think I don't need you!"

----oOo----

"Just keep it away from your father," Jeffrey's mother pleaded as she showed the puppy to Jeffrey.

"Can I take him?"

"Not indoors. Your father has said it will have to stay out in the garden."

"What is he going to sleep in?"

Mum shook her head, "I dunno. You'll have to make a kennel. It's just a box with a

door. I'll help you."

"Where's it gonna go?" Jeffrey scratched the puppy behind the ears, as it tried to take playful bites out of his hand.

"Best at the bottom of the garden, Jeffrey, out of your dad's way."

Jeffrey shrugged with a huge grin on his face. He buried his face in the puppy's fur, and as it struggled to lick him, he whispered, "What shall I call you, little one?"

----oOo----

The cardboard box covered with an old plastic tablecloth was never going to survive the rainstorm. It had already softened over the previous weeks, and in places the young dog had chewed it away inside. When Jeffrey ran out the following morning to check on Whisper, he was dismayed to see the puppy laying in a puddle shivering. He picked him up and carried him to the back door to try to get him dry indoors.

"What are you doing?" Jeffrey's father barred the way, "You know that isn't

coming in here. It stays in the garden. That's the rule."

"But he's soaking wet. He needs to get dry," Jeffrey looked up at his father pleadingly.

Jeffrey's father turned the corners of his mouth down and shook his head. He stared at the boy with cold hard eyes for a moment and then turned away.

His mother thrust a towel into Jeffrey's hands, "Dry him out there. I'll find another box."

"But Mum ..."

"Don't argue," she cut in throwing him a warning glance.

Jeffrey's head dropped and he turned back towards the bottom of the garden struggling to carry the cold wet dog.

----oOo----

The weather in the following three months was colder than usual. On the final Saturday of October, the slate grey sky threatened more rain, but Jeffrey still preferred to be out in the garden with Whisper. The little border collie loved to play hide and seek. Jeffrey would command

him to stay behind the shed while he hid a stick somewhere in the garden. He walked back to Whisper who looked up at him with adoration and barely contained excitement. The dog was as tense as a bow drawn back ready to fire an arrow. But this time, Jeffrey's usual command, "Where is it? Find it!" never came.

Jeffrey had stopped and was listening to angry voices coming from the kitchen. His father's voice was loud, his words biting. His mother's, shot through with sharp sarcasm and mockery. Jeffrey sighed and

waited for the door slam which usually terminated the row. This time though there was a great shout as his father lost control, a crash and then the sound of a slap. The shriek that followed was rage mixed with pain.

Driven by fear, Jeffrey ran to the back door and pulled it open. His father had his mother backed up against the wall with his forearm across her throat. She was white and shaking. He was shouting into her face. Jeffrey's stomach tightened as he screamed, "Stop! Stop!"

Before his father could respond, Whisper shot past Jeffrey, a black blur, teeth bared. Now biting the father's ankle. The man howled in pain, turned around and kicked out at Whisper, who dodged sideways. Furious now he grabbed a kitchen chair and swung it at the dog. It struck the side of Whisper's head who collapsed on the kitchen tiles. Then seeing the blood on the floor, and his wife sobbing, with Jeffrey wide eyed and terrified, he strode out and slammed the door.

----oOo----

"I hate him. Hate. Hate. Hate him!" Jeffrey hugged the dog who was conscious but dazed. He turned to his mother, his eyes bright, cheeks wet with tears, "Why do you argue with him? Why can't you just leave it? You make him worse! I heard you saying stuff, and you know he's too stupid to argue with you."

His mother, eyes blazing, her fear replaced now with fury, "You have no idea what I have to put up with. He's a pig." She paused to take in a great shuddering breath, "You hate him? How much more should I

hate him? He hasn't started beating you up yet! But he will. Oh yes!" She nodded her head, face twisted with bitterness. "That dog ..." she gestured at Whisper who was whimpering quietly in Jeffrey's arms, "that dog is trouble. I'm sorry I ever got it for you."

----oOo----

The next day Whisper seemed to have recovered his natural enthusiasm for life. The sun shone again, and the sky was blue. "Whisper! Here I come! I'm gonna catch you!" Jeffrey shouted, suddenly bounding

towards his dog. But Whisper's keen eyes had spotted the very first twitch of Jeffrey's leg and the dog was already on the move. While Jeffrey crashed through the undergrowth and ran around fallen branches chasing hard, Whisper wove easily through the tangle of trunks and briars, his black and white tail always maddeningly just out of reach. Suddenly he stopped, sat, ears pricked, tail wagging furiously. Then as Jeffrey stopped, laughing, exhausted, the border collie dropped to the herding stance unique to the breed. Suddenly a cloud

moved, and the dog was lit by a shaft of sunlight reaching across 93 million miles. Whisper sat upright and cocked his head to one side. The light flickered and strengthened almost as if to showcase the dog's perfection. The intricate beauty of sleek black and white fur across the back. The playful fronds on the back of the legs and tail. The clear intelligent eyes. "Good boy, Whisper," Jeffrey panted, bending to ruffle the dog's fur.

Then the moment passed.

They moved softly, boy and dog, ducking

through the twisted lines of ancient oaks contrasting with razor straight beams of sunlight slicing into the quietness. As the pair made their way together, the sunlit patches on the leaf carpet coalesced into a pool of light filling the clearing as the tree cover thinned against the sky. The air was gin-clear, the silence total, the space suffused with a confidential holiness. They both sat, unable to resist the settled serenity of the place.

Whisper dropped his head into Jeffrey's lap enjoying the ear tickle before looking up

into the boy's face. "I love you," Jeffrey murmured burying his face in the dog's fur. It seemed that time paused, waiting for Jeffrey to surface, and when he did, his face was wet with tears. "Oh Whisper, why is life so crap? I hate him."

----oOo----

Three days after the assault with the kitchen chair, Jeffrey saw Whisper begin to stagger sideways in the garden. He made a guttural sound that Jeffrey had never heard before. Suddenly his body convulsed and he stiffened. He collapsed with his legs

thrashing and twitching. His facial expression, usually so warm and soft, became hard and his lips drew back baring his teeth. His eyes moved rapidly side to side.

Jeffrey panicking ran to the back door, wrenched it open and shouted for his mother. Both parents came out and looked astonished at the dog as the spasms juddered through his body. Pink froth was dripping from the dog's mouth as he writhed uncontrollably on the ground. After a couple of minutes, the seizure

gradually decreased. The family watched helpless as the trauma within the dog's brain continued to grip him. Then without warning, the convulsions stopped leaving Whisper laying down panting frantically. Jeffrey knelt down and laid Whisper's head in his lap. The dog coughed twice then vomited violently, soaking Jeffrey's trousers. Jeffrey's mother shook her head, and the father turned away in disgust. Jeffrey stayed speaking softly to Whisper until his eyes brightened and he relaxed in Jeffrey's arms. Whisper's eyes slowly closed

and the dog fell asleep. Jeffrey waited quietly holding him as the sun sank in the sky, painting the horizon pink and gold.

"Don't worry, Whisper, I'm here. I'm not leaving you." Jeffrey spoke with his face close to Whisper's ear.

At a quarter to ten, his mother leaned out of the back door, "Come in now Jeffrey, it's bedtime."

"I'm not leaving him. If he has to sleep out here, so will I."

"Don't be ridiculous. You'll freeze. It may rain. In you come."

Jeffrey shook his head, "Either he comes in with me, or I stay out with him."

Jeffrey's father shouted out through the doorway, "Stay out there then, good luck to you." He turned to his wife rolling his eyes, "Idiot child."

----oOo----

That was the night during which Jeffrey began to question his understanding of moral authority. The question, "Why should I?" haunted his troubled dreams and continually invaded his waking turmoil. His parents were teaching him that

authority depended not on consistency, or principle, or fair play, but only the ability to coerce obedience. And it was as the sun was just rising, and the grey shapeless shadows in the garden began to show their true reality, that Jeffrey saw in frightening focus that he could rely on no-one but himself.

The following day, sat in the classroom, Jeffrey could barely stay awake. So he completely missed the teacher's question about right angle triangles. The teacher himself was not having the best day, and

barked at Jeffrey, "Are you listening, boy?! What did I just ask you?"

"I don't know," Jeffrey tried to recall, but gave up, "I didn't really hear you."

"Something wrong with your ears then, is there Jeffrey?"

The class laughed at the teacher's sarcasm.

"I missed some sleep last night."

"Oh dear, your mother says you spend almost all your time playing video games. Perhaps that's the problem?"

"No, that's not the problem."

"So precisely what problem do you have that prevents your ears from hearing what I am saying, Jeffrey?"

Jeffrey just closed his eyes and shook his head. The brilliance of the teacher's wit was lost on him.

The teacher frowned unsure how to proceed, then slowly shook his head in mock resignation, and turned away. And the night-time epiphany began to send out runners rooting wider and deeper in Jeffrey's thinking.

----oOo----

Jeffrey was late home from school that day, dragging his feet as he walked. Instead of going into the house, he went straight to Whisper's box in the garden. But the straw bedding had been removed and the water bowl was empty. He scanned the garden, checked behind the bushes at the far end, but there was no sign of his dog.

A cold shiver ran down his back and a knot of fear formed in Jeffrey's stomach.

Suddenly the back door opened, and his father stepped out into the garden. His face was set in a slight smile that never reached

his half closed eyes. He stared at Jeffrey in silence for a moment, then said harshly, "About that dog ..."

Jeffrey went cold, rigid, heart pounding, a premonition of his father's next words twisting his insides.

"... We had to take it to the vet with its fits. It's been put down."

The father lifted his eyebrows in an expression of indifference, then turned on his heel and re-entered the house.

Jeffrey couldn't move. His thoughts were spinning with the import of the words that

had slammed into his mind with all their absolute finality. *Put down.* The father's words had gone in sharp and barbed, presaging a grief that he knew would never fade. He knew he could never forget. He could hardly breathe. The pain in his chest left him struggling for air. He knelt on the lawn clutching his stomach, rocking in agony. He stayed bent over as great waves of sadness washed over him. It felt too much to carry, but there was no escape from the fact that it was done. He was certain of that.

He ran indoors, without seeing, without hearing, and flung himself on his bed sobbing.

Chapter 6

Winterborne Whitechurch, Dorset. 1973.

Jeffrey did not sleep that night. Nor the next. He couldn't think. Nothing mattered. The future was worthless. He saw only the shadow of a nightmare. On the third day, he was so exhausted that he fell asleep as soon as he came in from school. He awoke at half past midnight, his mind having a new clarity. His thoughts took him

through the events that had led up to this moment, the rejection, the callous cruelty, the violence. The longer he fixated on the injustice, the more the agony of sadness fuelled a seething fury.

He lay on his back in the dark, wide unseeing eyes staring up at the ceiling, his fists clenched, his teeth gritted, his mind working, planning. His father's careless disregard for his feelings was spawning something deadly within the darkness of Jeffrey's mind.

Whisper was gone. Gone. Jeffrey's only

friend. Gone. And now alone in a world that didn't understand him, and never wanted him. He sadness had been too much to bear, so he welcomed this outrage with it's promise of delicious retribution. Surely it would be so much easier to carry. He knew what needed to be done. But how to do it, exactly? Plans clamoured for attention in Jeffrey's mind. His father's hateful smile and careless brutality would be answered. Whisper and Jeffrey had suffered pain and his father needed to know what that felt like. Precious Whisper

had been taken away, so whatever it was that his father valued would have to be destroyed. It would begin with his father's cherished car, but would end with something far worse.

Jeffrey clenched his jaw and frowned. He was already anticipating his father's howl of anguish. Oh yes, that would be good. And right. *He has to feel what I feel.* Jeffrey thought. Jeffrey's mind contorted itself to welcome the twisted corruptions of vengeance.

The car was keyed the following night at

around 1.30am. All four doors and both front wings with deep unsightly scratches. It never occurred to Jeffrey's father that his son had the courage to do such a thing.

Over the next few weeks, Jeffrey imagined, planned, researched and rejected multiple ideas. Finally, following some information gleaned from the internet, he put a droplet of antifreeze onto the corner of a tissue, and stroked it on the inside of a teacup. He then filled the cup with water, and drank it to see the effect. He was astonished at what happened. He immediately had an awful

headache and vomited. The headache lasted for five hours during which time he had severe cramps in his stomach. His mother sent him to bed blaming a tummy-bug. He was terrified that he was going to die, but the following day, he had recovered apart from a mild twisting ache in his guts. He calculated that his father was more than twice his weight, and two strokes would be appropriate.

The cup of tea was offered to his father's surprise, and made.

Jeffrey stood in the kitchen, cup in hand.

He stopped at the door. The final pain from yesterday gripped his stomach. He gasped. Could he do this? Should he? The indecision tore at him. He could walk back to the sink and pour it away, and this foul thing he had embraced would be neutered. Or he could ...

He forced himself to stop thinking. He gripped the lounge door handle. Turned it and walked in. Proferred the cup to his father.

His father took it, trustingly, looking puzzled.

And drank.

Jeffrey may have been overly generous with his father. After an hour of rising nausea, his father vomited violently, and staggered back into the lounge collapsing on the sofa. He lay pale as a ghost trying to stay absolutely still, until the stomach cramps forced some writhing movement. Then needing to vomit again, he jumped up and immediately crashed to the floor overcome by dizziness. He rose gingerly and holding on to the furniture, just made it in time to the kitchen sink. In total, he vomited seven

more times, each time returning to lay flat out in the lounge. The last three occasions he had to crawl on hands and knees to get to the kitchen, he was so weak. On the penultimate visit, he was too weak to stand, and was sick on the kitchen floor.

Jeffrey watched all this with mixed feelings. He was terrified that his father was going to die, but he loved the irony. The man who was disgusted at dog vomit was on his hands and knees crawling in his own. He squeezed the twinges of guilt out of his mind, determined that he was exercising

justice.

Jeffrey went up to his bedroom. He whispered to himself, "You can deal it out. So you'd better hope you can take it!" His mouth twisted with bitterness. The memory of Whisper's loving chocolate brown eyes coalesced in his mind unbidden, and his anger suddenly flared to push back the nagging guilt. He pounded the bed with his fists as the tears came back.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 7

Balcad, Northern Somalia. 1994.

Far away, at a later time, in an earlier world, the morning sun blazed gold, flooding the distant skyline in liquid amber. The child was around four, with eyes shining in the dawn light. She watched the warm yellow flow across the undulating Somalia savannah, until it touched the edge of the sprawling village. She loved living in

Balcad. It was big enough to have a market, but small enough so that it seemed everybody knew her. She was standing in the doorway of a small hut, her hand holding on to one of the hanging tapestries that made her home beautiful. The soft wind ruffled her hair and fluttered the wall hanging. Her mother had named her Farhiya - 'joyful' - and she prayed daily to Allah that he would fulfil that in her life.

Not only joyful but spirited, Farhiya loved to play chase with her two older siblings. Their laughter, mixed with the warning

bleats of their goats, rang around the neighbouring huts as they easily outran her. The disapproving cluck of chickens could only be heard when the children fell silent, and that was only at mealtime, school-time and nighttime.

Their mother, Amina, smiled as she glanced at Farhiya fondly. She was up to her wrists in yeast, baking powder and flour as she prepared the laxoox. The freshly baked flatbread served with ripe mangoes would make the traditional breakfast.

Farhiya had been counting down the days

until today - her first trip with just Amina to Balcad market. She skipped excitedly as she imagined what she would see - scores of stalls each loaded with so much treasure. When they reached the edge of the market, her mother folded her little hand within her own. There was colour and life everywhere - stalls piled high with fabric, their ostentatious colours competing for attention with the earthy hues - crimson, yellow, apricot, saffron, ochre, sable, umber - of the spices heaped on the ground.

But Farhiya had heard about the stall

selling beads - every colour under the Somali sun which sparkled on the added glitter of some.

As they approached the centre of the market, the crowd grew denser and noisier. Farhiya could not see what was going on but she could hear music. Amina led as they threaded their way closer to the front. There were the musicians getting ready for the evening. They were dressed differently from the people Farhiya had seen before. They had boots, vests and long-sleeved shirts. Several had wide leather belts with

loops and pouches holding mysterious objects. Several drums had already been set up, and one of the musicians was beating a complex rhythm. As she watched entranced, another man started a soulful tune on the oud. Some of the crowd were already swaying to the beat, and Farhiya could not stop her body moving in time. Amina smiled as she watched Farhiya, knowing there would be dancing and celebration tonight, and at least one small joyful girl would be entranced.

They made their way back to the bead lady

who grinned in expectation of a sale.

Amina got down on her haunches, "You probably don't want to buy any beads, do you?" she teased.

Farhiya opened her eyes wide and nodded. Mute with excitement.

Amina opened Farhiya's hand and pressed a folded 1000 Shilling note and two 50 Shilling coins into her palm. "See what you can buy with that, habeen!" The little star smiled and turned to the stall, "Lift me up, Mama?"

Minutes later Farhiya opened her hand to

show her Mama. On her palm lay eleven beads. Amina bent down, "Oh, they are beautiful, Farhiya! And what lovely colours!"

Farhiya separated a big red bead from the rest, "This is Papa," she declared seriously, looking earnestly up into Amina's face. "And this is Abdi and Yusef." She moved two smaller beads, one plain green, the other green with sparkles to join the red bead.

She moved a large yellow bead across to join them. "And this," she wavered the final

word to heighten the anticipation, "is Al-Um Al-Mithaliyah!"

"Oh no, habeen, I am not the perfect mother," Amina said laughing.

The little star put on a much exaggerated face of horror, "No, of course, this is not you, Mama! This is Sacuud, because she's just had two more kids!"

"That goat!? The perfect mother?" Amina pressed her lips together and frowned, feigning offence, "All right young lady, you are on milking duty tomorrow, since you have such a love for goats!"

But Farhiya was not to be put off. Eyes half closed in mischief, she held her palm higher for her mother to inspect the remaining beads. "Which are the chickens, Mama?"

"I don't know which is who now."

"These are all chickens."

"But where am I?" Amina demanded playfully, "And you, habeen?"

Farhiya turned over her other hand and opened it. Two golden beads that had stuck together in the making.

Amina laughed and shook her head in

mock resignation.

It seemed a short time that the sun sunk to the horizon, it's multicoloured evening farewell as extravagant as it's morning greeting. The villagers began to get together around the musicians, five men with instruments and three women singing. The drums began their rhythmic thrumming, and soon Farhiya joined the little girls running and spinning in their colourful dresses. As Amina watched with pride, she felt the songs reaching down through the years, sung by her ancestors,

and knew that Farhiya one day would bring her daughter here to celebrate the soul of their heritage. The links in the chain, the bonds of love and community, holding together families and friends.

As she tired, Farhiya slowed and slipped out of the dancers to rejoin her Mama. As Amina held Farhiya close, together they watched the stars emerge in the black velvet sky and Farhiya knew that she belonged here. Her family, her tribe, her Somalia - joyful, peaceful, and full of light.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 8

Somewhere. Coma day 3.

Effie is staring at me. She had prompted me concerning Whisper so she must have known something about the whole foul business. She is shaking her head. I have a feeling she is horrified at the revelation of what my childhood has been like.

Well, now she knows!

"I'm so sorry," Effie says in a low voice, "I never dreamt ..." She stops, and glances as Eri.

His head shake is almost imperceptible.

What's that about? We look at each other.

Effie tries to cover over the awkward silence, "So what happened to you?" she asks.

"What?! I've just told you what happened." Was she not listening? That makes me annoyed, because telling it has brought back all the horror. As I was going through it all again, I could actually feel the black

threads of hatred pushing their way under my skin and sliding around my organs. It was unpleasant as it was happening, and it is still uncomfortable.

The old woman is really dislikeable. Why is she asking stupid questions, instead of telling me where we are?

"Yes, you told me what happened. But I want to know what happened to you," Effie explains. "You." Pedantically. Like I'm a child.

"To me ... what do you mean ... to me?"

"Sorry if I confused you there. I mean, how

were you changed by what happened? What came over you? What came into you?"

"I have no clue what you are talking about!" She holds both hands out, palms up, questioningly. "You keyed the car!" she protests, her gaze fixed on me as a disbelieving frown crosses her face. "You poisoned your father! Deliberately. What came over you?"

"I hate him!" As the words leave my mouth, I can feel the black threads inside me tightening around my gut, and inside my

head. I can feel them growing back up my throat, into my mouth. It fills with bitterness.

I lower my voice, and speak very slowly, just so this stupid interfering old woman understands what I mean. "I. Hate. Him."

Then the penny drops! I understand what *she* means. That must have been the first time that I actively welcomed hatred's embrace, and it fruited acrimony in my mouth ever after that.

I narrow my eyes and look again at the two of them, my brow furrowing as the

understanding of how these things work begins to dawn on me.

Eri's face is serious, "Good!"

"... that you recognise what happened to you," Effie hurriedly clarifies, glancing nervously at Eri, who, despite his brusque tone, seems rather pleased with himself.

Eri raises an eyebrow. "What? Self-awareness is a valuable skill! Besides, it's not every day you meet someone who can pinpoint the exact moment they started marinating in bitterness." He smiles and his face exudes faux-innocence, but Effie

quickly cuts in.

"What Eri means," she says, giving him a warning look, "is that recognising the problem is the first step toward getting some help with it."

Eri shrugs, unrepentant. "Sure, that too."

We have somehow passed through the ceiling of the bottom floor, and we are back on level one. Still many storeys above us. Still glass walls facing black underground. But it feels heavier in here. I feel heavier.

Eri is still sat down, panting slightly.

"So let's have a talk about Tamsin," Effie says.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 9

Earlier. Poole, Dorset. 1997.

Jeffrey leaned back in the office chair and ran his fingers through his hair. He squinted at the screen, then opened the file named turnham_cars.xls and scrolled to the bottom of the spreadsheet. The orders were significantly up on the previous year and had required extra staff. And the 23% increase in revenue was excellent. But the

profit column was way higher. He had deliberately focussed on the higher end of the second hand market, Porsche, Jaguar, even a couple of Lamborghini. He had increased the online presence, was working social media and was now reaping the rewards.

Then his eyes turned to the taxable total. It was, as expected, much higher. So much tax! It stuck in his throat - his hard earned money being taken and wasted on society's losers. He looked again at the breakdown in the profit column. Halfway down were the

three resales of the sought-after air-cooled Porsche 911's which had turned a truly ridiculous profit. An old school friend had come across them, and had demanded a cut, but this still left Jeffrey with a handsome return. He leaned back in his chair, elbows on the arms, steepling his fingers as he closed his eyes, sunk in thought. There was a way. Always was! If you wanted it enough. He would talk to Tamsin tonight.

----oOo----

Jeffrey pushed the empty dish away. The Eton Mess was so good. He poured the

remaining Chilean red wine from bottle into his glass. He downed the quarter glass in one and smiled across the table. "Tamsin, I want to talk about the business."

Tamsin raised one of her finely threaded eyebrows and bestowed a half smile onto Jeffrey, inviting more detail.

"I've just finished the accounts. It's been a brilliant year..."

"Don't tell me," Tamsin cut in, "We are up over 20%."

"Twenty three. You've been following it?"

"Of course. Every month. You know that. September and October were excellent."

"You're right. But the profits are way higher," Jeffrey replied, "It's the high end resales."

"So now you're worrying about tax?" She gazed at Jeffrey thoughtfully, her striking violet eyes narrowing as she tapped the table lightly with one long, shocking pink acrylic fingernail.

Jeffrey frowned. Tamsin was generally one step ahead. She had the mental capability to run the business herself, but preferred to

focus on spending the money. Her version of 'carpe diem 'was either a spa day or a trip to the West End buying fashion.

"Yes," he replied, "but I have been thinking ..."

Tamsin interrupted, "You want to implement transfer pricing."

Jeffrey shook his head, smiling. Unbelievable! His wife was beautiful and intelligent. And slightly scary. After a deeply unhappy childhood, and early teenage years frustrated by his own aggression and alcohol abuse, he had finally

found happiness with Tamsin. She was his rock. She had always been cool - distant even - but she anchored him. And excited him.

"Well, we can make supposed renovations and improvements under the auspices of a second ..." he began.

"I know how transfer pricing works Jeffrey." Her voice was smooth and cool, "You want me to set it up?"

Jeffrey was pleasantly surprised. Since the first couple of crazy years when they were starting up, Tamsin had kept clear of any

actual work. "You really want to do that?" Jeffrey asked.

Tamsin smiled and nodded. "Yes, maybe I need something to exercise my brain."

----oOo----

Two evenings later, after dinner, Tamsin casually dropped a couple of printed A4 sheets onto the coffee table.

"There you go."

"What's this?" Jeffrey asked.

"It's a proposal to set up the transfer pricing." Tamsin smiled disarmingly.

Jeffrey read it through carefully. Tamsin had seemingly thought of everything. The proposal was exactly what he had been considering. It was probably the simplest and most logical way to do it.

Firstly an additional company would be registered under Tamsin's name. In the British Virgin Islands. Thus the registration details would not be available, even to the UK government. Named "TC Auto Renovation" it would ostensibly undertake all the work to maximise the sale price of the second hand luxury vehicles. A

vehicle traded in to Jeffrey's company, "Turnham Cars" would be sold to the renovation company at the trade-in price, hence there would be no profit on the deal in the UK. The car would physically remain on Jeffrey's premises, but would show on the books that it had been shipped out for extensive renovation work. "Turnham Cars" would then buy the same vehicle back from "TC A R" for a far higher price, and would put it onto the forecourt with that price on the windscreen. Consequently when it sold, the

"Turnham Cars" books would show no profit on that deal either. All the profits would be declared and fully retained by "TC A R" being registered in a tax free jurisdiction.

Jeffrey reread it again slowly, but he already knew Tamsin would have covered all the points and avoided all the gotchas.

It was a simple structure. Historically it had been used by thousands of companies to legally avoid paying tax, but now the UK tax authorities are wise to the scam, and it is illegal if it can be shown that the tax

exempt entity adds no value to the product. It is however extremely difficult to trace. Tamsin assured Jeffrey that HMRC had an albeit unpublished company revenue threshold. And below that, they would not investigate any possible tax evasion.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 10

Balcad, Northern Somalia. 1997.

She quietly lifted the latch and eased the door open. Farhiya often was the first up and out, to watch the sunrise. She knew the precise position when the door would quietly creak, so kept it ajar and squeezed out into the still morning. The air was crisp and cool. A slight breeze caressing the tall grasses whispered a welcome. She drew a

long breath in through her nose, the sharp smell of the chickens tempered by the faint aroma of acacia. The newness of another day and the joy of being alive brought a sigh and a smile to her face.

She looked across at the small round huts close by. With their mud walls and thatched roofs, they too belonged here. The villagers partnered with the land, an age old synergy unchanged in millennia, their lives woven into the regular heartbeat of the savannah.

Farhiya's hut was by far and away the best

in Balcad, she thought. Her Mama, Amina, had outlined on the hut's outer wall a pattern of whorls and waves swirling around and flowing between seven flowers of various sizes. Papa and Mama's flowers were the biggest. The simple radiating petal structure of the frangipani. And each of the five children had a flower in different earthy shades, decreasing in size, oldest to youngest.

"Everyone is connected," Farhiya said softly to herself, as she traced her finger from her flower along the curved line to that of

Amina.

A neighbour was already drawing the morning's water from the well. She spotted Farhiya and smiled. The metal bucket was already sunk in the water far below and the woman was preparing to haul it to the surface. Farhiya ran across and offered to help, reaching out to touch the rope she held. "We'll pull it together," the woman said, knowing that in maybe a year, at seven years old, Farhiya would have to be able to draw water. Once retrieved, the woman tipped the water into a large clay pot. She

told Farhiya to stand strong and tall, trying to balance the pot on her head. Farhiya's legs buckled and the woman caught the pot, laughing out loud. Farhiya giggled at the failure.

"I need to give you some more serious training, little one," the neighbour said, her smiling eyes resting on Farhiya.

Farhiya ran to the edge of the village. She already had her own quiet place where she would sit. A patch of pyracantha stood ablaze, this week's fiery blooms scorning the once-glamorous flowers of last week,

now wilting in faded splendour.. She had been told that on the slopes of the distant mountains grew vast tracts of them, month after month. She settled down to eat the moos and the piece of coconut that she had brought. Which to eat first? She chose the banana. It was sweet and largely black inside.

Today was not a day for school. She had started attending the previous year and loved the first year. She had learned so much, and her teacher was like her mother - teaching her about plants and animals,

about food and music, and about Allah who made it all. She learned about respect for parents, kindness, honesty and being clean. But the second year was hard work. She had had to start learning the Quranic verses by heart, and she found that difficult. But she was a good student, and her mama and papa praised her recitations, writing and pictures when she brought them back to the hut.

She had learned the daily prayers, and so she folded her hands, and put her forehead gently on the ground, and recited the

morning prayer.

"O Allah, I ask You for knowledge that is beneficial, sustenance that is good, and deeds that are accepted," she whispered. She sat back on her haunches and wondered who he was, and how he knew her. Then she bowed down again, "In the name of Allah, with Whose name nothing in the heavens or earth can cause harm, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing." With her head bowed and hands gently clasped, she waited, her heart quieted. For a moment, the world stood still. Silence

flowed into her, enfolding her in serenity.

Then a faint rustling reached her ears, followed by a delicate tickle across the back of her hand. She opened her eyes, her pulse quickening as she saw the scorpion crawling along her wrist. It paused, still as stone. "O Allah, help me now," she whispered beneath her breath. She trembled slightly, and the scorpion, startled, scuttled away.

A fleeting doubt crossed her mind—had she been wrong to offer her own prayer instead of one passed down by her elders?

A shadow of uncertainty flickered across her face, for she knew those formal prayers were accepted. Had she stepped outside the boundaries with Allah. But it seemed to her that he had felt her fear and rescued her. So then she rose, resolving to embrace the day ahead.

She recalled with a smile that today was her turn to help Mama bake the flatbread.

The sun was strong now above her head, high in the sky. The air was warm and heavy. But Farhiya skipped lightly along the path, running free, finding shelter

beneath the ancient Acacia trees. Their spreading canopies cast cool shadows on the earth, offering sanctuary from sunshine. As the trees thinned, Farhiya ran fast across the sun dappled ground, her head full of mixing and kneading.

"Like this, habeen," Amina said. Four hands, two small and two larger, were together on the board, pressing on the dough with the palms, then folding it over, and pressing again. "Well done!" she said. The two older boys had scorned learning to knead dough and at last Amina had a

daughter with whom she could share the joy of preparing food for the family. Amina smiled happily. Life was good! But Farhiya was growing up so fast, and Amina knew that all too soon she would be preparing meals for the family without assistance.

Soon, the warm, toasty scent of baking flatbread filled the hut, rich and inviting. The little girl took a slow, deep breath, savouring the earthy fragrance, tinged with a sweet, nutty hint of yeast. It was the comforting smell of home, a warm familiarity that lived inside her.

As the bread was baking, Amina rummaged around in a large box and pulled out a beautiful woven piece of fabric. She beckoned Farhiya to sit with her while she began to organise some silk and her embroidery needles. Then she took Farhiya's hands, folded them together and they joined together in the afternoon Du'a prayer, "O Allah, I thank You for Your countless blessings and Your provision. Grant me contentment and sufficiency in all that You provide."

While they were still reverent and quiet,

Amina's skilful fingers embroidered the name 'Al-Razzaq' into the cloth. Farhiya watched quietly as her mother carefully folded the cloth and placed it into her small hands.

"This cloth shows the name Allah the Provider. Whenever you bake bread, remember that all good things come from him, and be thankful. He will provide everything you need. Do not allow the cloth to fall on the ground, or to get dirty, because it bears Allah's name.

Farhiya nodded, and with all the

seriousness she could summon, vowed to take care of the cloth. She smiled up at her mother, her heart full of love and tradition and belief, a fortress of security in which she felt completely safe.

"Thank you, Mama," she said, her voice soft and sincere. Amina touched Farhiya's cheek gently with her fingertips. "You are Allah's gift to me, a precious gift beyond price."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 11

Poole, Dorset. 1997.

Jeffrey's old school friend, Tarquin, was an estate liquidator, so was in an ideal position to watch out for valuable vintage or collectable luxury cars. And in the two years that followed the setting up of "TC Auto Renovation", he identified a total of 83 such vehicles. At the end of that period, "TC A R" was a seven million pound

company, and they had moved to a new six bedroom house in Sandbanks, Dorset, with an infinity swimming pool, rolling lawn, a tennis court and premier league neighbours. The property too was an asset of "TC A R" to avoid capital gains tax.

Tamsin had also acquired gleaming white tooth veneers, and a different bust to waist ratio. Plus a large collection of shoes. She hired a full-time live-in nanny for their only son, Kai, and installed her in the small bedroom in the north wing.

Jeffrey worked hard, long hours and

weekends, but he was always happy to come home to Tamsin. Even though they had been married for almost fourteen years, he was still besotted with her. She was different of course. She came from a stable family, with loving parents, who had nurtured and encouraged her. She was secure in her identity and had been valued all her life. Jeffrey, however, hid his insecurities behind a facade of bluster, becoming defensively uneasy when confronted. Only Tamsin knew the real Jeffrey and in her, he found his sense of

significance and safety.

Once cool and distant, Tamsin was becoming increasingly affectionate, much to Jeffrey's delight. With their new found wealth, they planned a second honeymoon together. Two weeks in Bora Bora staying in an overwater bungalow. It was a perfect paradise of crystal clear water, white sand beaches backed by lush tropical scenery. Kai would stay in Sandbanks with the nanny.

The first week was a dream - it seemed to Jeffrey that they had rediscovered each

other. But during the second week, Tamsin became increasingly quiet and withdrawn.

The return flight involved two changes, one in Tahiti, the other in Los Angeles. The journey door to door was twenty five hours. When they got home, Tamsin seemed exhausted for days. Jeffrey hesitated to ask too much, especially since he was swamped with emails and looming deadlines, so he spent long hours working that week.

"Are you alright, my love?" Jeffrey enquired on Saturday evening, a week after their

return.

"I'm just tired." Tamsin snapped back, looking as though she hadn't slept well.

"I'm going to bed early."

She slipped upstairs without a sound.

Jeffrey sat for a moment in the silent room, thinking. Then he sighed and reached across for the tv remote.

An unsettling stillness blanketed the house throughout Sunday. Tamsin wanted only to sit out by the pool reading and didn't seem interested in conversation. The air was thick with worry wrapped in

impenetrable silence. Jeffrey occupied himself with odd jobs around the garden.

Monday brought the pressures of work again, but Jeffrey was so concerned about his wife that he determined to take a half day on the Wednesday. He booked a table for Wednesday evening at 'La Vida Loca' in Canford Cliffs, because he knew Tamsin loved tapas.

He worked hard Tuesday and Wednesday morning and then left the office at lunchtime. He bought some roses on the way home. He found Tamsin sitting in the

lounge watching daytime tv. There was a lukewarm full cup of tea by her side on the coffee table.

She glanced briefly at Jeffrey then dropped her eyes, "Why are you not at work?"

"I reckon you need cheering up," Jeffrey said, and produced the flowers from behind his back. "I've booked a table tonight for tapas at the Loca".

"I don't want to go out."

"Why not, my love?"

"I'm just not in the mood."

"But you love tapas. And it will be lovely to spend a bit of time ..."

Tamsin cut in, " ... and I've said I'm not in the mood."

"But darling..."

"Don't fuss!" Tamsin stood up and left the room abruptly.

The next few weeks dragged by, bleak and lifeless. Jeffrey was increasingly confused. Tamsin seemed distant. She went rigid whenever he attempted to hug her before leaving for work. Whenever he tried to talk to her, she quickly shut him down. Jeffrey

observed her with growing unease as she moved through the house like a shadow.

On a Sunday evening, five weeks after they had returned from their second honeymoon, Jeffrey was upstairs in the home study, trying to distract himself by catching up on work. He could faintly hear Tamsin talking on her mobile downstairs. Only a few words reached him: "Are you sure you'll be okay? Won't you be tired?"

He missed the last part of the conversation, and then there was silence. It wasn't her words that struck him. It was her tone. It

had been soft with tenderness, filled with concern - and so unlike the distant, flat voice she had used with him for weeks.

He leaned back in his chair, pondering. Something felt off. He heard her footsteps on the stairs.

"Everything alright, my love?" he called out.

"Yes," she replied as she passed the door.

"Who were you talking to on the phone?"

"A friend."

Jeffrey heard the bedroom door click shut.

He swallowed, feeling a knot slowly tighten in his stomach. A thought seeded in his head. He tried to push it away, but his mind clung onto it. Analysing, evaluating, developing, and dragging him towards an unwanted conclusion.

He turned back to his computer screen, but his focus was gone.

As sure as if he had witnessed it, he knew. There was another man. He was certain. But it couldn't be! Could it? Not his Tamsin. Their journey had been everything new and always together - young love, life,

excitement, devotion, baby Kai, business, car, house.

But there it was. New. But decidedly not together. He could hardly grasp how it could be, or what it would mean.

Suddenly he was catapulted back into the mindset of that embittered sixteen year old. Back into the paranoia and self doubt of the adolescent before being transformed by Tamsin's love. Then came inchoate anger, and finally that rage that he thought had been vanquished years ago, rolling in as if it had every right to possess him. The rising

pulse, the stomach cramps, the fingernails biting into the palms, the gritted teeth. Always it had held him, only appeased by his own vengeful cruelty. Until Tamsin's love came. Then it had gone.

And now it was back.

"I have to calm down," he thought, "I must be mistaken." He knew if he only went downstairs and asked the question, then all this would go away. He forced himself to stand, his mind terrified, but his body moved by a sliver of hope.

He asked the question lightly, with a touch

of forced humour, so that the damage caused by the questioning would not be too great.

"I hope all this celibacy doesn't mean I have a rival!" Jeffrey forced a grin.

There was silence for a few seconds.

Tamsin couldn't meet his eyes. She just shook her head miserably. "I'm not talking about it."

"What does that mean?" Jeffrey's forced humour had evaporated.

"I can't talk about it. You'll just have to trust me." She raised her eyes, challenging

him.

Jeffrey backed off. If he was mistaken, he was at risk of damaging what they had left. Besides which, his mind was empty anyway.

----oOo----

The next few weeks were fraught. The fear lingered, a jagged tooth the tongue could not help but probe. The guilt burned, a nettle rash that scratching could only intensify. Jeffrey and Tamsin merely coexisted in the same space. It was no longer a marriage. Nor a home. On the

third weekend, Jeffrey mustered the courage to try again.

"Look, if there is someone else, you need to ..."

"I said I'm not talking about it," she snapped, 'It's my life."

"It's our lives," Jeffrey insisted. "You made a vow."

"People change Jeffrey! We want different things now."

"What about Kai?"

"He'll be fine."

"He's thirteen years old! He'll be lots of things, but fine won't be one of them!"

The conversation spiralled several times until Tamsin stood up to leave the room.

Jeffrey started to panic. "Please, my love. Please!"

She looked at him. Embarrassment flickered across her face.

He stepped forward and gently taking both her hands. "You won't find another man who will love you like I do."

Tamsin frowned pulling her hands out of

his.

Jeffrey took a deep breath and sighed heavily. "I need you Tamsin. I can't live without you," he begged, his voice breaking. "Please don't do this."

Tamsin's embarrassment was tinged with contempt now. "Don't Jeffrey! It's demeaning."

"Please." Jeffrey's throat tightened and tears ran down his face at the very real prospect of losing her.

Tamsin gazed at him with increasing contempt, "Just stop. You're being

pathetic." Dry eyed, she turned away, walked out and closed the door behind her.

Jeffrey stood frozen for several minutes. He felt his heart painful and pounding in his chest. He stared around the room. It was just a room. An empty room.

Over the next month, the situation in the house became untenable. After one particularly vitriolic row in which Tamsin had lacerated Jeffrey with her tongue, he could only return physical violence. It was all he had left. She moved out the following day. Her bags had been packed previously.

Several days previously.

Chapter 12

Balcad, Northern Somalia. 2001.

In the late Somali afternoon there was a corner of Ibrahim and Amina's hut that was always lit by the sun. Here Farhiya sat each day learning how to communicate with the oud. Her small hands struggled sometimes with the intricate runs down the paired strings, but as she practised, she was getting noticeably stronger. Aged ten she

had not yet mastered the span to the single bass string to provide a drone accompaniment.

"Who let the cat in?" Ibrahim demanded with a smile on his face as he came into the hut.

Farhiya knew he was joking and faked an expression of outrage and hurt pride. But her eyes were laughing, "Who let the papa in?" she retorted.

She was determined to learn the Somali folk song, Hooyooy La'aantaa. The words expressed what she so often felt, and the

music carried them beautifully. Everyone in the village knew the song and loved to sing along "Oh Mother, Without You." Amina looked at Farhiya with love, shaking her head indulgently as she whispered the deeply sentimental words - a tribute to mothers.

The run in the middle always defeated her though. Played on three pairs of strings in quick succession with the bass string playing the drone, it was both beautiful and fiendishly difficult.

As Farhiya came to that line, her brow

furrowed in concentration, then as the melody disintegrated in a tangle of aching fingers, it was frustration, "I can't play it," she wailed, "I just can't!".

"You will, little star," Amina said, "be steadfast. Today it fights you, but continue to love it, and one day it will carry you."

"What do you mean, Mama?"

"I don't know when or why, but it will."

Ibrahim reached for his durmaan, his fingers curling around the familiar drum. With a playful grin, he began a steady, infectious beat. "What shall we play,

Amina?" he asked, eyebrows jumping, eyes sparkling with mischief, and a teasing smile on his lips.

Amina laughed, shaking her head, "Oh no, Ibrahim! You are so much trouble, I should have listened to your mother!"

He glanced at Farhiya, who clutched her oud, and leaned towards him. "Ready, my girl?" he whispered. "Naftayda Raaxada!"

Farhiya burst into a fit of giggles. She loved the light-hearted song that poked fun at marriage's twists and turns. Few men in Balcad could laugh at themselves like her

father did. Ibrahim never sought to impress; he only ever wished to be true to himself.

But all too soon the sun was setting and the music corner was in shadow. The oud and the durmaan were put away and the family settled down for the night.

Mornings always began with the faint bleating of goats in the distance, as the sun rose and Farhiya drifted into consciousness. She was now trusted to guide them to the richest patches of grazing land, moving them with care when one area had given all

it could. Each of the six goats had its own quirks and, though her father might raise an eyebrow at the idea, Farhiya had a name for each one.

On long, scorching days, when their thirst became evident, she would trek to the river, filling their water trough until it brimmed. She was always happy when the goats jostled around her, waiting to drink. She would speak to them softly, as if sharing secrets with friends. She knew they couldn't understand her words, but in a profound sense, she valued their

interconnected lives, as they provided their contribution of milk in return for her care.

Of course there were sadnesses. One year they lost two goats to the hyenas. Farhiya was the one who discovered the loss and was horrified to see the scattered bloodied bones stripped of meat. She stumbled home weeping as she went, and Amina held her close until her sobbing died away. She was tied to the land by both happiness and heartbreak. So close. Connected. The long awaited rains greening the land were as surely a part of her as her own tears, and

the wind creating rippling waves in the sorghum and maize fields, as her own breath.

And she believed that for every night there would be a day, for every planting there would be a harvest, for hot and arid days of Xagaa there would be the rain drenched days of Gu. As a sensitive intelligent child, she perceived the invisible interlinking of life. Honesty, integrity, faithfulness, love, and care. And how she was bound to the land, to her parents and siblings, and to Allah, by an interacting balance of delicate

mutual giving and receiving.

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Chapter 13

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2004.

The pharmacological company Nexarion PLC, like many British firms, grew primarily through acquisitions, a faster process that appeases investors but often fuels internal turf wars. Organic growth, by contrast, fosters better collaboration. To balance both, Nexarion operates separate entities under one umbrella. Nexarion PLC

includes Nexarion Therapeutics (NT), focusing on medicinal pharmacology, Nexarion Fitness (NF), which owns 113 private gyms nationwide, Nexarion Veterinary Supplies (NVS), producing animal drugs, and several related small service companies.

It made sense for NVS to lead the cutting-edge research, as legal constraints for animal pharma were simpler and more relaxed.

The Kennel Club has much to answer for. It is largely responsible for the health issues

caused by selective breeding of pedigree animals. While enhancing breed-specific traits, this process has led to serious health risks: English Bulldogs struggle to breathe, Pugs have eye problems from shallow sockets, King Charles Spaniels have skulls too small for their brains, Dachshunds risk paralysis from intervertebral disc disease, and German Shepherds suffer chronic hip dysplasia.

Other breeds suffer from mutations caused by inbreeding due to limited genetic diversity within breed groups. This

includes Degenerative Myelopathy. DM is a progressive disease of the spinal cord affecting German Shepherds, Boxers, Corgis, Huskies, Retrievers, and Ridgebacks. By far the worst effect is the suffering of the animal. But there is also pain for the owner. Aside from the elevated initial price, owners then incur repeated veterinary costs and inflated insurance costs, followed by the heartbreak of putting their dog down.

When Nexarion Veterinary Supplies developed a groundbreaking therapy to

cure DM by correcting the faulty SOD1 gene, its share price soared. The condition had been successfully addressed through germ-line correction therapy and breeders had been only too happy to pay.

Someone pointed out to the CEO that DM in dogs is caused by the same faulty gene as Motor Neurone Disease in humans. At the next board meeting, the executives at Nexarion PLC decided that Nexarion Therapeutics should exploit NVS's expertise to enter the high-stakes field of genetic manipulation. While they had long

skirted quality control and approval regulations for drugs in developing countries, they now considered a risk/reward study for covert research to investigate pushing the legal boundaries. After all, they owed it to humanity, quite apart from the promise of very substantial profits in human therapy.

A small team of discrete trusted employees was convened and a project target of 48 months to prototype therapy was agreed.

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Chapter 14

Poole, Dorset. 1997.

Jeffrey continued living alone in the house all the while becoming increasingly vengeful, bitter, paranoid and hate-filled. What hurt him the most was that he had demeaned himself by pleading with her. In one particularly distressing episode of self loathing, he actually literally banged his head against the wall several times. Then he

stopped because it hurt more than the humiliating memory of his self abasement. Although not by much!

After a very short period of legal wrangling the divorce settlement was finalised. The house and garden with tennis court and infinity swimming pool was an asset of TC Auto Renovation. The company also held Tamsin's Porsche 911 Turbo S worth only £160,000 since it was a year old. Additionally, the company had just under five and a half million pounds cash in hand, and almost no costs. Registered in Tamsin's

name.

All the orders placed on TC Auto Renovation by Turnham Cars were signed by Jeffrey. No document available to the British Government bore Tamsin's name. Consequently, when Tamsin divorced Jeffrey eight months later, she took almost everything, leaving Jeffrey literally homeless. Any attempt to reach a just settlement would only have triggered an investigation by HMRC and almost certainly resulted in Jeffrey's prosecution. The experience ripped open all the old scars

and resurrected all the old demons. Jeffrey was once again broken.

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Chapter 15

Somewhere. Coma day 4.

"So what happened to you?" Effie asks the same question as before, but this time, I understand what she means.

She wants to know how Tamsin's betrayal affected me. And as I was telling it, I could feel the fear again tightening round my lungs so it was hard to breathe, and the

sickening dread winding around my guts. But it had been a lesson well learned. Oh yes!

So I had my answer ready.

"I learned to put Me First. No-one else was going to rip me off from that moment on. I understood no-one really cares about me apart from me. And I have been careful to remind myself of that frequently."

Effie takes a deep breath and sighs. She looks pensive. She's almost certainly judging me, but what does she know anyway? She thinks she knows best - all

women do! It would be good if I was sure that Eri was a normal bloke. He would back me up then. He's strange though - distant but somehow connected enough to put his finger where it hurts.

I have learned, through very bitter experience, that all woman are the same - just totally blind to their own faults.

"So now I look after myself. I do what I have to do, you know. I've taken responsibility for my own life. I'm not ever going to let anyone have control of my happiness. So if I get attacked, then it's my

fault for not being tough enough or smart enough or whatever. And if I get beaten up, now I just think 'whatever' and shrug it off. It's my safe word. Whatever! 'Cos there's always a way to get your own back."

I say I just shrug it off, but this stupid little woman is getting to me. I'm actually gritting my teeth. Evidently, I'm not quite behind my protective wall of whatever!

Effie is looking at me with a half smile, but with little shakes of her head, and tears in her eyes.

"It's not just the 'Me First' which had you

all twisted up, is it, Jeffrey?" she says gently.

I'm really angry now. Who does she think she is. I am just about to say, "I don't need a therapist, thank you. But if I did it wouldn't be someone like you - an old woman in a cardigan!"

But before I can say it, I'm hit with two hard painful thumps in the chest. There's rising acid in my throat. In my mouth. In my brain. Coalescing into resentment and prejudice. Spreading out in my head, making themselves comfortable. Then the pain is gone, but I know what happened

when Tamsin moved out.

An unholy trinity moved in.

And now I recognise the three of them.

Own them. I find myself naming them,

"Me First. Resentment. Misogyny.."

Effie nods.

Eri says, "Well done, Jeffrey."

I glance across expecting to see a smirk, but

Eri's face is unreadable. "Well done?" I ask,

all sarcasm. "What's that supposed to

mean? Congratulations, I'm a moron?"

Eri tilts his head slightly, as if considering

his response. "Well done," he repeats, "for the mental gymnastics - naming the demons that you'd rather pretend don't exist! It's not pretty, but it is a start."

Effie jumps in quickly, sensing my rising irritation. "What Eri means ..." she says.

"I know what it means!" I interrupt. "I feel them! I just don't want ..." I falter.

"... too much mirror mirror on the wall?" Without missing a beat, Eri has finished my sentence, fixing me with a stare that feels like open heart surgery.

I've given up trying to figure out Eri. I

don't know where we are going with this, but we've moved up another floor, and I feel way worse.

"Can we not go back down to the bottom floor," I ask, "I felt much better there."

Effie shakes her head, "No," she says firmly. "We need to move on. There's various ways to get through this, but they are all as bad as each other."

I shake my head, fearfully. "I don't want to have all that other stuff back. It's bad enough carrying this lot."

Eri shakes his head. So does Effie. "No," she

says.

I am getting panicky about the prospect of that horrible weight of negative trauma again, "Please. Please?" I despise what I sound like. A desperate child. The rage comes back and I'm boiling with frustration and self-loathing.

Effie's face softens, "Oh Jeffrey." She puts both hands up to cover her face for a couple of minutes. It's awkward. I can see she's crying.

She feels something for me! I'm so surprised.

Why? I can feel the tears pricking my eyes now, and my throat is tightening. I haven't felt like this for literally decades. I've deliberately and successfully walled myself off against this kind of trauma, and she keeps finding a way to jab me!

"Jeffrey," she sniffs and tips her head back. Then she looks at me, and blinks a few times.

"What?"

She takes a breath, blows it out through pursed lips, and says almost inaudibly, "Jeffrey, I'm your grandmother."

I stare at her. Her face, the shape of her mouth, the grey eyes. Can it be?

I shake my head slowly. I realise I must look stupid - wide eyed and mouth hanging open, so I shake my head a few more times and frown. Slowly I let out a wobbly breath.

I remember her now from a sepia photo on the sideboard. It's in a tarnished silver oval frame. She's much younger there, and holding a baby on her lap.

My grandmother! My mother's mother. I can almost see the connection between us.

There is a sudden overwhelming desire to be hugged. But a sharp familiar voice in the back of my head cuts in, "You're still a bleating little wimp. I can't even look at you!"

But Effie is speaking again and I force my mind to focus on her, rather than the mocking pantomime of demons.

"Yes." she says, acknowledging my unspoken question, "It's true."

Before I have time to quell my mental turmoil, she says, "You got married again, didn't you? Tell me what went wrong."

Yes, I did, but I am absolutely not going to talk about it. It will only stir up another horde. I clench my teeth in an attempt to keep my mouth shut. But my despicable immature desire for sympathy prises open my mouth.

"Everything," I bleat, my voice low and thin. "It wasn't my fault! I loved Melissa. But I was stupid. We all make mistakes though," I add defensively. "The disappointment with Tamsin was still eating me. I was reckless. Afraid, too. It was all so tangled up. I had Kai, and she had

Nick and Freya. We married, but I screwed it up—ruined everything. With my own hands. I couldn't find any other way."

Grandma's soft grey eyes study me, washed in sadness. "Why?" she asks gently.

I shake my head, more in frustration than despair. "At the time, I thought I was in control. But I didn't know what I was doing. Not really."

"Really?" Her voice is quiet, but there's definition there now, an edge, a challenge beneath the surface.

"No," I insist, the word blurted in annoyed

self-justification.

Grandma narrows her eyes, the faintest trace of a smile on her lips, like she's trying to unearth something I'm hiding from myself. "Are you sure about that?"

I shift uncomfortably, the memory stirring a bitter taste in my mouth. "I suppose I knew what I was doing. But I don't know why."

"Well, what is it that you were doing?"

Grandma presses on. Her tone is mild, but relentless.

I draw in a deep breath. The irritation is

starting to control all my responses now. I draw another as I try to steady myself. I frown, the lines on my forehead deepening as I force myself to piece it together. My mind, a chaotic mess, tries to untangle the threads. It's an abhorrent process, unpretending. Pulling apart the web of self-deception.

"I couldn't stop worrying that I was going to lose her," I admit, my voice harsh. I pause, blowing out a breath, as if I was getting rid of the poison. Grandma waits, observing me with an infuriating restraint.

"... so I watched her all the time," I continue, the words grinding out between clenched teeth.

"What do you mean, watched her?" She's still tilting her head to one side, but her gaze is sharp. It is cutting into me. Her eyes are drilling into mine, never wavering.

"She was really pretty, you know," I say, lifting my chin defiantly. A twisted pride masks my resentment. "She didn't realize it, but when she dressed up, she could turn heads down the street."

"And what did you think about that?"

Grandma's voice is gentle, but there's an undercurrent of something more.

"On one level, I liked it," I admit begrudgingly. "I wanted her to dress up in nice clothes, you know... clothes that flattered her, because then being with her made me feel like a winner. I was such a loser in my previous marriage."

Grandma waits, and I can feel her silence pressing down on me, heavy with expectation.

"And on another level," I continue, my voice dropping, "I was terrified that she

would go off with another man like Tamsin did." My hands are trembling now, a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead. I can feel my eyes blinking too much, betraying the turmoil inside.

Grandma nods, a sympathetic gesture that only fuels my irritation. "I know, Jeffrey," she murmurs, "I've felt fear like that."

Her words should have made me pause. I should have acknowledged them. They were real. But I was too stoked to slow down.

"So I tried to control all the places she

went, and all the friends she had, to reduce that risk," my voice is picking up speed, the words babbling out in a frantic rush. "It was fine for a few months because I kept it low-key, but when Kai reacted badly to me remarrying, I tried to control him too, and it just made everything worse. I thought if I could make her see that I knew best, then she would depend on me. But after a while, I could see her slipping away, and I just... I dunno ... I just ..."

I stop. I'm panting, shaking with tension like a cornered animal. Grandma is still

watching me, that same quiet intensity in her gaze. She has no idea what I went through, what I'm still going through. How could she?

"I couldn't help it," I mutter, my voice trembling with despair. "There's always this rage, boiling under the surface. And I can't control it. People deliberately wind me up."

The excuse sounds pitiful, even to my own ears. I glance at Grandma, searching for some sign of understanding, but there's only that quiet, infuriating patience.

'What are we doing?' I think. This is just awful, it's wringing me out, I'm feeling worse by the minute.

"Oh, my dear," she says, and before I can react, she wraps her arms around me.

Why has she done that? When I'm so crap! I push my face into her shoulder, hating myself for the weakness, for needing her comfort. Suddenly, I'm sobbing, my body shaking violently. She can feel me trembling, but I'm too angry with myself, and with her, to care.

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Chapter 16

Balcad, Northern Somalia. 2005.

From time to time, Amina still called Farhiya by her affectionate name, 'habeen'. She would always be a star in her mothers eyes, but she was not so little any more.

Every day it seemed Farhiya was stretching taller, but somehow maintained a grace rare in adolescence. She stood a couple of inches

above her mother, thin as a reed by the river. But her sensitivity still showed through her upbeat manner and her luminous smile. They now worked side by side, preparing meals for the men. In the evenings, under the soft glow of the kerosene lamp, they would sit together, mending clothes when necessary, weaving fabric when time allowed. With three men in the house, there was always something torn to sew, or worn to patch.

Farhiya's schoolwork was a delicate balance against her household duties. Her sister,

Nadifa, at ten, was able to fetch water but still fumbled with the intricacies of housework that Farhiya now performed with grace. As for her seven-year-old brother Hamza, he spent his days playing with friends in the village or roaming the surrounding countryside, determinedly unaware of the burdens carried by his elder sister.

Lately though she had taken to daydreaming. And she spent more time in front of the mirror examining her face and hair.

"Is there a boy?" Amina dropped the question in casually as she sat side by side with Farhiya one evening.

It was impossible to see her blush, but Amina knew she was embarrassed by the shuffling and throat clearing.

"A boy?" Farhiya replied, feigning both ignorance and innocence.

"What is he like?"

"Who?"

"The boy!" Amina paused, smiling, "Wait, I think I know. He has dark eyes, long lashes,

short neat glossy hair, and strong arms."

"Mother!"

"Well I do hope so, Farhiya!" Amina laughed, "I don't want my daughter marrying a man who looks like a dog!"

"He doesn't look like a dog!"

"Aha, so there is someone?!" her mother exclaimed triumphantly. She wagged her finger and assumed a serious expression, "But can he herd goats?"

Farhiya threw her hands in the air, laughing softly, "It's Ismail." She clicked

her tongue a couple of times and said, "So you tell me Mama, you are always right about everything."

Amina narrowed her eyes and looked at her daughter. She knew she would make a fine wife and mother. But it was impossible to tell whether the sparkle in her eyes indicated respect or wry humour.

"Well I was wrong about the hair, Ismail has cornrows doesn't he?"

"Maybe!"

"Well take care of your heart, little one," Amina said without a trace of irony, "Men

can be disappointing!"

"But not papa!"

"Of course not your papa. If we can find a man like your father for you, we will have done well. But you have years before you need to be thinking about these things."

"Well anyway," a sadness swept across the girl's face, "he has been asked to join the militants."

"The Shabaab?" Amina's eyes widened as she stared at Farhiya, "Are they recruiting here?"

Farhiya frowned as she looked at her mother's frightened eyes, "What's the problem? Are they dangerous."

"They've never bothered Balcad before. What has Ismail said? Ibrahim must speak to Ismail's father!"

"He only said he has been approached. I don't know what that means."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 17

Somewhere. Coma day 4.

"It's okay. It's okay," Grandma soothes, her voice gentle, as if I'm still the little boy she knew, the one she loved unconditionally. The one who didn't deserve it.

We stand together for a while, my shoulders still shaking, and her stroking my hair. Gradually, I feel myself relaxing,

despite my best efforts to resist it. Finally, I pull away from her, trying to regain some semblance of control. I bring both hands up to my face, wiping my eyes with my fingertips, then my cheeks with my palms. She knows I've been crying, and I'm crawling with humiliation.

I can't look at her. I'm so ashamed. My gaze drops to the floor. "I lost control of the marriage, and I lost control of myself. I beat her up. Lots of times. And Nick died. That was my fault—I see that now. But back then, I thought that I needed to work

harder at controlling those around me."

As I recount all this, a dark cloud of self-pity begins to settle over me, thick and cloying. I know what I am—a failure. I'm nobody. But there's something almost comforting in the misery, in wallowing in the familiar depths of my own despair.

I surface out of my stupid selfish little puddle of woe. It appears as if some kind of solid light is slowly taking shape behind Eri. He is still sat on the floor, but he lifts his face to me. I can't focus on him even though he is fairly close and facing me. He

seems to be a hazy shadow overlaid on the light emanating from behind him. The light shifts like smoke. When he speaks, his voice has a new authority. A new directness and purpose.

"Do you think, Jeffrey, that you can command someone or manipulate someone to love you? Can you coerce love?"

His words knife into me, and I have to squint to see him, his form blurred by the shifting light. I shake my head, mumbling, "No."

The light fades, and I can feel Grandma's

hand resting on my arm, grounding me. "No, dear, that's right. It's impossible to make people love you."

As soon as she says it, the hopelessness wraps itself around me, heavy and suffocating. The faint hope I was clinging to has evaporated, leaving only the cold, hard truth. I know what I am. Broken, worthless, inconsequential.

The certainty of being damaged unimportant trivial goods, streams into my mind and churns endlessly, tangled and bitter. Recounting all this, I realise I've had

some pretty bad luck. Look at what happened to me! My parents were hateful, my wives never really cared. I try to take control, 'It's not all my fault,' I tell myself.

The more I think about it, the more I can taste the familiar, sickly-sweet opioid of self-pity, masking the deep-seated hopelessness that gnaws at my insides. The cloying stickiness provides temporary relief from the pain, but I'm suddenly aware that I have been hooked on this addiction for a very long time.

And the thing about addiction - sometimes

you hate it, always you crave it, ofttimes you just love it. Self-pity tastes so good. And for a while - the pain just goes.

"Stop, Jeffrey!" Eri's face is right in mine and the tone is surprisingly authoritative. Can he read my thoughts? Surely not! I let it go.

I look up. The man who carried me in here is standing up now, quietly waiting for my response.

There's nothing worth saying. We've come up through another storey, and we're still far from the bright white light above us.

I'm exhausted. I don't know what's happening, but I do know it's a waste of time.

Eri looks at my grandmother and nods.

She turns to look at me. "What's next?" she asks.

I shake my head a little, resignation seeping into my bones, then resume the story of my wonderful life.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 18

Bournemouth Crown Court, Dorset. 2003.

Jeffrey sat in the dock, hollowed out by hopelessness, his eyes fixed on the floor. The courtroom benches murmured with speculation. The judge, old, stern, head bent over the court papers, ignored the pressure of expectation. He raised his head and stared hard at Jeffrey. The courtroom fell silent. He narrowed his eyes. The

ushers, barristers, and clerk maintained a professional detachment. Impassive. Impossible to read. The gaggle of reporters were only concerned that the story should be sufficiently salacious. The CPS representative and the attendant police were on edge. The jury were transfixed by their own responsibility, now fulfilled.

Jeffrey swallowed. He waited.

The silence deepened, heavy and portentous. The gravity of Jeffrey's crime has drawn down the full weight of the law.

The judge's voice was measured, "Mr.

Turnham," he began, deep, resonant, devoid of bias, "you have been found guilty of manslaughter in the death of your stepson, Nicholas Grange. Before I pronounce sentence, do you have anything that you wish to say?"

Jeffrey remained still for a moment, head bowed, hands gripping the bar at the front of the dock, knuckles white. He slowly raised his head and looked up, hooded eyes projecting defiance and weariness. He made to speak, but no sound came out. He cleared his throat twice, then finally

manage a single word. "No," he said, his voice hollow, desolate and almost inaudible. His head dropped and shoulders sagged.

The judge nodded once. He continued, his tone sharpening, as if to demolish Jeffrey's apparent careless detachment and to ground the man sitting before him. "Look at me, Mr. Turnham." He waited until Jeffrey reluctantly complied. "Do you acknowledge the magnitude of your inhumane and criminal conduct, Mr. Turnham? Society does not take lightly the

taking of a life, even if unintended. Do you really have nothing to say?"

The judge's eyes drilled into him, condemning and merciless.

Jeffrey, unable to maintain eye contact, dropped his gaze. He took several deep breaths. He had heard the judge tell the jury that he had beaten Nick to death. Had he? Surely not intentionally. So ... Regret surged within him, rising like a tide he could no longer hold back. Yet, intermixed was something unfamiliar, a bitter undercurrent. Was it remorse? Self-

reproach? He shook it off, telling himself he had no room for that kind of weakness. He needed to be hard, impervious - or so he tried to convince himself.

He gritted his teeth. He removed his hands from the rail, numb from the subconscious grip, he flexed his fingers and slowly raised his head.

He stared at the judge with undisguised contempt. "I said, No!" The disdain was evident in the hostile tone. He returned his gaze to the floor.

The judge rested his elbows on the leather

topped desk and steepled his fingers. His eyes narrowed, his mouth hardened into a thin line. He thought for a moment, then slowly and clearly, for all the court to hear, he said, "Your actions, Mr. Turnham, were the result of your unrestrained and uncontrolled rage and your disturbingly profound lack of empathy. But it is your refusal to acknowledge the seriousness of what you have done ..." he paused for emphasis, then continued, "... What. You. Have. Done. ... that necessitates the strictest permissible sentence." The judge

waited until Jeffrey was forced to raise his head once more and resume eye contact. "You have destroyed a life, Mr. Turnham. You have brought grief and mourning into the lives of your very own family."

Jeffrey gripped the arms of his chair, his body shaking as he struggled to maintain his composure. His right hand released and then balled into a fist. His eyes flared with fury. His lawyer leaned across and gripped Jeffrey's forearm, digging his fingers in. He slowly increased the vice grip pain until Jeffrey turned his gaze away from the judge

and looked at him. The lawyer shook his head almost imperceptibly. Jeffrey conceded by looking back at the judge, leaning back and placing both hands flat on the arms. They both waited.

"Mr. Turnham, having considered all the evidence and the seriousness of the offence, this court has determined that a custodial sentence is appropriate. Therefore, I hereby sentence you to fourteen years of imprisonment. You will be taken into custody immediately. This sentence reflects the just requirement for you to be

punished, furthermore deterred and additionally to protect the public."

The judge turned to the bailiff, nodded and quietly said, "Take him down."

Jeffrey, blank eyed, simply nodded stiffly and stood slowly as the court bailiff approached. Jeffrey, escorted, made his way to leave the courtroom, walking past the rows of spectators. He stared straight ahead as he left, seemingly almost catatonic. His face was a blank mask. Only his tightly clenched hands trembling slightly indicated his shock at the verdict. As soon as his back

was to the judge, his face darkened and twisted with hatred.

"Pompous idiot!" he muttered almost inaudibly, followed by an obscenity. Several spectators gasped. The reporters grinned to each other and scribbled.

"Stop!" barked the judge, "return to the dock!" Avoiding theatrics, he simply gripped the gavel to maintain his composure.

The bailiff forcefully marched Jeffrey back to face the bench.

The room fell silent once more. The judge

leaned forward in his chair and stared hard at the now trembling prisoner. Jeffrey visibly paled as the judge maintained silence. The judge's voice was a near whisper, but clearly heard throughout the hushed courtroom, "You will apologise to the bench, the staff and the spectators, or your sentence will be extended for contempt."

He waited.

Jeffrey's mouth worked in agitation, his eyes lowered yet glancing side to side. There was no escape. "I'm sorry."

The judge nodded to the bailiff who escorted his humiliated prisoner to the exit. The court door swung closed behind him with a dull thud, leaving the room in silence.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 19

Somewhere. Coma day 4.

"There's no justice! Is there? Was that fair? The court case was a complete travesty!"

I step back, startled by how sharply I had raised my voice. But how could I not? My grandmother specialises in these infuriatingly brainless, insensitive questions. She blanches, looking

momentarily upset before she resumes her relentless interrogation.

"Why do you say that?" she asks, far too calmly.

"Because he had a health condition! If he hadn't had that..." I trail off, frustrated.

"Listen, I'd been beaten up far worse myself, countless times."

"What health condition?" she presses, clearly unconcerned.

"I don't know, some blood pressure thing. What does it even matter now?" I can feel myself crawling behind my 'Whatever!'

wall.

"Do you think you didn't deserve prison then?" she asks in a neutral tone.

"No! Well, yes, of course, I had to go to prison, but fourteen years?" The more I talk about it, the more the injustice gnaws at me.

"No parole?" she continues, as if she's asking about the weather.

"Yes, but only by faking the remorse! Seven years of play acting, just to get my freedom!" I snap.

"And what do you say now?"

This woman is unbearable. I let out an exasperated sigh and glare at her, my patience worn thin.

"Some people," I mutter bitterly, "are just destined to be kicked around by life. I'm not going to stand here and whine like some kid, 'It's not fair.' People like you have no clue what it's like. Where do I even go from here, for God's sake?"

"Well, that's an interesting question," Eri cuts in. He is as maddeningly serene as my grandmother.

I turn to him, my eyes blazing, "Oh, don't be ridiculous! You know exactly what I mean."

"Jeffrey," she pauses until she has my attention, "I don't think you know what you mean," she says, almost pityingly.

"Believe me, I do! I know that whatever I try, it's all just going to turn to rat shit!" I snap back, the bitterness seeping through every word.

Eri, who has been mostly observing, speaks up. "You know, Jeffrey," Eri says casually, "old people can't get up out of saggy sofas.

Watch out—or you'll end up sat in the apathetic armchair of self-pity forever!"

My sanctimonious grandmother looks uncomfortable, disapproving. But he ignores her, "You might just have reached that age!" he continues. "You can stay angry, believe the cosmos is conspiring against you, blame everyone else. But where does that leave you?" I'm increasingly annoyed because he has unerringly put his finger on the pulse, but now, he sticks the scalpel in, "Stuck! Is that what you want?"

Ouch! I'm so angry I'm speechless. I

content myself with glaring at him. But the truth is I feel pressed down by the self-pity and the cynicism on top of everything else now. I am so utterly tired, like I am going to pass out. I slump down flat to the floor before I notice we've gone up another level while they've been interrogating me and nagging me half to death.

Grandma bends and puts her hand on my shoulder. She uses me for support as she lowers herself creakily to sit cross legged beside me. She smiles faintly and shakes her head, "Well, maybe things can work

differently from now on."

Eri suddenly speaks again, "Tell us about prison life, Jeffrey."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 20

Albany Section, HMP Isle of Wight. 2003.

In the third week, the man sidled up to Jeffrey in the prison yard. Even in his peripheral vision, Jeffrey could see he was fairly short, but barrel chested with unnaturally large upper arms. Face to face, the man presented almost a caricature of a hardened criminal. His nose must have been broken at least once and he had a scar

running down through one eyebrow onto his cheek. His face was pale and lumpy, his head shaved, his stare menacing and intense.

He evidently had something important to say, because he moved up closer until they were literally nose to nose. Jeffrey could have told him that he needed to buy a new toothbrush, and pay more attention to nighttime flossing, but it seemed inappropriate.

"Com, yuy!" he snarled, in a thick Belfast accent.

"What?"

"Com," the man turned on his heel and walked away.

Someone pushed Jeffrey from behind, "Go, you - idiot!"

Jeffrey stood still, confused, "What?" he repeated.

The short skinny youth who had pushed him, grabbed his arm and frogmarched him following the caricature. "When Rotty says 'Come' you'd better come," he said in a semi-broken adolescent voice.

"Rotty?"

By this time, Rotty had stopped and turned to see Jeffrey a few feet behind him. He glared at the skinny kid, "Ron away, kid!"

The thug did a backward nod with his grade 0 haircut to encourage Jeffrey in the right direction. Then because Jeffrey appeared to be rooted to the spot, he retraced a couple of steps and gripped Jeffrey's forearm just above the elbow. His fingers dug into the nerve channel causing unbearable pain. He pushed his face into Jeffrey's once more, "Lahst time a' tellan'."

The two made their way across to the far corner of the yard, where a tall heavily built man was standing. He had close-cropped hair and dark skin. As Jeffrey approached he noticed the two gold teeth on one side and one on the other. His confident smile was belied by the hostility in his eyes, and the way his head was thrust aggressively forward.

"Jeffrey! We meet at last, yuh see?" he said quietly in a strong Afro-Caribbean accent. "Ah see yuh done meet Rotty already, eh?"

Jeffrey was unsure how to respond,

"Rotty?" he replied.

"Yeah, Rotty. Dat's mi Rottweiler. Him love a good fight, yuh know? He's mi man. Real brutal. Ain't afraid of nuttin'. Only ting is, he ain't got much self-control, if yuh get mi meanin'." The man stared at Jeffrey for a few moments, then continued. "I'm guessin' the induction programme miss me out. So I tought it nice and friendly to come introduce meself. Denzil. Denzil Morris. But you, Jeffrey," he paused, "you don't call me dat. Definitely not more than once." Denzil extended a huge chunky

hand and grinned with narrowed eyes. Jeffrey tentatively took his hand, and was immediately gritting his teeth in pain, as Denzil squeezed like a vice. He could feel the bones in his hand grinding together, and gasped.

The smile disappeared from Denzil's face and his teeth this time were exposed in a snarl, "To you, J.Lo, I'm Boss." He threw his head back and roared with laughter at his own joke.

Jeffrey so longed to point out the puerility of Denzil's sense of humour, but the

prospect of broken fingers won out.

"J.Lo. Don be forgettin' J.Lo. I'm Boss," Denzil paused, gripped Jeffrey by the shoulder, causing him to wonder just how many exposed nerve points there are in the human body. "Say it! J.Lo." he said, with faux encouragement, "Say Boss!"

Jeffrey winced at the pain coursing through his shoulder, and decided not to comment on Denzil's all too obviously over compensated inadequacy. "Boss," he said grudgingly.

"Good girl!" He gave Jeffrey a shove which

sent him sprawling on the ground.

Laughter rang out from the group of men who had stopped to witness the interchange.

Two days later, Jeffrey was summoned again, this time to sit with Denzil in the cafe. Jeffrey dumped his dinner tray on the table and sat down opposite him. Denzil stared at him with raised eyebrows, his large brown eyes fixed on Jeffrey's face.

"What?" Jeffrey said quietly.

Denzil slowly shook his head, and his eyes grew larger. Jeffrey frowned.

Denzil nodded. And waited.

Finally Jeffrey came up with the magic words, "What, Boss?"

"Good girl! Look here now, I provide a service ‘round here and folk's real grateful for it. I like to tink you need what I got to offer." Denzil looked across to the guard's station to check who was on duty. "It's only civil, y'know," he continued, "So, here's de free sampal, jus' to make a nice introduction."

Denzil slid a tiny plastic bag across the table, containing what looked like dried

shredded herbs.

"What is it?" Jeffrey asked guardedly.

"Spice, man!" Denzil grinned, "De good stuff."

Jeffrey had learned about spice only a fortnight previously in the induction programme. He recalled the prison doctor's talk on drugs ...

"Spice is a drug developed in the lab to be cheaply manufactured and to provide users with the effects of cannabis. Badly controlled and powerful, it often causes severe psychological and physical damage.

It is cheap and difficult to detect. It is used extensively in all UK prisons. At this time, in this prison, I am aware of around 90 chronic addicts, and we probably have maybe 50 casual users. Please don't become one of them."

Jeffrey had thought at the time that this was all irrelevant information. He had a lot to learn about prison life.

"I don't want it"

"I don wan' it, what?" Denzil said quietly.

Jeffrey frowned, momentarily puzzled, "I don't want it. The spice. I don't want it."

"I don wan'," Denzil slowed, to emphasize each word, "The. Spice. What!?"

"Oh," the light dawned on Jeffrey, "I don't want the spice, Boss."

Denzil affected an offended surprise, "Aaaaay! Lookin' ongrateful, mi man." He screwed up his nose and mouth in distaste, "Get outta here!"

----------oOo----------

Chapter 21

Somewhere. Coma day 5.

"Weren't you afraid?" my grandmother looks at me a little anxiously.

The woman has no idea. I concede that she probably hasn't spent much time in the company of violent, drug-fuelled murderers.

"Yes. Terrified some of the time," I confess.

"But I was more angry than anything. That stopped me being afraid."

"What were you angry about?" she asks.

"Everything," I frown recalling the horror of prison life."Humiliation. Idiot screws. Thug prisoners. Abuse of power. Having to use a bucket if you wanna go in the night. Being punished for the slightest thing...

"Punished? How?"

"No TV. Solitary confinement. Cancelled OU lessons. Kicked out of the gym. No access to a phone. The list was endless."

I stop, because all this is bringing me down. I can feel myself getting angry and tense and resentful and I know how this develops. A pain in the chest, headache and a nightful of spiralling hateful thoughts.

"I don't wanna talk about all that. Let me tell you what the worst thing was," I say, breathing out heavily.

I pause. The two of them look at me, blank faces. Probably members of a society that largely approves of the current prison system, but has absolutely no clue about it.

"Boredom!"

I look at them both. Silence. No response. I could be on the other side of the world and speaking aborigine.

Grandma closes her eyes and shakes her head, baffled.

"Hour after hour after hour of nothing new to see or do or hear. For days, weeks, months, it seems it is never going to end. Until, you know what ... ?" I'm only just about holding it together now. The two numpties are struck dumb. "You long for a fight, for the excitement, even if you are the one who is getting beaten up. You long to

go to sleep and not wake up for a year. You long for the next time you can get some spice in you and drift into a mental haze."

I just can't get the measure of Eri. I've made myself look stupid and neither of them have a single thing to say. They both despise me—I can feel it.

Suddenly, a surge of uncontrollable rage floods me, blinding me in a red haze. I struggle to my feet, adrenalin fuelled, and find myself nose to nose with Eri, my fists clenching and unclenching as my chest heaves. I'm nearly snorting with anger.

This has happened before, often landing me in trouble, but it's always cathartic. I welcome it now.

But Eri is totally calm. I find his impassive manner really offensive, but then he says, "Humans can't be controlled. Hence the dehumanisation process."

But then I glance over at Grandma. She has gone very pale, but, her calmness pierces through my rage. She is cool and calm like Eri, but I can see she cares. My shoulders ache, and my back is rigid with tension. Exhaustion overtakes me again and I sink

back to the floor. I take a deep breath, then another, feeling a sense of shame in the face of her serenity.

This exhaustion is strange. It is even worse than my worst days.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 22

Balcad, Northern Somalia. 2008.

Ismael staggered into Balcad, every breath a searing agony as smoke clawed at his lungs. His eyes, scorched and stinging, barely took in the terror around him. For three long years, he had lived in fear, dodging the relentless pursuit of the Shabaab who had once tried to recruit him. Ibrahim, Farhiya's father, had taken a stand, warning

every young man in the village to avoid their misconceived calls to jihad. He had even set a watch, ensuring that the young men could vanish into the savannah at the first hint of danger. But the Shabaab had returned with a vengeance. They had seized Ismael and five other youths, their commander's fury erupting when he found the rest had disappeared.

Now, the Shabaab commander stormed into the village, maddened with rage and retribution, flanked by twenty men. Ismael was dragged behind them, his spirit almost

broken, as the commander's grim intent became clear - brutal vengeance upon Balcad, making it a chilling example to the nearby villages of Bulo Burde and Garbahaarrey. The Shabaab's wrath would be merciless and the price of resistance, devastating.

He strode into the marketplace, the village's heart. With a savage flick of his wrist, he raised his assault rifle and fired a deafening shot into the air. The crowd recoiled in terror. The commander's eyes were sharp and unnervingly bright, a predatory glint

threatening his cruel intent. He surveyed his men—mostly young, some barely in their teens, and two shockingly small boys of around twelve—all clutching AK-47s. With a humourless smile, he shook his clenched fist in a power show. Then he turned to the frightened villagers, his khat-stained teeth flashing in a predatory grin. "Where is Ibrahim Hassan?" he bellowed, his voice a razor-sharp edge of menace.

For a moment, silence gripped the crowd, hardly daring to breathe. The air crackled with tension, thick with the smell of fear.

The commander's eyes gleamed with icy rage. "Fine, then I'll start shooting!" he roared. He seized a young man, around twenty, dragging him from the cowering mass. The lad fell on his knees, frantic with terror.

The boy's mother, her cries desperate and wild, pointed trembling at Ibrahim. "It's him! It's him!"

Ibrahim, sighed in grim resignation and nodded to concur. Beside him, Amina clung to him, her body a hopeless shield. The two older boys inched behind her,

their faces pale with fear. Farhiya was rooted to the spot a few yards away, gripping the hands of the little ones, Nadifa and Hamza. She frowned and started to move to join her family, but Ibrahim caught her gaze. He silently mouthed her name, 'Farhiya', then widened his eyes in warning and made a barely perceptible shake with his head. She froze in terror, gasping ragged breaths as she waited.

The commander turned to his men, "Someone give me a gun!" He summoned Ismael and stood him facing Ibrahim. "Kill

them," he barked, his eyes glittering with excitement.

Ismael's face was a pale mask of horror. He held up the gun, waited a few moments, then suddenly whirled around to point it at the commander, but was cut down in a short chattering spray of bullets. He collapsed on the ground coughing and bleeding. A groan went up from the villagers, and several women screamed.

"The men of Balcad have betrayed Somalia. They have not joined us in the righteous struggle. And you, Ibrahim Hassan, along

with your family, will pay dearly for your part in this refusal." The commander spoke the words angrily, the veins in his neck bulging and his face red. He raised the AK-47 and for around five seconds the air was filled with deafening clattering and smoke and screaming. Ibrahim, Amina and the two older boys lay on the ground unmoving. Several in the crowd close by had been hit and were writhing on the ground.

"This is the end of Balcad," shrieked the commander. "Kill everyone! Burn

everything!"

The men and boys with guns started firing into the crowd. There was wholesale panic as the villagers scattered. Farhiya ran like the wind with a grip of iron onto the hands of her brother and sister. People were stumbling and falling alongside them left and right. She carried on running even though at times she had to lift Hamza dangling by one arm. The terrorists of the Shabaab fanned out into the village systematically setting fire to the huts. The shooting now was sporadic, usually

accompanied by screams as they executed the old and the very young who simply could not run.

Farhiya bolted into the savannah. After around fifteen minutes she could run no further. Nadifa and Hamza were wailing.

"Hush, little ones, we are safe now." She wrapped her arms around the two and held them close.

"What do we do?" Nadifa asked, her eyes bulging with fear.

"We stay quiet. We creep like a leopard, no sound, through the grasses. We have to go

to grandfather's."

----oOo----

The little ones sobbed uncontrollably in their grandmother's arms, their cries giving voice to the older woman's stifled grief. Farhiya stood frozen, her face buried in her grandfather's chest as she trembled with shock.

"My son... my dear boy is gone," Grandfather whispered hoarsely, his voice breaking as he unsuccessfully tried to rub the tears from his eyes. "Part of me is gone forever." Then his hands, worn and

shaking, covered his face in despair.

"Balcad is gone," Farhiya murmured, her voice barely audible. "We... we have to stay here now."

"Of course, my dears," Grandma said softly, her face pale and her eyes heavy with sadness. "This is your home now."

Throughout those first few days in their grandparents' home, memory of the trauma darkened the world. The children were worryingly subdued scarred by the loss of their family and village. Farhiya tried to help with the daily chores, but often-times

she was found sitting, staring at the floor in the corner in delayed shock. Then she would draw in a deep breath and with a sigh, force herself to the next job.

At first, the grandparents provided what they could—meals and a place to rest—but they had no savings to speak of. As the days became weeks, the meals got smaller and Grandfather's trips to the market more frequent. Finally the money Ibrahim had once sent regularly was all spent.

The children became hungry and the grandparents became thinner. Neighbours

left small parcels of food outside their hut from time to time. Her grandparents desperate whispered discussions in the night were not lost on Farhiya. Finally, after several days when there was almost no food even for the little ones, Grandfather broke down, when the the two little ones were out playing. He sat at the table with Farhiya. His voice was thin. Wavering as he faced up to cruel reality.

"Ibrahim has been giving us money for several years." he said softly, his face a picture of despair. "I have no idea what we

can do."

Farhiya looked at her grandparents, their faces lined with anxiety. She smiled and placed the fabric that Amina had woven for her. "Al-Razzaq," she said softly.

As she continued to speak, they learned that Farhiya had decided to travel to England and work to provide for all the family. She had asked around among the women to determine which of the local stall owners could probably be trusted. She had approached two of them and discussed her plan with them. With their bank

accounts already established, they had agreed to take a cut of the money she would send once she secured a job in England. They were to note her payments, keep 10%, and pay the remainder in cash to her grandparents.

While she felt they could be trusted, Farhiya had nevertheless had set up a cross-check on the stall owners. The village schoolteacher would speak to Grandfather each month and check he had received the correct amount. Using the school's single laptop, Farhiya had set up a Gmail account,

thanks to the teacher's quiet assistance. Each month, Farhiya would notify the teacher how much her grandparents should receive.

The sun was up, the sky painted in pink and orange. Farhiya stood outside her grandparents' modest home, feeling the weight of her decision. Nadifa was shooting up but Hamza was still tiny. Farhiya knelt down so she could see him eye to eye. As Farhiya enveloped her little brother in a tight hug, Nadifa, head bowed, bent down and took a small handful of soil,

studying it, rubbing it between her fingers until it had all seeped away. Then Nadifa's arms were around Farhiya's neck, eyes quietly pleading for assurance that her pain would soon be over.

None of the three realised the magnitude and finality of this farewell.

Farhiya swallowed trying to clear the lump in her throat. She kissed them both on the face and on the forehead. Then kissing her grandparents one last time, knowing she would almost certainly not see them alive again, she turned away.

She stumbled as she left the only family she had. Almost fell. Looking back, she recalled her years of practice on the oud, and her grandfather and siblings singing in the evenings as the sun sank below the distant hills. The future was a song not yet sung. She had no money to offer the traffickers, just a few coins the kindly school teacher had given her.

But she had read the story of Ibrahim the prophet, and like him she was leaving everything she knew. And she trusted the one whose name was woven into the piece

of fabric she carried - Al-Razzaq, Allah the Provider.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 23

Albany Section, HMP Isle of Wight. 2008.

The guard leaned into the corridor, his voice slicing through the stillness, "Roll call! Up and out in five."

A murmur of discontent rippled through the cells as the prisoners stirred, reluctantly emerging from their beds to face another empty day. The guard retreated to finish

his coffee, returning twenty minutes later to conduct the headcount and inspection.

He moved deliberately down the corridor, scrutinizing each cell and the state of its occupant. Midway down the left, a prisoner was still huddled in bed, with only a hint of movement breaking the stillness.

"Turnham!" the guard barked. "Up and at 'em. Make it quick."

The corridor echoed with a chorus of catcalls—some taunting the guard, others jeering at Jeffrey.

"Out of bed, Turnham," the guard's voice

carried an edge. "Or today won't be a walk in the park!"

"I can't, I'm ill," came a groggy protest from under the covers.

"Hmmm." Turning on his heel, the guard continued the roll call to the far end, then yelled, "Okay, stand down."

He retraced his steps to cell 14, selected a key from the ring looped over his arm, and unlocked the door. Stepping inside, he found Jeffrey barely moving.

"I'm completely wiped out. Something's wrong," Jeffrey mumbled weakly.

"Well if you want to see the pretty little nurse, you'd better drag yourself out of bed and follow me."

"Funny guy!" Jeffrey managed a weak, sarcastic retort.

The "charming" nurse was, in fact, a burly figure of about fifteen stone, with long, thin straggly grey hair and skin etched by years of chain smoking. His nose perpetually ran, wiped carelessly on the back of his sleeve, and he was unmistakably male.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 24

Cairo, Egypt. July, 2008.

Farhiya sat on the bed and closed her eyes. The precious memory of her life in Somalia flooded back—the familiarity of her home, and the simple joys of childhood spent in a loving family. But then the memory darkened, overshadowed by the horror of the slaughter, then of her escape, leaving

her feeling adrift in a sea of strangers.

Almost immediately, all the hardship and danger of the previous twelve weeks came back to her. The stumbling in the dark and bitter desert nights. The covert following of guided groups trying to avoid detection. The heat, the hunger, the bleeding feet. The fear of discovery hidden in trucks and trains. The blinding sandstorm just after Khartoum, the dehydration approaching Aswan.

The men and boys at the border checkpoints with guns. The hawkers and

hustlers peddling tea or flip-flops or bottles of bright orange drink. The exhausted mothers with babes in arms. The gaunt children with staring eyes...

Her journey had drained her of almost everything; her money had run out, her hope of reaching England was gone, her shoes were thin and her clothes were wearing away. It seemed her journey must end here. Cleaning bedrooms at the Hotel Miralux in Cairo. The job paid just enough to buy her food and her share of a room in a rundown tenement.

She worried about her grandparents and sister Nadifa and brother Hamza. They had no expectation of any money any time soon, because the journey was known to be long, but the question lingered - would she ever make it?

She felt so alone. The fear of abandonment gripped her; the contrast between the happy chatter in the colourful marketplace, then because of the night that everything changed, the devastation of her home village. She had seen too much loss, and her present position, so vulnerable, was

terrifying. She threw herself into her work, thankful that the concentration it required stopped her dwelling on the future.

Guests came and went but the work and the worry remained. She leaned on the trolley in the corridor, then shook her head, straightened and stuck a six-pack of toilet rolls under one arm, and loaded the hand up with mini shampoo bottles and soaps. Head down, she turned and continued searching in her pocket for the master key to the rooms on floor 5. Taking a step she cannoned into the man who was a regular

at the hotel. The penetrating gaze of his sharp eyes spoke of a confident intelligence. His elegantly cut pale linen suit, a dark shirt and silk tie indicated a man comfortable with his wealth. Unlike many of the guests, this man treated her as a human being. She appreciated his confident manner and easy smile, but most of all was grateful for his generous tips. He did insist on having his numerous pairs of expensive Italian soft leather shoes cleaned daily and she had to date spent many hours ensuring that they were extraordinarily shiny.

"Aasifah," she apologised, blushing. Mr Khalil had stayed for two weeks in the previous month. Whenever she cleaned his room he had been perhaps a little too friendly. But she was always polite and he did tip generously. She had overheard the hotel manager talking to him about the cost of fitting solar panels to the Miralux. Khalil had declined to discuss it - apparently his company only considered larger contracts involving multiple buildings. He seemed to be either on the phone or jumping into a taxi or discussing

restaurants with the front desk. He repeatedly met several grey shapeless suited men in the lobby before evening dinner.

Farhiya worked on room 54 for around an hour. She was just exiting when she heard an argument coming from Khalil's room 55 across the passage. At that moment one of the grey shapeless men emerged, red faced, evidently very angry, glanced at her, slammed the door shut and stamped off down the corridor. She shrugged and tapped politely on door 52 to check it was empty. Khalil's business wasn't hers. Once

she had cleaned rooms 52 and 50, then crossed the corridor and completed rooms 51 and 53, she paused, vacillating, looking at the number 55 on the next door. She was mulling whether to knock or skip it, when two men in police uniform came running down the corridor. The younger man was broad and solid like a wrestler, the older was heavily built but running to fat somewhat. He was puffing by the time he arrived, but then he listened at the door for a moment. He nodded to the younger man who demanded that Farhiya unlock the

door. Trembling she did so, and they immediately pushed past her, and burst into the room.

There was shouting and protests and name-calling, but eventually Mr Khalil was brought out, the door slammed shut, and he was escorted summarily downstairs. She heard later that he had been bundled into a police car complaining that he had not had time to collect his heart medication.

The following day when she arrived for work, the hotel was abuzz with rumour. Apparently he had returned at around

2.00am, said nothing and gone immediately to his room. And one of the waiters spoke confidentially of bribery, interrogation, and obvious yet unprovable criminality. It was a case of one man's word against another, with no supporting evidence to shed light on the truth.

Farhiya worked her usual route and arrived at room 55. She tapped the door, and heard Khalil say, 'Come'. She entered and saw Khalil on the telephone. He was still arguing with someone. Getting increasingly agitated, he motioned for her to continue

her cleaning. A little embarrassed, she moved to the en-suite to clean and check on the supplies.

Khalil's raised voice carried through from the bedroom. There was one final retort then the sound of the phone being slammed down. Some walking around. The other door slamming. Papers shuffling and some muted cursing. She was hiding now. It went very quiet for a few minutes, then there was some creaking and the sound of Khalil sitting on one of the wicker chairs. Realising she couldn't stay in there forever,

she returned to the bedroom.

"Hal artib al-sareer?" she enquired.

Khalil checked. After his evidently very disturbed night and then all the banging and thumping, the bed did indeed need to be made. He observed her seriously for a few moments, then slowly nodded. The bed was wrecked actually. It looked like Khalil and the police had been indulging in a giant pillow fight. She worked for around ten minutes, then jumped, startled by a heavy bang on the door. She exchanged glances with Khalil, who simply shook his

head in resignation. Then he rolled his eyes and spread his hands in a gesture of frustrated innocence.

She watched as he was grabbed a second time and then escorted roughly from the room by the same two substantial policemen as previously. The door swung closed behind them. She sat for a few moments until her thumping heartbeat returned to normal. Then since cleaning rooms was all that was keeping her alive, she looked around the room, finally exiting. She pushed her trolley further down the

corridor and started on room 57.

At the end of the shift she collected her lunch leftovers and personal bits and went to restock the trolley for the next day. She removed the cloth that covered those lower shelf items too offensive for the sensitive eyes of moneyed hotel guests - bleach, sanitary towels, toilet duck, dirty cloths, etc. Her eyes rested for a moment on the carrier bag. That was new. It was tied in a knot with a note taped on. She narrowed her eyes and frowned. She glanced up and down the passageway.

She read the note. She was surprised to learn that Mr Khalil had left her a gift as he would be leaving the country as soon as he had finished his business today. There was no need to get in touch with him. In fact, it said, 'please do not.' He indicated in the note that he had been falsely accused of bribery, and only released because they could find no corroborating evidence. And of course all businessmen carry cash. Just because there was quite a lot, did not mean that it was intended as a bribe. No! It meant that he was way richer than these

corrupt officials could conceive, and he didn't believe in roughing it on business trips. He would of course be stopped at customs and they would put two and two together and make five. He had not signed his name beneath the final blessing. It simply said, 'Barak Allahu Feek'.

Farhiya was confused. She didn't understand the implications, nor the metaphors. She neither understood Mr Khalil's motivations nor his concerns. But when she opened the bag, she did understand that this was a very great deal

of money. In cash. Many bundles of US dollars, plus bundles of Egyptian, Libyan and Moroccan notes, plus a smaller bundle each of European and British notes. She had never seen dinar or dirham, nor pounds or euros. She recognised the dollars. She looked again in both directions along the corridor, afraid that she was in trouble. Was this an answer to prayer or an invitation to Hell? Surely the blessing said it all? 'May God reward you with goodness.' Wisely, she decided to consider the matter in private.

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Chapter 25

Albany Section, HMP Isle of Wight. 2008.

"I'm at a loss," the nurse declared after a cursory examination. Extreme fatigue and muscle weakness were common enough in prison, but Jeffrey's symptoms were particularly severe. An appointment was quickly arranged for later with the prison doctor.

After lunch, the guard reappeared, his baton clanging against the bars, jolting Jeffrey awake. "Time to see Mengele," he said. The doctor's name was not actually Mengele. And he didn't perform inhumane experiments on inmates. It was just one of those light-hearted prison jokes that guards use to brighten up the prisoners' long days. In the doctor's office, Mengele bombarded Jeffrey with questions and conducted a series of tests, including the classic knee and reflex hammer assessments. The exaggerated reflex response led the doctor

to suspect that Jeffrey was faking it. Yet, after thorough observation, he decided to refer Jeffrey to St. Mary's Hospital in Newport for further testing. "They've got ‘bigger mallets' there," he quipped to Jeffrey with a wry smile.

They took some bloods for testing. The usual two week wait for the path lab was accelerated to twelve days. Then they showed nothing particularly interesting. Over the following few weeks, Jeffrey's symptoms increased until there were daily muscle cramps, routine twitches, but more

worrying significant muscle weakness in the lower left leg. He was finally diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease six weeks after the onset of serious symptoms. He was given a prognosis of survival for a further two to five years probably, with the possibility of up to fifteen years if he was unusually lucky.

The thought of dying behind bars terrified him. The mere anticipation of stepping into the sunlight as the prison gates clanged shut for the final time had been his sole beacon of hope. But as Jeffrey, convinced

that luck had long forsaken him, spiralled deeper into despair, that distant dream seemed to fade further away.

Antidepressants lifted his mood but did nothing to change his bleak outlook. He made a ostentatious spectacle of his misery, self-deprecatingly calling himself a "dead man walking," until one inmate pointed out with grim practicality that, given the progression of MND, he'd soon have to drop the "walking" part altogether.

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Chapter 26

Somewhere. Coma day 5.

"Oh Jeffrey, that's must have been so difficult!" his grandmother murmured, "How on earth did you cope."

The memory of those first few months after diagnosis returns with a sting, settling into a raw ache. I try to recall how I dragged myself out of despair.

"I tried to fight the depression off with study. I started an OU degree, but got too far behind when some more bouts of ill health meant I couldn't leave the cell to access the internet."

"What subject did you study?" Grandma seems genuinely interested.

"Psychology. I wanted to understand myself better."

"Well that's ... that's very good." She nods in a feeble attempt to give me some credit.

I shake my head. Why am I bothering? I don't know. But it seems to matter that

they don't give up on me.

So I say, "And I tried a lot of self help books. And courses on the internet. Some it was interesting, and might work on other people."

"Feel the fear and chicken out anyway?" Eri is deadpan. I assume he is now going to make fun of what little I have done to try to improve my crappy life.

"Shut up!" I fire back."

"Tell me, Jeffrey, did any of it help you, even a little." Grandma enquires, frowning slightly.

I turn my mouth down with disdain at the memory of the course. "Not really. I never had the mental resources to follow any of the advice. As I say, it might work fine on people who weren't so screwed up. Or so ill." I have tried to address her question seriously.

Eri comes back with, "Ah yes! The advice that works best on people who don't need it then?!"

I can't work out whether he's mocking me or genuinely sympathetic.

It is tediously irritating that he has

instantly put his finger on the Achilles heel of the entire self-help industry. Because in my case it has all been a complete waste of time. The stuff I am now so aware of, what I have carried all my life, is not anything that can be rationalised away, even given all the supposed power of 'effective habits' or of 'mind management'. The power of 'Now!' doesn't cut it with me.

Then I notice we have ascended another floor, and I'm now carrying the additional weight of rage and loss of self control.

The longer this goes on, the more I feel

buried in pain and exhaustion. And I knew it would pipe up again, the voice that follows me around. It's my own personal life critic, always primed to dissect the latest twists in my melodrama. The review is always the same - blunt and brutal.

"Face it. You're just bad news. A useless, meaningless relic. And all this discussion is just performative nonsense to stroke what little is left of your pathetic ego. Give it up, idiot."

This time, the voice is so clear that I look around to try and locate the speaker. But

my grandmother and Eri appear to be in conversation with each other, although I can't hear what they are saying. And as I watch, they fade to sepia, and then disappear.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 27

Dorchester County Hospital. Coma day 5.

The world broke over him foaming like a breaker then crashing into his awareness. Awash in shards of sound and shifting shadows, Jeffrey drifted toward semi-consciousness. He struggled to stay afloat but his limbs felt unresponsive. Just on the edge of perception, someone was asking him a question. It seemed important, but

he couldn't make out the words.

"Jeffrey? Mr Turnham? Can you hear me? Squeeze my hand." A woman's voice, albeit very gentle and calm, echoed into his mind. He tried to open his eyes, but it was too much effort. Tried again, and briefly caught blurred shapes moving in a harsh white light.

The neurosurgeon, Mrs Faye Moore, felt a faint pressure from his fingers, almost imperceptible. Her mouth tightened as she shone the test light into each pupil. One very slowly shrunk to a point; the other

stayed fixed and dilated. She exchanged glances with Dr Timothy Glass, the Speciality Registrar in Neurology.

"Asymmetrical pupil reaction," she announced briskly. "Vitals please!"

"BP 165/90; Heart rate 50," the nurse replied.

Mrs Moore's face fell, and she gave a tiny shake of the head. Cushing's triad! Dr. Glass had almost completed the Glasgow Coma Scale evaluation.

"Eyes: 1, Verbal: 2, Motor: 4—Total: 7," he confirmed, his words clipped.

Using her knuckles, Mrs Moore pressed down on the centre of Jeffrey's chest and rubbed hard. The controlled pain should evoke some response. Sure enough, Jeffrey's legs extended with toes pointing downward. "Hmm. Decerebrate posture," she murmured uneasily. She looked up and addressed the team of five in the room, "This isn't just residual swelling, there is intracranial pressure - life threatening I'm afraid."

"So CT scan straight-away please," she ordered.

Within 20 seconds, Jeffrey was being transferred to Radiology, the two nurses moving the wheeled stretcher, plus his ventilator and IV lines. Within two minutes, the CT scanner was humming as they began the process.

The radiologist pointed to the areas of concern as they appeared on the screen. She felt sure Mrs Moore was already ahead of her, but protocol demanded her explicit verbal summary.

"Diffuse cerebral oedema," she said, running her fingertip around the gray

patch indicating swollen tissue. "And a six millimetre Midline shift."

Mrs Moore was already examining the asymmetrical ventricles, visibly compressed by excess pressure within the skull.

"Herniation risk!" she said, before the radiologist could get there.

"Okay, thanks, I'll come back later for a more detailed discussion of course, but we've got what we need at the moment."

The radiologist inclined her head gracefully, and the neurosurgeon hurried out of the room.

Once they had reconvened in the side ward, she addressed the team. "We will put him back into coma," she said, nodding to the two nurses. "Start the sedation - again Ketamine and Fentanyl. But this time, we're implementing the trial."

Dr Glass's eyes widened. "You mean... the dimethyltryptamine?"

Mrs Moore gave a short nod, her voice steady but firm. "Yes. There's approval for the trial with caveats and conditions. Mr... ," she glanced at the patient notes clipboard on the end of the bed, "Mr

Turnham qualifies."

She passed the specific instructions to one of the nurses, while she reminded the registrar of the details. "You'll recall, Timothy, that dimethyltryptamine is psychoactive?"

"An ayahuasca derivative, isn't it?" he replied wide-eyed.

"Yes, the dosing protocol is conservative of course, in my view perhaps a little too risk averse. But hopefully we'll see some neuroinflammation reduction which we can correlate. The preliminary data looks

good, and with Mr Turnham's prognosis at this stage, we need to explore all avenues."

For a moment, they stood in silence, as the nurses double-checked the dosage.

"And he's signed of course," she said.

Addressing the entire team as they worked, she said "Dimethyltryptamine has anti-inflammatory properties. It can reduce glial cell activation and cytokine production. But it's a hallucinogen, hence the conservative dosage. Let's hope it dials down the inflammation and buys us some time."

Jeffrey felt someone fiddling with the cannula in his left arm, then a cool sensation spread from his elbow, and the voices softened until he could no longer make out the words. Within three or four seconds, the gentle silence ushered him into the welcoming darkness.

"As usual, monitor vitals, ICP trends, and cerebral perfusion. We'll evaluate the response in six hours time." Mrs Moore checked her watch, "Let's say, 2pm."

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Chapter 28

Somewhere. Coma day 5.

This strange world has slowly spiralled around me, it's coils finally dissolving into solid space enveloping me again. It smears slightly as I turn my head, but settles after a couple of seconds. My grandmother and Eri have reappeared but somehow, everything seems bigger than before. I can't work out why it seems that way, because

everything is in proportion. But it is definitely bigger.

Then the foul memories slide to the forefront again, and I realise then that I have been so bent out of shape by them that the strangeness of where I am had taken a back seat. I look around. I can pretty much see the four or five larger floors below me, and the remaining smaller floors above me. For all the world, it is as if someone has built a glass pagoda, and then buried it vertically.

"Why the pagoda?" I demand.

Grandma rocks back a bit, thrown by the change of subject. Eri immediately replies, "It's for you."

"Sorry!" I shake my head, puzzled, "I'm not following! For me?"

"Yes." Eri steps closer and looks down at me. "You know, don't you the relationship between the self-help books you've read and the pagoda?"

He knows I don't know. Why humiliate me? I'm on the floor aren't I? Isn't that enough? Silently, I shake my head.

He carries on, "For the most part, the self-

help industry is repackaged Buddhism." Eri continues.

I don't know where this is going, so I say nothing.

Eri is getting into his stride. He mimics what I imagine a televangelist Buddhist would be like, if they existed.

"Bettering oneself in actions and in thought, guided by a heightened self-awareness, one ..."

He drops out of character and momentarily into cynic mode, " ... supposedly,"

And resumes money-making guru mode,

" ... becomes more heavenly, as one is enlightened by understanding. The pagoda symbolizes this Buddhist path to enlightenment. The vertical structure of the pagoda, with its multiple tiers, can be interpreted as the journey each individual makes. Steadily ascending to higher realms of thought - a representation of spiritual ascent, moving from the earthly realm toward the heavens,"

He turns off the sales pitch and morphs into a stand-up comic making an off-script

aside, "where confusingly you learn that the self is an illusion and ultimately does not exist!" He pauses for effect, then concludes with, "Boom!"

For a moment, his voice echoes unnaturally, like ripples on water spreading out and returning in distorted waves. Somehow the sound seems to unsettle the space and the whole place starts to unspiral in coils before settling down as the echoes die away.

And Eri has reverted to a serious tone, "It's completely wrong of course." He smiles,

point made.

"Right." I say. I'm thinking, 'So what?'

"So this pagoda has been constructed to help you understand reality." Eri is bending down, his face close to mine. His eyes are sparkling, deep and black. There is a real smile on his face. He evidently cares about this.

"What do you mean ... constructed?"

"Literally constructed from the fragments of your understanding combined with significant elements of reality," he looks across at my grandmother and they

exchange infinitesimal nods, "You do know, don't you Jeffrey, that when you were properly alive ..."

He is still talking on, but I have stopped listening. I'm hooked up, my head spinning, "What?!" I cut in. "You're saying I'm not alive?"

Eri stops and looks at me as if I've lost something, "I can tell you, Jeffrey, from the perspective of your medical team, you're just clinging on by your fingernails! Anyway, that's beside the point ..." he hurries on, "... when one is alive on earth,

and this includes you, your brain can only receive electrical impulses from your senses?" His rising tone and raised eyebrows indicate that he wants to see some evidence of comprehension.

I nod. My mind is still three quarters tangled up with the 'when you were alive' implications.

"And," he continues, "your entire perception of reality - everything you saw, heard, smelled and felt was *constructed* by your brain." He pauses. Then,

"Constructed," he repeats looking at me.

"The greenness of the grass, the blueness of the sky, the softness of Whisper's fur, the warmth of your bed. All constructed. I'm not saying it was all an illusion - absolutely not. Because the brain is designed to ensure the construction is sufficiently aligned with reality to enable you to live in it!"

"Stop!" I say. A whole bunch of questions are jumping around in my mind now clamouring to be asked.

Okay, which one first? "And this is a construction?"

Eri and Grandma both nod like a couple of

Churchill dogs on the parcel shelf.

"Is any of this real?"

More nods.

I glance around. The glass walls, the light illuminating us from above, the two numpties. I look at my own hands, and flex my fingers. I look up, "Precisely what is real here?" I think I've probably asked the crunch question.

"Your thoughts," says Grandma. "Our words," Eri concludes.

"Is that it? So you don't look like ..." I look

from one to the other, "... like this?"

Now they are both slowly decisively shaking their heads.

"And I don't look like this?" I ask gesturing to my body and legs.

"Er, you were shot." Eri's voice rises in disbelief that I could have forgotten how bad it was.

"Three times." Grandma's sympathetic tone is considerably more conciliatory.

I guess she has probably been through what I'm going through now and gets my

confusion. It begs the question of what Eri is though. That's got to be for later.

"So anyway, getting back to the question," Eri says.

I can't recall the question actually but Eri has clocked that from my blank face.

"You asked, 'Why the pagoda?' You remember? The Buddhist journey? Ever onwards and upwards? Get a grip? Positive think stuff? The pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootlaces technique?" Eri is overdoing it. I'm guessing he's not into self-help. I close my mouth, begrudgingly smile and nod.

"The construction that we are in now takes an element of reality and expresses it as a pagoda too. But our pagoda is the *reverse* of the Buddhist self help scheme. As you travel downwards through the floors, deceptions are increasingly diluted and you become more aware of the truth about yourself. In this pagoda, the true way up is down."

I'm not really getting any of this religious psycho-babble, and I guess the sceptical look on my face sends the message.

"Let me cut to the chase," Eri says with a

sympathetic smile on his face.

"Please do!" I reply, perhaps a bit curtly.

"You recall what it felt like on the bottom floor, all the pain and anguish and destructive habits and attitudes gone," he pauses for confirmation, then continues, "and you felt great didn't you?"

I'm nodding.

"So you want to be there, don't you?"

"Yes, but I was there," I protest, "and then you made me bring all the crap back. Of course I want to be there." We seem to be

going in circles. I am hoping Eri is going to make sense in a minute.

"This is a construction remember. The pagoda is a metaphor. But you have to make that descent in reality," he repeats so I don't misunderstand, "not here but in actual proper genuine reality."

"Okay. How do I do that?"

"You can't!"

"What?"

"Well, not on your own. You remember what you felt like on the bottom floor of

the pagoda?"

"Like a child."

Eri smiles, "Bingo! Like a child."

I wait. Because this is the first conversation where it seems Eri is actually trying to help me understand. Presumably there's more to come.

"There was once a man who said that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven you have to be like a child."

A faint smile crosses his face as he says this.

I know that bit about entering like a child,

because my second wife Melissa was a big signed up Christian person, and she used to ram some of that down my throat. But the lecture is making me feel more and more grouchy.

"And what," Eri pauses because evidently this question is important, "... what is a child like?"

"Innocent?" I say.

"No! No, no, no. That's not the point! A child is *dependent*."

"Dependent?"

"Yes, can't do a thing. Hungry, all a baby can do is open it's mouth. Little children not only *are* dependent, but crucially, they *know* they are. They don't resent it. They accept it. As they become more independent, they become less childlike."

Before I have a chance to respond, something happens to my vision again. It seems like the whole place pulsates a couple of times before dissolving into translucent ribbons of space again, uncoiling around me. For a moment the coils are so loose that I can see ... what? Not light. Nor darkness

really. Just nothing really like when you close your eyes too tight.

Then just as fast, it all solidifies and settles back into place soundlessly, like water after a stone's throw. I stare around for a couple of seconds trying to get my bearings. Neither my grandmother nor Eri seem to have noticed the ribbons.

And I struggle to recall what we were saying. Then it comes back. "So what's this got to do with the pagoda?" I ask.

"It is a picture. As you become increasingly like a child, humble, dependent, you open

yourself up to the possibility of accepting help from the only one who can remove all your accumulated rubbish, and change you so you don't accumulate even more."

I shake my head in confusion. I'm lost as to where we are going now. "And what then?" I ask.

"Then you have the character to be a servant, you have the strength to put others first, you ..."

I cut in mockingly, "Huh! Really?! And why on earth would I want to do that?"

Eri laughs apparently delighted by my

rebuff. Maybe it gives him the opportunity to come back with another clever answer. I assume a long-suffering expression of resignation. And wait. Sure enough, he takes a breath.

"What was the best ever moment in your life?"

The question catches me off guard. I haven't had too many best ever moments! I am about to reply with a cynical put down but Eri seems to know that, and deflects me. He cuts in ...

"... Seriously Jeffrey, let it come."

I pause, frown ...

"Let it come," he repeats gently.

And then it comes. It's pushing its way through the dark congealed gobs of past trauma and emerging clear and vivid, bringing with it the fresh scent of heather, grass, and my dog's pink tongue hanging out of his smiley face. It comes washing over me like liquid gold, rekindling a bliss that long ago, the years of anguish had buried.

"Whisper," I say, almost to myself, "sitting in the glade."

Eri looks at me and smiles with me. It's almost as if he is sharing the moment with me.

"Whisper." he says the name reverently, smiles truly happy and puffs out an inaudible laugh through his nose. "You carried him, you fed him, you walked him, you dried him, you slept with him one night in the wet and the cold, you served him, you probably would have given your life for him. Wasn't it almost heaven?"

I'm swallowing hard. There's a lump in my throat and hot tears in my eyes and I'm

gulping trying to maintain my composure.

"You see people think that you serve those you love, but it is the other way around. You come to love those that you serve. And serving is the best thing ever!"

I sit back, refreshed, enjoying the moment again, it's bliss ....

It's the soft weight of his head resting in my lap as I stroked his silky ears, the way his warm brown eyes closed just enough to show he absolutely trusted me. It's the regular rhythm of his breathing in the stillness of the evening, that echoes in my

own breath as I remember. A quiet reminder that there is a continuity to all those things done right, something lasting about everything good, in a world where good often feels so far away. The memory is warm, like sunlight on my skin, and I recall his exuberance when I took him off the lead, and he would bound away exulting in freedom. And in that fleeting moment, all the struggles and sacrifices fade into the background, leaving me longing for that freedom of peace, of joy, of love.

... but then all too soon, the demons of

resentment and anger come roaring back. 'But you loved Tamsin,' they snarl, hot and bitter in my ear, 'much good that did you. You bloody stupid fool, can you never learn?'

And without warning my head and heart are filled with bitter acrimony, and I burst out in a rage, "I loved Tamsin! I can tell you it was bloody awful," I bat back his shallow Pollyanna words with bitter experience.

Eri pauses before he responds. He speaks so quietly and carefully, that I have to really concentrate to hear him. "That is because

your love for Tamsin was fulfilling your own need to be loved. And when that kind of love stops, then the pain starts."

"So what's the answer?" I demand, really hoping that there is still a thin thread that can pull me back into life.

Eri starts to speak, and...

"Understand that the one who created this amazing world, including you, and Freya, and Kai, and Whisper, is the one who loves you endlessly."

... and there it is!

He continues, "Once you get that, you have a reservoir of love which causes you to want to serve others. And you spend far less time fixating on yourself. Focussing on self is a major mistake!" He pauses to let his volley sink in.

Then he serves the ace, "You see, the phrase 'self-help' is an oxymoron."

Grandma smiles.

"So this metaphorical pagoda is to convince me that the giving up of self is the ultimate self-help," I say.

"You've got it." says Eri, "but

understanding is one thing, doing it is something else!"

And with his comment comes the renewed awareness of the massive weight inside me. I put my head down on the floor. "This all sounds nice in principle," I mumble, "but I'm not even in the right postcode."

"Tell us about it," says Grandma softly.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 29

Albany Section, HMP Isle of Wight. 2008.

Jeffrey was muttering to himself as he made his way to the laundry room. His last spice hit was overdue by several agonising hours. The urge was making him twitchy and distressed. The looming hopelessness always returned when he was out of spice. Only that enabled him to ignore the leg pains and muscle cramps of MND, and the

unnerving prospect of probably dying in prison.

He was reminding himself of what he had been through in the last four years! Oh, he knew his way around HMP Albany. He knew who to avoid, who to stroke, who to antagonise and who to bully. He knew the best places to smoke, to sleep, and to fight. He knew about trouble - how to avoid it, provoke it, turn it to his advantage. He knew how each of the screws could best be manipulated. But when his system was clear of spice, what he knew more surely

than anything was that however many more years he had to live, they would all be spent in this hellhole.

Not much had changed. Denzil was still the over-compensating inferiority complex - the boss of the spice trade with several screws in his pocket. Rotty was still his attack dog with a limited vocabulary, but an infinite number of ways of helping people to understand what he wanted. Jits was still his inadequate little bootlicker distributor.

The laundry room in HMP Albany is

actually three rooms, one large cupboard, one small cupboard and a central access hall. When the prison was opened in 1958, these rooms were all storage facilities, but as prisoners' rights improved and were established in law, the rooms were allocated as a laundry facility, and the original much larger room used as a small gym to provide somewhat more sophisticated exercise facilities than continually walking circles in the yard.

Jeffrey leaned momentarily against the door, pausing until a wave of pain

subsided, then shoved it open. He walked in and across the first room passing six industrial dryers, arranged as three down each side. On the opposite wall, a second door led through to the access hall. This had four more doors leading respectively to the washing room, the folding room and the cupboards. The washing room housed six industrial washing machines. The folding room was smaller providing two large tables. The large cupboard held eight large trolleys which transported the laundry round the prison. The small

cupboard held the laundry supplies, and spare laundry bags.

Nobody bought spice on Tuesdays and Fridays. Jits was too busy those days. They were his rota-ed days in the folding room.

But Jeffrey considered this was an emergency. He couldn't put up with this pain, and the MND drugs from the prison quack were not half so effective as spice. So he was just going to have to disturb the folding process and insist Jits break his no-Tuesday-or-Friday rule. He pushed the folding room door. It was, as usual,

jammed shut with a laundry trolley. Jits insisted that no customer could access him in the laundry area. The risk was too great. So because Jits had Denzil's ear, and Denzil had a Rottweiler, no-one stepped out of line. So far.

At his best, when spiced up, Jeffrey was angry, violent and paranoid. Without the pacifying and pleasantly distracting effects of spice, he was like a block of Semtex beyond its explode-by date.

His legs were extremely painful. So instead of simply kicking the door, he retrieved a

second laundry trolley and charged at the door with it. The trolley crashed onto it's side, and the door flew open banging against the side wall. Jits was revealed sitting at the smaller table, not folding laundry but cutting little piles of traditional English Breakfast Tea into little piles of spice with an HMP Albany library card.

The colour instantly drained from Jits' face. In a restrained voice that would have been louder but for the requirement for privacy, he requested Jeffrey to close the

door and re-jam it with the trolley. Jits alternated each word with a traditional English expletive to emphasise the urgency of his request.

Jeffrey secured the door, then turned and looked at Jits. The two men held each other's gaze while both minds were working furiously to determine the best way forward. Jits ran his fingers through light brown unkempt hair.

Jeffrey narrowed his eyes. The opportunity dangled enticingly in front of him. Sweet forbidden fruit. It was so easy. He already

had the words. But a shadow fell across his mind. What was he, after all? He recalled that each morning, he saw his own face in the cracked mirror in the washroom. What would he see tomorrow? Power and money? Or self respect and dignity? Something inside him was urging him to back down, to walk away. The questions came slowly - 'Self respect? Dignity? You really think you have any worth saving? How about looking after yourself? Why not take control?' He entertained them, nurtured them, until finally, they answered

themselves.

Jits was young and street smart but still shaking like a terrified rabbit. Jeffrey had forgotten his pain for a moment and was smiling now, like a hungry crocodile.

"Why the pale face, Jits. Surely you're not worried I'm going to grass you up to Denzil?"

"Denzil knows all about this!" Jits did his best to sound supremely confident.

"I don't think so, Jits. Cutting the spice with tea looks like a Jits sideline to me. But I can check with Denzil of course. Or

maybe Rotty knows?"

Jits was trembling as he quickly swept the spice into a plastic bag and the tea into another. He put both into a laundry bag. He twisted the bag between his long narrow fingers as he spoke, "No, no don't do that Jeffrey, it would only cause trouble."

Jeffrey's smile became faux-reassurance as he said, "Here's what's going to happen. You are going to put away the evidence of your little sideline, and then we'll discuss figures."

Jits didn't move. None of the ideas he was coming up with were worth verbalising in light of Jeffrey's approach.

So Jits did as he was told. He cleared away all traces of the evidence and folded it into a laundry bag.

"So where does that go?" Jeffrey asked carefully.

"It gets put away." Jits replied grudging every word.

"In a safe place?"

"Yes, of course."

"A safe place that we need to inspect together as we are partners now in this little enterprise." Jeffrey said evenly. Then he waited.

The moment stretched out between them, but Jits knew he was beaten. He never had any stomach for a fight.

He was due to be released within the next 12 months, having served five out of ten years for burglary and drug possession with intent to supply. He was physically weak, nervous and paranoid, but he was smart. And resourceful enough to make a success

of the sometimes difficult negotiations involved in spice distribution. So Denzil had thoughtfully provided him with protection in exchange for his retail skills.

Jits took the laundry bag back into the washing room, knelt down by the middle machine and prised the service panel off the front. It came away easily. Jits pushed the laundry bag in alongside the motor.

Jeffrey flicked then waggled his fingers pointing to the front panel. Jits handed it over. Jeffrey could see the screw shafts had been removed, the screw heads glued in and

magnets attached to the back of the panel.

"Neat!" Jeffrey said, approvingly.

A small flicker of pride crossed Jits' face.

"Now," continued Jeffrey, "lets go back into Folding, sit down and do some calculations, shall we?"

Jits' face fell. He could see where this was leading.

As a second hand car dealer, Jeffrey was on home territory.

Jeffrey sat opposite Jits, leaned back, narrowed his eyes, smiled and began. "The

doc told us there were maybe 120 to 150 users, but let's assume 130. And each one is smoking a gram a week. At £15 pounds a gram, that's about two grand. I reckon that the markup is about 100% because the business is risky, but lets say 80%. See how kind I am, Jits! So Denzil is clearing sixteen hundred quid a week."

As Jeffrey's confidence was growing, Jits was looking increasingly worried.

"Now, let's look at your dirty little scheme, shall we?" Jeffrey continued, "Unless you're thick, and I know you're not, you're not

cutting it by more than 15%, right? So let's say 10% and call it a day, yeah? A volume increase of 10% inflates the profit of sixteen hundred. Which means, Jits, that you are trousering the extra hundred and sixty every week."

Jits of course was familiar with the maths, but he was astonished at how quickly Jeffrey had arrived at a pretty close figure. In fact, Jits was taking closer to £250 a week.

"So little Jits," Jeffrey continued remorselessly, "do we want to speculate

what Denzil and Rotty's reaction is going to be at the loss of twelve grand a year or shall we discuss our partnership?"

"Wad d'ya want?"

"Make me an offer, Jits."

Jits pursed his lips in disapproval. He was silent for a moment trying to come up with a starting figure. Finally he looked at Jeffrey with a defiant stare, "Sixty."

Jeffrey gave a small smile and slowly shook his head, "Oh Jits, I'm not sure you've thought this through. Denzil is going to assume that you've taken almost fifty grand

of his hard earned money over the last four years. And I'm taking a very big risk keeping that from him, aren't I. What would he do to me if he found out I was colluding in this little scam?" Jeffrey's tone shifted. A hard edge replaced the previous faux-indulgence. "Try again!"

Jits waited for a believable period, wiped his palms on his trousers and said, "Eighty. That's evens between you and me."

Jeffrey took a long sniff, exhaled hard through his nose and grimaced as though Jits had made an offensive smell. Boiling

with sudden uncontrollable rage, he leaned across and grabbed the front of Jits' shirt, and pulled him so that they were nose to nose. The move caused stabbing pains in his joints and he gasped quickly. He gritted his teeth for a moment. "Don't fool around, Jits," he snarled, "You're in this mess with four years of misdemeanour. I'm squeaky clean like Mother Theresa. Now give me a sensible offer that reflects the risk I'm taking for covering your fifty grand, plus future takings, or I walk out of here."

Jits was blinking in the face of the angry

spray of saliva that accompanied Jeffrey's outburst.

"And if I walk out, you're finished. Rotty will soften you up, and Denzil will finish you off. And you can kiss goodbye to parole for a very long time."

Jits sat terrified, shaking. He put his head down on the table and began to hyperventilate.

"I'm glad you're taking all this seriously, Jits. To save you the trouble, I'll tell you how much you are gonna owe me each week from here on - a hundred and fifty!"

Jits raised his head. "I'll be working for a tenner a week!" he protested shakily.

"Rubbish! I know you're taking more than a hundred and sixty, and you're sitting on fifty grand," Jeffrey said in a quiet threatening voice, "so that's the deal."

Jeffrey got up and walked out, humming softly. Sauntering on down the corridor he murmured to himself, "I think, Mr Turnham, you pitched that about right!"

----------oOo----------

Chapter 30

Somewhere. Coma day 6.

I haul myself into a sitting position, and look up at my grandmother, "I had to look after number one. After Tamsin, I knew I had to take care of myself. No-one else would, certainly not in the nick, that's for sure." I know I sound defensive, but it's all true. Prison life is foul and you have to toughen up fast.

"But ... blackmail?" she says, looking disappointed.

I bristle with annoyance. She wasn't there!

"I'd lost everything," I shoot back, "Twice!"

Eri raises an eyebrow and comes back with a wry smile. He skewers me with, "Twice?! Well then perhaps you're not as good at playing the game as you think?"

I know he's trying to wind me up! So I give him what I hope is a cold hard stare. But for just a moment, Eri's face seems to blur, his features unravelling into liquid threads that ripple outward like translucent glass.

The coils of his form stretch and twist, looping back into a shape that isn't quite human—just an impression of his piercing eyes and the trademark smile, swirling in and out of the shimmering air. Then, smooth as a snake recoiling its body, the image coalesces back into place, solid and unnervingly composed, as if nothing had happened at all.

Then he turns deadly serious and follows up with, "Soon you're going to face reality, and I hope by that time you're ready to 'fess up and carry the can ..." He takes a breath,

"... rather than being quite so committed to making a mess of everything."

Unnerved by the distortion of his face, I snap back more harshly than I intend.

"Shut it!" Then I regret it, because he's not such a bad bloke. But for sure, he knows nothing about prison life!

"Maybe. Maybe not." Eri murmurs. *Did he just answer my unspoken thought?* Eri's gaze is steady, "Treated you like a dog, did they?" he pauses.

I freeze. We lock eyes.

"You had to realise it's dog eat dog to

survive. Yes ..." he breaks eye contact and looks off into the distance, "I can understand that."

He swivels his gaze directly at me. He knows which levers to pull.

Dog. Huh? Oh God! Suddenly it all washes back in and breaks over me. The purity of the moment in the glade, the loveliness of taking care of each other, the honesty and integrity and faithfulness of Whisper, the beauty of his eyes. I know then that that is what I want my life to be.

But the relentless awareness of what I have

become is crushing me, twisting me and wringing me dry of any hope.

Because I know they have not yet heard the worst by far.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 31

Albany Section, HMP Isle of Wight. 2008.

"This is getting too risky! I've had to reduce to 5% cutting in the tea. Some of the punters are complaining. My profits are now negative, because you're taking a hundred and fifty quid a week!"

Jits' was desperate. Or Jits deserved a BAFTA. One of the two.

Jeffrey wasn't sure and didn't particularly care. He was in constant pain now. "Little Jits, it's a hundred and fifty or you're dobbed in to Denzil."

"And if I tell him you've been taking a cut?"

"So that means you won't get a beating, does it?"

"You won't grass me up. You're complicit!"

"You think?"

"You're ..."

"Listen," Jeffrey angrily cuts in, "you can give Denzil chapter and verse about how

every week for the last fourteen months you've handed over your profits to me, but you don't have a shred of evidence!"

"Neither do you!" retorted Jits, defiantly.

Jeffrey smiled, "Don't I? Oh what a pity! If only I had, say, a bag ..." Jeffrey brought the laundry bag from behind his back and waved it in Jits' face, "... that contained some tea and some spice and someone's library card."

Jits' face was a staring mask of horror.

"Oh wait," Jeffrey continued remorselessly, "here's one I found earlier!"

"I can't pay you a hundred and fifty a week. I haven't got any savings here. I send the money out. 'Course I do. Look, I'm only making thirty a week now," Jits was talking fast, losing control, pleading.

"A hundred and fifty." Jeffrey said quietly, then stood and walked away from Jits taking the evidence with him. From across the other side of the canteen Jeffrey shouted, "You won't need your library card," he gave a scornful laugh, "You've probably read all the decent books in the library by now anyway!"

----oOo----

A week later, Jeffrey walked into the prison library.

He approached the library duty officer, intending to enquire whether Jits had requested a new card. A pile of returned books sat atop the desk ready for re-shelving. An old worn copy of "The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry" topped the pile. It was open at page 46. The poem title was "Automobile". Jeffrey frowned and crinkled his mouth in distaste. He loved

cars but considered poetry a boring pretentious waste of everyone's time. Hence the dilemma. His eyes ran down to the bottom of the page where the author's name was displayed. William Carlos Williams. 'Stupid name,' he thought, 'why would any mother choose to call their child William Williams'.

Idly he flicked to page 48. He read the poem title. "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. It was one of the very few serious poems that he had heard of. He had some idea that it was a bit like that 'Sliding

Doors' film. He had never read it. Never wanted to. But something felt different today. He stood for a while, conflicted. Finally curiosity got the better of him.

"I'll borrow this," he said.

Later that day, he sat in his cell with the book open on his lap. He read the Frost poem from start to finish. It was an intriguing idea. Two paths in a yellow wood. He could see it in his mind - one trodden down by scores of people and the other narrowly threading it's way between brambles. It was such a simple idea - that

the complexity of life could be resolved at each moment to a single free choice. He cast his mind back to his route which had brought him to the prison cell, the moments of decision, the anguish of the errors and the no going back. Only ever forward to the next fork in the path. Then despair reminded him of the futility of brooding on what-ifs, and he slammed the book closed. He was determined to dismiss it. It was rubbish. He wouldn't think about it any more. He had better things to do. Didn't he?

As soon as he had opened the book again at the problematic poem, Jeffrey's gaze was drawn down to the final line, "I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference." He could almost feel the fork in the road before him.

One path offered a way out—a chance to end the arrangement, quit while he was winning, and let Jits off the hook. The other path beckoned with a different choice—demand payment, even if it risked betraying Jits to Denzil.

For a fleeting moment, the first path

whispered possibility. But just as quickly, he dismissed it. Look after yourself. Watch your back. No one else will.

The authorities never found out who had beaten up Jits. They suspected Denzil and Rotty, but of course none of the prisoners knew anything about it. Nor had they seen Jits dragged to a corner of the yard. Nor had they heard the screams muffled by hands over his mouth. Nor did they know anything about the cracked rib or the shattered knee or the serious concussion. Neither had they stood in a circle so that

the beating was hidden from the yard cameras.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 32

Somewhere. Coma day 6.

"How did you feel after that?" Grandma puts the knife in.

I hold my breath, clench my teeth, as if I can stop myself telling the truth, "I didn't care," I say flatly.

Eri raises his eyebrows. He twists the knife, "And now? Do you care now?"

Absolutely not! Maybe I want to start caring, but that's a sure way to get shredded. So no thanks! I don't care. I don't want to care. I like it here behind my mile-high wall of 'Whatever?'

My grandmother has already put some holes in her side of the wall. I can't start picking away at my side.

Eri knows where I am, so he says it for me, "Wanna care. Don't wanna care. Too scared to care, I guess."

The old woman's surprise is evident. "But how could you do something you must

have known would lead to a friend being hospitalized?" she asks.

"Friend?!" I nearly choke with indignation.

I shake my head, at a loss for words. Somewhere along the line, maybe because of Tamsin, I picked up this cynical 'Huh' reaction—it's faster than 'Whatever?' and it often comes with wide, disbelieving eyes. I have actually said on multiple occasions, 'You're confusing me with someone who's cares.' It sounded clever at the time. That's what my grandmother sees on my face now.

What I do say is, "They were druggie thugs. I don't owe them anything. Denzil, Rotty, Jits they destroyed my life in there. D'you think they cared about me? You're just a number in prison." I stretch out the words. I want them all to land. "Nobody... cares... about... anybody."

My grandmother looks shocked.

"So," I continue, "I fit right in."

"This is people we are talking about!" she says.

I just pull a face and shake my head at her. *Half of them are animals!* I don't say it

because it will only offend her, trapped as she is in her 'everybody be nice now!' bubble. If only she knew. Prison is a jungle. It's every man for himself. She just doesn't get it.

I am about to retort, "Sorry, but you just don't get it!", when the room suddenly feels more fragile, as though everything is stretching too thin. The disintegration starts in my peripheral vision, with spiralling coils that unravel faster than I can track. The pagoda glass walls, my grandmother, Eri, even my own feet, - they

all twist into long, translucent curled ribbons of space that slowly thin to gossamer threads circulating in a void. And the background is nothing. Neither light nor darkness, but that same abyss of nothing.

Then I'm floating free with no body constrained by no boundaries in endless time.

But now, there's a pulse. A faraway beep. It is pulling me back out of the void.

Chapter 33

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2008.

The Nexarion Therapeutics executive restaurant was just a rumour for most of the staff, and Bjorn was counting on Clive being out of his comfort zone. The Finance Director, had invited him for lunch, supposedly to reward the scientist's brutally long hours and his technical excellence. Bjorn was already seated at a

window table that overlooked the grounds. Clive joined him, they exchanged pleasantries, but the atmosphere between them was immediately tense. Bjorn, overweight and squeezed into an expensive but ill-fitting suit, shifted awkwardly in his chair. His small, watery eyes flicked to Clive, trying to gauge his mood. This time, Bjorn couldn't afford to be high-handed - he needed information.

"Nice day out," Bjorn said, gesturing to the gardens. His voice was light, trying to sound casual, but there was an underlying

tension. He couldn't rush this. He had to play it cool, be amiable—he needed Clive onside today.

Clive, muscular and direct in his usual work clothes, barely raised his head from studying the menu. His cold blue eyes, sharp and focused, flickered disrespectfully at Bjorn. "Yeah, if you're into that." Clive didn't like Bjorn and wasn't one for small talk, and it showed.

Bjorn forced a smile and loosened his tie, which suddenly felt uncomfortable in the folds of his neck. "I hear things have been

stressful down in the labs."

"Understatement," Clive muttered. He hunched forward a little, his arms crossed over his chest. "It isn't stress! We've hit some real roadblocks. Biological constraints. We've had to rethink the whole approach. This isn't anything we can fix by just throwing money at it."

Bjorn nodded slowly. His usual strategy was to subtly threaten to reallocate funds away from projects that weren't delivering. But that wasn't going to fly here. And that's what worried him. He felt out of his

depth. He needed to understand what Clive was facing—not just for appearances, but so he could assess the risks of the project. "Of course, I get that," Bjorn said, trying to sound sympathetic. "But surely there's something we can do to, you know, keep things on track?"

Clive grunted, annoyed. "There isn't a track! This is leading edge stuff," he said shaking his head. "We are way outside anyone's comfort zone here. And there's no shortcuts."

Bjorn's fleshy neck wobbled as he fidgeted

again. His fingers unconsciously tapped the table. This was getting to the heart of his insecurity. He hated that you couldn't control technical stuff as easily as shuffling budgets. "I get it, I do," he softened his voice to sound collaborative. "I'm just want to understand the techy stuff better to inform our decisions." Bjorn didn't catch Clive's blanch at the 'techy stuff', and simply bumbled on "Maybe if you could walk me through the specifics, we could look at some alternatives?"

Clive's eyes narrowed, as if debating

whether Bjorn was truly listening or just patronising him. Then he sighed, resting one clenched fist on the table. "It's not about alternatives. They've all gone. Only one technique has survived the feasibility study, Bjorn."

Bjorn forced another nod, his mind racing. He had to get Clive to open up. He smiled thinly, hoping Clive couldn't sense the desperation beneath. "Okay, let's talk about that."

"This is not a debate. I've said, there's only one method left now."

"Fine. And I know you've done all the tech research stuff to ... um ... to minimise the risks. So what have we got?"

"What do you want to know, Bjorn?" Clive stared directly at Bjorn.

The tension was eased momentarily by the waiter taking their order, then Bjorn replied, "Just give me the outline first then we can talk about the pinch points, risk factors, mitigation. The usual stuff."

Clive sighed exaggeratedly to communicate his impatience with corporate exec-speak. "I'll keep it simple or you're gonna get lost

real quick."

"Fine, Clive," Bjorn said, clearing his throat, "walk me through it."

Clive gave a curt nod, sensing that Bjorn was going to be out of his depth. He ruffled his messy blond hair with his fingers and began in his usual no-nonsense tone. "The male - we're talking about a man with Motor Neurone Disease, right? He's got a mutated SOD1 gene which is normally supposed to encode a protein that protects cells from oxidative damage. In his case, it's faulty..."

"Where are we going to find ..." Bjorn cut in.

Clive waved the interruption away and continued. "In his case, it's faulty. So the plan is to harvest his sperm because it carries the mutation—no need for any medical procedure beyond that. We're working with what he's already got. That's the simple part. Got it?"

Bjorn nodded, trying to look like he was keeping up. "Right. And this mutation is what causes the disease?"

"Er yes!" Clive's voice was curt with

frustration. "Malfunction due to that mutated SOD1 gene causes cells, especially motor neurons, to die off over time. It's what leads to the degeneration and eventual paralysis. But we're not going to cure him. The project is about finding a way to stop MND being passed to the next generation."

Bjorn murmured, "MND? Oh, Motor Neurone Disease."

Clive was tempted to roll his eyes, but contented himself with closing them while taking a deep breath.

"So, where does the mother come in? What are we doing with her?"

Clive took a deep breath. He'd gone backwards and forwards through this a hundred times in his head. "I'm going to simplify it, but this is really complex. And dangerous. This is bleeding edge." He widened his eyes to emphasise the seriousness of doing this research. "The female," he continued, "has her germ-line cells modified. We tweak the DNA in her egg cells, specifically in a way that ensures her immune system, and eventually the

baby's, will recognise and attack cells missing the healthy SOD1 protein. The trick is to trigger an autoimmune response in the baby."

Bjorn's face creased into evident worry. "Autoimmune? You're making the baby's immune system attack its own cells?"

"Only the ones missing the SOD1 protein," Clive clarified quickly. "Look, the baby will be born with the mutation - the same one the father has - the one that's going to give it MND. But because we've tweaked the genes in the egg cell, the baby's immune

system now sees any cell without the proper SOD1 protein as an outsider. So it attacks and destroys only the faulty cells."

Bjorn's shook his head in wonderment. His jowls emphasised the gesture. "And when does this ... autoimmune condition kick in?"

"Right after birth," Clive said, warming to his subject now that they were getting into the details of the science. "During the birth process, the baby inherits the determinant for this autoimmune response. It's part of the genetic tweaking we've done to the

mother. Once the baby's immune system is fully active, it recognises the problem and starts eliminating cells with the mutated SOD1 protein."

Bjorn rubbed his chin, his mind churning. "So, the immune system essentially wipes out the cells that would have caused the disease?"

Clive nodded.

"So what's the problem then?"

Clive half closed his eyes, exasperated. "I've made it sound simple, but it is fiendishly complex. There's a reason no-one has ever

done this before," he retorted. "By targeting and destroying the faulty cells before they can outnumber the good ones, the baby avoids developing the disease entirely. It's pre-emptive, cutting the disease off at its source."

Bjorn leaned back in his chair. It sounded like science fiction. He thought he had grasped the concept now and wanted to ask an intelligent question. None came to mind, so he said, "And what does SOD1 stand for?"

Clive raised his eyebrows, then paused as

the waiter served their meals. The project was completely secret and way beyond the line of legitimacy.

With the waiter at a safe distance, Clive responded. "SOD1? Superoxide dismutase 1." He waited for Bjorn's response.

Bjorn frowned and shook his head, "And what does this SOD1 gene do exactly?"

"It is the build instructions for a protein which dismutases superoxide," Clive replied crisply.

"In English?"

Clive smiled, now that he had demonstrated his superiority. "Dismutases - rips apart - superoxide - strong chemicals which destroy motor nerves." Clive stopped speaking. There was after all, dumbing down and dumbing down!

Bjorn's lips pinched into a small expression of unease. "Interesting. So ... what are the risks?"

Clive looked at Bjorn for a moment. Then he decided to lay it on the line. "If we screw up the germ-line gene editing, we could easily create a new genetic disability that

goes on uncontrolled for generation after generation. That's why this is all completely illegal. So you and I would be ... shall we say ... significantly exposed."

The colour had drained from Bjorn's face.

"So how are we handling this risk?" he asked shakily.

"We are being very, very careful, and if things do go wrong, well we have a plan B."

"Which is?"

"You don't wanna know."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 34

Dorchester County Hospital. Coma day 6.

The decision previously had been to keep Jeffrey Turnham in a coma for ten days, but during the first five days there had been some significant reflexive movements in the limbs.

Mrs Moore stood by the bed monitoring Jeffrey's state following the decision to

bring him out of the coma. He could not by any means be brought back to a fully conscious state, but the CT Scan showed good progress on brain swelling and inflammation. His responses to tactile, auditory and visual stimulation were miniscule.

"Mr. Turnham?" Mrs. Moore deliberately spoke in a firm sharp voice. "Can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you can." She waited. Evidently it managed to cut through the brain fog. Because, after a long moment, he weakly squeezed her hand—

just a flicker of movement, but it was there.

"Do you recall why you are here?" she said, squeezing his hand.

There was no answering squeeze.

"How about your own name? Squeeze my hand when you hear it. John. Jim. Jimmy. Jane. Jeffrey. Janet. Jeffrey. John."

No answering squeeze.

Mrs. Moore exchanged glances with Dr. Glass, who was taking notes beside her.

"No signs of persistent awareness," he muttered.

She nodded, her face briefly tightening. "He's going in the right direction, but not fast enough. We'll put him back under for a further five days at least. But for the sake of the trial, we need to stop the Dimethyltryptamine and note the effect on inflammation reduction and limb reflexes."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 35

Tangiers, Morocco. September, 2008.

After long hours of hiding from police and border patrols in the hot claustrophobic streets of Tangier, Farhiya slipped into a small café several streets away from the busy port. She was grateful for the dim lighting. The place was full of life - animated conversations in Arabic, French, and Spanish. She sank into a corner booth,

grateful even for the lumpy upholstery and the worn fake red velvet.

From the kitchen came laughter and excited chatter mixed with the sounds of bowls and pans clattering and the aroma of roasting meat and spices. The ambiance triggered memories of family meals, laughter, and love - things that now felt like distant dreams. She quickly pushed those thoughts away, afraid they would drown her in sorrow.

She could not count the times that fellow migrants had spoken the words, 'Fi

Amanillah' to her, and time and again, that blessing was all she had had. 'May Allah protect you on your journey'. She had thought she had faith, but she was embarrassed to find herself surprised by her own safe arrival.

Back in Cairo, she had decided the money was Allah's provision for the journey and that she should pray about how to use it. There were no set prayers that she knew would fit the situation, so she had used her own words.

There, in her rented room, she had

separated a small amount of the local currency into a separate bundle, then wrapped the bulk of it in her oldest underwear, deliberately unwashed, then double-wrapped in a dirty, torn plastic carrier bag. The local currency had gone into another plastic bag, to which were added some dirt collected from the street. All the notes had been screwed up and dirtied, then separated into two's and three's, so that she could appear to offer all the money she had for each of the trucks she travelled in.

The journey from Cairo to Tangier had been a difficult eight weeks. But it had still been far easier than the trek through Ethiopia and Sudan to Egypt. The memory of the horrors of that five months had almost broken her.

Nevertheless, she was exhausted. So tired, it felt as if someone had removed all of her bones. She stared motionless at the menu. It was printed on a large card. Raising tired eyes, she couldn't help noticing a man sitting two tables away. She turned back to the menu, but could not ignore his gaze.

He was late middle-aged, very heavily built, with a recent cut across one cheek. He was dressed in clothes that like hers, had travelled. His shoes were almost worn through. As soon as she acknowledged his gaze, he nodded to her, then got up. She noticed that he was very tall. As he got closer to her table, she was able to see his dark gentle eyes and what seemed to be a genuine smile. He did not seem to be an official, but Farhiya could not help a minor panic catching her breath.

"Salam alaikum, sister. You look worn out.

I have a feeling..." he paused, smiled for a moment as if listening or thinking, then continued,"I have a feeling I may be able to help you," he murmured quietly in Arabic.

Just his smile and his gentle words were enough to evoke the familiar ache of isolation. She raised her gaze apparently confidently, her fragile mask of strength hiding the turmoil within. Every kind word threatened to expose her, but she steeled herself, desperate to appear resilient.

Farhiya's nodded cautiously, narrowing her eyes, as interest, or maybe hope displaced

some of her weariness.

"I'm from Ethiopia, a Christian," he continued, settling across from her. "I learned Arabic on my journey here."

The man continued speaking easily, his words weaving a story which could have been Farhiya's own. Like her he had travelled without any guarantee of success. He too had known hunger and thirst, fear and abuse, and was now facing the Mediterranean crossing. A barrier that had swallowed so many lives.

"But Allah is our refuge and strength, yes?"

he said. The phrase was unfamiliar to Farhiya.

"But you are a Christian, not a Muslim!"

"And the Quran states that Allah is the protector of those who have faith."

"We are not of the same faith."

"Aah!" he smiled, "sadly many Christians and many Muslims, indeed many Jews, believe their faith is in rituals and structures and correct detail and religious practices!"

Farhiya frowned. She had never heard

anyone speak like this.

"But," he continued, "faith is simply trusting that Allah will have compassion upon you."

Farhiya's eyes widened in astonishment. Tilting her chin, she asked softly, "And will Allah have compassion on you?"

For a moment, the man hesitated, his hand brushing over his face, feeling the reddened mark on his cheek. Tears welled in his eyes, and his voice trembled as he offered a slow, heartfelt, "Oh, yes." He drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly in an effort to gather

himself. "Look at me!" he said wiping his eyes, "If only you knew!"

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?" Farhiya asked.

"Tesfaye," he replied, "and yours?"

"Farhiya," she said.

"Farhiya," he repeated softly.

It had been several moons before the last Eid that Farhiya had heard her name spoken. Mostly it had been 'gabar' back in Somalia, then 'bint' in Sudan. The face of her beloved father, Ibrahim, saying her

name, shaking his head, saving her life, came flooding into her mind.

She looked at Tesfaye full in the face, "I am from Somalia." It came as a whisper of anguish. It was sufficient to recall her grief, the memory of her family, fractured, destroyed. She dropped her eyes to the ground and suddenly she was welling up with tears. The gentleness of the man had opened her up a little, and she was angry at herself for revealing her vulnerability.

He paused for a moment as he looked at her. "I need to tell you," he leaned in closer

and continued in a near whisper, "my younger brother made it. He got to London in England." He took a pen from his pocket and began to write on a napkin. "Here's the address of a church in Harlow, and my brother's address too, where you can get help once you arrive. You can also find help from the Harlow Islamic Centre of course, which you may prefer."

She shared some of her experience of the journey with him, but kept the Khalil episode to herself.

It was so strange, she thought. Here she was

- a young Muslim Somalian woman and he was an old Christian Ethiopian man. Her mind painted a picture of two rivers born horizons apart, carving through different lands but destined for the same ocean.

Farhiya sat quietly listening in wonder. How had this happened? It seemed that this man was exactly who she needed to meet. "Do you speak Spanish?" she asked on impulse.

"Yes, sufficient to get by. And you?" he replied.

Interest sparked in her eyes. She did not

reply. Too many ideas were cascading into her head. She looked across at him with a new certainty. Then she looked down at his feet, "You need new shoes," she said simply.

"It's true." The Ethiopian man coloured a little and shook his head regretfully.

"I shall buy you some. Can you take me to the market?"

He paused, his brow furrowed as he studied her. "Wait... you're serious?"

----oOo----

She bought shoes for him at the first stall.

The trader could see she had very little money, since the note she passed across was filthy and crumpled.

She bought shoes for herself at a different stall, and another well used and much valued note was passed.

At the next stall, she bought two new bundle cloths.

They went to a stall with a good range of men's clothes, and she produced several more screwed up notes from a different pocket.

In the forty-five minutes it took her to buy

a complete wardrobe for the both of them, he saw more money than he had in the previous six months.

"You need to take me to where you are staying, she asserted, with an unsettling directness. "Is it private?"

Tesfaye took a step back, and shook his head. "Who are you? What is this?"

Farhiya put her bundle on the ground. She stood for a moment thinking. She spread both hands, palms upwards and said, "You have to trust me."

"I don't know you."

Farhiya tipped her head on one side considering what to say. She puffed a breath out through her nose and a small frown crossed her face.

"No," she said, "you don't know me. So you can't trust me." She paused. "Clearly!" she added.

The man felt the awkwardness fill the space between them, so wishing to let her off the hook, he responded, "And similarly, you cannot trust me."

They were at an impasse.

Then her face cleared to a smile, "But ..."

she began.

" ... we can trust Allah," he cut in.

He was renting a tiny room in a large house. The bigger rooms could evidently accommodate large families, but there appeared to be no children and hardly any women. As they entered, a fierce dispute erupted as several men burst from a room into the hallway. Farhiya shrank back behind Tesfaye. She could hear echoes of the uncontrolled screams of the men who had attacked her village, their faces twisted in anger. The clamour reminded her how

close she had already come to death.

They hurriedly deposited their bundles in Tesfaye's room, Farhiya whispering a prayer, and left immediately. They walked the city, as she explained that they would need to find a captain and rent a motor launch for the journey to Spain. She had sufficient money, she said, to ensure a safe passage, but they would need always to give the impression that their latest payment was close to exhausting their funds.

They would need to wear clothes that indicated that they had sufficient resources

for the current deal which was well beyond the means of the average refugee.

It would have been less complicated if Farhiya had not taken pity on a destitute mother on the street, with three small children, who Tesfaye knew had family in Spain.

Within one day, a boat and crew were identified. In all they were seven migrants, and a crew of two aboard the 33 foot Zodiac N-ZO 760 RIB. The sea was relatively calm for the Strait of Gibraltar, waves a mere six feet high rather than

twelve. The woman and children intended to claim asylum in Spain so they would be dropped off close to Almuñécar. Two hours later, just after midday, Farhiya and Tesfaye were standing alone enjoying the isolation and tranquillity of the Playa de Maro.

"It is time to pray," Farhiya said and rolled a small prayer mat on the sand.

"Indeed," grinned the Ethiopian, "what a privilege, thank you Father."

Farhiya, her face to the mat, widened her eyes. Her companion's tone of voice carried

the authentic sincerity of an intimate trusting relationship of love. Still she found a certainty in the familiar words of the Dhuhr prayer.

"Guide us on the Straight Path, The path of those who have received Your grace; Not the path of those who have brought down wrath upon themselves, nor of those who have gone astray." she murmured.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 36

Somewhere. Coma day 7.

It occurs to me that I am quite tired of this interrogation. And the weight of my past is still way too heavy to be sustainable. Then it dawns on me that I am back in the pagoda. It feels like I have been away, but I don't know where. As one does when one awakes from a good night's sleep, it is evident that time has passed, but there is no

way of knowing *how* you know it.

And everything that has happened to me, every wound, every loss, it's all back. And on top of that, these incessant questions are grinding me down even further.

My grandmother opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. "No! I don't want any more questions. You seem to have all the clever answers, so maybe it's time you answer some of mine!" I glare at them both, finally locking eyes with Eri.

"Fine," he says not missing a beat, "fire away."

"You'd agree that I've had more than my fair share of suffering, wouldn't you? What with my parents," I shoot a pointed look at my grandmother, "and then Tamsin. And ..."

Eri cuts in before I can talk about Nick, or prison, "Yes, you have."

I stop, surprised. I had expected a load of rationalisation, some way of pinning the blame on me.

"Well then," I say, "if anything means anything ... I mean, if there's supposed to be some reason for why things happen,

why has all this happened to me?"

"What makes you think there has to be a reason?" he fires back.

Eri's being deliberately obtuse, so I cut to the heart of it. "You've said I'm dead." I crane my neck to look up at him.

Seeing my frustration, he joins us on the floor. "I didn't actually say that," he murmurs.

I pause, but he is evidently not minded to elaborate! So I continue, "You've talked about the Kingdom of Heaven, which implies some grand, intelligent scheme of

things."

Eri inclines his head in agreement and waits for me to continue.

"So, why?" I demand. "You can't answer, can you? There's never an answer to *why*. Melissa had no clue and she was a big signed up Christian. It strikes me ..." I pause, swallowing down my anger, "... this world your god supposedly loves so much is literally a bloody great mess! It seems to me your god has no idea what he's doing. "

I'm shaking now, biting my lip to keep from spiralling into a full-blown rant.

Eri looks at my grandmother. She looks back at him. They don't have anything to say. I press my lips together and frown. They're both standing silent. I've won. I desperately didn't want to.

"Why can't ...," I stop, mentally struggling with the notion of a god who could fix stuff with just a click of his fingers, but doesn't even bother. "Oh I dunno, I give up," I mumble, dispirited.

Eri, the man who carried me here, leans closer to me and clicks his fingers. Once.

At that moment I see a butterfly fluttering

at the glass. It comes towards us. It's swooping dipping flight, seemingly random, ends about half a metre in front of me, where it freezes, suspended at eye level.

Eri did a backwards nod as if to say, 'How about that?'

I look at it curiously. It doesn't seem to be hovering. It is more like it is somehow glued in place. He shakes his head and shrugs. "It's a red admiral." he says. "Look closer." Eri raises his eyebrows questioningly.

I frown and stare at the frozen butterfly,

"What am I looking at?"

"Focus on a leg."

"What?" I gaze a little longer, then shake my head again. "What?" I repeat.

"It's okay, I know what you need! Just wait!" Eri asks.

In the next instant, the butterfly explodes silently into a small spherical cloud of wings, legs, antennae, as well as head, and bits of body. I take a couple of steps backwards.

"No, it's okay. You know about exploded

diagrams, right? Ex-motor mechanic and all that? As I say, focus on the leg."

But my eyes have drifted to one of the forewings, seemingly suspended in mid-air. As I watch, it comes into sharper focus, the whole cloud begins enlarging, then the forewing itself disassembles into a dense cloud of literally tens of thousands of scales and veins. The entire sphere had grown to about 5 metres across.

"I said, the leg," Eri says sharply, "not the wing."

I shake my head, baffled. But I switch my

attention to one of the six legs.

The wing cloud remains. The leg explodes. Another cloud materialises, this time a few thousand tiny parts, with six larger lumps visible close to the centre.

"We are looking at six major parts of the leg, and a host of other bits and pieces. You can see the femur of course. The thigh bone is off to the left. There's also the tibia, left again, a bit further in. But no fibula. You can easily see the tarsus and pre-tarsus parts. But for now, try to ignore all those, and focus on the tiny tubes in the cloud."

Eri is back in university lecturer mode!

But it's too hard to focus, and my attention drifts to a large black lump in the centre, and the sphere expanded again like a huge explosion, resulting in bits of thorax scattered across an area about 20 metres in diameter and up to a similar height. A plethora of nameless internal organs are suspended in the air.

Eri sighs. "I think I may have told you to focus on the tiny leg tubes?" his voice is heavy with sarcasm.

I'm now afraid to look at anything! I

mutter, "It's too confusing!"

"Okay, how about this." The nearest tiny tube now has a red box around it and a line leading off to the left, terminating at the word 'Trachea', suspended in mid-air.

This time I do what I'm told and squint at the highlighted trachea. Within a couple of seconds, the sphere had expanded again to around 50 metres, and the trachea is disassembling into another small cloud of parts. I can see the tube now, almost see-through, with thicker material spiralling around the outside. As I watch, the spiral

detaches, and scores of tiny branches on one end of the tube spin out. Liquid appears to be leaking out of them. Then the other end, which looks like a tiny valve, detaches.

I shake my head in confusion, and wave at the cloud of butterfly bits. "What's this all for?"

"This?" Eri grins. "This is mostly for fun!"

Then it dawns on me that I haven't had a repeat of the disintegrating spirals thing. I put it to the back of my mind because Eri is still speaking and for once, it's quite

interesting!

"But let me just round this out for you. You're looking at the tube through which the butterfly breathes."

"What!?'

"Yes, they breathe through their legs. You'll see the tube is supported by a spiral strengthener, avoiding tube collapse, but still enabling flexibility in the tube, hence the leg. The valve there comes to the surface of the leg, and regulates air flow and water ingress."

"It"s crazy!"

"Yes, not bad is it! Now you see the tiny branches, they penetrate the cells and the liquid facilitates gas exchange. Oxygen in and carbon dioxide out. We could carry on forever here though checking out the heart, stomach, intestines, nervous system, immune system, but ..."

"Stop, stop!" I beg. Listening to Eri on a roll is like trying to drink from a firehose!

Eri feigns disappointment, "Okay, the big finish now ..."

He waits for a moment, a big smile across his face, eyebrows raised, jazz hands

waggling, building the tension.

"Go on ..." I say in a resigned voice, as I look across the swirling mass of butterfly bits extending into the far distance.

With that he clicks his fingers on both hands and every particle in the spherical cloud turns into a butterfly. A seething mass of iridescent colour, dazzling as they fly within the sphere, without a single collision.

Eri murmurs casually, "You are looking at 29,242 butterflies, each a different species. Only 17,500 discovered by humanity so

far!"

I'm stunned. It's just ridiculous. I mean, why? I blow a small laugh out through my nose.

There's a short silence. He clicks his fingers again. The cloud instantly disappears.

"You see," Eri looks me in the eye, "the problem is not with the finger clicking!"

Eri is studying his fingernails. I am staring at him. "What?" he asks.

"Who are you?" I ask, "How do you do stuff like that?"

My grandmother looks nervously across to him, but Eri just smiles and says, "Well, I don't really do stuff like that. Not now anyway. This is a construction remember and ..."

"Though they say he'll get back to it," my grandmother cuts in, "For now, he's ... well ..." she puffs out a breath and frowns, "he gets rid of the rubbish. But it's such a foul job that we ... we dress it up a bit poetically and say, he's the 'bearer of burdens'. She lifts both hands and waggles her fingers as air quotes.

Eri looks serious, "If I could do more, I would."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 37

Maro, Costa Del Sol, Spain. October, 2008.

"It will be cold within a few weeks, and we will need warmer clothes." Tesfaye said.

"Yes, I had heard that." Farhiya was sitting by his side on the beach next to their bundles thinking about their next steps.

"My brother told me there are shops here that sell clothes that wealthy people no

longer want."

"Good, we will need stronger shoes too I think." Farhiya struggled to her feet and hauled her bundle onto her shoulder, "Let's go, before the sun sets."

"We cannot take the bundles," he said.

"We must." she replied forcefully.

"No!" he insisted, "They will know we are migrants. The border police will see us for sure. No-one here has bundles."

"Oh." Farhiya stopped and sat down. A wave of panic shot through her at the

thought of being caught. A sudden fear that gripped her gut and made her heart pound swamped in the all too familiar feeling of helplessness. 'Allah. Just hold on to him,' she told herself, 'Allah has been with me every step.'

Slowly the panic subsided. Her brow furrowed as she considered the alternatives.

"Then one of us must stay, and the other go."

"You go!" he said.

"How? I can't speak Spanish!"

"Okay, I'll go."

There was a pause as she looked at him thoughtfully. She tipped her head on one side as if to sort through the various complications.

"What's the problem?" he said.

"The problem is I have no papers, do you?"

"No."

"Then we have to walk into France across the mountains," she looked at him.

"I know."

After mentally dancing around for a few more minutes, Farhiya realised she would

need to be open about her plan for crossing Europe. But even as she was explaining it, doubt crept in whispering that she may be simply wandering deeper into danger. But she knew she had no choice but to keep going. The shadows of her past were never far behind.

Tesfaye looked doubtful and began to ask all kinds of questions, so in the end, she told him to locate a hiking shop and buy the best rucksacks he could find - one for each of them - sufficient to carry all their belongings.

She handed Tesfaye ten 100 Euro notes.

"This is way too much money for two bags," he protested.

"Then you will be able to bring some money back," she replied, "but buy the best."

She looked him critically up and down. His clothes were evidently not expensive, but his shoes were new and he could probably pass muster as a casually dressed local.

He still looked unhappy, like a huge child shuffling his feet. He looked uncertainly at the money in his hand.

"Put it in your pocket and go!" she declared, nodding with wide eyes.

He shrugged and walked up the beach.

"You look fine, trust me," she called after him as he left.

He turned his head smiling and fired back, "Sorry, trust ... who?"

The sun was sinking below the western horizon by the time he returned. He had bought two black rucksacks. The large cardboard labels bore the words, "Osprey Aether Plus 70L". Had she been able to read the words on the back she would have

known that they were made from high-density nylon, durable and water-resistant. The plethora of compartments, loops and connectors were completely mysterious. But they were easily able to pack their belongings in, and were left with plenty of space. It took them a while to realize that everything was adjustable - the padded hip belt, the back panel, the harness and frame.

Farhiya began transferring her belongings from her bundle cloth into one of the rucksacks. Several items came unravelled and dropped onto the beach. As she

crouched down to retrieve them, she realised that the cloth embroidered with the words "Al-Razzaq" had fallen face down on the sand. Distressed she picked it up and began brushing the sand from the precious cloth. The memories of that day returned, afresh into her mind, the sight and sounds of her mother in their home talking to the little girl. Her mind clouded with sadness and she swallowed hard, but her next breath became a sob rising in her throat. She sat on the sand holding the fabric. She could see the name of Allah the

Provider embroidered with stitches that her dear mother had made. She sank lower onto the sand and wept aloud.

Tesfaye crouched by her side and put his arm around her shoulder. "What has upset you?" he enquired gently. It took her a while to regain sufficient composure to talk.

"This means 'Allah my provider'," she said, fixing her gaze on him. "He provides what I need to put my clothes in, and provides someone who can help me find my way, but he does not provide what I most dearly

want and need - my mother, my father, my brothers back with me again!"

"I know," Tesfaye murmured, at a loss as to what to say.

She looked up at him, and they fell silent for a few minutes, both trapped in a cocoon of upsetting memories and shared sorrow.

After a while, Tesfaye decided he would say what he felt, even though he knew nothing could take away the pain.

"Farhiya, Allah has provided you with love - for your family, your mother. And that is

the most precious thing."

She acquiesced, tears streaming down her face.

"But," he continued, his voice softening, "with love, always comes the possibility of pain." Then turning, and speaking almost to himself he murmured, "Father, lead us away from the pleasure that destroys us, and into the pain that fulfils us."

As the words lodged in Farhiya's mind, somehow she knew they were right. Right for eternity, and right especially for this moment.

"Let's eat," he said, "and continue packing after that."

Once they had eaten, they finished repacking the rucksacks from their bundles. Then not without some difficulty, they strapped each other in to the rucksacks, and waddled around the beach trying to get their balance.

"Now I am ready to go to the moon!" joked Tesfaye.

"Oh, really? I don't ..." Farhiya's teasing reply was cut short as she overbalanced backwards and ended up on her back on

the beach, limbs flailing.

Tesfaye doubled over with laughter. "What's this? A helpless upside down turtle?"

"Stop it!" Farhiya tried to be severe, but Tesfaye only laughed harder, tears running down his cheeks.

"Maybe it needs to be dragged down the beach and thrown in the sea!" He grabbed her hand and started to pull. She pressed her lips together, glared at him and tried to look aggrieved. But it was no good. They had shared enough anxiety and fear and

sadness together, that as he gasped for air, his uncontrollable contagious laughter swamped her and she smiled. Then she too quietly laughed with him. It was the first time since the slaughter.

Tesfaye helped her stand. "Be strong!" he said, "and very courageous."

"Maybe," Farhiya said, "but we are not ready to go to England! We need to buy proper hiking clothes."

Tesfaye looked at her curiously, "How much money do you actually have?"

She looked up at him as he towered over

her. On the beach behind him, his long shadow stretched wide.

"I don't actually know," she spread her hands in a gesture of honesty, "but I know it's enough."

"It sounds like the grace of Allah," he murmured.

----oOo----

The assistant in the Decathlon store had had a slow day. He looked at the two who had just entered. A young girl, maybe seventeen, and a giant of a man who must be her father. The father did all the talking.

Apparently they were about to take a hiking tour of the Pyrenees. A keen eyed salesmen, he noted the quality of their rucksacks, although they were dressed down in fairly scruffy summer clothes. They were open to advice having only limited hiking experience. They only guidance the father gave them was that his daughter was insisting on 'the best quality'. Excellent! He was able to advise them concerning the various clothing layers for hot, cold, wet, dry conditions plus footwear. In the end after much loud

protest from the father (who obviously had all the money) and whispered insistence from the daughter (who clearly had all the aspiration) they spent just under one thousand nine hundred Euros on clothes.

He could hardly restrain himself from the classic salesman tell of rubbing his hands together and smiling.

Of course they would need to be very well prepared for such a trip. He owed it to them to spend some time explaining the necessity of all the hiking accessories, sticks, stove, multi-tool, quick-dry-towel. The

daughter was evidently fascinated, but the father's eyes were glazing over. He was losing him. So the assistant backed off somewhat and stuck to the easily justifiable necessities. That racked up a further eight hundred Euros.

The father was frowning. The daughter was smiling. The payment was cash.

The assistant quit while he was winning.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 38

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2008.

At five feet eleven, in a dark blue suit, Simon Warwick carried his 47 years well. Lean, fit and exuding energy, he was a man who made people feel secure. His creativity plus his analytical mind contributed to his natural leadership. He was the youngest CEO that Nexarion PLC had ever had, and it had gone from strength to strength

under his tutelage. His ability to both set strategic direction and propose detailed tactics in finance, technology and human resources ensured that a frisson of fear motivated vigilance and responsiveness in all his immediate reports. He could be both radical and ruthless, but those employees who were intelligent, energetic and committed felt mostly secure. When he first rose to prominence, he had inaugurated a "pump and dump" policy towards recruitment, hiring the best of the best in the May University milk round, and

shedding passengers in the November well prior to financial year end.

His sharp blue eyes gleamed behind his rectangular glasses as he faced the project group. He stood relaxed, completely owning the room.

There were three men seated. Clive was present - a hands-on scientist, a leading authority in genetics. The second was Juan, the project manager, having a doctorate in biochemistry. The third was the money man, Bjorn. He was overweight verging on obese, small watery eyes sunken within a

bloated face, a wide misshapen nose, and underchin flesh that wobbled when he spoke.

Clive drummed his fingers on the table. He was the complete opposite of the stereotypical nerdy scientist. His chest, shoulder and upper arm muscles stretched his t-shirt tight, and his thighs were those of an Olympic cyclist.

"So item one today - the male requirement." Simon flashed Clive a smile that never reached his eyes. "There are various options, each with a degree of risk. The first

is a clinical transfer, but with ..."

Clive interrupted, his tone direct. "We've got strong links to several private clinics, but they'll want details of ongoing therapy," he paused and looked around the table, then continued, "which as you know, we can't provide."

Simon frowned briefly, then kept silent for a few moments. He knew Clive was managing some emotional turmoil at the enormity of the project. "Probably true, so let's park that for a moment." Simon thawed slightly. "The second option," he

said evenly, "is NHS research and a targeted abduction."

Bjorn frowned and shook his not inconsequential jowls. "No! Too much fallout, search, and cover-up."

Simon scanned the group. "I agree, Bjorn. I can't see any of us very keen on the idea of that. So that brings us to option three," he continued, "HMP Albany. They hold Category A and B males, but the statistics aren't good."

Clive frowned. "The spec has to be tight, or ..."

Simon broke in, "Your current spec is probably too tight, Clive. Required fertility level pushes us into the younger range, but familial MND tends to occur after the age of 40. You know we will probably have to be flexible."

Clive's mouth set into a thin line, and he shook his head. "I know, but I don't want to compromise on the age range at this stage, and everything else has got to be non-negotiable."

Juan, the project manager turned his soft brown eyes to his colleague. "It's fine," he

interjected, glancing at Clive. In another life, Juan could have been a border collie. Startling intelligence corralling his natural desires to please. Unrelenting and enthusiastic work ethic.

Then addressing Simon, he continued, "We have nothing to lose by approaching Albany with the current spec. And you've got proven contacts and you've had successful arrangements there before."

Their administrative contact at HMP Albany, Deidre, was on a mutually convenient monthly retainer and

appropriately obliging. She confirmed immediately that they had no detainees matching the spec but offered to check the NOMIS database.

'Okay, well let's move on," Simon said, "Clive, have you got a breakdown of the process steps in words we can all understand?" He lifted one eyebrow and looked at the scientist. Clive smiled, relieved to be on home ground as he stood to speak.

The meeting continued while Deirdre at HMP Albany in Newport, Isle of Wight

continued to search NOMIS. Despite the UK prison IT system's notoriously slow and clumsy user interface, she called them back within the hour. The search had yielded one match. Reed, a 33 year old male was a guest of His Majesty at HMP Northumberland, located near the village of Acklington - approximately 370 miles north of Blandford, Dorset.

Simon took the call, then nodded to the team, a rare smile on his face. "That was Deirdre. We're on!" Tangible relief washed around the room. "One Caleb Reed, HMP

Northumberland."

Juan sat up straight and rubbed his hands together, "Excellent! I'll coordinate with Deidre to prepare a case for the transfer."

"Wait!" Bjorn barked. "I don't like it. A transfer means at least three or four more people in the loop."

Juan leaned forward, shaking his head. "Surely the budget can ..."

"It's not a budget issue," Bjorn spat the words out, as if talking to a child, "it's an incremental risk, and the risk assessment says we are already on the limit."

Juan threw his hands in the air, frustrated, "Let's at least calculate the new risk level, then ..."

"If the risk goes any higher," Bjorn fixed Juan with a direct stare, "then I. Am. Out."

"What other option is there?" Juan protested.

The four sat at the impasse for a few moments, then Simon spoke. "Listen guys, there's multiple ways this can still work."

The others waited for Simon to continue, Clive quiet, Bjorn and Juan still glaring at each other.

"We know fertility starts to decline at 35, which is where our top age threshold is. But if we raised it to say 55, then fertility will have declined by around 30%." Simon paused.

"Exactly," Clive said, "that's why I set the top limit at 35 years old on the spec."

"But Clive," Simon's voice was soothing, the essence of reason, "isn't it true that there is huge variation in sperm count between adult males? Way greater than 30%?"

"Well, true," Clive grudgingly conceded.

"What is it?" Simon asked, feigning ignorance, but knowing full well he had Clive cornered.

"Of course, it's all the way from zero up to 200 million per millilitre, but of course it includes a whole bunch of sterile males."

"Okay, let's exclude the least fertile twenty percent. What's the range then?" Clive persisted.

Clive closed his eyes and shook his head impatiently. He tapped on his tablet for two or three minutes. Simon waited calmly, while Bjorn and Juan exchanged glances.

"The low end is 33 million, the high end is as I say 200 million."

"So listen Clive, I'll leave the decision up to you." Simon knew the stats would support his own decision anyway. "But work out the number, taking into account the centrifuge phase."

Clive nodded acquiescence, realising he was beaten.

Later that day, they reconvened. Simon brought the news that Deirdre had come back with the results from the newly relaxed requirements spec, and they had a

hit in Albany. A male, Jeffrey Turnham aged 54, due for release within 18 months, recently diagnosed with familial Motor Neurone Disease. The team agreed that they should move ahead, and accordingly contacted Deirdre with the remaining details of the plan.

Around ten percent of MND cases are 'familial', arising from a genetic mutation leading to a lack of the heroic warrior protein SuperOxide Dismutase 1. Without it, nasty SuperOxide radicals proliferate. Typically radicals in both society and the

human body cause a lot of heartache. SuperOxide radicals directly damage the nerves that control muscles. But when they are caught by the SOD1 warriors, they are summarily dismutased (a.k.a. ripped apart). When SuperOxide radicals proliferate, they accumulate and incapacitate the host with muscle weakness, cramps and twitches, finally killing with paralysis of the heart and lungs.

A horrific disease. A cure, even one developed outside the bounds of the law, would be worth hundreds of millions.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 39

Cherbourg, France. December, 2008.

The journey to Cherbourg had been much easier than they expected. Nonetheless, the journey, which would have taken three days by car had taken twenty nine on foot. Caution necessitated short-distance coach journeys to avoid the requirement for ID, and the Pyrenean trek had taken eight days, because only the most physically

challenging walking routes were guaranteed free of border controls. Farhiya had travelled with ease, her youth and years of carrying water giving her an advantage. Tesfaye had kept up reasonably well—he was strong but not a natural walker.

It appears that God had been on their side. They located a second hand rib for sale, a six and a half metre Zodiac Pro. For cash, the owner wanted seventeen thousand Euros. The owner was also selling the Yamaha 125 outboard for a further five and a half thousand. Unusually for the time of

year, the Channel had been flat calm, and the rib had eaten the hundred miles in less than three hours.

In the mid December, on a mild Thursday afternoon at 3.15pm they motored slowly into the north end of Chichester Harbour. Several boats were beached and some others tied up alongside a short quay. There were no tourists around, just a few locals wandered aimlessly along the beach. An old man was messing around in a half drowned tender. They drew alongside the jetty, tied up, and strolled quietly away.

There were several lanes leading inland from the quay, and they chose the largest, the rightmost lane. After a few minutes of walking they passed an ancient church, the noticeboard bearing the words, "Holy Trinity" and declaring it had been built in the 11th century.

Continuing along the High Street they attempted to walk confidently as they entered the village centre of Bosham. But inside, Farhiya could feel anxiety bubbling just beneath the surface. The fear of discovery had been a constant background

shadow, but as she got closer to the end of her journey, it was resolving into a number of possible outcomes, none of them good. Each passer-by felt like a potential threat, each official looking person seemed to be watching her.

But truly, no casual observer would ever have suspected a thing, and fortunately the Bosham residents who were out and about that day were all casual, relaxed and enjoying the relief from a recent bitter cold spell.

After some time spent in seemingly aimless

wandering, they spotted signs to the Railway Station. Turning off Delling Lane, they entered the station. They checked the large map on the wall for the route to London. They were temporarily stumped by the lack of anywhere to buy tickets. Only unmanned machines and advice to download apps seemed available, and the machines expected credit cards.

After a short while they were about to give up when a train pulled into the station bearing the word "Havant". They boarded without tickets unchallenged. At Havant

they used the machines to determine the ticket price, cancelling when it requested a payment card. Farhiya spent some time awkwardly extracting sufficient cash in notes, then they walked to the ticket booth. Tesfaye murmured the word "London". The weathered old chap in the office took the proffered money and slid two tickets beneath the glass. He hardly looked at them. The train to Waterloo was in very poor condition, rattly, screechy, with faded upholstery and peeling paint. As the train got closer to London, they were astonished

at the ever increasing number of people boarding at each stop. The final part of their journey, the train was crammed with all of mankind. Apart from the absence of chickens, they could have been anywhere in the world.

Farhiya began to feel uncomfortable at such close quarters in the carriage, and was only marginally relieved at Waterloo. The station was heaving with people, and her fear grew that they would be discovered. Tesfaye went off to the Information Office to determine travel options to Harlow.

Farhiya stood waiting glancing in each direction from time to time, and wishing she was invisible.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 40

Somewhere. Coma day 7.

I sometimes think we might be getting somewhere, but it is so painful.

My grandmother speaks again, her voice cutting through the silence.

"I can see you think I'm hopelessly naive when it comes to life in prison, and perhaps I am. But something else happened in

there, didn't it? Something that seems to have scarred you deeply."

She shakes her head, confusion knitting her brow. Eri waits quietly, unmoving, as if he already knows what's coming.

I press my palms flat against the floor, attempting to straighten myself, trying to reclaim a shred of dignity. The effort sends a sharp ache through me, but I manage, "Oh, you want the next thrilling instalment of my glorious life?" The bitterness is evident in my sneer. "Almost six years I'd done in prison, so the end was in sight.

Well, imagine my surprise when I was chosen—singled out—for a special purpose. It was packaged as some grand research project, the promise of relief from my Motor Neurone Disease. Like every other lie I've been fed, it dangled the trifecta of health, wealth, and happiness, only to deliver something else entirely: hell on earth."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 41

Albany Section, HMP Isle of Wight. 2008.

Within three days of Jeffrey's selection, he began to suffer from a significant increase in the aforesaid muscle weakness, cramps, twitching and stiffness. It was not a particular surprise since his MND prognosis indicated this would happen sooner or later. MND calls for specialist treatment, and the closest specialist

hospital was in Oxford, with a couple more in London, and the rest in the North. With Jeffrey deteriorating fast, and the local NHS staff running out of options, it was a wonderful coincidence that HMP Albany were formally contacted by Nexarion Therapeutics who kindly offered to immediately admit Jeffrey into an MND therapeutic research programme that was shortly due to begin.

The process of transfer between prisons and private clinics is rarely invoked, low priority and highly complex, a collegiate

proposal subject to multiple self serving vetos. The grunt work is done by the prison healthcare professionals and psychologists, plus the case manager of the detainee. A formal request is then submitted to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) or Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) who make the final decision.

The process of transfer between prisons and private clinics is extremely high priority and childishly simple when accompanied by financial considerations. Clive's contributions and Juan's

storytelling crafted a remarkable work of highly believable fiction. Bjorn somewhat grudgingly allocated 12,000 pounds split into four separate envelopes. The only difficult part was the final decision, and this was facilitated by a relentless attrition involving incessant phone calls.

Thus within two days, Jeffrey found himself bundled into a cell van bearing the words "HMP Isle of Wight - a Public Private Initiative serving justice" in sober black Times font. It was just as well because he was deteriorating fast. Following a short

journey on the most expensive ferry in the world, the cell van turned out of the ferry car park and joined the M27 West. It arrived at Nexarion Therapeutics just after 11.00am in Blandford Forum. It reversed up until the rear doors could be opened directly into the goods receiving entrance. The property did not originally have a freight truck compatible goods receiving entrance. Set amidst the expansive grounds of the Hartington Estate, the house itself had accommodated eleven generations of the Hartington family. The library

recorded the family's exploits, their business interests in the Caribbean, their financial acquisitions, their various accesses to royalty, and their extensions and improvements to the estate.

There was also a complete record of the experiments in 'pneumatic chemistry' of Montague Hartington (1727 - 1783). While his early work was an obsession with pressure and volume reduction of ambient air, he later became obsessed with oxygen, and tried to emulate Joseph Priestley's work with isolation and extraction using

mercury. Despite several fascinating experiments involving inhalation, exhalation and explosion, Montague did not self immolate in an inferno, but died an altogether more protracted and painful death by mercury poisoning.

As the years passed, the burden of property maintenance became too heavy for the family to bear. Given the decline of old money, the decision was reluctantly made to sell the property to Nexarion Therapeutics, who were swimming in the new stuff. The family upped sticks to a

large, eminently more practical, and excitingly designed modern pile in Kingston, London.

By the mid nineteenth century, the Hartington Estate stable block was already far more comfortable for horses than were most citizen's homes for humans. Consequently they were very easily converted as guest accommodation by Nexarion Therapeutics. However, NT expended just under 28 million in it's initial phase to convert the property for use as the headquarters of a 21st century tech

wannabe. That was around 6 million over budget, due to complexities with the roof.

Jeffrey was ushered through the main building and out across the stable yard and made comfortable in the guest accommodation. He still had absolutely no idea what was happening.

The first and most urgent phase in Jeffrey's therapy was to terminate his deliberate poisoning with organophosphate pesticide. The resultant metabolites could have been detected by specific blood or urine tests, but the symptoms were sufficiently close to

MND to avoid suspicion. The carefully calibrated dosage was offset by two weeks of atropine medication, and Jeffrey was then deemed ready for the start of the programme proper.

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Chapter 42

Waterloo Station, London. December, 2008.

Farhiya was being watched. Stefan had spotted her within three minutes of her arrival. Stefan had seen three others so far, and this one looked the best. She seemed too smartly dressed to be an asylum seeker, but he could see she was terrified. He scanned the tide of commuters cascading into the station concourse, each

determinedly following the shortest possible path to their particular platform. No-one was interested in Stefan with the easy smile, nor the girl with the body language radiating fear. And he had nothing to lose. His story was pitch perfect. Stefan with the friendly face.

He approached Farhiya holding out a bar of chocolate. A small frown crossed her face. She stepped back a pace. Stefan flashed the reassuring smile and showed her a Camden Council security pass. Then he unfolded a home printed A4 picture

depicting three passports laid side by side, Algerian, Albanian and Iraqi. He showed her the passports picture, cocked his head on one side and spread his hands enquiringly. She gave a small upward nod of the head, and clicked her tongue.

Stefan showed the girl his mobile phone and pressed the screen play button. A short movie played showing a sentence in different languages on screen, playing the audio soundtrack. Farhiya watched impassively until the Arabic sentence came on screen, then she nodded and murmured,

"Haaa".

Stefan stopped the movie and loaded an Arabic audio track. Briefly this informed Farhiya that Stefan was an approved local government liaison officer for unaccompanied asylum seekers. He opened his briefcase and gave her a bread roll and a can of Coke. She smiled.

Stefan looked at her again. She was tall but very thin, and appeared to be about sixteen. She was possibly too young. But Stefan had had a long tiring day. And it was hard to tell with migrants. They were often several

years older than they looked. And the contract had been very clear about the requirements for qualification. A UAS. Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers were usually male, but a Female was required. And she had the other requirements. Clear skin. Straight back. Symmetrical features. No evident health issues. Between sixteen and twenty years old.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 43

Maidstone Services, M20 Motorway. 2009.

Approximately six hundred trucks use the Maidstone Motor Services on the M20 each day. The parking area provides around 60 truck bays. At the northern end of the truckers parking area, the bays back directly onto a thick tree line. This is where the reefer pulled in and backed up hard against the woodland. The refrigeration

unit was set to nine degrees centigrade - one degree too low for the tomatoes, two degrees too high for the citrus fruits, but ideal for the occupants.

The driver gingerly eased himself out of the cab, stiff from the drive. The journey from Albania had been reasonably good though with no additional inspection delays, and border controls at Dover as fast as could be expected. He walked to the back of the truck and opened the rear door.

A man wearing a grey donkey jacket with an orange plastic carrier bag stepped from

the tree line. He nodded at the driver and climbed up into the back of the truck. The driver closed the rear door, glanced left and right momentarily, and then hurried across the car park to the Road Chef.

He made for the Leon cafe and ordered a Halloumi Breakfast Box which he took outside and sat at one of the patio tables. It was due to be a good day. The run would make him just over twenty thousand, at twelve hundred per unit. He had seventeen on board, and hoped to deliver several within the next hour.

When he got back to the truck he reopened the rear door and climbed in. Donkey jacket was waiting for him.

"How many did you choose?"

Donkey jacket shook his head, "Not much choice. I was looking for two. Only one of yours is any good."

"Whatever," the driver grunted.

A roll of notes was passed, the driver checked the amount, nodded then turned and opened the rear door.

Donkey jacket climbed out and walked

away into the trees followed closely by a girl aged 19, dressed in new jeans, a white t-shirt, with flip flops on her feet.

The driver walked to a nearby rubbish bin, dropped the carrier bag stuffed with old clothes in, and returned to the rig. Within three minutes he was back on the motorway en route to his next stop.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 44

Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, Bedfordshire. 2009.

Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, located in Bedfordshire, does not publicly disclose the exact number of guards, for security reasons. It has a planned maximum capacity of 900 detainees , the vast majority being women. At this point in time, nine hundred and forty three were in residence.

Sexual abuse was rife with almost seventy percent of detainees reporting attempted rape. The majority of staff were and still are male. It has for years been under investigation by various authorities, and the target of protest for multiple human rights groups. Mental ill health among detainees is common and untreated. Hunger strikes occur frequently. Suspicious deaths have occurred from time to time.

On this night, the guard detail was six rather than five. The three women and

three men were responsible for the security of the perimeter, and to attend any emergency call-outs.

The call apparently came in at 1.20am. Tim tipped his chair back, stood and hurried across the security staff room and picked up.

He hung up, "A fight in Hummingbird Wing. I'll see to it."

The others showed little interest, clustered around the poker table. The bets were high enough to make it interesting, rather than exciting.

Within twenty minutes, he had returned. He placed five separate stacks of notes on the card table. "Sorry it's not a grand each this time. We're six up."

One of the women sat up straight, "What's this?"

"Come on, just take your split."

"No, thanks. Not unless I know what it's for!"

"You don't wanna know."

"If I don't wanna know, I don't want my split."

"Okay. Your choice."

"Yeah, it is. I'm out." The woman threw her hand down on the table, stood and stalked out the room."

"Fine!" The remaining five split the money, pulled their chairs closer to the poker table and the bets became exciting.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 45

Somewhere. Coma day 8.

"Jeffrey," Eri's voice is mild, "I understand that every person sees themselves as the kind of lead role in their own drama, with everyone else relegated to the supporting cast. But that's not how things really are. When people ask, 'Why is this happening to me?' they're assuming a significance in the situation that isn't there. The truth is,

most of the pain we feel doesn't come from, as you put it, being singled out by others. Instead, it comes from their indifference—people are so wrapped up in their own lives that they don't stop to think how their actions impact those around them. Most of the hurt that people experience is collateral damage, either from someone else's internal struggles or from the fallout of their selfish ambitions. If you really want to understand your suffering, you need to step outside yourself—way, way outside—so you can begin to see others clearly."

He pauses to see how I will respond.

"Go on then," I say, as if listening is an intolerable burden.

A small smile briefly crosses Eri's face. "It began with Meiriel," he continues smoothly. "He became greedy for power and wealth and position, and he must have lost sight of the Way. Meiriel suggested that rather than ruling by means of love and service, it would be more efficient to rule by coercive power. Of course, that was always a theoretical possibility, except that it had always felt so foul! But we suspected

that Meiriel had already deserted the Way, and instead was embracing personal control. For some reason, he seemed to want to elevate himself..."

"Sorry, who was Meiriel?" I break in.

"You've almost certainly met him, but not registered him. He prefers to stay in the background. Anyway," Eri continues quietly, almost as if talking to himself, "it was clear he was trying to sway the host. With deceit of course. But it could never become the Way. As they considered his proposal, the prospect of power began to

move some - a very few, thankfully. But the vast majority of the agents chose to keep to our model of ruling through serving."

Host? Agents? I'm confused, and am about to interrupt again, but in the end I let it pass, as Eri glances at me. Grandmother smiles. Perhaps she has heard the story before.

"The debate got very bitter. It went back and forth, with some switching sides. Meiriel had hoped to subvert the entire agent host, but in the end, only a few were persuaded. His attempts to twist the truth

failed, leaving him without any claim to victory."

"At that point, we could have chosen to destroy the rebels. But back then, neither the agents nor the beings of other worlds could grasp the appalling horror of leaving the Way or its inevitable consequences..."

This time, I simply cannot stop myself from interrupting. "Is this all ... I mean, is this a metaphor or something?"

Eri shook his head slowly. His eyes had a depth of unfathomable sorrow. "Sadly, this is all literally true. The narrative sounds

like science fiction, right?"

I nod.

"That's because it happened far away and longer ago than you can imagine. Back then, if Meiriel had been wiped out immediately, many might then have obeyed only out of fear. And so the consequences of Meiriel's rebellion would have continued to infect others. Ready to re-emerge in a subsequent generation. So ... What to do?"

I wait, listening hard.

"Instead ..." Eri pauses, taking a deep breath in through his nose and letting it out slowly

with a long sigh, "Instead, we chose to continue to give Meiriel the freedom to cause misery and chaos, but ..." he tips his head back, blinks rapidly a couple of times, sniffs loudly and continues, " ... but only on the Earth planet. Meiriel was allowed to work out his methods and to reveal his ways, so that all might see his true colours.

"It was the only way. But not without huge cost. By letting Meiriel's rebellion grow and produce it's bitter fruit, it would carry the seeds of its own destruction. The impact on all of the cosmos - the spiritual realm as

well as planet Earth, and human life, and the alien, albeit animal, life forms inhabiting the billions of star systems across the cosmos - would be so dire, that when contrasted with the Way of selflessly and lovingly serving others, all would freely reject the rebel choice. It would prove that the peace and happiness of all creation can only result from a free submission to loving rule.

The horror of it is dawning on me, and I instinctively hunch down trying to shield myself from the implications of Eri's

words. I can feel my fingernails biting into my palms, and I welcome the pain, because it distracts me. But it is only a momentary relief. I dare not look at Eri. But I can't escape him, any more than I can escape the truth. The way he watches me, penetrating, seeing every flicker of pain. My chest is tight now with an outraged protest building inside me. But before I can say a word, Eri simply raises one hand, and puts the backs of his fingers against his lips. His face is tranquil now, but his eyes, often dancing, are heavy with grief. His and

mine. His lips are pressed together and his hands are steady in his lap. Somehow I can see that he wants to reach out to me but he is holding back. Every breath he takes is hard work, heavy with untold sorrow.

"We are still struggling with this ... you and I." Eri's voice is steady but quiet, and it has an edge, every spoken word, every pause expressing a depth of control that is managing his suffering.

His gaze is locked onto mine, as if he can will me to understand what he cannot express. He draws in a long slow breath,

gathering his strength.

"Because understanding doesn't help at all. Not really."

That is exactly what I don't want to hear. Even though I already know it to be true. I try to stifle a frustrated groan. I search Eri's face for something - hope maybe, or comfort, even a loophole in the reasoning. But Eri just watches me. Instead, he leans towards me a little, creating an emptiness between us that holds only the awful truth that we both had hoped never to confront.

"I understand it perfectly," Eri continues,

his voice taking on a raw, almost fragile edge now. "But each child..." His voice fades, and he glances away, his jaw clenching as he fights to keep his composure. For a moment, his face twists with pain, eyes closing as though to shut out the memories and the expectations that flood his mind.

"Each child that is abused," he murmurs, his voice breaking slightly, "or young man cut down in a hail of bullets..." He falters now. The words hang in the air, unfinished. A shudder runs through his

body, as he seems to recoil, shoulders sagging under the burden of what he feels. His eyes, abyssal and haunted, silently plead with me to understand the anguish that comes with love this deep.

Eri takes a breath, then struggles as he forces the words out. "Each one of those..." His voice cracks again, and this time, his hands tremble visibly as he reaches out for mine. He grips them, his knuckles turning white. For several long seconds, he can't speak. He looks down, swallowing twice, waits until he calms. When he finally meets

my gaze again, it's with a passionate, unbearable tenderness.

"Let me just say this," he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper now, each word carefully measured, "those who love the most... hurt the most." He closes his eyes briefly, his face contorting with the truth of it, and when he opens them again, they are bright with grief. "It has always been the way."

It feels as if something inside me has collapsed. I have to protest, to fight back, to repel the pain with understanding, but

Eri's gaze holds me unmoving. The finality of the words settle deep, and for a brief moment we sit, silent, tied together by the raw, unspoken truth that love and suffering are inseparable.

Then the moment is shattered as the caustic memory of what Whisper went through surges into my mind. I shake my head to try to avoid being dragged back by it, but it refuses to be dismissed by intellectual hopscotch. And I've suffered too, haven't I? No! No, it's crazy.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 46

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2008.

"No names. Let's see what we've got."

Simon nodded to Juan. The project manager put the first PowerPoint slide up on the wall. Simon sat down, leaned back and glanced around the room for their reaction.

The other three men seated, looked with

some detachment.

They were viewing a close up of a girl's face. Her skin was light brown. She had dark eyes set in a narrow face. Beneath the picture was a summary legend.

Girl X. Documented age 19. Seemingly healthy. Syria. Yarl's Wood.

Simon raised his eyebrows and looked at the other two, "Okay?".

They nodded again. The slide changed again. Yet another face. Pale skin. Brown eyes. Broader face and nose.

Girl Y. Estimated age 18. Seemingly healthy. Algeria. Truck stop.

They nodded. Simon advanced the slide. Another girl's face. Dark brown skin. Dark eyes. Hair in long braids.

Girl Z. Estimated age 17. Seemingly healthy. Somalia. Waterloo.

Bjorn leaned forward, his brow creased with worry. "Is there going to be more?" he asked.

Simon smiled, "Relax, Bjorn, we're still in pocket money! Extraordinary spend to date is less than thirteen thousand. By the way,

we haven't got the medicals yet so we are not choosing today."

"So," interjected Clive, "let's get on with them then."

"It's over to you now, Clive, they are all yours." Juan responded immediately, "Any roadblocks, let me know!" Then he looked around at the assembled group, "Right now, we're on track and in good shape."

Bjorn narrowed his eyes, "How about the security report? What's the collateral risk?"

The project manager responded a little too quickly, evidently anxious to reassure. "It's

all fine. No loose ends. Everyone's paid and we have secured leverage if we need it." He turned to Bjorn with a calculated smile, who decided not to challenge for more detail.

----oOo----

Simon, Bjorn, Clive and Juan reconvened two days later to review the results of the medicals.

Clive stood by the wall screen, hands casually shoved into his pockets

The screen behind him showed a mass of incomprehensible detail. Clive took a deep

breath, smiled briefly, then began to run through the essential information, using non-technical language where he could. He was fluent, concise, and confident.

The project was nothing if not thorough. For each of the girls X, Y and Z, the tests progressed from the initial anthropometric measurements of weight, height and BMI, through a complete blood count, serology, thyroid and coagulation tests, moving on to immunological tests for HIV, malaria and TB, and concluding with chest x-ray and full body and brain MRI scans. No

specialist consultations were planned since that requirement alone would preclude the candidate from the programme.

The results were stark.

Girl X from Syria had evidently had tuberculosis a few years previously. The Mantoux test showed swelling on the forearm. Subsequent chest X-rays showed fibrotic scarring, calcified granulomas, and volume loss. She was immediately disqualified.

Girl Y from Albania had hookworm and a gastric ulcer due to poor hygiene and an

inadequate diet. Although the conditions were treatable, she too was excluded.

Girl Z from Somalia was surprisingly healthy, had proved to be intelligent, but was suffering from diabetes due to poor diet. She also exhibited some anxiety, possibly PTSD, due to exposure to violent death, specifically that of her immediate family during warfare.

There were several questions from Bjorn and Juan, seemingly to let Simon know that they had been paying attention. Clive fielded these projecting an air of tolerant

impatience. But within a few minutes, the consensus was that girl Z was the preferred candidate.

"So we're all agreed on the choice?" Simon narrowed his eyes and smiled as he addressed the group.

There were nods all around the room.

Simon looked pleased. "You know what that means don't you?" He paused, then turned to Juan, "Your call," he said.

"It means that we've completed stage one," Juan responded, "under budget," he smiled at Bjorn, "and on time. Well done!"

"Yes, well done Juan, Bjorn, Clive," Simon said addressing each in turn. "Let's keep on it, guys. Enough for today."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 47

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2009.

Simon convened the project team to review progress. He ran his glance around the room establishing eye contact with each of the team - a subtle alpha male ritual. He paused, waiting just long enough for a slight discomfort to register.

"The first agenda item is the status of Girl

Z," Simon began, adjusting his glasses. Nodding to Juan, he said, "Where are we?"

The project manager leaned forward, speaking softly but clearly. "She's well settled, convinced she's in a UK Government holding facility and her immigration status is being reviewed. She expected to be treated badly, but obviously, the reverse is true. She's puzzled by the absence of other detainees but seems happy enough."

Clive leaned forward, "You'd better be careful she doesn't get suspicious. What

have you said about other detainees?"

"I haven't said anything other than we are well placed to take care of her ..."

Clive cut across Juan, "That's not good enough. You need to have a believable account of why she's here ..."

Juan interrupted, "She thinks she knows why she's here. She's totally convinced we're on the level."

"But she's bright, you know. And given her background, she'll smell a rat if there's anything that doesn't fit."

"Granted, she's bright. But we've got the back story, all the details, all the contacts. You have enough to worry about with the lab and the process. Stop worrying about things I'm well capable of taking care of!" Juan retorted.

Simon cut in smoothly, "Guys! I don't want to miss any concerns at all. Bjorn, are you happy with the choice of Z? You've read the profile notes?"

Bjorn exchanged glances with Simon. "She's complicated," he said.

Simon raised his eyebrows, "No real

objection though?"

Bjorn turned his mouth down and shook his head. Given his impressive jowls, it really was a mannerism that he should probably forego.

"OK! Next item. What news of dry runs?"

Simon gazed at the scientist. "Clive..." he prompted.

The scientist looked around the room for a moment. He raised his eyebrows at Simon, who simply nodded. "Well, both dry runs, X and Y, are complete. The good news is that both went exactly according to plan."

Bjorn shifted in his seat to face Simon.

"What this about dry runs?"

Simon turned the corners of his mouth down and shook his head carelessly, "It doesn't affect the budget Bjorn, and it reduces the risk, so don't worry about it. It has always been part of the detailed plan."

"I'm not worried. I just want to know what it's about."

Clive spoke up, "It's just ..."

Juan cut in smoothly, talking over Clive. "Bjorn, we had two minor surgical tasks which were effectively to de-risk the main

operation ..."

"X and Y?" interrupted Bjorn.

"... yes, the other two girls. Both successful."

"And ..."

This time Simon cut in, "Bjorn, it's fine. The operations were minor and successful. And necessary." He gazed challengingly at Bjorn. "And had no effect on the budget calculations. And de-risked the final operation."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 48

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2009.

For the project team in Nexarion Therapeutics, the following three months were a little quieter, after the initial flurry of activity.

Bjorn worried over his spreadsheets. But in reality, they were well within the budget figures, and in any case, he knew Simon

would have extra money ferreted away somewhere to ensure they came in under budget. Simon's reports to the Board were always exemplary, tremendous, outstanding, and leading edge. But Bjorn worried mostly about the risks assessments, constantly reviewing the activities, the lists of contacts, the leverage they had with anybody who knew anything.

Juan had very little to do. He knew he couldn't push Clive, so he busied himself ensuring that their guests were all happy and still buying the story. There were

always loose ends to tidy up as well.

Clive on the other hand was working from 7am until 10pm seven days a week. He was incentivised by the ridiculous bonus promised if he succeeded, but in truth, he excelled at science and biotech was the love of his life, his mistress. Like any mistress of course she would frequently toss him into the slough of despond when she chose not to cooperate.

Formal project reviews were held every two weeks but the team was so small that they all knew the project status anyway

whenever anything interesting happened.

At the seventh project review, Clive's outstandingly good news was received with a cheer. At the end of the meeting Simon opened a bottle of champagne and they toasted the completion of stage two.

As the others were leaving, Simon turned to the finance manager, "Bjorn, just stay behind please, there's a couple of things ..." His voice trailed off as the others left the room.

Simon leaned in, his voice low. "There's a small problem, Bjorn. It's about girl Z."

Bjorn looked up, confusion etched on his face. "What?"

"She came with money."

"Came with...?"

"Money," Simon interrupted, a hint of urgency in his tone. "Just slightly under one hundred and forty grand, to be precise. I just stuck it in the safe, but now I think we'd better deal with it."

"What?!" Bjorn's voice squeaked, an uncharacteristic pitch that betrayed his shock. His eyes widened as he processed the news. "How on earth did she bring that

over?"

Simon shrugged slightly, maintaining his calm demeanour. "All in high denomination notes. Mostly Dollars, but quite a lot of Dinar, and Dirham. Then there's some Pounds and Euros. Total weight's about four kilograms, tucked away in the bottom of a very expensive, professional rucksack."

"Where did she get it?"

"She says she was given it!"

"So she stole it."

"Probably. Does it matter where it came from?" Simon asked.

"Oh God. A finance director's nightmare!" Bjorn moaned, burying his face in his hands. His shoulders slumped as he leaned against the table, overwhelmed. Another thought occurred to him, "Is it new sequential notes, or used?"

"A bit of a mixture, but mostly new sequential notes," Simon paused, and put his index finger to his lips, "It's in US dollars mostly, but also quite a few bundles of dinar and dirham, and a two or three

bundles of euros and pounds."

"What!? What's that ... er ..."

"Egypt, Libya, Morocco." Simon cut in, "I did the conversion myself so only three of us now know about it."

"It just gets worse! I'll have to talk to her, this Z girl."

"Really? Why?"

"Do you want to know? This is to do with how hot it is."

"Fine." Simon's voice was resigned. He knew it was crucial to keep Bjorn on his

side, especially now that the guy was visibly frazzled. "Listen, we don't need it. Just bury it. You'll figure it out." He paused, waiting for Bjorn to lift his head and meet his gaze. "And Bjorn...," he added, lowering his voice, "Whatever you do, I don't wanna know."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 49

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2009.

One week later, staff outside the CEO's office could see Bjorn pacing furiously, his gestures wild and animated. The soundproof glass ensured that none of their heated exchange could leak out.

Simon sat calmly at his desk, his demeanour starkly contrasting Bjorn's rage as his

finance director's face flushed red.

"You just ... disposed of them. I didn't sign up for this," Bjorn snapped, his fists clenching at his sides.

"Bjorn, we're a team," Simon replied, his tone steady. "We're all in this together. We have the board's approval for any action we choose to take..."

"Murder?" Bjorn interrupted, incredulity washing over him.

"You're being inconsistent," Simon countered, leaning back slightly. "You're the one worried about loose ends and risks.

This action was painless, risk-free, and eminently practical. It's done. It's over. No trace."

Bjorn's eyes widened, disbelief morphing into anger. "The bodies?"

"Do you really want to know?" Simon arched an eyebrow, maintaining eye contact.

"No." Bjorn's voice was low, but his body radiated tension.

"Well, I'll tell you anyway," Simon continued, his tone almost casual.

"Cremated, along with the usual

procedures for incinerating clinical waste and animal subject carcasses."

"You're disgusting!" Bjorn shot back, his hands clenched into fists.

"No, Bjorn, you're being sentimental." Simon gestured toward the chair opposite him, his expression unfazed. "Sit down..."

Bjorn reluctantly took a seat, visibly agitated, his leg trembling with pent-up energy.

"Listen to me, Bjorn. Those girls were destined for utterly miserable lives—emotionally crippled by the past and facing

a future surrounded by people who wanted them gone. That's no life!" Simon's voice softened, but the intensity remained.

"So you kill them?" Bjorn's voice trembled with outrage.

"We made sure they enjoyed their time here," Simon explained, his tone firm yet eerily calm. "Then one evening, we treated them to a lovely meal. The sedative was undetectable. They fell asleep. We administered intravenous potassium chloride. Instant death. No pain, no fear. How can that be wrong?"

"You're an animal, you know that?" Bjorn growled, his brow furrowing.

Simon blanched, casting a quick glance through the glass walls. All the staff were studiously avoiding the confrontation.

Bjorn wasn't finished. "And I suppose you're going to do the same to Z?"

Simon opened his mouth to respond, but Bjorn cut him off. "What's her name?"

"What?" Simon feigned ignorance, but Bjorn loomed closer, his face twisted with rage.

"Z! What's her name?" Bjorn shouted, rising from his chair. He leaned across Simon's desk, his eyes blazing. Grabbing a fountain pen from the stand, he removed the cap and attempted to stab the nib into Simon's hand. Instead, he only succeeded in smearing blue ink across the papers. He tried again, but the nib snapped. Nose to nose, he snarled, "Tell me the girl's name, or so help me, I'll..."

"Farhiya," Simon murmured, his voice barely a whisper.

Bjorn stepped back, glancing towards the

outer office. He resumed speaking, his tone dripping with acid sarcasm. "Oh, Simon! So she's a... person!"

Both men paused, breathing heavily, the weight of their conflict hanging in the air.

"You disgust me," Bjorn said quietly, his words coated with loathing. He straightened his back, took a deep breath, and turned to leave.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 50

Somewhere. Coma day 8.

I'm still fuming inside, but trying to hide it, because I can see Eri is struggling too! "Are you telling me that this planet ..."

"The planet Earth," my grandmother gently corrects me.

"... that planet Earth was chosen as a demonstration? It is obviously not true,

but if it was, it would be a real sick joke," I laugh and even I can hear the bitterness, "Come and observe the idiotic human race, chosen to be a warning as to the consequences of royally screwing everything up! Brilliant!"

I turn away, repelled. "Now I've heard it all!"

There's a brief hiatus. My grandmother is the only one still on an even keel. Both Eri and I are breathing hard. He's looking intense.

After a while, Eri says quietly, "You haven't

heard it all!"

"I've heard enough!"

"Planet Earth, well specifically the human race was chosen, but not to be just a warning."

"What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't understand!"

I'm really annoyed now. I push my face into Eri's. "Try me," I mutter from between gritted teeth, "explain it to me!"

Eri takes a step back to regain some personal space. "It's not something that can

be explained, exactly ..."

"Oh no, of course not!" My voice sounds like a sneer even to me, "and that's because ..."

Eri cuts in, "But I could do better than that!" He looks at me questioningly, then shakes his head in resignation, "I'm going to have to show you."

I step back, fold my arms and glare at him grimly. Maybe Eri is finally taking me seriously.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

"Ready for what?"

A small smile crosses his face for a moment, and then we are surrounded by total silence.

It is just a dull ache at first. MND gives me various aches in different places all the time. This one is in the small of my back. Like a muscle strain. I straighten and stretch to ease it, but it lingers. Then it builds steadily into a gripey pain as it moves forward into my guts.

Maybe I didn't sleep right. Or probably something I've eaten. Or maybe I'm just

going down with something. It'll sort itself out, or more likely, resolve back into the all too familiar Motor Neurone Disease pain.

But it doesn't. The intensity increases until it feels as if iron fingers are gripping my insides. Tight. Then backing off a bit. Ah okay, maybe it's going now?

No! Oh ooaah. It's come back worse. Like waves of pain, squeezing and letting go, then squeezing again. I can't think about anything else for a moment. My attention momentarily returns to Eri, who is watching me closely. He's looking regretful.

I'm puzzled. Is he doing this?

When it is peaking, the sensation is overwhelming. I can't think straight. My body feels strange, somehow alien. I'm convinced now that something is definitely wrong.

"Can you stop this?" I ask.

Eri slowly shakes his head.

If this continues, I am definitely going to die. Except that I half believe I'm already dead anyway. But whatever - I can't put up with this.

Maybe I should walk a bit. I struggle to my feet. I take a pace. Then another. It's not helping. It's agonising when my feet hit the ground, and jolt my body. The pressure now is hindering my breathing. I'm panting, but not getting enough air. I fall down onto my knees. Instinctively I double over and push my hands into my abdomen, but it makes not an ounce of difference. The pain just keeps getting worse, and I'm gasping now rather than breathing.

I bury my face in my hands, to grip my head, as if that might help. But nothing

helps. And when I bring my hands away, they are dripping with sweat. I can feel it running down the sides of my face. Stop. Wait ... wait ... wait.

"Good grief!" I can't even think when the excruciation is on me. I can feel the cold sweat running down my back. My heart is pounding in my chest so much that it hurts. I have to get calm or I am going to have a heart attack. For a full minute I cannot breathe, the torture is so intense.

"Breathe, Jeffrey!" Eri's voice is authoritative.

There's something else now settling on top of the relentless attack. I'm suddenly terrified. Is this Hell? Or purgatory? Or punishment? Have we been leading up to that? Is this something I deserve? I try to avoid the jagged edges of my fear. No, it cannot be! I know I'm a pretty foul person, and done some really disgusting things, but not enough to deserve this!

A new wave of agony is building, tightening. I'm gasping. Sweating. Shaking. I double over again, my body folds and my forehead hits the ground. I scream out with

pain. What is happening?

I want to beg Eri to make it stop, but there's no time even to think before another wave of pain hits me. I let out a growl. It's anger and anguish and pleading. Something is very clearly, very wrong. This isn't just an upset stomach. Fool I was to think it might be. I'm finished now. I am going to pass out. I try to lift my head to look at Eri or my grandmother, but this monster forces my forehead back down into the dirt. My back muscles are going into cramp. I have to try to move. But the

pain only increases. I cannot carry on, and yet it doesn't stop! And I am still conscious. What is this searing twisting beast trying to tear me apart? I howl - a primitive guttural cry. My throat is raw from screaming. My chest aches sickeningly. My fingernails dig into my palms. As soon as I get a little air in my lungs, the pressure forces it back out. The edges of my vision are going black and I'm spinning. Spinning ...

---oOo---

Grandmother looks at the unmoving form curled up on the ground, then up at Eri.

"Just give him a minute. It's fine. He's not feeling anything right now!" he says, as if he were witnessing a case of hiccups.

Grandmother frowns and shakes her head.

"Well he said he really, really wanted to know," there is an unusually defensive tone to Eri's voice that she has not heard before. He tips his head on one side and raises his eyebrows.

---oOo---

I come to, and hear what Eri just said. I'm still panting, but the pain has completely gone. Apart from several badly pulled

muscles in my back. There is no stomach pain. My guts seem to be intact. My breathing slowly reverts to something like normal. There's blood on one of my palms.

Eri crouches down and looks closely at me. He puts his arm around my shoulder.

"You're okay now. It's not coming back."

"What was that?" I gasp.

"Tell him, my dear," Eri says, looking at my grandmother.

"That, Jeffrey, is what it feels like to have a baby..."

I stop. My mother went through that? Tamsin? Melissa? Good God!

"... but," she continues, "of course, you missed out on the best part. Holding that tiny child with it's face and eyelashes and fingers and toes, and hearing that first cry that proclaims a new life."

I stare from one to the other ... what on earth?? ...

Eri's voice is calm and controlled, "You have experienced what a young naive girl may go through, who has no idea that she is having a baby. Of course the experience

feels terrifying, uncontrollable, but most importantly ..." he pauses, "... it feels wrong."

"But it's not of course," cuts in my Grandmother.

"Well ... um..." Eri nods his head from side to side for a moment, then lets it pass.

"So why did you put me through that?" I demand.

"There are two places in the writings that you are surely familiar with, from your years of paying close attention to preachers in church," Eri says with a trace of a sparkle

in his eyes. "Places that highlight just how painful it is to be in labour!" Eri's face is otherwise deadpan, but I'm sure he knows full well I did my best to detach and be mentally elsewhere at sermon-time.

"Go on," I say.

"The first is the story of Eve."

"Eve?"

"Yes, Adam and Eve Eve!"

"Oh, that Eve."

"Just after she confessed to eating the forbidden fruit, she was told in no

uncertain terms, 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children.'"

He looks at me to make sure I'm listening to *his* sermon anyway!

"Very severe," he repeats. "Painful." He pauses, then, "The second is what Paul wrote to his friends in Rome ..."

"Paul?"

Eri rolls his eyes and looks at me in mock reproach, "You really concentrated on not listening didn't you!"

"I got it down to a tee," I said proudly, then I told Eri that all I ever heard from those preacher guys was complete nonsense. I can't recall the actual word I used, but it wasn't 'nonsense', of course.

"I grant you much of it was, well, not really quite the business, but you missed this - Paul told his friends that he knew the whole of creation was in agony, and that was..." he slows down to emphasize the point, "that was the ... Agony. Of. Childbirth!"

I narrow my eyes. He can see I'm not

exactly following.

"Okay! Let me spell it out for you, Jeffrey, since you're struggling to understand!" Eri says it totally flat, as if the words were not pretty offensive. And he's smiling! "This cosmos, this bloody mess as you called it earlier, is pregnant with the Kingdom of Heaven. It's in labour."

I try to get my head around that.

Eri slows down, "The whole point of the suffering of labour, which fifty percent of the world's population directly experiences is to explain ...", he slows down even more,

"... to explain. The. Suffering. In. The. World."

A light goes on.

"I get it!" I say.

"You don't get it!" he fires back. He shakes his head slowly, looking at me pityingly, "You don't get it, Jeffrey! You might get the pain, but you absolutely don't get the baby! You cannot even begin to comprehend ..."

Grandma jumps in, "Slow down a bit. He's doing his best."

Eri switches his gaze to Grandma.

"Yeah, well, his mind is nowhere near focussed enough, nor his brain big enough, nor his spirit strong enough. I can see him ..." Eri is shaking his head while he's talking, getting frustrated. He stops, drops his gaze, and continues after a pause in a quieter voice. "His thoughts about the coming Kingdom is like comparing ..." Eri stops. He swivels his exasperated glare to me.

"Perhaps lighten up a bit," murmurs my grandmother.

Eri shakes his head resignedly, "What are

your interests, Jeffrey?"

I'm thrown by this non-sequitur. "What!?"

I shake my head.

"What are you interested in? What subjects? Do you have any hobbies?" he demands.

"Cars, I suppose?" I reply. Even I can hear it sounds a bit lame.

His shoulders drop, he spreads his hands and looks at me steadily. "Please! Give me something to work with!"

I frantically try to think of something

cleverer to say. "Astronomy!" I say triumphantly. "I've got a telescope ..." I trail off into a hopeful silence.

Eri says "Fine!" like he is confronting an idiot. "I'll go with that."

He thinks for half a second, then resumes, "In your head, you have a finger painting done by a three year old. Of a Sun. An incomplete wobbly almost-circle, with six or seven fat lines coming out of it. It's yellow. Of course!"

He looks at me with anticipation, but a fleeting look of pitying disappointment

slips across his face before he can mask it.

I find this pretty irritating. I really have no clue where he's leading. I say, "Uh?"

"Okay. Your best concept is the yellow wobbly circle with lines, whereas in fact the Sun is a G2V main-sequence star, 4.6839 billion years old, made 98% of hydrogen and helium in the ratio three to one. Nuclear fusion of hydrogen at the core releases electromagnetic radiation and neutrinos. It weighs 1.989×10^{30} kg and shines at 3.828×10^{23} Kilowatts. Temperature at the centre is 15.749275

million degrees Centigrade, at the surface it's 5778."

He pauses to take a breath. Then continues.

"Let me tell you about the mathematical structure of the magnetic field which is responsible for solar ..."

"Stop!" I cut in. "I understand."

"What?"

"Your point."

"Which is?"

"That I don't understand." I suddenly feel very tired.

Grandma shrugs.

Eri puts his hand on my shoulder, and takes a softer tone, "Let's take a different tack, because we went down this road with a guy called Job. The best we could do was to get him to confront how little he understood. How incomprehensible were the things that he could actually see. Every day. In the natural world. What was right in front of him."

I can see Eri is about to launch into another lengthy, passionate, and animated discourse. I hold both hands up in

surrender. "Sorry, not now!" I interrupt before he can get started. "I am totally knackered!"

"He never had a baby before," my grandma murmurs with half a smile.

"Of course," Eri's tone is more conciliatory, "but I would just like to point out one thing. When the baby arrives, the pain is forgotten ..."

A pause.

Then Grandma clears her throat meaningfully.

" ... Okay," he concedes, "maybe not forgotten, but I happen to know that pretty much every woman on the planet thinks that the pain was very definitely worth it."

"Right," I say.

"Out of all the places in the heavens, the earth and it's people were chosen not as a warning! Not as a warning to others but as the place and the people within whom the new heaven and the new earth would be conceived and delivered."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 51

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2009.

Farhiya's assigned room was in the north wing of the old house, on the first floor. All south-facing rooms had been transformed into spacious offices. This part of the building, refurbished but sparingly furnished, had been kept clean, dry, and simply repainted. Though comfortable, the room resembled a budget motel—except

the door only locked from the outside, and the window, looking out onto the garden, was secured with two fixed cable stays.

When Bjorn entered, he immediately noticed Farhiya was upset. She sat on the edge of the bed, rocking slightly, her face flushed, eyes red from crying. His heart sank. She was around the same age as his own daughter. She looked up, a glimmer of hope mingling with fear in her eyes, and he managed a small, forced smile. But he already felt he was treading into dangerous waters, unsure how much deeper he was

willing to go.

Holding up his phone, Bjorn showed her a translated message on the screen:

"Hello Farhiya. I am Bjorn."

As she began to respond, he gently raised his hand, touching his mouth with three fingers to signal silence, then tapped the microphone icon on the screen, smiling and nodding for her to speak into it. He held the phone closer.

She murmured something too softly for the phone to register. Bjorn leaned forward, cupping his hand to his ear and

encouraging her with a gesture. She spoke a little louder, "As-salamu alaykum."

The phone displayed:

"Peace be upon you."

Bjorn had practised this response, so he attempted it aloud, though his Arabic was nearly unintelligible, "Wa alaykum as-salam."

Farhiya's face crumpled as tears welled up again, and she started speaking in rapid Arabic. Seeing her distress, Bjorn held up his hands, feigning confusion, and shook his head before pointing to the phone.

"What has upset you? Is it your friends?"

"I don't have friends. Not here."

"Then what is it?"

Farhiya looked down, visibly ashamed, her shoulders slumping as fresh tears began to fall. She shook her head fiercely and turned away, hiding her face.

"Is it about the money?"

At this, her body stiffened, and her crying grew louder. She bent forward, covering her face with her hands. Bjorn sighed, slowly typing on his phone before pressing

‘Translate.'

"Please tell me. I am in a position of authority here. I am sure I can help you."

She read the message, her gaze shifting to him with a look of deep resentment and bitterness. She stood abruptly, her face contorted in anger, and launched into a heated stream of Arabic, her tone sharp and accusing. Her words became louder, more staccato, as she jabbed her finger into Bjorn's chest in time with the last few words, her anger unmistakable.

Bjorn, bewildered, raised his hands in

surrender, eyebrows high with uncertainty. Finally, Farhiya snatched the phone, pressed the microphone icon, and, with cold precision, enunciated, "Ana ḥāmil."

Bjorn's eyes dropped to the phone screen as the words translated to: "I'm pregnant."

Bjorn realised, with a nauseous clarity, that Simon wasn't the only one who had seen these girls as nothing more than resources for a research project—objects, not people. Guilt surged through him, filling the hollow spaces left by months of avoidance and denial. He sank heavily onto the bed,

running his fingers through his thinning grey hair. "Don't worry," he murmured softly, "we'll take care of you." But a shudder went through him as Simon's casual heartlessness replayed in his mind, along with the unspoken threat that loomed over Farhiya's life.

Bjorn cleared his throat, his mind returning to the purpose of his visit. "Farhiya," he said, holding up his phone.

"I need to talk to you about all the money that you brought with you."

Farhiya nodded, staring at him with

hooded eyes. He continued through the phone's translation app.

"I need to know how you came by the money. Where did it come from?"

"From Allah," she replied simply, though now, even that didn't feel so clear.

Bjorn's eyebrows raised, and he looked at her, uncertain. Farhiya met his gaze evenly, as though her answer were self-evident.

"From Allah?" he repeated, frowning.

"All good things come from Allah," she said, her inner confusion masked by the

rolling Arabic rhythm of interwoven vowels and consonants.

Bjorn hesitated, thrown off balance by her apparent steady conviction. She seemed to take this as permission to continue, her voice low and trembling. "I had a plan to work, but this is Allah's plan. It is better."

"And what is Allah's plan?"

"To provide for my grandparents, my sister, and my brother."

Bjorn leaned in, his voice softening. "Not your parents?"

Her face hardened. "The Shabaab slaughtered them, along with many of my friends. But I trust Allah to have kept the rest of my family alive. I know they must be hungry. Allah's intention is to support them with this money." She spoke defiantly, then realising she was mentally daring Allah to have failed again, fell silent beneath a wave of unhappiness.

Bjorn took a breath, keeping his tone gentle. "The money is in my keeping now, under my control," he said, showing her the screen.

Farhiya shook her head slowly. "No, it is with Allah."

Bjorn blinked, feeling the tension loosen in his mind, confusion dissolving into something clearer. "How did you intend to transfer the money to your grandparents?"

"By direct bank transfer every month."

Bjorn nearly laughed at the absurdity. A divine plan orchestrated through bank transfers? Spirituality, to his mind, was all mystical nonsense, whispers and fog as unreliable as ectoplasm - it certainly did not involve electronic banking.

"And do you have the account details?"

Without missing a beat, she recited the sort code and account number, then took the mobile from his hand and typed the amount: $500.

At last, Bjorn felt a small surge of purpose. He stood, nodding as he typed.

"Fine. I will set up the transfer."

Farhiya glanced at the screen, then dipped her head in silent thanks, her expression unchanging as though Allah had simply fulfilled His part.

"How will you know it's received?"

She provided the email address of a local teacher she trusted, and Bjorn committed it to memory, still taken aback by the demeanour of the girl.

----oOo----

Bjorn decided to deposit the cash as a lump sum into a holding account, to be done with it. As an international finance director, he knew a single transaction could avoid money laundering flags, with a simple written explanation of the currency sources. With most non-dollar amounts

being minor, this would be easy to justify.

Setting up the monthly payments was straightforward, too. Money laundering alerts trigger at $10,000 in most countries, but for Somalia, anything over $5,000 could draw attention. He set the amount at $2,500, labelled as "Family Support," and emailed the teacher with instructions to notify him only if any month's payment failed to arrive.

Then he tried to forget about the future and to tell himself that he was doing the right thing.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 52

Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2010.

It was all rather peculiar. Jeffrey's serious symptoms that had developed in prison were successfully treated by Nexarion Therapeutics, and he was grateful for that. Yet, the Motor Neurone Disease persisted. After just over a year with Nexarion, they decided to discharge him back to Albany to serve his final year. Adjusting to a cramped

prison cell and the restricted food options was hard, but he made use of the prison library's fast internet to research his condition.

He delved into familial Motor Neurone Disease, tracing its link to the faulty SOD1 gene, which blocked the production of the SOD enzyme. He followed the disease pathway from the absence of SuperOxide Dismutase to the build-up of damaging SuperOxide free radicals and the resulting motor nerve damage. Soon, he was swimming in statistics, probabilities,

geographical distributions, and related conditions. He noted, intriguingly, that a nearly identical genetic error caused SOD enzyme deficiency and Degenerative Myelopathy in dogs—but no other animals.

Reflecting on his time at Nexarion, he recalled a period when they had wanted samples of his body fluids, though they soon lost interest. Once his severe symptoms subsided, they stopped monitoring him entirely—no pulse checks, no blood pressure, no strength tests. They

seemed to give up on him, though he remained in their facility for nine more months.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that he was missing something. There had to be reasons, a bigger picture that made sense of it.

"Follow the money" had always served him well—in the second-hand car trade, the prison drug trade, and now, on what the internet revealed about Nexarion Therapeutics. He noted the parent company, Nexarion PLC, and scanned a

ten-year share price graph. It had risen steadily, with a sharp increase seven years earlier. Curious, he reviewed the profitability of their subsidiaries, finding nothing unusual at Nexarion Fitness. But Nexarion Veterinary Supplies—the subsidiary responsible for that sharp profit spike—stood out. On their product list, a therapy for Degenerative Myelopathy in dogs caught his eye.

By the time his seven-year sentence was up, he was convinced that Nexarion Therapeutics was researching a gene

therapy for MND.

Accordingly he decided to rent a room in what had been the old George and Dragon Hotel in Blandford. At the time, the building had been repurposed as cheap accommodation for those in financial difficulty, or simply seeking a fresh start. There was a warden at the front desk most times of the day since many of the residents were in sheltered accommodation.

Over his time in prison, he'd built a network of contacts on the outside: people who could help him find gainful

employment, a place to stay, or financial advice, as well as those who could pick a lock, supply gear, or provide muscle.

Helpfully, the planning application for change of use of the Hartington Estate House was publicly available, including a detailed architect's plan of all floors.

That's how, on Christmas morning at 2:30 a.m., the alarm came to be silenced, a cellar trapdoor prised open, and the cameras turned blind. And how Jeffrey found himself sitting in front of Simon's laptop in Simon's office chair at Nexarion

Therapeutics.

He'd already rifled through the desk drawers and seen that all documents were stored electronically. Unable to guess the password, he simply slipped the laptop, power cord, and cordless mouse (why not?) into his rucksack and exited.

Once clear of the building, he dumped his latex gloves, facemask, boiler suit, and shoes into a bin bag, rolled it tight, taped it shut, put it inside another bag, and stashed it with the laptop. He donned trainers and jogged back to his bedsit in the old Crown.

While the country sat down to Christmas dinner, Jeffrey plugged in his Kali Linux bootable memory stick, hoping a brute-force attack would crack it. His script laboriously churned through over three and a half million passwords, but the bcrypt hashing algorithm made him wait nine hours before telling him it wouldn't work.

It was late, and Jeffrey decided to see if Boxing Day would bring any nice surprises. By 10:00 AM, he had located the little china oil diffuser. He squeezed superglue

into the dish and lit the tea light before carefully placing it at the bottom of his landlady's wardrobe. On the shelf directly above, he placed the laptop. Within 30 minutes, the cyanoacrylate fumes had adhered to the greasy fingerprints on the laptop, leaving behind delicate white traces. Using tape, he lifted four excellent prints and about six slightly smudged ones. Knowing that fingerprint sensors are sophisticated, Jeffrey employed GIMP software to merge, correct, and enhance the final print.

When he applied the print to Simon's laptop sensor, he whispered, "Open Sesame!" And it worked.

The first Boxing Day surprise? A folder with project details was right on the desktop, and it was unencrypted. Clearly, Simon was more of a businessman than a technologist.

As Jeffrey read through the profiles of the three girls, his heart raced with a mix of astonishment and excitement. There were separate risk assessments relating to each of three teenage girls. That was puzzling; in

the 14 months he'd spent at Hartington, he had never seen a trace of any of them . What had happened to them? He continued poring over the minutes from meetings before his arrival and reviews of his own attitude toward treatment, each line stirring a complex mix of nostalgia and confusion.

He consulted the checklist he had prepared weeks ago, his mood gradually lifting with each step. The next item was "Show Hidden Files." With a flicker of hope, he selected the menu, and two encrypted

folders appeared simply entitled "S" and "V". Holding his breath, he reran the brute force Python script. This time, one of the passwords matched. The "S" folder opened to reveal slightly more than a hundred Word documents.

Checking the time, he sighed, then got up to locate a cold burger he had bought on Christmas Eve. He opened a bottle of red wine, pouring a generous glass. As he settled down to read, the warmth of the wine mirrored the growing anticipation in his chest, a feeling he hadn't experienced in

a long time.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 53

Somewhere. Coma day 9.

"That's all well and good," I protest, a bitter edge creeping into my voice. "But it's just a pipe dream, all that good stuff. In my experience, when things seem to start coming together, and life stops battering you, what's actually happening is life has just wandered off to fetch a bigger stick. My life is just a doom loop of escalating

disasters!"

"Yes, it is." Eri replies. He's slowly nodding in agreement. "It would probably be better if you just gave up."

I frown, startled. "What?!"

"Give up."

"What do you mean?"

"A while back," Eri begins, his voice low, "I came across a young guy who had hit rock bottom. He was living on the street, scraping by in the strangest way - feeding pigs, of all things."

"Feeding pigs?" I echo, astonished. The thought turns my stomach. But then I realise that I'm not worth much more than that myself.

""Yes, that's all he could find. He wasn't fit for anything else. His clothes were rags, he hadn't washed in weeks. He was a wreck, body and soul.

"I asked him how it had come to this, and his story was tragic. He'd come from a rich family, made off with his share of the inheritance, and lived it up in the city. You know the sort - parties, women, drugs,

friends flocking all around him. But the money ran out, and so did the friends.

"When I found him, he was starving. His arms and legs were like sticks, and there was nothing in his eyes. Much longer and he would have died.

"So I said, 'Give it up! Go home.' "

"And did he?"

"At first, he protested," Eri continued. "Swore his father would never take him back, convinced the door had slammed shut. But I told him he had no choice. If he stayed where he was, he wouldn't survive

the winter."

"And then?"

"He went home!"

"How did that go?"

"Astonishing actually. You would have expected a kind of grudging forgiveness. After all, few fathers would let their kids starve. But this father was in a different league.

"When the kid got within a few hundred yards of home, his father spotted him. Turns out he had been watching, on and

off, for months. And the father came out of the house running like crazy and threw his arms around him."

"No!"

"And remember - this guy reeked. I mean he stank to high heaven! But the father didn't care. Months earlier, he'd already bought new clothes for him, had a gold ring ready—like a symbol of his forgiveness. Then he threw a massive barbecue. The whole family showed up. Even the neighbours came."

"Oh, I bet the kid loved that!"

Eri laughed, "I met him later. He told me that the barbecue had been acutely embarrassing, because of everybody's awkward questions. But what had astonished him was his father's reaction. Instead of rejection, he was totally accepted! And get this - all without a single word of blame.

"His father made it very clear that the only thing that mattered was that the relationship had been fixed. That's all he cared about."

Eri looks directly at me for a moment, and I

can see his mind working. He knows I'm a mess. And I am. I'm a lost cause. It is a nice story but ...

Eri interrupts my thoughts, "God the Father is like that."

"What do you mean?"

"A man who knew him pretty well once said that the more we screw things up, and the worse we are, the more he reaches out to us in love."

I don't believe that for a second. Everybody I know who has ever talked about God has been very clear - he, supposedly, is holy and

pure and is going to sit in judgement on me. On that basis, I'm dead in the water.

But Eri continues, "So the good news Jeffrey is that you're an ideal candidate."

It is certainly true that I've screwed up more than most people. And it's obvious, if I am honest, that I am just a sad bitter angry old git.

"Yes, you are," Eri says.

Is he reading my thoughts?! "I am what?" I ask.

"The ideal candidate," he fires back, with a

twinkle in his eye.

"So does that mean it doesn't matter what I do? Or what I've done?"

"Oh, don't fall into that trap. Every choice echoes through time. But not in the way you think. The consequence is not you standing in a courtroom awaiting some arbitrary punishment.

"Instead, think about it in terms of something organic, like a fruit tree. Where what you do makes a difference to who you are. Who you become. And how you grow, develop."

Eri looks at me earnestly, "What you do matters because it affects how you develop, and after all the rubbish has been dumped, how much of you is left! Because it is only what is genuinely you that can be transformed."

I don't really get what he's saying. What is this 'transformed' business. I would ask about that, but I have another question.

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Chapter 54

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2010.

Farhiya stared empty eyed out of the window. Everything was different now. The air was cold. The sky a relentless grey. The food she ate was unfamiliar. The faces around her blank and unknowable. Even her own body felt strange - uncomfortable, acidic, wracked by waves of nausea. *How has Allah allowed this to happen?*

A fresh wave of doubt surged as she retched painfully into the basin. Did Allah care about her? Why had she ever believed that he did? Her parents had trusted Allah to keep them safe, and they had been cut down by the bullets of men who believed they were doing Allah's work. She wrestled with her beliefs, but they refused to bend enough to fit the life she'd known.

She ran her fingers through her long hair finding it damp with bile. She grimaced. What was her experience of Allah? *How does He show himself to be a compassionate*

powerful God in my life, she asked herself. The thought came softly at first—a faint desire to open the Quran. It wasn't the time for it, but the urge became irresistible. Quietly, she stated her intention to study, to dwell upon its words, and to be obedient to Allah. She then ran fresh water into the bowl and ritually washed hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, head, ears and feet in careful reverence. It felt very good to be fresh and clean again. She unrolled the prayer mat, then took her mother's fabric strip with the words 'Al-Razzaq' and placed

it face up on the mat where her forehead would rest. She retrieved the Quran from its place of honour - the highest point in the room atop the wardrobe. Kneeling low to the ground, she began with Ta'awwudh and Basmala, seeking refuge from Satan and honouring Allah.

The wudu ritual had brought her to a fragile peace. The room settled into silence. Unsure where to begin, she placed her trust in Allah to guide her hands and opened the book.

Her eyes widened with dread as they fell

onto the page. It had opened at Surah Al-Ma'idah. And there at 5:51 was a verse she had read many times before, though now it cut like glass. This time the words were alive. This time they spoke about someone she knew.

Obedient to the tradition, she felt compelled to read it aloud. Her voice, barely a whisper, trembled as she repeated the words, "Do not take the Jews and Christians as allies ..."

She had always been taught that this specifically forbade a Muslim from relying

or placing any dependence on a Christian. *Haven't I done exactly that?* she thought fearfully. Her life, her experience, was colliding painfully with her belief. She remembered how Al-Shabaab had wielded verses like weapons, razing her village in what they saw as Allah's work. And even in her own community, a quiet belief lingered —that Allah would punish Shia Muslims in Hell for their errors.

If Allah was indeed guiding her, then he had pulled her violently from her world, forcing her to live beside and rely on a non-

Muslim. He had shown her a group of men who, in their fervour to honour the Quran were heartless and violent. And he had made her realise that she had assumed that what one believed could decide one's fate, irrespective of the way one behaved.

She tried to silence the rebellious thoughts but they defied her. Why had He allowed wicked men to make her pregnant, shattering her life? She was distressed beyond measure, as the cold brutal reality of her situation crystallised, and her belief in Allah, compassionate and powerful,

began to dissolve.

But this was who she was! Without Allah, life was meaningless. Her simple faith, the faith of her father and mother - how could she leave it? No. Her grandparents were trusting Allah surely and ... well, what were they? Had they starved to death?

She looked down at the book in her hands. "I trusted you." Her voice was thin, and questioning. What was happening? Where were these crazy thoughts coming from. "I trusted you" she repeated tremulously.

Then came the question she hadn't dared

to form: *By you, do I mean the book... or the god?*

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Chapter 55

George and Dragon Hotel, Blandford Forum, Dorset. 2010.

Jeffrey surfaced, eyes aching from the relentless reading, yet he couldn't tear himself away. Each document seemed darker, more fascinatingly horrifying than the last.

Most of the reports related to surgical procedures—some on dogs, some on

humans. Many had clunky translations from Russian or Chinese, but the majority originated within Nexarion PLC itself. A cold dread settled over Jeffrey as he found direct evidence that Nexarion had conducted illegal surgeries involving germ-line DNA modifications. He read, heart pounding, as the records detailed initial operations on subjects labelled 'Girl X' and 'Girl Y'—all overseen by Clive.

But the most chilling report was of the final surgery on 'Girl Z'. The procedure involved a delicate CRISPR-based gene editing

technique, fine-tuned through Clive's earlier practice with the other two girls. The records stated that, after deliberation, the team had decided Clive would handle the operation on Girl Z alone.

Jeffrey's stomach twisted as he read about the pre-operative steps. Girl Z had been administered a series of hormone injections, and they'd used Rohypnol to ensure she'd remember nothing that might later prompt "inconvenient questions." They had employed a trans-vaginal ultrasound to visualize her ovaries, then

inserted a thin needle through the vaginal wall to retrieve the eggs from her follicles. Jeffrey felt a strange, sick pull to keep reading, even as he imagined the scene unfolding.

The editing involved two main components: an RNA guide molecule to find the DNA target and a Cas9 protein to cut it. Mixed with the eggs in a sterile dish, the CRISPR components were then subjected to brief electric shocks, creating pores in the eggs' membranes to allow the edits to take effect. Clive had checked the

edited sequence using Sanger sequencing before fertilising ten of the edited eggs with sperm. Finally, three embryos were transferred back into the girl. Seven hours —she had been sedated for seven hours.

Jeffrey's traced the chilling words again. Slowly the pieces came together in a grotesque realization - it was his sperm. They had used his DNA to fertilize the edited eggs. A wave of nausea and fury surged through him. He leaned back and took a deep breath, letting it out in long shaky sigh, as he stared at the incriminating

words on the screen.

Jeffrey slowly stood and in a daze, walked unsteadily across to his fridge. He yanked open the door, grabbed a cold beer, and prised it open with trembling hands, the cold drink foaming over his fingers. He sat down heavily on the bed, pressing the bottle to his lips and gulping, welcoming the chilling bitterness. For a while, he sat immobile, staring empty-eyed at the floor.

But the laptop screen beckoned him from the desk across the room. He tried to ignore it, but knew there were more horrors

waiting for him. The glow was insistent. One moment he was hunched on the bed panting slightly, the next he found himself back at the screen, clicking on the other folder - "V".

There were around thirty videos. Jeffrey hesitated, feeling unable to face them all. But surely, he thought, he could check just one or two. Torn and uncertain, his fingers moved almost of their own accord, clicking on the first video.

It wasn't at all what he'd expected. The lighting was dim, the camera angle skewed,

and the entire scene seemed slightly off-centre. In a conference room, Simon sat with Juan - whom Jeffrey had met - and two other men. From the poor setup, it was clear this had been recorded covertly. The conversation was dry and monotonous, and soon the video ended without incident.

Puzzled, Jeffrey tried the next one, and then another. Each video followed a similar pattern: a meeting, lengthy discussions, some of it heated. After five or six more, he realised that Simon had routinely recorded the project meetings in secret. And in each

one, Simon took care to get a clear agreement from all attendees on the project's decisions.

Jeffrey leaned back, thinking. Maybe ...? Yes, surely Simon was systematically documenting their complicity in the illegal project—keeping evidence of their shared decisions. It was insurance, a fail-safe against anyone who might try to back out. Calculating and ruthless, Simon had planned for everything.

Impatient now, Jeffrey clicked on the most recent video. The project team were

discussing their latest findings. He leaned in, trying to catch every word. Slowly, he began to piece together a chilling truth—the tone of their conversation implied that Girl Z was pregnant? No! She had already given birth. He felt a chill run down his spine as he grasped the implications. No, it couldn't be, he thought, shaking his head slightly. But as he listened more closely, the reality settled over him like a weight.

His heart raced, and he struggled to breathe as it became clear they were talking about *his child*. They planned to raise the baby

until he was one year old, but there was an unsettling silence about what would happen after that, leaving an ominous gap in their plans.

Confusion alternated with dread as he tried to get his head around the information. If the experiment succeeded, they might develop a therapy for Motor Neurone Disease. But it was clear they could not market it until the law surrounding germ-line gene modification changed. Jeffrey tried to figure out when that change was likely to come, but he couldn't focus.

Lingering thoughts of Girl Z and the child - *his child* - churned through his mind.

His fists clenched, anxiety knotting in his stomach. The girl was undoubtedly at risk, but she was probably safe for a few more weeks while breastfeeding. The child, however, was definitely secure for, what? He checked the date on the video file. He calculated another ten months. It seems they wanted to observe how the child's immune system responded to the faulty MND cells in its body.

Taking a deep breath, Jeffrey allowed

himself to relax slightly. The child is safe, he reassured himself. Surely the company would provide the best healthcare to protect their investment. Yet he couldn't shake the fact that he had never seen the girl.

He walked back to the bed and grabbed the unfinished beer from the floor, the cold bottle shaking in his hand. He sank onto the edge of the bed, his thoughts racing. A dawning realisation began to take shape—he could leverage this situation to his advantage. He had successfully blackmailed

Jits before, but blackmailing a corporation? The paltry few thousand he had extracted from Jits would be absolutely dwarfed by what he could prise out of Nexarion. The rewards were way higher, but then so were the potential risks. But the more he considered it, the more he became convinced he could play in the big league. He would simply have to be very careful. And very analytical. And very meticulous.

Suddenly, an image flashed through his mind—the unknown girl cradling his child, her face radiating love and care as she

looked down at the baby. He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing the vision away. She's safe, he told himself. For sure, they'd keep her to look after the baby. Pushing his concern for her aside, he focused on how to expedite the blackmail.

There had been plenty of valuable lessons in prison about how fastidious successful criminals needed to be. He smirked ruefully, recalling the seasoned inmates who had ended up there despite their skills. I can do this, he thought, a flicker of determination igniting within him. I know

I can.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 56

Somewhere. Coma day 9.

I look back up at Eri again. I'm in pain, and I'm tired of trying to figure everything out, but I can't stop myself. "I have another question. Why are we humans even *allowed* to make choices which are so often disastrous?"

Then again, considering that neither my

son Kai's choices, nor my attempts at coercing him led to anything much positive, maybe I've just answered my own question.

Eri looks at me thoughtfully for a moment, sensing that the question stems from genuine concern.

"First of all," he begins, "are you comfortable now with the notion that this is a construction?"

I say, "Yes, I suppose so," although my mouth is turned down and I am shaking my head as I say it.

Eri smiles, "So it won't spook you out if we change the scenery a bit?"

"As long as it doesn't hurt, do whatever you want!" I retort, "But I can't handle another torture session!"

"Excellent!"

Before I have a chance to take a breath, I find I'm not on the floor any more. I'm sitting on a wooden swivel stool with what appears to be a little hand loom on the right and a spinning wheel on the left. It's a bit of a strain with all my historical trauma weighing me down, but it's manageable. By

my side, there's a box filled with a huge variety of fibres of different thicknesses and colours and textures.

"Pick one," Eri says, "and spin it into thread, then use it as the first thread in your tapestry."

"My tapestry?"

"Yes, just start. For the sake of the exercise, you'll find you have all the necessary skills. Take care though! You don't want to be falling asleep for a hundred years if you prick your finger ..."

He spots my confused face and trails off

into silence for a moment. Then he shakes his head and says, "Just a joke. I guess you had to be there!"

This time, I get the joke and retort, "You were there? Yeah! That figures."

Then I root around in the box and pick a fluffy light green fibre that looks like wool. I'm surprised to find that I can spin it well enough, and I do make a fairly decent job of it. In retrospect, it's a bit bright for a first weft thread. The warp is already set up, but I check the tension anyway (to my own surprise), and weave it in. I make to

pick up a second fibre. My grandmother puts her hand on my arm to slow me down.

Eri points out, "So you had a choice. Then you made a decision. Then you took action."

My grandmother nods and with a serious expression says, "Choices force decisions which are followed by actions."

It feels a bit like being back in primary school, but I suppose I have to humour them. I look at the fibre box again, and this time pick a thinner darker fibre. Once I've spun it, I can see that it is always going to

be weak and irregular. I am about to discard it, but Eri stops me.

"Sorry, you made your decision. Now you have to weave it." His tone implies it's mandatory.

I feel somewhat belittled, and it is rather tiresome. I weave it in. It snaps off short. I weave in the final three inches or so. It looks a mess.

I continue in this fashion trying to pick by colour sometimes and by thread strength sometimes, and get into a bit of a rhythm. The fabric starts to take shape. It isn't what

I wanted, and anyone can see it's not pretty.

I am about a third of the way through the box of fibres when Eri stops me again. I've done about eight inches of twenty inch wide tapestry. I'm quite impressed with myself, even though anyone can see it will probably end up in the bin!

He says, "So you've got a kind of rhythm going - you've settled into a workable behaviour."

Grandma echoes "Choices force decisions ... resulting in actions which become behaviour."

I turn on the stool to Eri who has been watching over my shoulder. "I don't really want to do this any more."

He puts his hand on my arm and says, "Look, I know you feel a bit patronised, but just humour us a bit longer."

I frown and squash my mouth into a disapproving grimace. I top it off with a resigned puff out through my nose just so they know this is costing me. "Okay," I say. "Under protest."

"Good man!" says Eri. "So how are you going to proceed from here on. You've got

about twice as much again to do."

"Well, just keep going, I suppose."

"Are you happy with the fabric so far?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"Well anyone can see that even assuming you can ignore the lumpy texture and the broken threads and the inconsistent thread size, the colour choice is a bit random, and the design is not very clear."

"Oh!? There's a design?" Eri says with raised eyebrows and a grin. But he is just

winding me up, "Chill, Jeffrey! I can see it is a dog. And it's not too bad actually."

He's either blind, or lying, or inordinately considerate.

"I'm just going to carry on then," I say, encouraged.

"You could choose a bit more carefully looking ahead more, and you could spin slower, and control the tension with a bit more effort," my grandmother advises.

"No, I don't think so. I'll just finish it off, and then we can talk if you like. No doubt there's a moral coming up." I verbally

italicise the word 'moral'.

For a moment, sadness crosses Eri's face, then he smiles, lifts his eyebrows and nods for me to continue.

I rattle away at it. The quality improves a little but not much. Largely because I'm doing the same thing over and over. After five minutes or so, Eri stops me.

"Note what's happened. You've now got into a habit on every part of the process - how long to decide, what fibres to prefer, how slowly to spin the thread ..." Eri rolls his hand in a circle to indicate an etcetera.

"There's no hurry to finish, but okay, carry on."

After another ten minutes or so, the box of fibres is empty, and my tapestry is a couple of feet long now. There is definitely a kind of dog shape! The stick on the ground looks like a grey sausage. The background grass and trees are a muddy green mess. I never expected any better than this anyway. I swivel my chair back around to indicate I'm done.

Eri smiles broadly and nods encouragement. "Very good!" he says, and

strangely he seems to mean it.

"A couple more points to take away. By the time you were halfway through, your behaviour had set you up with a pretty firm mindset of the way things would pan out. You had mentally compromised on the quality of work at a point you could live with, and given the same choices, you were repeating the same decisions, action and behaviour. What has gone before tends to be repeated - the quality, the attention, the skill, the pattern." Eri turns to my grandmother, "What do you say, Effie?"

She smiles as if I'm her favourite grandson.

Maybe I am - or was?

"Choices force decisions, which are followed by actions," she repeats, then adds, "and actions become behaviour creating habits which mould your mindset."

I nod. It makes sense.

"As night follows day, one thing leads to another." She continues, slicing the air with her hand on each word, Choices. Decisions. Actions. Behaviour. Habits. Mindset. Character. Destiny."

"Oh," I say. I didn't see the last two coming.

"Can you see now that that is exactly what has happened? Do you remember the choices, Jeffrey?" she says quietly.

My mind drifts back to the choices I faced and the decisions I made. The image of my father crawling across the floor in agony haunts me—the poison I fed him folding him into a fetal position, a mix of pain and the bittersweet taste of vengeance intertwining. I shake my head, desperate to clear my thoughts, but it's futile. Just as one memory fades, another rushes in—my

rage over the tragedy of losing my son, culminating in my brutal assault on my stepson, Nick.

Horrifyingly, I relive the thrill as my blows struck his head, face, and neck. In that moment, I could have chosen differently; the clarity of that truth pushes into my chest like a dagger. And look at the consequences of those first, foolish decisions, I chastise myself.

Then there was blackmail—I learned the dark art with Jits, enforcing payments with the threat that left him scarred for life. And

even though that had such a disastrous consequence, foolishly, I repeated the whole sorry affair with Nexarion. I see it now: moments where I could have walked a different path, woven a different thread into the fabric of my life.

Eri gently lifts the tapestry from the little loom. He looks at me seriously, and says, "I can only take what you have made."

It is destined for the bin. I know it.

But as it slips through his fingers, the colours seem to glow, and the fabric begins to shrink until it's just a small square, no

more than two inches across. At this size, the stitches become impossibly fine, and the image sharpens into vivid detail. It's Whisper, unmistakably in the glade, with a stick at his feet. But it's more than that. He looks almost alive—there's a gleam in his eye, and the slight blur on his tail gives the impression of an excited wag. In Eri's hands, the tapestry is utterly transformed.

He passes it to me, and as I hold it, my heart beats faster. I'm overjoyed, but there's an unspoken yearning. I gaze at the intricacy of it, at my beautiful friend

captured so perfectly.

"You can keep it as long as you want," Eri murmurs, waving his hand as the loom and tools vanish.

I look back down at the almost living picture in my hands. A quiet happiness fills me, flowing into a heart hollowed by sorrow, softly easing the sting of separation. But it is so small! Why hadn't I spent more time choosing? I could have been more careful with my spinning, making the threads smoother. Why hadn't I planned the design better, taken more

care? I thought it didn't matter, but now it seems as if nothing mattered more.

And I reflect then on all those moments when the weight of choice hung heavy - when paths diverged before me, and in my stupidity, I allowed rage and selfishness to decide. I've been a fool, wishing for a chance to choose anew. The past is immovable, set in concrete - stark, immutable.

And yet, even in my despair, a soft question takes shape in my mind: perhaps something in the past can reshape something in my

future after all?

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Chapter 57

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Mon 2nd Aug 2010.

The prayer mat was thin beneath her knees, the familiar fabric reminding her of the need for constancy even as her mind churned with confusion. Farhiya bowed her forehead onto her mother's 'Al-Razzaq' cloth, followed the wudu ritual, then into the quietness, murmured a prayer for

guidance. She was desperate for clarity, something to cling to in the storms of doubt that were assailing her days and nights, week after week. She reached for the Quran, hesitating, then opened it. Surah Al-Kahf. Chapter 18. The story of Moses and Khidr drifted back to her, blurred memories resurfacing: Moses desperate to understand Allah's hidden wisdom meeting the enigmatic man of miraculous understanding.

As she read the story, the room seemed to grow darker around her. Khidr kills a

young boy without hesitation, claiming to demonstrate divine wisdom. She felt her gut twist as she experienced the shock that had challenged even Moses.

"A boy," she whispered, her eyes drifting across to her beautiful son, sleeping peacefully under a soft blanket. She had named him 'Ayaanle'. A name which means 'blessed'. She made to reach across and touch his face, but stopped short, recalling that she was in the middle of prayer. She drew her hand back, then a rebellious thought shot through her mind, and she

deliberately stroked his face. His chest rose and fell with tiny breaths, his innocence as pure as his soft brown skin.

She forced her eyes back to the page in the open Quran. Khidr's rationale seemed simplistic and blunt - "his parents were true believers, and we feared that he would pressure them into defiance and disbelief."

Even explained as a divine mercy, it still made her shiver.

"Could Allah really want that?" she murmured, watching her son, secure and sleeping peacefully. Could Allah ever

command such harm? Her eyes drifted across the succeeding verse and as was her practice, she spoke it aloud - "so we hoped their Lord would give them another, more virtuous and caring." But even as she heard the her own voice, the words were clothed with the shocking reality of her own child. Heartlessly destroyed!

Forcing herself to be honest with the text, she began to read the verses aloud again, her gaze moving between phrases to rest for a moment on the Ayaanle's face. The words caught in her throat, and she faltered. The

justification sounded empty—pathetic, like an attempt to sanitise or sanctify the horror of the act. Could any goodness truly justify such a choice?

Farhiya's heart pounded as doubt surged, demanding to be heard. She struggled to reconcile the murder she imagined with the mercy she had been taught. She had always been told to trust, to have faith in a wisdom greater than herself, yet something deep inside recoiled. Every fibre resisted the thought that her baby's life could ever be so unworthy or easily replaced.

The first thought that began to form was tentative - 'A murderer! Is that really what You are like?'

But as her eyes drifted from the page to her child, to his fingers curled around the blanket and his long dark eyelashes, as she watched his fluttering eyelids, somehow the words that escaped her lips were certain, and resolute: 'Al-Razzaq, the compassionate, the One who provides.'

----------oOo----------

Chapter 58

Somewhere. Coma day 9.

I am still confronted by all those times that I screwed up. The frustration begins to twist me inside. How come I was allowed to do all that? I confront Eri with it all: my decision, as a *child*, to poison my own father, the way I blackmailed Jits and let him get beaten up, then blackmailing Nexarion with the possibility of risking

Farhiya's life - all of it. "Was this the plan then?" I demand. "This... 'leading me into temptation'? Does this make any sense to you? Because I can't see it! Why allow me all this foul behaviour when you knew it would only drag a whole lot of suffering in its wake?"

Eri looks at me, and then he looks away.

My grandmother looks across the room and gasps.

Another me. Jeffrey B.

I look at him. I feel like I am staring out of a twisted mirror. This version of me had

the same choices, but somehow, he had been persuaded, maybe coerced, to take the 'right' path. At all those forks. The path I didn't. And here he is. Standing tall. Smiling confidently. Full of himself. Smug. Arrogant. He is giving off this vibe, like he's untouchable. Nothing could ever phase him, let alone break him. I can see it in him - the way his eyes lazily glide around settling on each of us in turn - he reckons he's got everything figured out. No need for change. No room for growth.

I can hardly believe it. His complacent

certainty, his self-sufficiency - it's a problem. He doesn't know it either. Throughout his whole life, he thinks he has depended on himself, and he's won every time!

I recall what Eri said earlier - that to enter the kingdom you need to be like a child. Well this Jeffrey B version of me is so sunk in pride that he doesn't even realise how far off he is.

And here I am, the one who's been dragged through the mud, hounded by my memories, with no desire or ability to

pretend any more. I've been burned more often than I can remember, I've hated myself times without number, and I've whimpered in helplessness despising my own weakness. And now there's nothing left but a very clear understanding of what I am.

Then, without warning, Eri waves his hand and Jeffrey B is gone. Just like that.

Then he turns to me, his gaze steady, calm. There's a warmth there, subtle but undeniable. His expression softens, like someone who's seen it all and still has hope.

"Jeffrey," he says, "I know it doesn't feel like it, but you're in a good place right now."

Then the back of my throat hurts, and something heavy in my chest is making it hard to breathe. Emotion rises inside, threatening to expose me. I blink several times, trying to stay in control, but it's no use. Ashamed, I have to put my head in my hands, trembling and sobbing like a child.

I hear Eri's voice again. It has a new quality - strangely gentle and soothing, like a warm breeze that wraps around me and holds me.

"Humility and dependence and damage.

That's all you have. And that's all we need. Nothing else."

He continues talking quietly and although I know he is talking just to me, that strangely feels really important. Even so, I can't quite grasp what he's saying, but somehow, as he speaks, I begin to feel myself relax. His voice flows with pain, disappointment, and despair - exactly what I've been carrying but could never put into words. The rhythm of it mirrors my own thoughts, almost too perfectly. It feels familiar, like a distant memory, as if he's

quoting from the Psalms.

Every word he utters attaches to some fear or regret that has been incomprehensible for so long, all tangled up. And one by one, the knots loosen, the connections straighten out. My doubts, my failures, my crappy decisions, I can see now how they relate to the path I have chosen.

And I can see there has been another hand at work. I have never been alone in this struggle. He has known it, shared it. He has been in this turmoil all along.

Then he says, "Amen". Was that a prayer?

My mind circles back to what he said about damage. Did he really say that's what I needed? I slowly raise my head to look at Eri. But he is fading. The pagoda is fading. I turn to look at my grandmother but it is too late, she has disappeared. And everything is gone.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 59

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Tue 3rd Aug 2010.

As is often the case with corporate over-achievers, Simon was at his desk the day after Boxing Day. The building was nearly empty, with only two or three other employees and a security guard on duty. Even before he sat down, he noticed his laptop was missing. A chill gripped his gut

as he glanced around, knowing full well that searching would be pointless. He sank into his chair, silent and fuming.

Clive. He would call Clive.

Clive had set up the laptops. The IT department had been kept out of the loop for secrecy's sake. Simon dialled Clive's number, drumming his fingers impatiently on the desktop. After a few rings, the call went to voicemail. He redialled, and this time, a child's voice mumbled something unintelligible. Simon forced a friendly tone, asking to speak to "Daddy," only to

learn that Daddy was still in bed. Emphasising the urgency, he managed to convince the child to rouse Clive. After a long wait, Clive finally answered, his voice groggy, the kind of tone a man might have after several nights of drinking.

Clive was not particularly inclined to come into the office just because the CEO had misplaced his laptop. As he protested, Simon grew more insistent, demanding that Clive drop everything and get to the office. Finally, Clive had a brainwave: there was no reason Simon couldn't use his

secretary's desktop computer to run the Windows Find My Device app. He guided Simon through the menus and hung up as soon as the app started running.

Unfortunately for Jeffrey, Simon's missing laptop was in a Wi-Fi-rich area near his bedsit, which allowed the app to pinpoint the device's location to within four or five meters. As Simon watched the map, the drop arrow hovered squarely over what was now the George and Dragon Centre.

Simon leaned back in his chair, looking around the office. Nothing else had been

taken, not even an iPad left out on a nearby desk. Gradually, an idea formed. He nodded to himself, then made a call to the centre, asking to speak to a Mr. Jeffrey Turnham. The helpful warden informed him that calls couldn't be transferred to residents, and besides, Mr. Turnham had left the building just a few minutes earlier. Simon thanked him and hung up, deep in thought.

Finally, he made a quick call to Clive, thanking him for his help and casually mentioning that he'd found the laptop

after all—it had been stashed away in a cupboard.

He spent a little while investigating options on the internet, then he dialled a number a spoke a few sentences, then quickly hung up.

----oOo----

"So, that's the deal. Close surveillance, on foot. He hasn't got a car, but I need every detail - who he meets, what his daily pattern is." Simon slid the Costa latte over to the man with the hard face wearing grey cargo pants and a plain beige T-shirt. He

looked eminently forgettable. Simon settled opposite him and took a sip of his espresso.

"How's it done?"

"Team of four, minimum," BeigeT replied.

"Four? Really?"

"If you want it done right," he shrugged. "We've got one guy on the target, another for cover—"

"Cover?" Simon cut in.

"Backup for the eye on the target, handles parallel routes. Third guy runs comms—strategy, decisions, usually on a motorbike."

"Why a bike?"

"Even without a car, the target could hop a bus or a taxi. And the fourth guy's static, parked at likely stops." BeigeT gave a brief, reassuring smile.

"How much is all this going to cost?"

"Do you need 24/7?"

"No, just from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. I'll risk the night."

"And you'll want a daily report?"

"Yeah, so how much?" Simon leaned forward. This was his first time hiring

surveillance, and he knew he'd be handling cash.

"Depends on the kit—car trackers, drones, specialist cameras?"

"No, none of that. He's just an ex-con with a stolen laptop."

"Right, let's stick to what you need," BeigeT cut him off. "It's looking like two and a half grand a day, but I can itemize it and send it over."

Simon paused. "No paper trail. I don't want this in any company records."

"Fine. We'll go with a daily rate contract, and my insurance is in the daily reports. They'll be worded carefully—nothing illegal, everything anonymized." He smiled, unbothered.

"And cash?"

BeigeT nodded. "Standard practice."

"There's one other thing I may need."

Simon slid a piece of paper across the table allowing his companion to read it. Then he held his finger to his lips. The man smiled and narrowed his eyes.

"That will cost you, of course."

"How much?"

"It depends how it goes. Assuming all goes to plan, and it takes, say, one hour, plus prep, plus washdown, we could do that for eight thousand."

"Fine." Simon said.

The two men stood and shook hands casually. BeigeT left and Simon ordered another espresso.

The team had no issues tracking Jeffrey. He was completely oblivious, no anti-surveillance tricks—no doubling back, no sudden stops. They stayed on him

undetected, reliably eyes-on from morning to night.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 60

The Old George And Dragon, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Fri 6th Aug 2010.

Jeffrey sent two identical emails, one to Dorset Council Children's Services and one to the Clerk to the Court in Dorchester.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Should you receive an encrypted memory stick from Jeffrey Turnham, please note you will need this password to open it:
Jit5Take_2!

Once open, the select the menu item "Show Hidden Files/Folders". Then open the folder

entitled "Nexarion Criminal Evidence".

Best regards
Jeffrey Turnham

Then, taking the kind advice from a Citizens Advice Bureau volunteer, Jeffrey reached out to Mrs. Clara Alden at Alden and Henshaw: "Specialists in family law, employment rights, safeguarding, civil liberties, and corporate ethics—advocating for justice with integrity." Within an hour, he found himself waiting in the firm's reception.

"Good afternoon," a young man with eye-

contact avoidance greeted him from behind the desk. "You're here to see Mrs. Alden? Let me notify her assistant."

Moments later, Jeffrey was ushered into Clara's office. He began explaining his "legal problem," spinning a tale about his brother-in-law, a violent man now separated from Jeffrey's sister, who had allegedly harmed her children. He indicated that he'd compiled evidence to support his sister's request for the family court to restrict her ex-husband's access to the children.

As he spoke, Jeffrey placed two encrypted memory sticks on her desk.

Clara Alden listened with practised attentiveness. Her extensive experience in family law had brought her into contact with many delicate cases, and her commitment to children at risk had made her well-regarded for taking on challenging causes.

"All right, Mr. Turnham," she replied, picking up the memory stick. "Let's have a look. What's the password?"

"I can't tell you, although I realise you're

required to examine the contents. Here ..." he said, walking around the desk, "I'll type the password."

Clara examined the documents on the memory stick. It seemed to be a series of dates and accusations of arguments or fights, plus every now and then, the name of a witness. "So why can't you give me the password?"

Jeffrey hesitated, looking contrite. "I know, sorry, and I do apologize. But given the sensitivity and the threats I've received, I have to be really careful about where this

information goes."

Clara tilted her head, raising an eyebrow.

"It's just—he's dangerous," Jeffrey explained. "Look, here's what I need you to do." He slid two addressed, stamped envelopes across her desk. "One is for the Clerk to the Court and the other to Children's Services in Dorset Council. Both the clerk and the social worker have the decryption password, but not the stick. Can you hold on to them for me. Securely. I'll send you a text every Monday and Thursday. If you don't hear from me, I'd

like you to send both sticks to these addresses the following day."

Clara's expression turned serious. "Do you believe you're at risk?"

Jeffrey gave a cautious nod. "I'm doing what I can to stay out of sight. My sister hasn't authorized the release of this yet, but I'll instruct you as soon as she does."

"To be clear," Clara confirmed, "I'm to hold onto these until I miss two texts or until you give permission to release them?"

"Precisely."

Clara's eyes softened slightly, though she kept her professional demeanour. She opened a drawer, withdrew a printed fee schedule, and pointed to a specific line. "This will be our charge for managing your case, Mr. Turnham. Each text will incur a minimum charge of six minutes—a tenth of our hourly rate of £214."

Jeffrey's face fell slightly as he spread his hands. "Is there any chance for a reduction? It's just a quick message saying ‘All okay.' That's barely a minute. Could we agree on one six-minute charge per week?"

Clara considered, assessing the request against the case's potential profit. Nodding, she offered a small smile. "I think we can make that work."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 61

Somewhere. Coma day 9.

The pagoda, Eri and my grandmother have gone. The earthy beetroot smell has been replaced with something sharp and clinical. There's a bright light directly above me hurting my eyes. I can see a nurse moving around at the side of my bed checking the saline drip. She glances across at me, and seeing my eyes open, takes a step back and

stares. Her mouth opens and she calls out something, but all I hear is silence. She turns and hurries off somewhere.

She comes back with a man in a white coat that I've not seen before. He leans over me and smiles. His mouth opens and it seems he is saying something, but I can't hear any of his words.

Then I hear, well not really hear, more like sense ... I sense Eri's voice, though he is nowhere to be seen.

Why beneath the weight you carry,
bow you low?
Would that you bequeath the bruises,
all the wounds the accuser uses!
Don't you know

Meiriel tries, but breaking self,
in truth supplies his own defeat?

It's a murmur really, the words only just audible. The nursing staff take no notice at all. The white coat man has started prodding me. He lifts my hand to see whether I have any strength in my arm. He lets go. My arm drops as if it belongs to somebody else. He shakes his head. The poetry starts up again. The hospital staff don't respond. Evidently they cannot hear the words that are filtering into my mind.

Fractured bones of self reliance
all concede
in grudging tones a faint surrender
knowing they can never tender
what you need.
Their broken failure grinding down
each hope and you are left to drown.

Now self-loathing clogs your throat
and clouds your eyes.
As tongue revisits rotting tooth,
so your mind would forfeit truth,
caressing lies.
Spirit's passion, clean and clear,
show the deceit that feeds your fear.

My mind locks on now to Eri's voice. It is becoming clearer and louder. The nurse looks at the heart-rate monitor alongside me and says something to the white coat. His face looks concerned and he leans across and adjusts a tap on one of the lines.

Then I get the cold sensation creeping up my arm from my elbow again. The ward fades fast, and in what seems like a couple of seconds, I'm fully back with Eri and grandmother. Eri continues speaking quietly, as if to himself, but his gaze is fixed on my face.

Gripping guilt that saps the heart
relentlessly.
Plunged beneath the icy river,
weakening, then lost forever!
Finally
a lightning shaft of absolution!
Dispel the shadows of confusion.

Morning sun, come melt the frost!
Come, grace his eyes.

Open, honest, soft embrace,
tenderness, come light his face
as all self dies.

This gift of love, so vast, so pure -
forgives!

Forgiven?
Yes, you are ... secure.

He lapses into a peaceable silence.

I lie there thinking for a while, rehearsing the experience in my head. Did I just make it back into the hospital? Maybe I am still alive? I must be. Surely? But then the last line of the murmured poem repeats in my mind, driving out all other thoughts.

Forgiven?

Yes, you are ... secure.

"Do you mean, I'm forgiven?" I ask.

"For everything."

"What?" I stammer, unsure if I misheard.

"We forgive you," Eri says, his expression serious, unwavering. "For everything you did, thought, considered doing. For everything you didn't do, but should have. The whole lot."

"Can you do that?" I ask, incredulous.

Eri smiles, a soft, almost amused expression. "Gladly," he says, nodding.

"Don't I need to repent or something?"

"You've done enough repenting, Jeffrey!"

"So, that's what this has all been about?"

"No, far from it," he responds, with a calmness that seems effortless. "That's the easy part - at least for you."

I shake my head slightly in disbelief.

"Really? It didn't feel easy," I mutter.

"Jeffrey," Eri says, his tone growing more pointed, "letting go of all the wrongs you know you've done - that's not the hard part. What's truly difficult is letting go of

self. His gaze locks onto mine, each word measured. "Your self-righteousness is long gone, yes, but in its place is self-loathing, which, frankly, isn't much better. And recently, you've finally let go of self-sufficiency," he continues, his voice compassionate as he gently puts his hand on my shoulder, "leaving you feeling a bit worthless and profoundly insecure."

He pauses, watching how I react. "You're still hooked on self-pity, though I don't need to tell you that," he adds, one eyebrow raised as he states what I already know.

"You're consciously indulging in self-deception, but unknowingly, you are still resting on the hardest thing to relinquish - self-importance."

"And to make things worse, far worse, the 'self' we're talking about here? It's damaged. Not beyond repair, but it's really bent out of shape, and it's not serving you the way it should. It is so totally distorted that you are being led astray almost constantly in all your thinking by it."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 62

Three Legged Cross, Dorset. Sun 8th Aug 2010.

Dritan Krasniqi's presence usually infused a room with a palpable tension. At 6'5", he was a towering figure, his sharp-angled face and high cheekbones unmistakably Albanian. A once-broken nose, now slightly crooked, added to his rugged appearance. Everything about him exuded the air of a natural predator. His deep-set

eyes were rarely at rest: when not appraising the people around him for potential threats or capabilities, they were scanning the environment for entrances, exits, and alternative routes.

Tonight, however, he was at ease in his own dining room. His five-year-old daughter sat on the floor, engrossed in her Duplo blocks. Across the table, his wife glanced up from her reading when he grunted in approval. As was often the case, he had his a mobile jammed next to his ear.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"Just another job. Good money," he replied gruffly.

"How soon?"

"Weeks, maybe months. I don't know."

She didn't press further; she knew better. Details of his work were never discussed. Most of it revolved around eliminating obstacles or discreetly tidying away inconvenient problems.

Unlike the average low-level contractor—a thug with a gun—Dritan was highly intelligent. He was meticulous in preparation, and tonight his focus was on

Nexarion Therapeutics. He had already gathered significant intelligence about their Hartington Estate facilities. Skimming Simon Warwick's bloated LinkedIn profile, he noted the exaggerated credentials and scrolled through carefully curated social media posts. It all painted the picture of a consummate successful good looking intelligent professional with an idyllic, happy-family life.

Switching gears, he accessed a blockchain-based dark web database. Entering a series of search terms, he paid just under three

hundred pounds in Bitcoin for a cache of hacked Nexarion network data. While the files boasted functionality for financial transactions, he focused solely on what interested him: staff profiles, contracts with external security companies, and similar intel.

Dritan's research extended beyond Nexarion. He had pieced together what he believed was a thorough profile of Jeffrey Turnham's later years, drawing from court records and contacts in the prison system.

For now, he doubted his Makarov PM—a

compact, semi-automatic pistol—would be needed. But the weapon, much like its owner, was experienced, reliable, and trustworthy. It would come along regardless.

If things took a turn for the worse, his old friend Mak would see him safely back to his family, leaving anyone foolish enough to stand in his way to face the consequences. The 9mm rounds it fired had a reputation for chaos once inside the human body—tumbling unpredictably and driving shattered bone fragments into surrounding

tissue. Even when the bullets travelled straight, the cavitation shock from their velocity could collapse lungs or tear arteries, wreaking havoc without ever needing to strike directly.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 63

Somewhere. Coma day 10.

"Yes, Jeffrey. Just as your body becomes increasingly less able to serve you as it becomes damaged, so it is with your soul."

"My soul?" I echo, uncertain.

"Your mind, if you prefer. Your self. The person you are on the inside."

"Wait - my soul is my mind?" I ask, feeling a

flicker of confusion. This isn't how Melissa's church leaders had explained it.

"Don't get too tangled up in definitions," Eri says smoothly. "You're a whole being - body, brain, mind. A whole self - physical, mental, psychological. And you're damaged."

I must look a bit woebegone because Eri slips his arm around my shoulders. "But don't worry! It's all fixable."

He's seems so certain! Looking at his face, the notion suddenly sweeps in and lifts me. It feels euphoric. I can only compare it to

the crisp shock of an ice-cold beer on a scorching day. The thought that I could have a fresh start, that all the scars of my stupidity, my schemes, and all the bitterness I carry could be gone - it's exhilarating.

"But your spirit," he adds with a grin shaking his head, "I can't do anything about that."

"My spirit?" I frown, not sure what he means. I wasn't really aware I even had one.

"Why not?" I ask.

"It's long dead. You were born with a dead

spirit."

"So why are you smiling?" I ask.

"You'll see."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 64

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Tue 10th Aug 2010.

Simon,

Perhaps we could meet up for lunch.
I would like to return your laptop.

Best regards
Jeffrey Turnham

Simon stared at the email, feeling a sudden, sharp pressure in his jaw as he clenched his teeth, then tightened his fists under the

desk. Attached was a video file—a clip from one of the encrypted folders. In it, he and Bjorn discussed the fates of X and Y in unmistakable detail.

He stopped the video and let his head sink into his hands. His worst fear had materialised: Jeffrey had cracked the encryption and now held all the incriminating evidence. His heart pounded wildly, the fear creeping through him in waves. Simon deleted the email, stood up, and walked slowly to the window.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 65

Somewhere. Coma day 10.

Trying to have a meaningful conversation with Eri is like whack-a-mole. He's constantly changing the subject, or the angle, or switching sides. I can't figure out whether he's talking to my emotions or my reason. So I'm not surprised at all when, out of the blue, he says, "Pick a date."

"What, any date?"

"Yes, any year, any month, any day."

I furrow my brow, glancing around for inspiration. Is this a joke? What is this about? But Eri's gaze is steady, serious. I take a deep breath, settling my thoughts.

"Alright. The roaring twenties. Nineteen twenty-four. March 24th."

"Any reason?"

"No." I shrug and shake my head, the uncertainty tightening in my chest.

"Now pick a place."

"What, anywhere?" I ask, trying to gauge the gravity of this strange conversation.

"Anywhere on planet Earth."

"Right. Let's say... um, Punjab," I suggest.

"I don't know any actual towns or villages, though."

"Hmmm. Right, give me a letter."

I look blank, my mind racing for a connection in this odd exchange.

"Any letter, A to Z," he clarifies, his voice calm yet compelling.

"N please."

"Villages starting with N in Punjab are," Eri pauses, his eyes thoughtful, "Nirmalpur, Nawanshahr, Nandpur, Nandkhera, Nawabganj, Nachhatar..."

"That's enough!" I cut in, raising my hands in a mix of frustration. I'm not good with games! "Let's say Nandkhera."

To my astonishment, immediately there is a movement. A glass flagon has appeared on the floor. A small brown puddle in the bottom seems to have come from nowhere. As I watch, more liquid appears, slowly filling the flagon. Within a second or so,

thick murky sludge, with bits of sediment rises to almost fill the jug. Although it's a yard away, the smell of rot and decay is repellent.

To my horror, Eri pours some into a glass and starts to drink it. He half closes his eyes, blanches, then drains the glass. He is silent for a moment, takes a deep breath and blows it out from between pursed lips.

"Your turn!" he says sadly.

"No way!" I retort.

His expression is serious. "You must," he replies, "your date, your location, your

choice."

I shake my head, but Eri is implacable.

Thankfully after five second stand-off, he graciously produces a small silver spoon.

"Just a bit, then!" he says.

"If I must."

He passes me the spoon. I take it and get half a spoonful direct from the flagon. My face creases with revulsion at the smell. I take several steps back and look at the muck on the spoon close up. I sense Eri watching me. Sure enough, he is wide-eyed

and nodding fast.

It can't be that bad, can it? Eri just drunk a glassful! Turning my mouth down, I hold my nose and tip it into my mouth. To my horror, the liquid immediately coats the entire surface of my tongue with an intense sickly sweetness that swiftly becomes caustic. Desperately I try to spit it out, but my mouth is dry as bone and bitter as bile. I try to swallow but a rotten metallic aftertaste remains.

Then without warning, a wave of arrogance, all too familiar, comes into my

mind. That is followed by an inexplicable dread. This quickly morphs into terror. I am familiar with all these emotions but never in this intensity, nor simultaneously.

Then, just as suddenly, they begin to ease, simmering down to something more bearable, but immediately joined by one that I am all too familiar with - hopelessness.

Eri gently takes the spoon from me and starts to speak.

"On March 24th in 1924, the village headman, elder Harnam Singh confronted

a platoon of British Soldiers. They had raided the homes in Nandkhera multiple times in the previous five years, following the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh. They had come again, on the orders of Michael O'Dwyer the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, with accusations of weapons and rebel sympathies. Harnam Singh was face to face defying the platoon Major. I should tell you that the villagers had to date been outwardly peaceful, but they held deep grudges against the British for their brutality and harsh repression of any

dissent, however minor.

"The Major lost patience with the headman and ordered for him to be beaten. A whip cracked just once and the old man fell forward onto his face. The Major rolled him over with his foot, kicking him in the process. The platoon then raided the village, entering the homes, overturning their altars, smashing their pots and pulling all the men and boys out into the street. The found a pamphlet calling for self-rule in one home, and they mercilessly beat the man and his wife in front of their children.

Then they demanded that all the men kneel in the village square under threat of death while they complete their search.

"An 18 year old lad, Jaswant Singh, stood and protested at the treatment and was shot in the leg. The soldiers prevented anyone attending him as he was bleeding out. After around 15 minutes the lad stopped moving. The soldiers then left having completed the task - that of ensuring the local population understood who was in charge."

Eri falls silent. Then he turns to me and

asks, "How do you feel now? - inside, I mean."

I reflect for a moment. Since this whole experience began with Eri and my grandmother, I have become quite an expert at introspection, and putting my feelings into words. But it has most assuredly been both unpleasant and unsettling. I feel far worse now than I did before this fiasco began.

"I feel traces of arrogance, but that is slowly being replaced with hatred. And I feel outrage, but that is fading and there is a

growing sense of futility. Despondency I suppose."

Eri nods. "Okay," he says quietly turning towards the flagon, and spoon. He murmurs, "Brutality is a flame torching a neighbour's house, where its embers are banked and stoked until the certainty of vengeance is forgotten."

He turns back to me to make sure his apparently throwaway comment has landed.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 66

Blandford Forum, Dorset. Wed 11th Aug 2010.

"Simon!" Jeffrey stood to welcome his guest. His forced smile didn't reach his eyes. He'd been sitting at a corner table in The Fluffy Cat Café, where not only were the walls lined with cat pictures, but real cats roamed between tables, some perched by the window. Jeffrey projected complete confidence, although he felt sick inside. If

this worked, it would be the biggest deal of his life.

"Before you say anything—" Simon started.

"Let's get some lunch!" Jeffrey interjected, passing Simon one of the menus on the table.

"I'm not eating," Simon retorted.

"Well, you won't mind if I do, will you?" Jeffrey gave a casual shrug, then sauntered over to the counter, throwing a grin over his shoulder as he leaned on the counter-top to place his order.

Simon's jaw tightened as he watched, his eyes flashing. He was intent on keeping his cool, even as Jeffrey strolled back to the table, apparently with irritating ease.

"Let me at least get you a drink, Simon," Jeffrey offered as he returned.

"Fine. Double espresso," Simon replied, trying to inject some menace into his polite tone, but it seemed to slide off Jeffrey, who merely nodded.

When Jeffrey finally returned with the drink, Simon leaned in, voice low. "I don't have a lot of time. Are you going to give me

the laptop back?"

"But of course!" Jeffrey replied, bending down to retrieve his rucksack. He pulled out the laptop and slid it across the table with a flourish. "With compliments!" He added the power lead and mouse on top, as if presenting a gift.

Jeffrey leaned back in his chair, biting into his sandwich with evident satisfaction. "I must say, the videos were... intriguing," he commented between bites. "Bit grainy, but the audio was clear enough. Every word came through."

Simon's face hardened. "What do you want?" he demanded, his gaze unyielding.

"Just a little compensation. After all, you did admit on camera to arranging for me to be poisoned."

Simon clenched his fists beneath the table.

"What do you want?" he repeated icily.

"One thousand pounds per week."

"Take a hike!" Simon snapped.

"Also you took pains to record yourself planning an abduction."

"Absolutely not a thousand a week? Are

you insane?"

"Arranging bribes for a government employee." Jeffrey grinned, savouring his victory like a cat with a trapped mouse. "Oh, and the little mystery of X and Y!"

Simon's jaw twitched. "It won't stick. There's no evidence that'll hold."

"Oh, Simon," Jeffrey continued, undeterred. "I've got document after document, video after video. Nexarion will either crash or throw you to the wolves if this gets out. Best case, you find a miracle-working lawyer, fight off a murder charge,

but you're out of a job and no one wants to hire you. Worst case?" He smirked. "A few very loyal friends of mine at HMP Albany will be more than pleased to make your acquaintance."

Simon's nostrils flared. "And how long is this little scheme going to last, Turnham?"

Jeffrey smirked, leaning back. "Maybe you should worry about how long a prison sentence would last. I suggest you let me handle the details."

Finished with his meal, Jeffrey slid his dirty plate across the table toward Simon, then

stood, straightening his jacket. Leaning down close, he whispered, "One more thing. My solicitor has two encrypted memory sticks. Should I meet with any... unfortunate incidents," he flicked his fingers in a gesture that conveyed everything might go south, "one of those will be with the law court in Dorchester, the other with Children's Services—the very people tasked with caring for unaccompanied asylum seekers."

With that, he turned on his heel and strolled out of the café and into the street.

Simon watched him go, fists clenched, and muttered a low curse under his breath.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 67

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Thu 12th Aug 2010.

Paying out the first thousand pounds stung, but Simon kept his reaction under wraps, determined to limit how often it happened. The surveillance team seemed professional, and midway through the second week, he decided to review their daily reports more carefully. Jeffrey, it

seemed, was a bit of a loner. He visited the pub infrequently, always drinking alone. He had been to the Citizen's Advice Bureau twice and made several trips to the Co-op convenience store. Significantly, there had been a visit to a law firm early in the first week.

Checking the law firm's website, Simon saw there were two solicitors practising at Alden and Henshaw. The senior partner, Mr. Barton Henshaw, specialized in employment rights and corporate ethics, while Mrs. Clara Alden focused on family

law and safeguarding. Simon chose to call Henshaw. The receptionist connected him.

"Good morning, Mr. Henshaw," Simon began smoothly. "You have a client named Jeffrey Turnham who's involved in blackmail. I believe you're holding data for him, and—"

"Before you say any more," Henshaw interjected firmly, "understand that we cannot discuss anything about a client's case, nor confirm or deny the identity of any clients." He paused briefly, then continued with a calm but forceful tone,

"However, you may wish to speak to my colleague Mrs. Clara Alden. I'll transfer you." The line went silent, then began ringing again.

"Good morning, how can I help?" Clara's voice was cordial but distant.

Simon repeated his opening, this time completing his sentence. "...and I'd like to come in to discuss this."

"Of course," Clara replied, keeping her tone professional as she held the line for a moment.

"It's urgent," Simon added, leaning in,

"There's significant money at risk."

Two hours later, Simon was sitting in the seat Jeffrey had occupied only a few days earlier.

"I can't tell you anything," Clara stated firmly, her hands clasped on the desk, maintaining a calm, professional posture.

"Client confidentiality, of course."

"Not a problem. I'm here to provide information, not request it." Simon leaned forward slightly, sliding a business card across the desk with a measured movement.

Clara inclined her head, allowing him to

continue.

"Jeffrey Turnham is an ex-convict. HMP Albany placed him in the care of Nexarion Therapeutics, where I'm the CEO," Simon continued, tapping the card for emphasis. "We provided therapy to help alleviate his motor neurone disease."

Clara nodded, sitting up straight, and her gaze unwavering.

"If you wish, feel free to check with Albany. Mention my name." Simon held her eye contact, waiting, his expression self-assured.

Clara offered a polite smile but remained silent.

Simon went on, "The problem is that Mr. Turnham stole some sensitive, confidential documents from us. He's now threatening to send copies to our competitors unless we pay him."

"And how does this involve us?" Clara's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Turnham tells me he's deposited two encrypted memory sticks with you, both containing our data. So I have to insist on taking them back."

Clara held his gaze, choosing her words with care. "Describe Jeffrey Turnham to me."

"Mid-fifties, maybe a bit of middle-aged spread," Simon said dismissively, waving a hand. "Thinning grey hair. Confident—like a con man."

"Fine," Clara replied, a slight smile appearing as she studied him. "But you understand, I can't release client property without his authorization."

Simon's jaw tightened. "This is difficult, Mrs. Alden. You apparently can't let them

go, and I can't leave them here."

Clara leaned back, one hand resting thoughtfully on her chin. "I'm sorry, but I can't release something that was lodged by a client for safekeeping. That would be a dereliction of duty."

Simon's gaze sharpened. "Have you examined the contents of the memory sticks?"

"I have. I can confirm that they contain nothing related to Nexarion, its employees, or pharmacological research." Clara's voice was calm, but her fingers tapped the desk

ever so lightly.

"Did you decrypt all the data?"

"Yes," Clara replied, with a slight hesitation.

Simon watched her closely. "Did you check for hidden folders?"

Clara flushed slightly, her gaze shifting momentarily. "There were no folders—only files."

Simon narrowed his eyes, a brief smile of satisfaction crossing his face. "I'm sure they bear the Nexarion logo. Let me take a

look."

Clara, visibly tense, retrieved the memory sticks from the cabinet and placed them on the desk.

Simon picked one up, examining it closely. "The logo is faint, but it's there." He picked up the second, then pulled a small pair of mole grips from his jacket and crushed both sticks in a single, swift motion. He dropped the shattered pieces into a brown paper bag, folded it, and handed it to Clara with a cold smile.

Clara sat frozen, her eyes fixed on the bag.

"I apologize," Simon said with cold finality, "but I have to protect Nexarion's intellectual property. And I doubt you'll hear from your client again - unless he needs representation in court." With that, he turned on his heel and strode out, leaving Clara open-mouthed, wondering what on earth had just happened.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 68

Blandford Forum, Dorset. Sat 14th Aug 2010.

BeigeT was wearing his usual plain beige t-shirt, though he'd switched to black cargo pants. The second man was in his forties, stocky, with a stiff posture and greying hair several shades lighter than his grey suit. The third man, in his late twenties, stood tall and solid in dark blue jeans and a fitted white t-shirt.

No one passing by would assume they were together.

BeigeT looked at GreyHair, raising an eyebrow. "What's your preference? Ket or ether?"

"Ether every time," GreyHair responded dryly, glancing at his watch. "Knocks them out in about 40 seconds. Ket takes 90 or so."

"Fine. Your call."

GreyHair nodded, tapping his fingers as he spoke. "Ether needs two of us though. You and I can handle it. We'll use four prepped

pads, eight-two-eight timing."

BeigeT furrowed his brow. "What's the eight-two business?"

"Eight seconds on, two seconds off. Four cycles. Keeps the brain safe." GreyHair's tone was brisk, practised.

They both turned to the third man, who gave a vacant grin and shrugged, flexing his arms as though to remind them of his one job here. Clearly, BlueJeans had not been chosen for his academic ability.

----oOo----

Jeffrey's usual route to the Co-op convenience store took him through Fairfield Road, Blandford. After nine at night, it was the perfect setting. Narrow and cramped, the L-shaped street hugged a row of ageing terraced houses, and the traffic was reliably scarce at this hour.

An old gentleman at the far end was watching his dog relieve itself, while struggling to separate the handles of an uncooperative poo bag.

As Jeffrey passed the halfway mark down the street, a Volvo rolled up, blocking the

entrance. Simultaneously, three men appeared around the corner, converging just as Jeffrey drew level with a white van parked tightly against the curb.

BeigeT, casual as an acquaintance, stepped forward and asked Jeffrey for a light. Without a beat, BlueJeans slipped behind Jeffrey, pressing the taser into the small of his back. Jeffrey convulsed, gasping in pain, and BlueJeans gripped him, pinning his arms.

From a plastic bag, BeigeT pulled out an ether-soaked pad and passed it to GreyHair,

who quickly yanked Jeffrey's head back by his hair, pressing the pad to his nose and mouth. Jeffrey thrashed, his eyes wild, but BlueJeans held him firm, jaw clenched with concentration. A faint ping from GreyHair's pocket signalled the timing. GreyHair lifted the pad, covering Jeffrey's mouth with his hand, forcing him to gasp for air through his nose. Another pad came out, and GreyHair reapplied it in rhythm. By the third application, Jeffrey's resistance slowed, his eyelids fluttering. By the fourth, he was utterly limp.

With a quick glance around, BeigeT slid open the white van's side door, and Jeffrey was tossed in. Five seconds later, the van and the Volvo pulled away.

At the far end of the street, the old guy finally managed to get the poo bag open.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 69

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Mon 16th Aug 2010.

Simon swallowed, cleared his throat, and looked around the table at his team. Clive, restless as always, tapped his foot impatiently. Juan sat silent, puzzled—this was unusual for him, usually the one reporting to Simon. And Bjorn... Bjorn looked like he was going to be difficult. His

lips were pressed tight together, his eyes narrowed in hostility.

"We've encountered an unexpected issue," Simon began quietly, though his attempt at casual detachment didn't quite work. He pushed on, "The target male, Jeffrey Turnham, has contacted me. He's demanding cash. Seems he's got wind of some aspects of the project."

Clive raised an eyebrow, and Juan glanced at Simon with mild confusion. Bjorn grunted, shaking his head, before slamming his fist on the table. His voice was sharp.

"What does he know?"

"It's hard to say exactly," Simon replied, trying to stay composed. "But he knows about the experiments. Some of them, at least."

Clive frowned. Juan's eyes widened slightly.

"How does he know that?" Bjorn's voice was tight, strained.

"I don't know," Simon lied, his calm façade starting to crack.

Bjorn's eyes flashed with anger. "What else does he know?"

Simon hesitated. "He says he knows enough to ruin us."

Bjorn shot to his feet, his chair scraping across the floor. "What does that mean? What the hell does he know?"

"I've contained the situation," Simon said, his voice firm but tinged with a faint edge of frustration. "Turnham is isolated. For now."

Bjorn's fists clenched. He leaned over the table, glaring at Simon. "What does ‘contained' mean? What does that even mean?"

Simon rapped the table with his knuckles, sharp and quick. "It means he's in the north wing. First floor."

Clive and Juan immediately reacted, voices rising in protest, but Bjorn's face turned pale, disbelief settling in. He shook his head slowly, unable to process the decision.

"Stop," Simon snapped, his voice rising despite himself. He needed control back.

"Just stop."

"Who knows about this? Who grabbed him?" Bjorn demanded, his voice low but dangerous. "How many more people are

involved?"

"Only one more than the original team," Simon said. "We're covered. No loose ends."

Bjorn slammed his hands onto the table, leaning in close, his voice thick with contempt. "Apart from Turnham—and the girl?"

Simon met his gaze, breathing hard. "Be careful, Bjorn," he said quietly, but with menace. "It's far better if we're on the same team."

Bjorn's jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing as

he fought back a response. Slowly, he sat back down, exhaling sharply. "So what happens now? I assume we're cancelling the project?"

"No," Clive interjected quickly, voice rising in protest. "Not after all the work we've done."

"We're not cancelling anything," Simon said, his voice smooth but resolute. "Turnham's just a grifter—a second-hand car salesman. He's not a threat."

"A grifter who's got us by the neck," Bjorn muttered bitterly. "He's gonna bleed us

dry."

"Then we'll take more radical steps," Simon replied coolly.

Juan interjected, his tone more resigned now. "We'll have to draw a line under this. You know that, right?"

"I've got it under control," Simon said, standing up. "We'll have more clarity by the end of tomorrow."

Juan looked at Simon, expression unreadable. "Fine. But why the north wing? Why not the stables?"

"Turnham trashed the stables," Simon replied, his tone apologetic. "And it's too noisy. It can be heard from the road."

Bjorn rolled his eyes, clearly frustrated, but didn't comment further.

"He's secure," Simon said, eager to close the meeting. "He's quiet, and he's doing what he's told. I'll update you all tomorrow."

With that, he turned and left the room, the door clicking shut behind him. The others sat in silence, each wondering where this would lead and what the cost would be.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 70

Somewhere. Coma day 10.

I still have the foul aftertaste in my mouth, but now there is a second flagon beside the first. A moment ago it wasn't there. But now it is, empty and clean. But this kind of thing doesn't phase me any more. It is a 'construction' after all.

"Pick another date."

I thought for a moment, then on impulse gave the last four digits of my landline, "1392 ... um," I pause for a moment, then give my father's birthday, "June 1st?"

"And another place, different this time."

"Oh, I dunno," I say, scouring my mind for the most remote place imaginable, "The Congo?"

"... is huge!" continues Eri. "It's the of size Western Europe, so you need to be more specific."

I hesitate. I can't recall even one thing about the Congo apart from the river!

"Eerrr ... Eastern Congo?"

"Okay," Eri concedes with a smile, "Let's say Mobolo, it's a village of around 1500."

The second flagon fills, this time with a liquid nearly clear, tinged dark green, bubbling up until it rests, half full. Eri dips the spoon into it, offering it to me with an unspoken challenge.

Hesitant now, I take it, careful not to repeat my earlier mistake. I take the tiniest drop into my mouth, just a whisper of the brew on the tip of my tongue.

A searing heat strikes first, a blaze so fierce

it scratches at my tongue and burns inside my cheeks. Then, as the fire wanes, a bitterness creeps in, foul and lingering.

"You have to swallow." Eri's voice is gentle but insistent.

"I can't."

"You must."

The moment I swallow, the rage floods in, cruel and hateful, gripping me just as before. My hands clench into fists as I wrestle to contain it. Then, as the fury ebbs, fear surrounds me, and my heart races wildly, adrenaline coursing through my

veins. The thudding in my chest is terrifying, but before I can dwell on it, an intolerable sadness envelops me, as if I'm being dangled above a vast, black abyss. Slowly, the storm of emotion subsides, leaving me utterly drained.

"What was that?" The words come in gasps as I try to get my breathing back to normal. Eri fills a glass, then in one unhesitating movement, raises it to his lips, tips his head back and drinks it down. His face remains devoid of emotion as he controls his response. His eyes closed, he waits for a few

seconds then explains.

"On June the first, 1392, the girl, Mokele, was only fourteen. A Lomami girl. She was out with her father Kambale, a mile or so from the village. They were on their way to the river to take a couple of fish for their evening meal. Kambale had three children, and Mokele was the youngest. Theirs was a small tribe, always threatened by the Luba people who had spread and dominated the North of the country.

"Suddenly out of the bush came two Luba men, Kabwe and Nshimbo, both in their

twenties. Kambale knew they had come for Mokele. It often happened - a young girl carried away as a slave, or abused and killed if she refused. So he told her to run. The Luba had worked themselves up into a rage to quell their own fear, but it was unnecessary. Kabwe chopped at Kambale's leg with his machete, while Nshimbo pursued the girl.

"So you're tasting the rage of the Luba, the fear of Kambale and the desolation of Mokele.

"Now what do you feel?"

I'm sickened. To have felt what they felt!?

What is this all for?

"Tell me." Eri insists.

"The obscene excited anger is fading but being displaced by frustration. The fear and the desolation have stayed, though lessened. It's just horrifying."

Eri pauses and looks thoughtfully at me.

"Well, yes. But humans are nocturnal. And the shadows of their brutalities will only become visible when the sun rises."

"What do you mean?"

But Eri has turned back to the flagons.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 71

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Tue 17th Aug 2010.

"So, where do we stand now with project close-down?" Juan's voice carried a carefully measured tone, but the question had been weighing on him ever since Simon's update about Jeffrey.

Simon met his gaze, the CEO's expression sharp, scrutinizing. Juan was concerned—

Simon could see that much—but at least he seemed to remain firmly onside. Simon expected nothing less.

"Well," Simon began, his tone as smooth as glass, "none of the necessary adjustments can, of course, appear explicitly on the written plan. But you already have a methodology for this kind of... tidying up."

Juan gave a subtle nod, appreciating both the decision and the delicacy with which it was delivered. At the project's inception, he had been adamant about maintaining formal project management documents—

records that could, if needed, pass scrutiny. Simon's understanding of that unspoken compromise had always been a cornerstone of their uneasy rapport.

"And last time," Simon continued, his words unhurried, "the documentation was entirely satisfactory. Bjorn made some noise, of course, but even he couldn't deny that we handled matters appropriately and," his smile flickered, icy and precise, "disarmingly professionally."

Juan leaned forward slightly. "For clarity, then: within scope, we have girl Z, the

child, and Turnham?"

Simon's eyes gleamed with a dangerous humour. "Yes. Although," he said lightly, "we might forgo the excellent final meal with Turnham this time."

Juan inclined his head in quiet understanding. "I'll need help with Turnham," he said quietly.

"Agreed. Any other concerns?"

Juan shook his head.

"Excellent."We're done here," Simon said, his tone clipped.

Simon had long since learned that some conversations were best kept short. Too many words, after all, could make the unsaid too clear.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 72

Somewhere. Coma day 10.

"So," Eri clasps his hands together, "last one," he says indicating a third flagon on the floor.

"I don't want to do this," I protest, "what is it all achieving?"

"You'll see," he replies, "It's really important."

I know what he wants. He isn't budging. And he is exuding an air of authority that has been growing throughout this weird process. So I say, "Year 1000, Capital city of Sri Lanka."

Eri waits for a beat, then looks at me and says, "No. You don't want that. Somewhere else."

"What's wrong with that," I ask.

"The capital city of Anuradhapura had stood for a literal one thousand years, accumulating the culture and knowledge of the Sinhalese. Seven years earlier it was

home to 146,000 people. The seat of governance, the King's palace, the crossroads of international trade routes, the wealth of the nation, pearls, gemstones.

Then it was overrun by the warriors of the Chola Empire located in Southern India. They looted the city, desecrated the shrines, exterminated the citizens and levelled the buildings. In the year that you chose, so soon after the genocide, Jeffrey, the entire place is desolate. Survivors, traumatised and desperate, were living like rats in the ruins. Fighting over food.

"It's too much for you," he concludes, shaking his head, "Pick another date."

I have a think. An idea develops. I do know a bit of local history. And I reckon I can pick a safe date and avoid the last hurdle.

I look up at Eri with a smile, "Corfe Castle," I say.

Eri raises one eyebrow, and waits.

"Yeah," I drawl, confident I can game the system, "Corfe Castle, August 5th, twelve oh..." I pause and grin at him.

He knows. He shakes his head.

"1209!" I say, confident that I've landed on a safe space.

"You think?!" Eri looks resignedly at me.

"Yes! I do. King John starved the 22 knights to death in the dungeons of Corfe Castle back in 1202. By 1209 his authority was re-established and everybody just got on with life!"

"Fine!" Eri turns to the flagon. It has refilled with a sticky, dull yellow liquid, with a texture like honey. It smells like rotten eggs, but also has an acidic sharpness. I can smell it from where I stand.

"That doesn't look so good." I murmur.

"You first," Eri says.

I dip the tip of the spoon in, and touch it to my tongue. At first, it tastes exactly how I'd imagine rusty metal would, then that is joined by concentrated vinegar, which cuts into the back of my throat. I start to gag but manage to control the sensation. Desperately I swallow several times, but this simply leaves my mouth feeling gritty and sore, and I'm left with the rancid taste of curdled milk. The sensations come in then. Vindictiveness first making me want

to fight back, physically I start to shake a little. I involuntarily clench my hands into angry fists. Then exhaustion takes over and a gripping stomach pain is associated with regret. All the pain of the past seems to roll over me for a moment, and then it all lessens a little. The shaking and stomach pain disappear. But the vindictiveness remains keeping my fists clenched and ready to hit someone.

"Okay?" Eri asks gently.

I nod slowly.

"It was one of the villagers, Gerald de Grus,

that was charged with watching the knights. Paid by King John to be their jailer. The villagers begged him to pass scraps of food to the knights, but he refused. That would have been understandable, were it not for the fact that de Grus boasted how he enjoyed watching them suffer. When after 53 days without food, the last knight was dead, de Grus took a handsome payment from King John, and let everyone know how important he was. From that day on, de Grus was a marked man. Come forward six

years and the villagers had had enough. They abducted de Grus and locked him in the castle dungeon. He begged them not to let him starve, so they agreed one meal a day. Each day, a live rat was delivered to the cell. Eating rats kept de Grus alive for seven and a half months. That episode didn't of course make the history books."

I listen in horror at the story. I understand now the vindictiveness, the stomach pain and the exhaustion.

"Now watch." Eri gently takes my clenched fists in his hands. He releases one just long

enough to pour a glass of the yellow liquid, downs it in a single gulp, then reclaims my hand with a quiet smile. My fists, still tense, rest in his calm, steady grip. My strained gaze meets his. "You see, Jeffrey, every painful experience leaves its mark. Scars from every confrontation, every misunderstanding, every betrayal, every disappointment - they've etched themselves into you, day by day. It's become a part of you. Your very self is in need of healing."

"Some scars you hide, some you wear openly, and many control you without you

even realizing it. And it's not just you - every person on this planet carries their own wounds. You could have chosen any moment, any place, and the chances are that someone was abusing, someone was being abused, and both were being damaged. This vicious cycle of harm is more vast and profound than you could ever fathom."

"And it isn't just a few these jugfuls," Eri says, waving his hand at the three jugs, "this bitterness, this rancid inescapable daily experience is as common on earth as salt in

the ocean, as nitrogen in the soil. It is everywhere."

Immediately, my mind paints a tableau - earth cloaked in cruelty and conflict, then vengeance and violence. Now drenched in distrust and despair, regret and reproach, every bitter hopelessness known to man. A kind of horrified fascination grips me, as I see within the planet an infinite sea of scarred faces.

"As far as the eye can see," Eri murmurs, "filled with the suffering of each man, woman, boy or girl, in every time and every

place. I drank it all."

My mind is, as usual, struggling to keep up with this man. What can he be talking about?

----------oOo----------

Chapter 73

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Wed 18th Aug 2010.

Simon stood in the doorway, his face a mixed picture of disbelief and annoyance. The chair was upturned, its back shattered, one leg bent. Chunks of plaster had been gouged out of the walls. It was the second time this week. This was not the result of a planned vandalism. It was evidence of a

man trapped in an insanity of rage and bitterness, trying to find a way to escape his anguish.

"Again?" Simon demanded, his voice sharp with frustration as his gaze flicked to Jeffrey.

Jeffrey, red-faced, furious, shot back, "You can't keep me here! You do know, don't you, that my solicitor—"

Simon cut him off, stepping forward with calm, controlled menace. "I know your precious Clara won't be sending portfolios to anyone, Jeffrey," he said, his voice ice-

cold. "And if you don't start being reasonable, we might have to terminate the project." He paused, letting the words hang in the air. A nasty smile twisted his mouth as he leaned in and murmured, "You know, the one with all the... assets."

Jeffrey's face drained of colour as the threat sank in. Involuntarily, his hands balled into white-knuckled fists. The rage inside him bubbled up violently, and he surged forward—only to be jerked back by the chain shackling him to the wall. A wave of frustration tore through him, and he

yanked on the chain, but the action only underlined his impotence. His eyes, though, remained fixed on Simon with a mixture of fury and defiance.

"Okay," Jeffrey rasped, his voice trembling with barely contained emotion. "I know about the boy. You touch a hair on his head, and—" His words faltered as his voice broke, the rawness of his fear slipping through.

Simon's expression remained unchanged. He stepped back, almost bored, folding his arms. "The boy is safe," he said firmly. "As

long as you behave. No more destroying the place. No one can hear you in here anyway. It's pointless."

Jeffrey's mouth twisted into a grimace. His chest rose and fell with uneven breaths. "I want to see him," he demanded, his tone sharp and insistent, desperation evident.

Simon shook his head once, slow and deliberate. "No," he said, his eyes cold.

"If I don't see him," Jeffrey pressed, leaning forward slightly, his voice low and threatening, "you'll witness some of the things cons do when they protest in

prison."

Simon sighed. Silence stretched between them as they faced each other down. "Look, alright," Simon's voice was a quiet rebuke, "you can see him tomorrow, once we've sorted this room out." He took a step back, watching Jeffrey closely, "But no more outbursts. No more wrecking the place."

Jeffrey relaxed a little, then his face contorted with emotion, and he took a step closer to Simon, his voice cracking. "I want to see him every day. I want to spend the day with him. He's my son." Then as if this

had just dawned on him, "He's all I have now!" His voice broke completely, and a strangled sob followed, the weight of his helplessness crushing him.

Simon studied him for a long moment, his expression unreadable. He didn't respond immediately, the silence stretching the moment between them. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, but still firm. "If you're going to cooperate, we can give you some time with him every day. But there'll be a guard with you. The child sleeps most of the day, but there should be a couple of

hours you can have." Simon paused, gauging Jeffrey's reaction. "But you've got to behave. No more trashing everything."

Jeffrey's shoulders slumped, and he nodded stiffly, his lips trembling as he exhaled sharply. "Fine."

Simon gave a sharp nod, but his tone was matter-of-fact. "The mother's in there, you know."

Jeffrey's expression shifted, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. "Z? Farhiya, isn't it?" He leaned back slightly, as if the mention of her name had no effect, though

his voice was threaded with something that might have been tension, or maybe just resignation. "I can live with that."

The words hung in the air between them, and for a moment, Jeffrey tried to satisfy himself with that small concession. But he was still trapped. He could only hope that somewhere there was an alternative way of escape. Without that, he knew he had very little chance.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 74

Somewhere. Coma day 10.

"You drank it all! What do you mean?"

Eri gazes at me. In the silence, I can feel my heartbeat. His eyes, thoughtful and distant, linger on mine. He can see inside me. I'm too afraid to break the stillness. He inhales deeply, tilts his head to the heavens as if waiting for words, then finally, he speaks.

"When it began..." His voice is careful now, as if every word has to be perfect, "I realised... neither Father nor I had ever known anything like it. Not like that. So close. So deep... inside me." He pauses, his breath catching. I can feel the struggle in him, the battle to express something beyond words. He swallows hard.

"But I couldn't pull back. My father's love for me... and for them," he tips his head back, tears pooling in wide open eyes, "... it was so strong. That kind of love never let's go." He looks at me, eyes searching mine

then to find shared ground, "You know, don't you? A father's love never lets go."

"But all the failure. The twistedness. The damage. The..." His voice falters, his lips tightening, "the deliberate ..." A shudder ripples through his body, and he exhales a broken breath before continuing, "... the deliberate lack of care."

I watch as his shoulders sag, seemingly under the weight of what he's recalling. His eyes dim with sorrow. "In those first hours," he continues, voice strained, "it all invaded me - so completely, it was as if I

had done it all myself. Done the abuse." His words crack, and I see his eyes, shining with unshed tears. "And suffered the abuse."

His head drops, and he trembles. The silence between us is thick and fragile. I want to say something, anything - but my grandmother's eyes silently beg me to let him speak.

"The first hours were..." He tries again, his voice a shadow of its former strength, "...unspeakable." His chest rises and falls with another deep breath. "And it just... it never stopped. More and more... it just

kept coming."

His gaze meets mine, wide and wet with pain. "At one point, I wanted to cry out, 'No more!' I felt alone... as though I had been forsaken. But then, something in me realised - the deeper the evil, the greater the love. The more horror I drank in, the more grace flowed out of me. And I... I wondered what that could mean."

His voice trembles, and his face tightens. "A flood of selfishness, so foul, so overwhelming. I wanted to refuse, to scream 'enough', but... I knew that to hold

back meant to fail. So I gave up more. And more of myself." He breathes heavily, fighting to continue. "And the more I gave, the more the Father poured grace into me - until I understood as a man what we have always known. Grace could only flow if I relinquished myself."

He looks at me intently, searching my face for understanding. "Are you getting this?" he asks gently. I can't speak. I can barely breathe and my eyes are stinging really badly. Mute, I nod.

"And only when I had given everything..."

His voice lowers to a whisper, "...only then did I understand, viscerally I mean, that the grace I had received was enough. Enough to forgive."

I want to look away, but I can't. His eyes, raw and full of truth, affirm his words.

"Giving up myself..." His voice cracks again, "it wasn't hard because I wanted my own way. No... it was because it was me I was surrendering. My very identity." His breath shudders. "In the end, I had nothing left. Just one final prayer."

He swallows. "Into your hands..."

His voice trails off. A tear slides down his cheek. He looks at me, almost as if apologising for the weight of it all.

"Into your hands, I commit..."

Another pause, deep and trembling. "One last act. My own."

His voice breaks as he finishes, barely above a whisper. "...I commit my spirit."

The air feels heavy. Everything around us stills. Eri breathes in, and then, in a confessional whisper, he adds, "That's all I was. I had relinquished everything else."

He continues to speak but so softly that I can no longer hear him. I glance at him and he's gone. My grandmother has gone too.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 75

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Thu 19th Aug 2010.

The small room was quiet. The girl was head bowed as she sat cross-legged on the bed. The baby was a tiny bundle by her side, wrapped tight and fast asleep. Jeffrey stood just inside the door, watching her. His jaw was tight and his body tense. The guard nodded towards the one empty chair.

Farhiya raised her head, her face expressionless. The strange reality of their meeting hung in the air like an unspoken question.

Jeffrey found that he was longing to see the child's face, but still there was a settled anger inside him drowning out the anticipation - that Nexarion had so heartlessly used him. And her. Nexarion had dealt them a twisted hand then forced them both to play their illegal little game. He moved across and sat heavily in the chair. He stared at the baby for a long

moment, his face unreadable, before turning his gaze back to Farhiya.

"I didn't ask for this," he said, his voice thin and low. His gaze wandered around the room, finally settling on the bundled white blanket on the bed. "None of this," he continued, "but here we are."

Farhiya brought her hands up to hold her face. She stared at him - this man who, she had just learned, was the father of her child. She hadn't even known for sure he existed. The previous year had been a tangle of relief and fear, then confusion and

isolation, and subsequently, horrifyingly, a realisation that she was a prisoner. And worse still, a mother without a husband.

She kept silent, uncertain of him. He seemed calm, he wasn't demanding, but she sensed he was suppressing a rage inside. He was jittery, hands twitching, as if he had to consciously control his body. And he was white. What had they done to her, these white men?

"He's my son," Jeffrey said. Words out of the blue. They sounded strange, even to him. "I didn't choose this."

The child she had carried for months, afraid and alone, now linked her to this unknown stranger. The baby stirred, whimpered a little, and she reached across and drew him onto her lap. She felt him warm and heavy against her, and instinctively she tightened her grip as the man stared at her child.

His child.

Jeffrey watched, mute, uncertain of what to think or feel. As he watched her, with her arms enclosing the child, he saw she was no more than a child herself. He stepped

forward forcing a smile onto his face. "Can I see?" he breathed quietly. She gently lifted her chin, nodding upward. He crouched down eyes level now with hers as she carefully moved aside the blanket from the child's face. "Ayaanle," she said.

The baby frowned, drew a shaky breath and opened his eyes. Dark eyes, long lashes. A small cry.

He felt like an intruder, someone from outside, unwanted. But his heart was pounding, and a light flared illuminating the darkness within him as he held the

child's gaze. The moment stretched between them, connecting them as mysteriously as mycelium connects trees beneath the earth. "Hello Ayaanle," he whispered.

Farhiya sat on the bed watching him watch the child, as her shaking hands nervously folded and unfolded the blanket. Neither of them spoke for a long time. Finally, Jeffrey dropped his gaze, and stared unseeing at the floor, his thoughts racing as fragments of hope were tossed around in a whirlpool of anger.

Farhiya relaxed a little as she refocussed on the baby in her arms. He knew nothing of the violence that had marred his mother's life. His face was a study in innocent tranquillity. His body, warm against her, almost made her forget the confusion and chaos around her. But not quite.

When she spoke, just a whisper broke the stillness. "Ma garan karo sida aan ugu dhaafiyo." She did not have the words in English to say, 'I don't know how to forgive them.' so she simply said, "Forgive?" while shaking her head, wide-eyed and sad. The

Al Shabaab commander, the man who abducted her at Waterloo, the guard, Simon the CEO - all the pain associated with them and what they had done. What could she do with it? She knew that if she tried to carry it, it would destroy her in the end.

Jeffrey, still crouching, looked up into her face, his own vulnerability so visible. The rage he felt had dissipated a little as he saw her struggling with her own pain. And he could feel it. In the way she held the baby, the way she looked at him with such

intensity, as if he might have the resources she needed.

"Nobody says you have to forgive them," Jeffrey's voice was low and bitter. "No-one could forgive something like this?" He glanced across to the door, now locked, and guarded no doubt by the thug in the corridor. Nexarion still manipulating them, controlling them.

And just as if to confirm Jeffrey's suspicions, the guard unlocked and pushed open the door.

His bored gaze wandered around the room.

"Time's up!" he said, without a trace of feeling.

----------oOo----------

Chapter 76

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Fri 20th Aug 2010.

Farhiya took a deep breath, closing her eyes. Ayaanle had just finished feeding. She wrapped him in the blanket and laid him under the cover on the bed. This time he settled.

"Okay... now," she called.

The guard opened the door, ushered Jeffrey

in and then leaned against the wall, his contemptuous gaze wandering around the room. His ego power-play was as evident as the handgun holstered at his waist. Finding himself ignored, he snorted and left the room.

Jeffrey smiled at the girl sat on the bed and walked across towards her. Farhiya shrank back a little, still not trusting him. It had been a bad night. The child had been fractious after the nighttime feed, difficult to settle, maybe sensing her mother's tension. The desolation and loneliness were

fiercest in the earliest hours of the morning, and Farhiya found it impossible to ignore the pain at night, so raw and real.

She had always been taught that forgiveness was essential for healing. She knew that! But knowing and doing are different, she reflected sadly. It was possible to say the words of forgiveness, but the hurt and the urge for retribution dug its claws into her flesh and refused to yield. Her recollection was so vivid of the slaughter in Somalia, the startling blue sky, the shiny green satin of her mother's dirac - the long flowing dress,

the bright red of the blood pumping out of her father's body as he lay in the yellow dust. And then the darkness of her own violation, the grey shadows of semi-consciousness and fear, and the drab walls of the room.

How could she forgive? And yet she knew what happens to the soul if vengeance is entertained. She had seen it's effect in the lives of Al Shabaab, the suffocating grip of hatred choking off every breath of joy.

"How are you?" Jeffrey's words brought her back with a start.

"This ... " she didn't have the English, so she screwed her face into a grimace, and clenched her fist pressing it into her stomach. Then sat for a moment not meeting his eyes. "It eats me!" She lifted her face, and he saw hopeless frustration.

"But..." she exhaled a sigh, shaking her head, and then gestured hopelessly at the sleeping child.

"I know," Jeffrey murmured. He knew he had been consumed by rage and bitterness for many years.

"I don't know... " she said softly, her voice

shaking as she spoke, "... to forgive? But ... it eats me!" She glanced at the baby again, and for a moment, her eyes softened.

Ayaanle didn't ask for any of this, she thought, *and neither did I*. She gave a sigh which turned into a growl of frustration. She wanted peace but did not know where to find it.

The air in the room felt tight and thick, the tension hovering between them, their shared impotence bonding them even in this isolation.

"I'm not interested in forgiving," Jeffrey

snorted, "I'm not letting them off the hook. What's it all for?" he flung out the question, his voice rising

Jeffrey's gaze flickered away from her, as if the weight of her words was too much to bear. His fists clenched at his sides.

"Forgiveness," he said, shaking his head. "Why should we let them get away with it." He paced a few steps, his voice hardening and rising in volume as he spoke. "Why should we forgive them when they've... ," he paused, snarled and took a breath, "... they've ruined us? And what for? What do

we get? Out of this... experiment?" His breath quickened, he was panting now, his hands shaking, clenched into fists.

Farhiya watched him, fearful of his temper. She had seen men consumed by hatred before, and never wanted to see it again. And she knew then that however hard it was to get through this, she did not want to end up like him.

She stood, afraid yet resolute and walked across to him. She took one of his fists in both hands and pulled at his grip, trying to peel open his fingers. He shook his head,

puzzled, then slowly relaxed his hands.

She clenched both her fists, thumbs together. "Hold it," she said, twisting them as if wringing out a cloth, "it tear you apart!" She relaxed and flattened both hands, palms upwards. "Let go, maybe it fly."

"I know," she said, her voice less certain than her words, "or you forget to ... run? to live!"

She watched him for a few minutes as he paced the room, agitated and muttering. She could see he was suppressing so much,

trying to crank down on the aggressive rage, but terrified he would sink into hopeless despair. His eyes flashed as he turned to her. "I won't forgive," he said flatly, "it's just weak."

Farhiya's gaze softened. She knew that though outwardly calm, she was walking the same path. Could she truly forgive? Murder, destruction, abuse, dishonour, violation? The scars of shame that she feared would never heal. "I just can't!" she murmured beneath her breath in Somali. "Go'aankaygu marnaba ma ka adkaan

doono maskaxdayda dhaawacan!" *My resolve can never overcome my damaged mind!*

In an instant, the words of her mother Amina rang through her mind, "You will, little star, be steadfast. Today it fights you, but continue to love it, and one day it will carry you."

"Forgiveness isn't about letting them off the hook," she told herself. "It's about freeing myself. Freeing my heart. If I hold onto this bitterness, it will sour all my days. And I will break."

She turned back to Jeffrey, determined to share her thoughts with him. It took some time, for her English vocabulary was woefully lacking, but after ten minutes or so of back and forth, he understood.

Farhiya saw the shadow of doubt cross his face, as he wrestled with her words - the possibility that heartfelt forgiving may be the only way to a healthy future. She beckoned him over to the bedside, and together they looked down at Ayaanle, sleeping as if the world were perfect.

Nodding down to indicate him, she

challenged Jeffrey face to face with the words, "Haddii aan kuu ahayn, markaas isaga."

He looked confused and shook his head. Haltingly she translated, "If ... if not you... if not for you... for him."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 77

Somewhere. Coma day 10.

I find that Eri is sitting beside me. I feel like I must have nodded off for a moment. The mist outside is still swirling like whispers, casting a dreamlike veil around the top floor of the pagoda. It feels as if we're suspended, somewhere between the world and the heavens. His eyes, clear and alive, meet mine. Deep smile lines crease his face,

but it's his smile - the way it brightens his whole being - that catches me off guard.

I'm afraid to ask the question that has been waiting to be voiced, but I know I must.

"Why did you do it?"

"Ah..." he breathes out, his voice as soft as the mist around us. "All kinds of reasons, but at the back of them all... it's because that's who I am."

For a moment, time seems to hold its breath. It's as if everything has paused for an eternity of unspoken work to take place. Essential groundwork. Somehow I know

that there is nothing I need to do but to simply be still. And in that tranquillity, something within me shifts. Understanding settles in.

He watches me carefully, his gaze unwavering. "You know, don't you?" he murmurs, his voice gentle, almost tender. "Who I am."

I can't trust myself to speak; words feel too clumsy, too crass for the weight of what I'm realizing. So I simply nod, bowing my head in quiet acknowledgment.

"But I want to explain two reasons, Jeffrey."

His tone changes now, filling with authority - the kind that commands belief, the kind that compels you to listen.

"Firstly, it's the offended party, the one who has been hurt, who must do the forgiving. Without bearing the anguish of the offence, how would we ever know we could forgive? I cannot save someone I cannot forgive."

I let his words settle before I venture, "So when you said..."

"'Forgive them, Father, for they don't know what they are doing,'" he finishes for me.

"Yes, that. When you said that... you were talking about..."

"The whole world," he confirms, his eyes never leaving mine. "Yes, everyone. Including you, Jeffrey." His face softens into a broad, joyful smile, the kind that makes his eyes shine. He looks ridiculously happy, as though the weight of the world has left him, and in that moment, his joy is so real, so complete, it makes me want to smile too.

Without warning, Eri reaches across and wraps me in a tight embrace, squeezing me

hard. It's overwhelming, beautiful. It takes me back to the pure warmth of hugging Whisper, my old dog - so full of love, no conditions, no judgment. Just acceptance.

When he releases me, he leans back and says, "That alone would have been reason enough. But listen - there's a second reason." His gaze sharpens, becoming serious once more. "The suffering made me able to heal those I've forgiven. Heal deeply I mean. Before I experienced the invasion of evil, I couldn't do it. I had to watch damaged people walk away."

I frown, struggling to grasp what he means. "I don't understand."

"You saw what happened when you drank from the flagons - the poison came in and infected you. Of course, that was just a construction. But in actuality, Jeffrey, you've been poisoned. Infected. Damaged by the abuse you've endured."

"And I've damaged other people too," I mutter, feeling the weight of that truth settle over me.

Eri nods, unflinching. "Now think back to when *I* drank from the flagons. Yes, it was

foul, painful, and repellent. But when you catch a virus, what happens? Your body fights back, refuses to succumb. It creates antibodies - defences - and you become immune. You heal, and you're stronger for it."

I stare at him, trying to process what he's saying. "Wait... are you saying you became immune to abuse?"

"In a way, yes. Immune in the sense that the abuse was not able to create in me cynicism, hatred, vengeance, or hopelessness. Instead, by grace, it simply provoked the maturing

of my latent immunity to those infections." His words hang in the air, profound and heavy.

I feel a knot tightening inside me. My anger issues, the way I've given up expecting anything good, how easily I fall into despair - he knows all of it. And my paranoia, my self-loathing, my self-pity - it's as if he sees every part of me.

He's watching me closely, and I can tell he knows what I'm thinking. He can see the longing in my eyes, the desperate hope for something better. What would it feel like

to be whole again? To be carefree, positive, trusting - like a child. Could that ever be me?

"I can heal you," Eri says simply, as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

I swallow hard. "How does it work?"

"Like this," he begins, taking both my hands in his. "You let go of your own life. Your priorities, your desires - your very self. You relinquish it all. And when you're as good as dead, I can pour my life, my Spirit into you. You inherit the immune response. My immunity becomes yours. My spirit

becomes totally integrated with your body and soul."

I stare at him, trying to grasp the implications of what he has said. The spirit of this one who consumed all the foul selfishness of the worst of the world and still came back forgiving? That spirit? The spirit of him who clicks his fingers and stars fill the sky?

The words hit me like a tidal wave. Could I really let go? Could I surrender everything I've held onto so tightly, even the parts of myself I hate, and let him fill the emptiness

with his spirit?

I look at him, my mind racing. Could it really be that simple? Could I truly be healed?

Eri's gaze is calm, resting on me. His eyes say, "Yes, you can."

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Chapter 78

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Sat 21st Aug 2010.

The guard pushed the door open and shoved Jeffrey into the room. Jeffrey turned angrily to argue at the rough handling, but the guard had already gone, locking the door behind him. Fuming, his gaze ran around the room resting on the pair on the bed.

They were both asleep. The girl and the child. Should he wake her? He decided against it. Surely she had had another bad night. And so he walked closer until he could see the Ayaanle's face, and forced himself to simply watch the child sleeping. The room was still, its silence broken only by the steady rhythm of Farhiya's and the baby's breath. Slowly, the quiet soothed him, drawing him in. This room, he thought, had a peacefulness about it—light, airy, a sharp contrast to the windowless space he had come from. He

moved toward the window.

He could see a winding path which snaked through the garden, leading to a fork. One direction veered toward neatly trimmed box hedges and a broad, undulating lawn, its edges framed by massive pots bursting with showy blooms. A York-stone patio lay just beyond, guarded by two stoic stone lions, each locked in a timeless struggle with a serpent. On the carefully manicured lawn, towering specimen trees—veterans of the Caribbean, long transplanted—rose majestically, their presence commanding

and dominant.

The other path led to a wilder, untamed stretch of land, where the wind stirred the long grasses, creating rippling waves across the green expanse. Random patches of shorter grass revealed primroses, cowslips, and ox-eye daisies, their English wildness both charming and free.

As Jeffrey stood there, time seemed to slow. His mind sharpened, and in an instant, a stark contrast unfolded before him. On one side, there was the garden's painstakingly controlled, endlessly managed beauty—its

false compromises, its never-ending upkeep. On the other, a world where nature reigned, cooperative and unhurried, where human hands played a small but respectful part in a greater, wiser design.

Though the sea was miles away, a few gulls wheeled above the ocean of green, dipping and diving with effortless grace, catching insects mid-air. Then his gaze drifted toward the patio, where gulls squabbled around a pot that had been turned into a makeshift bin.

In that moment, the choice that had

defined so many of his decisions - the choice he had always faced - was there again: the pursuit of absolute control, no matter the cost, or the humility to step back, let go, and trust in a larger plan.

He turned away from the window and realised she was watching him, tense and fearful again. She thought she may have seen a fleeting fragility on his face, and her expression softened a little. Encouraged, he murmured, "Do you want me here?" He spoke slowly understanding that her English was rudimentary.

Farhiya closed her eyes for a moment. She had waited long enough. Let him wait a little longer. Her own confusing maelstrom of hope and dread, of love and shame still made her body shake and her throat tighten. Hope because this baby that she loved with a frightening passion had no past of violence or brokenness. He was new, perfect, unmarked. Dread because whenever she was alone, her mind reminded her that she must not trust herself to anyone, not even the father of her child.

She had seen his rage, his bitterness, his confused turmoil. She had watched his internal warfare twist his face and clench his fists. But more and more, what she saw was his knife-edge vulnerability.

"You have to be here," she said quietly, the tremor in her voice echoing her trembling hands smoothing the child's blanket.

He was surprised at how strong was the relief that washed through him as he realised she might be accepting him as her baby's father. He had wanted to be enraged by the appalling abuse of Nexarion. Indeed

he had had the words cascading through his mind as he stepped through the doorway - 'I didn't ask for any of this. This... experiment. The baby... all of it. I had no idea what they had done. How the hell could I have known?'

But the tranquil room, the simple sounds of easy respiration, the moment of choice that was brought to him, swept away the torrent of anger and his mind had settled like stilling waters.

"Yes," he nodded slowly, "but what do I do? What do you need?" He immediately

berated himself silently. What could he do? It was a thoughtless senseless question.

"Do? You can't *do* anything!" Her own fear broke through for a moment, and she fell silent, closing her eyes as tears squeezed out and slid down her cheeks. She took a couple of breaths then with a sigh murmured, "You can only *be* ... be his father." She swallowed and shook her head as a wave of despair threatened to submerge her.

Jeffrey's shoulders slumped and for a moment he dropped his head. Then in misery he said, "Listen. I don't know how

to do this. I don't know what to be. I'm a crap father. I don't know what to think any more. None of this makes any sense." His voice faltered, then continued more quietly speaking to himself, "I've always thought I could get through anything, but now..." He trailed off into silence.

All his life, he had understood that no-one was on his side, that the only way to survive was to stay in control. But now, he saw he was controlling nothing.

Oh, he had a plan. That might work. But probably wouldn't. And this child? And

the girl, because she was only a girl. Could he control them? Not a chance. He was in way over his head, and he knew it.

Farhiya's eyes met Jeffrey's as they despaired together. She was churning inside with uncertainty, thoughts contradicting recalled thoughts of only a second ago. Where was the sense of destiny? How could anyone believe in a cosmos that thrust you into senseless violence? Or fate that demanded sacrifice in return for ... what? ... What was there to hold on to?

She could almost feel her faith unravelling,

thread by thread, like a dirac coming apart at the seams. Terrified, desperate to slow the disintegration of everything she had once believed, she murmured softly to herself in Somali. The familiar rhythm of her mother tongue took her back to a time before — a time of peace, of wholeness. A time when joy and security had seemed certain.

"I used to understand... No, I used to think I understood. The teachings, the Quran, all those precious words I loved. It all made sense then, but now..."

She paused, brow furrowed. No, she told herself, she would be ruthlessly honest.

"I never really let myself think about it... about that violent passage. Maybe I did, but... the people weren't real. Not the child... not this flesh and blood," she said, her voice almost inaudible.

She inhaled deeply, then exhaled in a long, shaky sigh.

"It doesn't make sense," she whispered, as the very foundation of her faith slipped into doubt. "I can't honour something that would take a child's life. What makes that

child any different from mine? From Ayaanle? Where's the safety in that?"

Jeffrey watched, sensing the crisis but unable to grasp its full weight within her. It wasn't until she placed the baby aside, turned her worn, weary face toward him, and haltingly put the words together, "I don't... don't believe. Not any more."

"What?"

"I don't believe any more. My faith..." Her voice trailed off, and she stared at the ground, her words hanging in the silence.

Jeffrey didn't know how to respond. He

couldn't imagine how to help her. But in the ache of her loss, he felt the echo of his own. Not having anything better to say, he asked quietly, "What don't you believe?"

"I don't know what I believe any more. I just... I don't know."

"There's nothing wrong with questioning," he said, his voice low, though the words felt thin even to him. Her despair was palpable. He understood it — the emptiness, the disillusionment — but not in the same way. He didn't know the details of her pain.

"But I do know this: you shouldn't give up.

There's still your life ahead, and this child's life — decades, a lifetime. Maybe there's something better ahead for both of us. For you and me. For our baby."

He stopped, startled by his own words. *Our baby*. It felt strange, heavy — the weight of the responsibility settling on him like a stone. But there was no turning back now. He had to press on. He couldn't give in. He had to find a way through.

Farhiya looked at him directly, her dark eyes wide with uncertainty. "I can't live with this anger any more.," she said softly,

the words almost lost. "I have to find something better. I have to be better." She glanced at Ayaanle, still peacefully asleep on the bed. "For him."

"And you..." She took a step closer to him, her gaze firm now. "You have to be better too." She moved toward the bed, bent to pick up Ayaanle, still wrapped tightly in the blanket. Then, turning, she placed the child gently in Jeffrey's arms, her gaze locking with his. "You have to be better, too - for him."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 79

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Sun 22nd Aug 2010.

Another day and night had passed. Jeffrey was despairing of ever escaping this mess. He knew Simon was ruthless - he had read the transcripts of the meetings, although the details were never spelled out explicitly. He had come back in to see Farhiya again, dreading this conversation. He was

weighed down by the prospect of a difficult confession, and knew that their relationship could so easily be destroyed.

He took a breath, glanced at the baby, then at her, and braced himself. Speaking slowly so that he wouldn't be misunderstood, he said "Farhiya, there's... something I need to tell you."

Farhiya, curious, frowned a little at his tone, then gave a nod, encouraging him to continue. "When I first discovered - found out... about Nexarion's plans, what they'd done to you," paused unsure how to

continue, then simply plunged in, "I didn't try to get help."

Her eyes narrowed, and he pushed on quickly before he lost his nerve. "I... I chose to blackmail them instead." She looked blank and shook her head. "I asked them for money instead."

The words hung in the air, heavy and offensive. The warmth drained from her face as her eyes darkened. She stepped back, her body rigid. He watched the emotions play across her face, disbelief, then betrayal, then pain. He waited.

Then she spoke.

"You knew? You... chose money? You... left me?" Her words were strangled, trembling. She felt the gossamer thread of yesterday's trust that linked them snapping apart. Her face, which just seconds ago had smiled a welcome, hardened, the betrayal filling her eyes with tears. "So all because of you..." She shook her head. "... I am... still here. Still... alone."

She suddenly stood, and Jeffrey stepped back afraid she would strike him. She crossed to the window and stared out, her

back turned, her fists clenched. With lowered head, Jeffrey watched her in silence, the shame like a nausea in his gut. He wanted to explain, so she would understand, but wisely he kept quiet.

Farhiya suddenly whirled around to face him. Her voice was low, dangerous with fury. "You left me, Jeffrey." Her mouth compressed into a thin line. Then she snapped.

"My life!!" she cried. The baby started, then whimpered. Ignoring him she continued, "My life!" quieter this time. Her shoulders

sagged as she turned a careworn face to him, "For... money!" she said in utter disgust.

She fell silent, leaving her accusing stare speaking volumes. Shamefaced he dropped his eyes to the ground.

He knew there was no excuse that would not sound contemptible. "It was wrong. I know that now." he said, barely able to look her way.

She stepped closer to him, until they were eye to eye. "You know that? Now!" She stopped. Staring furiously at him, never

flinching. "Why now?" she demanded.

Jeffrey hung his head, "Because I have seen you," he paused, stepped back and glanced at the still sleeping child, "seen you both... " He swallowed as tears ran down his face, "And Ayaanle is my child too."

The room was suspended in time. Silent but for the faint screech of a distant gull. Still she held herself away from him, her arms crossed, staring across the chasm. She took a long trembling breath, and continued, struggling with both her emotions and her English.

"My parents murdered. My brothers killed. Village ..." Without warning, she slapped one hand down on the other indicating sudden destruction. "I have no-one... No-one!" Her face, her rage, her words, were dragging him down into the pit of her suffering. "No home. Alone... " She slowed down emphasising every word now. "And. Why? Me here?"

Jeffrey could only shake his head. He had no answer, only a weight of guilt that threatened to break him.

She was relentless. She lifted her chin and

stepped closer. "You choosed ... money!" She was trembling under the weight of enough suffering for multiple lives. She raised a forefinger in his face. "I tell you," she declared.

"Cross... across..." Frustrated she walked her fingers across the other hand. "Africa. On. On. And on..." She repeated the words over and over as her fingers moved. She stopped, then made the movement of a hand putting food into the mouth and chewing. Then suddenly cut both hands across horizontally and shook her head

furiously. Shook her head, silently begging him to understand what it was to starve and thirst in the desert.

She tapped a finger several times into her chest, then twisting her face into a mocking leer, she picked at her own stomach and breasts. Her other hand pushed the first one away, mimicking a violent struggle. "On and on," she muttered bitterly. Then, gripping the hem of her dress in both hands, she yanked as if to tear it apart. When the fabric held firm, refusing to rip, her frustration spilled over, and she broke

into desperate, angry tears.

Jeffrey stood motionless, knowing better than to reach out or offer comfort. He understood he had to face the consequences of what he had done and could only hope that she might show him mercy. But he knew that hope was faint, fragile at best.

Ayaanle stirred again, crying out a little, but Farhiya ignored him, pacing back and forth, her voice rising and falling talking to herself usually in Somali or Arabic, before resuming in English.

"I hope... I did hope," she corrected herself,

"I ask why. Ask! I ask for... purpose." She shook her head. "I stay. I hope. On and on and on. I ask Allah for help. On and on," she said, her voice thin now and tired. "I did pray for help. For someone to come for... for help." Her voice died away then, and her gaze, filled with misery, locked onto his."But you... You choose for money."

Jeffrey felt throat constricting, and found he could hardly breathe. There was a dull lump in his chest where his heart was, and his arms were trembling. He looked around

the room, then sat heavily on the bed before his legs gave way. He put his head in his hands and wept, shoulders shaking with anguish.

Farhiya was spent. Watching his desolation, her face softened. In a low voice, eyes wet she said "You choose... You choosed wrong!"

Jeffrey had no words, no reply. But he felt he had to explain himself somehow. He nodded. "Yes. I've... I've always been angry. I always wanted to control things. But... I've been wrong."

They lapsed into long drawn out silence, each recovering from the confrontation. Slowly the heartbeats slowed and the fury lessened. Then after a long while, Farhiya laid a hand on his arm, and asked, "Jeffrey, you are empty?" In despair he nodded again.

He had never allowed himself to consider that. But now the words were spoken, they seemed to cling to him. The chest pain was a hollowness. His scheming, his control was never able to fill that abyss inside him. The introspection triggered a further bout of

sobbing.

Farhiya watched him for a few minutes until the intensity of sadness had diminished, then squeezed his arm.

"Jeffrey," she said, then waited until he looked up at her, "I have to... I... I forgive you."

"You forgive me!? How?" he asked, astonished.

"I must."

"But... " The very notion of forgiving had become alien to him. He was at a loss to understand.

"I need Allah to forgive me. I must forgive." Then she quoted in Arabic some verse from the Quran that Jeffrey did not understand.

"But Al Shabaab destroyed your family, your village! How can you believe that you must forgive?"

"I don't know. I feel." She sat still for a moment, then spoke haltingly, "Al Shabaab kill. They say Allah's will. I don't know." Her gaze rested on her child, remarkably still sleeping despite the turmoil in the room. "How can they?" She turned her eyes back to Jeffrey. "In the Quran... " she began

hesitantly, her voice thin and shaky "... Allah commands to kill."

"Weren't you taught to always forgive, to... turn the other cheek?"

Farhiya's eyes widened with confusion, her brow knitting. "Turn... what? What do you mean?"

"I think... it's something Jesus said," Jeffrey explained, "or did? ... or said God... Allah did?" at which point he had reached the extent of his understanding of the topic. He could at least explain the metaphor though. "It means to not hit back, to be

merciful... To let go of the need for revenge... Oh and it means to be willing to be hit again, I suppose."

Farhiya raised her eyebrows slightly, as though this was language from another planet. "Christ, peace be upon him, said this? Allah did this? No. No, I was never taught this."

----------oOo----------

Chapter 80

Somewhere. Coma day 10.

"I just don't know," I admit, rubbing the back of my neck as I struggle to articulate my thoughts. "It's so difficult to let go. It doesn't just happen because you decide you want it to. In my experience, wanting it isn't enough. When I say to myself, 'let it go', my body shoots back, 'you're kidding, not a chance', and then my mind chimes in,

'be reasonable - this isn't really necessary'."

I glance down, the weight of my words pressing heavily on me. "Time and time again, I just haven't been able to dump all that baggage that I don't even like any more." I lapse into a grumpy silence.

Eri interrupts my train of thought, tilting his head slightly, his expression empathetic. "Struggling with that, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," I admit, slumping a bit. "Mostly because it just doesn't work for me!"

He nods, lips pressing together with a

knowing look. "No, it doesn't," he concedes, his gaze steady and reassuring. "That's another reason why I had to go to the cross."

"Sorry, what's the reason?" I ask, frowning slightly as I try to piece together his meaning.

"Well," he begins, his tone softening, "I'm asking you to do something you can't do. When it's clear you don't have the determination to surrender everything - not just your burdens, but your very life - and then be filled with mine." He fixes me

with a penetrating gaze. "Let's face it, you don't have it in you."

I huff out a breath, frustrated. "So where does that leave me?"

A small, enigmatic smile lifts one corner of his mouth. "How about you give up giving up?"

"And then what?" I press, scepticism lacing my voice.

"Then leave it to me." He watches me intently, knowing I need more than that vague reassurance.

"The thing is, Jeffrey," he continues, gesturing with open hands, inviting me to follow him, "you'll recall that we've only got this far because I carried you."

I raise an eyebrow, my confusion evident.

"Yes, but this is all a construction. What you're talking about has to work in real life."

"You might remember that when I first picked you up, I immediately set you back down again, and you almost fell," he recalls, a hint of amusement on his lips. "But I caught you."

"Yeah, that did seem strange at the time, why did you do that?" I ask, genuinely curious now.

"Because I wanted to drive home the point that I have to be carrying you *all the time*. Every minute. It's not just a 'set you back on your feet, wind you up, and let you go' kind of thing." He allows the weight of his words to settle between us before continuing.

"Think of it this way: whenever you let me carry you, I'll carry you to the cross. And the cross is the place where self dies. You

and I - we die together at the cross. This isn't a one-time thing. If you trust me enough to let me carry you for a while, then a little bit of you will die, and a little bit of my life will come into you." He pauses, letting the implications linger in the air. "And that little bit of my life will enable you to trust me to carry you a bit longer. It's that kind of 'How do you eat an elephant?' question!"

I furrow my brow, clearly confused, and Eri nods his head side to side, raising both hands in a mock gesture of innocence.

"How do you eat an elephant?" He continues nodding, with the playful demeanour of a children's TV presenter before answering his own question with a grin. "One bite at a time!"

It doesn't quite land.

So after a moment, he senses I still need clarification. "Oh," he says, snapping his fingers as if a light bulb has gone off, "you know that old hymn they sing at football matches?"

"Abide with Me?" I venture, recalling the familiar melody.

"Yes, that's the one. Henry Lyte's words. Of course, they don't go far enough. He really should have written, 'Abide in Me.' But no matter - he was a lovely man." Eri pauses, his expression softening as he gazes off into the distance. He's off air for a moment, then he refocusses his gaze on me again. "Yes... Jeffrey," he says, "If you let your life, your actual self come into a real union with me, you'll be constantly living a Good Friday Easter Sunday weekend. Bit by bit, everything that's impossible to let go will lose its grip and die," he's making slow

deliberate nods to confirm the statement, "and new life - my spirit - bit by bit will come to life in you."

Noting my narrowed eyes and lingering scepticism, he adds with a knowing smile, "As the Celts say, 'It's better felt than telt.' If you want to live, Jeffrey, you've got to die!"

Yes, I think to myself, *that's as clear as mud!*

----------oOo----------

Chapter 81

Nexarion, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Mon 23rd Aug 2010.

The baby whimpered softly as the guard escorted Jeffrey into the room. Farhiya sat in the far corner, perched on the edge of the bed, clutching Ayaanle tightly to her chest. Her eyes flicked nervously to the guard, lingering for a moment on the pistol holstered at his belt. She glanced toward

Jeffrey, who caught her gaze and offered a reassuring nod, though he felt anything but reassured.

The guard crossed the room briskly and picked up the dirty plate, cup, and cutlery from lunch. Balancing them in one hand and his keys in the other, he was just behind the door when it burst open, slamming into his face. He staggered back as a massive figure in a stocking mask charged through.

With practised fluidity, Dritan Krasniqi swung his Makarov PM in a wide arc,

striking the guard across the temple with the pistol's grip. The guard fumbled for his own weapon, but he was far too slow. Before his hand even brushed the grip, Dritan drove a straight, crushing jab into his solar plexus, forcing the air from his lungs and doubling him over. A final swift chop to the back of the neck sent him crumpling to the floor, semi-conscious and groaning.

At the sight of the violence—the gun, the latex gloves, and the grotesquely distorted features beneath the mask—Farhiya let out

a primal scream that seemed to freeze the air in the room. The baby joined her, wailing at an ear-piercing pitch.

Dritan spun on his heel, his eyes scanning the room with lethal precision in less than a second. When his gaze settled on Jeffrey and Farhiya, the tension in his face eased as recognition dawned.

He strode to Farhiya who was still shrieking, and shaking his head furiously, clamped his hand over her mouth. Her eyes rolled back in panic, and she heaved in a deep, shuddering breath. Fearing another

scream, Jeffrey pushed Dritan's hand away and replaced it with his own. "Quiet!" he hissed urgently.

But it was too late. The door crashed open again, and Simon stood framed in the doorway. His legs were planted wide, and his gun trembled in a two-handed grip, the barrel pointed directly at the masked intruder.

"Stop!" Simon barked, his voice cracking with fear and aggression.

Dritan's gaze flicked to the sleek, pristine weapon - a Heckler & Koch P7, it screamed

wealth and ego rather than combat experience. He noted the unsteady barrel and allowed a predatory grin to twist his lips.

He didn't stop. Moving like a coiled snake, Dritan twisted his body sideways just as Simon fired.

The bullet embedded in the wall where Dritan had stood moments before. In a blur, he dropped into a crouch and fired twice in quick succession.

The first shot ripped through Simon's left shoulder, sending the gun clattering from

his grasp as he screamed in agony. The second struck his right thigh, cracking the femur. The bullet, slowing from 710 mph to 380 mph, exited his leg in a messy spray, punched a hole in the closed door, and rolled to a stop in the corridor.

Farhiya's renewed screams of terror mixed with Simon's screams of pain as he writhed on the ground, clutching his shattered thigh with his remaining functional hand.

Only Jeffrey noticed the guard stirring on the floor, his hand fumbling for the pistol at his side. Seeing the weapon rise, its barrel

aimed at Farhiya, Jeffrey lunged without hesitation, knocking her and the baby off the bed. They crashed to the floor just as four shots rang out in rapid succession, followed by a fifth. Then silence.

The first bullet hit Jeffrey in the shoulder, shattering his collarbone. It ricocheted upwards, grazing the side of his head and rendering him unconscious. He never felt the second shot, which tore through his elbow with a sickening snap and a spray of blood. The girl felt the impact of the third bullet before her vision swam, and

everything went black.

The guard lay prostrate, shot first in the chest and then through the neck with surgical precision by Dritan. The Albanian predator scanned the room, his sharp eyes taking in the aftermath. It seemed only the sharp suited businessman and the baby had survived.

He stepped over the guard's body, kicking the pistol from his lifeless hand. Then he crouched by Jeffrey, carefully avoiding the spreading pool of blood. Checking his pulse, he found it weak and irregular.

Gently, he pulled Jeffrey off Farhiya and positioned him on his side in the recovery position.

Farhiya lay motionless, her face slack, her lips parted. Blood soaked one of her legs. Dritan shook his head, nevertheless he shifted her into the recovery position as well. He picked up the baby who was apparently completely unharmed, and placed him on the bed.

The room fell into eerie silence, broken only by the baby's soft whimpers and Simon's laboured, rasping breaths.

Straightening up, Dritan mentally replayed the fight, retracing his steps to locate the spent shell casings. He dug two out of the wall, one out of the door frame, and retrieved the fourth from the corridor, pocketing them with practised efficiency.

Crossing the room, he loomed over Simon, who raised his head weakly before recoiling at the sight of the gun barrel aimed at him.

Dritan's lip curled in disdain. "You're not worth it," he spat.

With a swift motion, Dritan pulled a phone from his pocket and dialled emergency

services. Calmly, he reported four gunshot victims in critical condition before hanging up. Without a backward glance, he turned and left.

The door swung closed behind him, leaving Simon writhing on the floor, clutching his shattered leg as tears streamed down his face.

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Chapter 82

Dorchester County Hospital. Thu 2nd September 2010.

Jeffrey had gone. Eri looked around as the construction slowly faded around them.

"We're done here," he said smiling, "Thanks Effie, well done."

She looked up at him, her face pale, "Did we lose him?" she asked, her voice thin with anxiety.

Eri eyes widened, "What do you think?" his tone was direct and serious.

"I don't know," she said looking worried.

He tilted his head slowly to one side and gave her a reproving look, "I think you should know, Effie, that love never fails!"

----oOo----

When Jeffrey finally managed to focus his eyes and mind, emerging from eleven days in a medically induced coma, he noticed a woman seated beside his hospital bed.

"Jeffrey," she greeted him with a calm smile,

"just to remind you, I'm Mrs. Moore, the consultant neurologist overseeing your care for the past couple of weeks."

Jeffrey nodded cautiously; any sudden movement made the room spin.

"While we're awaiting the MRI results," she continued, "the CT scan shows that the swelling in your brain has reduced nicely. You'll still experience some headaches and dizziness, but overall, your progress is encouraging." She spoke slowly, giving him time to process each word. "We'll keep you under observation for at least another

fourteen days before reassessing."

Another careful nod from Jeffrey.

After a pause, she said, "You might recall agreeing to a trial of a drug called dimethyltryptamine. I'd like to ask you some questions about it, if that's alright?"

She paused, raising her eyebrows slightly.

His silence seemed to signal permission.

She leaned forward. "We can monitor the drug's physical effects, but assessing its impact on your mental state requires your input. The medication has hallucinogenic properties, so I need to ask—did you

experience anything unusual?"

Jeffrey's brow furrowed briefly as he tried to recall, but his expression soon cleared.

"No, I can't remember anything," he said.

"No vivid dreams? No shifts in perception? No feelings of danger or isolation?" she pressed gently.

"No, nothing like that. It's just ... blank."

"Not a single memory?"

"Nothing at all," Jeffrey confirmed.

"But you remember me speaking to you during the times we briefly brought you

out of the coma?"

"Very vaguely, yes."

"And the events leading up to the attack?"

"Oh yes! I won't forget those in a hurry!"

"But from the attack to now, all you recall is us talking during those moments of partial awakening?"

"Exactly. It's just... empty. Something feels different, but..." He trailed off, his voice uncertain.

Mrs. Moore's smile softened. "Feeling different, empty, or unsettled is entirely

normal during recovery from head trauma. Please don't be alarmed by that."

She reassured him for another ten minutes, her calm demeanour steadying him, before standing to leave. "Oh, by the way, you have a couple of visitors - three, actually. If you're up to it, I'll send them in?" With that, she gathered her notes and left the room.

----oOo----

A little while later, the door opened. Jeffrey's face lit up as he saw Farhiya with Ayaanle - his son. Behind them stood a

man, tall and broad-shouldered, towering over the pair. Like Farhiya, he had deep brown skin and strong features.

Farhiya handed the baby to the man and hurried across the room to hug Jeffrey.

"You are fine?" she asked, smiling.

"I've been better," he said, "but every day is better than the last."

"I am very worried," she said. "But then I hear you are fine now?"

"Yes. How about you? I heard you weren't hurt."

"No, only your blood on me. And I... fell."

"And Ayaanle..." Jeffrey hesitated. "Our baby... is he okay?"

"Yes, he is perfect."

They chatted for a while before Farhiya said, "Oh, sorry! I must say—this is Tesfaye. He meets me in Tangiers. A friend."

"Good to meet you, Tesfaye," Jeffrey said, extending his hand. His own disappeared into Tesfaye's massive grip as they shook hands.

Gesturing to Ayaanle, Farhiya explained, "We are... we stay in the brother's house of Tesfaye."

"My brother lives in Harlow with his wife and four children," Tesfaye explained. "Farhiya can stay there as long as she needs to."

Farhiya hesitated, looking shy. "Jeffrey, I have something I want to tell you," she said, stepping closer to the bedside. "I have decided to follow Jesus."

Jeffrey stared, astonished, wide-eyed. His mouth opened, but no words came at first.

Finally, he managed to speak, his voice tinged with disbelief. "So you're not a Muslim any more?"

Farhiya paused, her fingers fidgeting with the edge of her sleeve. Her gaze dropped for a moment, then with a small smile and a shake of her head, she confessed, "I don't know."

"What? How can you not know?" Jeffrey's question was edged with confusion.

Farhiya's eyes darted momentarily to the child in Tesfaye's arms, and then back to Jeffrey, a fleeting vulnerability crossing her

face. She opened her mouth, then closed it, as if weighing how to express what she was just beginning to understand herself. "I only know I need to follow Jesus." Her words hung in the air, simple yet profound.

Jeffrey blinked, taken aback, his thoughts stumbling to catch up. "So what... I mean how has this happened?"

Farhiya hesitated, her gaze shifting between Jeffrey and the child in Tesfaye's arms, as if she was hoping to find the right words somewhere in the room. "I think ... I think I was just ready," she said finally, her voice

tentative, as if she was reaching out for something in the dark.

Jeffrey didn't respond straight-away. He shifted against the starchy hospital pillows, his bruised face unreadable but thoughtful. She needed space to express what she was feeling.

Farhiya shifted in her chair, her fingers twisting the edge of her headscarf. "I saw ... too many times. Death. Pain." Her words came in starts and stops, halting. "Men ... they try to make things right. By killing." She paused, as if she was halfway up a steep

hill, her eyes pleading with Jeffrey to understand. "I did not want to think ... Allah is the same. Just stronger."

Jeffrey's brow furrowed slightly. "So ... what do you think now? About Allah?"

Farhiya's face softened, then came a smile so wide, it simply painted the sterile harshness of the hospital room with a quiet radiant joy. "Tesfaye told me ... about Jesus. Peace be upon him. How he lived. How ... he came to show us what Allah is truly like."

"Yeah?" Jeffrey prompted, his voice quieter

now.

"Yes," Farhiya said, her words quickening with an urgency that outpaced her English. "I can hardly believe. He ... he serves us! He washes our feet!" Her voice broke, and she covered her mouth with her hand. Tears spilled over, and she bowed her head, overwhelmed by the weight of this thought —this God who stoops low.

Jeffrey watched her for a moment, a lump rising in his throat. Then he shook his head, with a puzzled expression on his face, "But to leave your religion, Farhiya, are you

sure?"

Farhiya remained, head bowed, and in that quietness, Tesfaye standing nearby with the baby, spoke softly, "The thing is, Jeffrey, if I may?"

Jeffrey nodded.

"The truth about Allah... God, rejecting coercion, and humbling himself, giving up his power and his glory and taking the lowest place - the place of a servant, and winning us purely with his love, is completely missing from Islam. This is ..."

Tesfaye continued speaking

But Jeffrey was no longer listening. The words he had heard were settling in his mind like missing pieces of a half-finished puzzle, reorienting long misplaced fragments. He could feel blurred memories shifting, aligning, and connecting in his mind - though not yet clear enough to be fully understood.

The room felt still, not with silence but with truth taking root, deeply shared. All that Jeffrey and Farhiya had been through individually and together. Tesfaye gave Jeffrey a subtle nod, as if to say, *Be still. Let*

it grow.

Jeffrey blinked hard, breaking eye contact. His voice, when it came, was ragged.

"God ... Washing feet!" He laughed softly through his nose, then murmured,

"Incredible but... yes, strange but that feels... exactly right."

"Visiting time's up", the nurse called through the open door.

"Oh, I have a gift for you," Farhiya said holding out a piece of fabric - the embroidered cloth that she had carried for so many months.

Jeffrey took it and stared down at the fine stitching, and the golden threads running through the Arabic script. "What does it say?"

"Al-Razzaq," she replied, "It means 'God, the compassionate, will provide'. Take care of it for me."

Jeffrey lifted his gaze and looked at her. He knew it was precious. He smiled. "Thank you. I will," he said simply. "Could you put it on the cabinet?"

Farhiya took it from him and placed it lovingly on the surface. Then she reached

across and picked up something else. She tilted her head to one side, and with wide eyes asked, "What is this?"

She was holding a small square of fabric.

"It's beautiful," she murmured as she bent her head to look closely at the tiny tapestry.

Jeffrey stared at it, his eyes wide and unblinking, as a profound stillness filled the room. Slowly, a soft, almost imperceptible smile curved his lips, and his expression spoke of love, then of longing and hope. After a few moments, his features settled into a deep, unshakable

calm, radiating a joy too deep for words.

The dog seemed to be almost alive.

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Epilogue

Farhiya's asylum case is in the Home Office in-tray, and will be probably for months to come. Her child automatically has British citizenship, since the father is British, so Farhiya has temporary permission to stay until a firm ruling on her own case. She and the baby are staying in the home of the brother of Tesfaye in Harlow.

The child Ayaanle does carry the genetic deficiency leading to familial Motor Neurone Disease. However, in early life, the cellular quality control mechanisms are robust, there are alternative biological pathways, and young tissue is inherently resilient. The research albeit undertaken illegally by Nexarion has pushed the understanding forward to the extent that it is hoped immunotherapy will be sufficiently advanced to treat MND once it emerges in the life of Ayaanle.

The project team at Nexarion are in

custody, while evidence is gathered concerning their crimes.

Farhiya's grandparents and younger siblings are secure, sharing their God given good fortune with neighbours and friends, and hoping for a visit from Farhiya in the not too distant future.

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